

The search for quality primary education

MAHMOOD AMINUL ISLAM

There has been a marked increase in enrolment in primary schools after Bangladesh introduced universal primary education (UPE) in 1980. It is estimated that currently around 80 per cent of 18.30 million children of the 6-10 age group are enrolled in primary schools. But in spite of this significant progress in enrolment during the last 20 years, achievement of UPE seems to be a far cry. According to Manzoor Ahmed of UNICEF (The Daily Star 1.8.2000) a large number of eligible children, estimated at 4 million, fail to enroll, and another 6 million or so drop out at different stages before completing the 5-year cycle of primary education. This means that about 10 million children are still not benefiting from primary education programme. And then the quality of education poses a big question mark. How many of those completing primary education have the basic learning competencies of reading (with comprehension), writing and numeracy and been able to develop cognitive skills to deal with the real problems as they would face later in life.

Of the 18 on-going projects, 10 are related to raising the quality of education, 6 to new construction, reconstruction and renovation of class rooms for creating greater access to education and 2 projects food for education and the stipend scheme are meant to encourage poor students to enroll and continue their studies.

The components included under the quality are: teacher training, improvement in classroom teaching, adding classrooms to the existing 3-roomed schools for conversion from two-shift to one-shift teaching, performance monitoring of schools and preparation of student profile and strengthening field level administration of the Directorate. There is no project on pre-primary education for 5-year old children. This deficiency presents formidable learning difficulty for majority of the students and is therefore of direct relevance to quality. The government has, however, decided in principle to introduce preparatory classes and allow individual schools to open pre-primary section.

One of the projects, namely Intensive District Approach for 'Education for All' spread over 25 districts has touched upon the need

for decentralised planning and management bearing on the quality of education. The main project components are: creating special awareness, holding planning evaluation workshops, local production and supply of teaching/learning materials, and establishing Upazila resource centres. But it does not seem to have gone far enough to highlight the importance of school-centred planning and development.

Efficient management of a school as reflected in creating and maintaining adequate physical facilities (especially in view of the surge in enrolment), forging close school-community relations and effective administrative and academic supervision, enhances the quality of education. Implied in it are: adequate and furnished classroom

ment and school-community relations, and sent on short attachments to reputed well administrated schools (there are quite a few in Bangladesh) to gather first hand experience of good management practices. At the same time, it would be necessary to give the headteachers a distinctly higher status and pay commensurate with their higher responsibilities.

It is well to remember here that the importance of community initiative in running primary education programme was minimized when in 1950 the district school boards were abolished, and later on in 1973-74 the management of over 36000 primary schools was taken over by the government. That initiative has to be restored by reversing the present trend of centralised plan-

decentralisation and community participation.

The general inactivity of the school managing committees (SMC) as seen at present is ascribed (though mistakenly perhaps) to the fact that they do not have much to contribute to school development and administration. But a recent decision by the government allowing formation of school-based welfare association/trust involving local people should infuse new life to the SMC. The welfare association/trust will raise fund to pay for various sundry activities which will benefit the school and the students: repair and renovation of classrooms, supply of furniture, creating amenities like drinking water and toilet, organising extra academic activities and cultural

functions. (The problem can be temporarily eased by allowing the schools to hire short term teaching assistants from the community to help regular teachers).

The present lack of trust between the teachers and the management can be removed through a mechanism of regular consultation and associating the former in planning and management of primary education at different levels in order that teachers do not feel stagnant. In their job, there should be enough scope for upward mobility. Upgrading the post of headteacher as suggested offers such a possibility. Acquisition of higher qualifications by the teachers to brighten their career prospects should always be encouraged.

The recurrent per student cost of

than being made at present. In addition, second chance education for children aged 8-14 years, and education for special need children have yet to be dealt with the seriousness they deserve.

It is not sure if the government is in a position to accommodate further increase in expenditure and to what extent. But meanwhile, the civil society in Bangladesh cannot afford to ignore the cause of providing quality primary/basic education to our children, fifty percent of whom are from the disadvantaged families. Granting that we are all for joining hand in this nationally important endeavour, it would be necessary to institutionalise our efforts. For example, a national foundation for primary education may be formed to promote expansion and development of quality primary education in conjunction with the national programme. The foundation may have the following as its objectives:

- 1 provide grant assistance to educational NGOs and for individual school development programme;
- 1 make major investment to improve teaching-learning process through the use of education technology both within and outside classrooms;
- 1 provide financial assistance to qualified teachers to acquire higher professional qualifications;
- 1 strengthen teachers' training, especially of headteachers in planning and management;
- 1 promote basic and action research on various aspects of primary education related to quality and achievement of UPE;
- 1 experiment with school lunch and healthcare programme in selected schools; and
- 1 identify areas of investment for special need children.

Sponsored by the government the foundation will raise fund by launching a popular appeal through media and other means for contributions from all sections of the society. Donations will also be collected from other sources supportive of the foundation objectives.

There is a clear need to strengthen the national primary education programme by carrying out reforms and making greater investment, without which we are likely to lose out a great many of our children to poverty and ignorance.

Mahmood Aminul Islam, a retired Addl. Secy, served in the Ministry of Education in the 1980s.

Local people should be made to feel that they have a stake in the education of their children. They should know the general and particular needs of the school they see everyday, and be allowed to plan with the teachers yearly increase in enrolment together with what is required to cope with this increase in forms of creating and maintaining physical facilities, additional teachers, teaching-learning materials etc. and place their demand to some higher authority (with intimate knowledge of local conditions) like the former district school board for examination and resource allocation.

accommodation; knowledge, competence and commitment of teachers, availability of teaching-learning materials; efficient student evaluation system and correctional teaching; sufficiency of study hours in an academic year and teacher-student contact time (which depends upon teacher-student ratio, daily pupil attendance and school timing).

Judged from these criteria, the national primary education programme suffers from many weaknesses. But a capable headteacher can play a key role in covering up the deficiencies to run the school efficiently. I have seen during my decade long involvement with primary education (while serving in the Ministry of Education in the 1980s) that if the headteacher discharged his/her managerial and supervisory responsibilities with initiative and tact and in cooperation with others, the school discipline improved, enrolment increased and drop out rate decreased, the quality of classroom teaching improved, and community participation became more spontaneous and effective.

For this to happen, the headteachers should be made familiar with the concept of manage-

ment and management of schools by the primary education directorate through its hierarchy of field level officials.

Local people should be made to feel that they have a stake in the education of their children. They should know the general and particular needs of the school they see everyday, and be allowed to plan with the teachers yearly increase in enrolment together with what is required to cope with this increase in forms of creating and maintaining physical facilities, additional teachers, teaching-learning materials etc. and place their demand to some higher authority (with intimate knowledge of local conditions) like the former district school board for examination and resource allocation. In 1981 a proposal to set up local education authority (LEA) in each sub-division (now district) for administration of primary education (600-700 govt. primary schools), prepared by the Ministry of Education was passed in the Parliament. But with the change of government the enactment has remained inoperative still to this day. This enactment regarding LEA can now be revived in keeping with the present government policy of

functions, payment of examination fees (now a burden to many students), organising preparatory classes for 5-year old children, and giving monetary help to poor students etc. which are not possible to take up now. The school managing committee and the welfare trust should be headed by the same person with the head teacher serving as the member-secretary to avoid any confusion and clash of interest.

Presently, we are being extravagant in supplying free textbooks to all primary students irrespective of their parents' income. Restricting supply of free books to poor students and recovering the cost from others will yield substantial savings. Through a policy change the government can allow the school to utilise the savings for supplying educational materials (free to poor students) which do not come with textbooks and for other priority activities.

Low morale of teachers has been one of the reasons for the deteriorating quality of education. The surge in enrolment causing shortage of teachers and crowded classrooms means heavier workload for teachers under difficult working condi-

primary education calculated on gross enrolment, was roughly Tk. 890/- in 1999-2000. This includes the average price of about Tk. 150/- for one set of textbooks supplied free to the students. Over 90 per cent of the recurrent cost is spent on teachers' salary.

The total expenditure on primary education in 1999-2000 was Tk. 22485.3 million (Tk. 13120.8 recurring+Tk. 9364.5 million development). The bulk of development expenditure goes for infrastructure building (mainly civil works), teachers' training and printing and distribution of textbooks.

It is apparent that compared to the student population and the requirement of primary schools the present level of expenditure is small. The civil works component providing for enough classroom accommodation and recruitment and training of additional teachers to conform to the laid down 1:40 teacher-student ratio have substantial cost implications. Over and above, helping schools to run extra academic activities, and application of modern education technology in teaching-learning, essential to raise the quality of education, require much more budgetary allocation



All health information to keep you up to date

Always children first

Stools: What is normal for a baby?

- * Most babies' bowels work within 24 hours of birth
- * The colour and texture of your baby's stools will vary
- * First stools look blackish-green and sticky. This is because your baby is getting rid of meconium (mucus and bile which were in the intestine while in the uterus)
- * As the baby begins to take feeds from the breast or bottle, the stools change to greenish-brown, then yellowish-brown

Breast-fed babies

- Tend to have soft, yellowy stools. There may be some green stools while the digestive system is settling down
- * Several small stools a day are normal for the first few weeks. This does not mean the baby has diarrhoea
- * After a few weeks there are fewer stools only about one a day
- * May go for two or three days without a stool because breast milk is nearly all absorbed and contains very little waste. This does not mean the baby is constipated

Bottle-fed babies

- * Have brownish stools three or four times a day at first, decreasing to about one a day
- * Miss the occasional day without a problem but, if the stools are hard and are only passed every two or three days, consult your health visitor or doctor
- * Sometimes have a few curds in the stool. This is undigested protein and is nothing to worry about

Dos and Don'ts

Do

- * Take care to store medications in a cool, dry place and protect them from light or refrigerate them, if advised to do so.
- * Keep all drugs, including seemingly harmless medications such as cough preparations, locked away out of the reach of children.
- * Check your medicine chest regularly in case other members of the family have left their unwanted drugs in it, and to make sure that none of the normal supplies are out of date.

- * Keep all drugs in the original containers with the original instructions to avoid confusion.

Don't

- * Take any prescribed or over-the-counter drugs without first consulting your doctor if you are pregnant or trying to conceive.
- * Offer your medication to other people or take medication that has been prescribed for someone else (even if the symptoms are the same).

Next : Fact and faction