

# The promise must be kept

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THE fifth annual *Education Watch* report focuses on quality with equity in primary education. It probes into inter-connected factors bearing on performance of schools and children in specific locations in 10 upazilas. A micro (children, teachers, parents and the school) and a meso (role of the upazila education authority and local administration) perspective, complementing a macro and national view, the focus of the previous *Education Watch* studies, is provided in the present report.

The big picture of primary education deprivation is well-known. Despite commendable progress in the last fifteen years in expanding enrolment, the large majority of children, as many as two out of three, mostly poor and disadvantaged in other ways, grow up without basic skills and preparation for life.

It is not one or another cause, but a *syndrome of poverty and disadvantage* that causes deprivation in primary education. Contributing importantly to non-enrolment and dropout are child labour, the phenomenon of private tutoring, school and home factors related to low class attendance, and problems of the first generation learners. Almost half of primary school children have mothers who are illiterate and both parents are without literacy for one-third of the children.

Low average school attendance, about 60 percent, is caused by children's need to help at home either regularly or for seasonal farm work, ill health or sickness of child or a parent, acute family economic problems, and falling behind in lessons with no help to catch up from teacher or at home. Without the capacity of school and willingness or ability of teachers to help the child to catch up, any disruption in schooling set in motion a slippery slope of further lag, more absences, and eventual dropping out.

The well-intentioned interventions such as distribution of free textbooks and stipends for children from poor families, consuming a large part of the government spending on primary education, are beset by governance problems and clearly do not address the quality problems. Arguably, as the experience of NGOs show, ensuring a properly



functioning school is the most important inducement that can be offered even to poor parents who are willing to make sacrifices for their children's education.

Classroom observations carried out by the research team revealed that serious deficiencies in subject knowledge in key subjects as Mathematics, Bangla and English caused students to be subjected to wrong information, explanation, examples and pronunciation. Teaching was based, with rare exceptions, on one-way communication in often large and crowded classrooms with a class timetable that did not permit carrying out a complete lesson sequence. Few learning aids were used, but a stick as a tool for discipline was seen in many classes.

Teacher recruitment riddled with corruption was seen by stakeholders at the local level as a major impediment to improvement of quality in primary education. SMC members, parents, teachers, AUEOs and UEOs all expressed concern about infractions and manipulation of rules and regulations regarding the recruitment of teachers in both government and registered non-government schools leading to recruitment of people who

were not qualified to be teachers.

No one appears to have a responsibility and authority to maintain an oversight of primary education in the upazila. There was no common or comprehensive source of information about education in the upazila, nor was there any focal point for promoting or planning for compulsory primary education or EFA goals in the upazila. The madrasas, for example, remained virtually without any supervision although they served a sizable proportion of children. The proprietary kindergartens are growing in number and are popular with the upcoming middle class even in small towns and some villages, but they remain outside any regulatory framework. In fact, there is no focal point of responsibility to protect and uphold public interest in the sphere of education in the upazila.

Ambitious goals have been set for PEDP II, the umbrella development programme of the government in primary education for the period 2003/4 to 2008/9, on which much hope is pinned. But it has been already late by more than a year in getting off the ground. There has to be a much greater sense of urgency, greater determination to cut through

inertia and bureaucratic obstacles on both national and external donor fronts, and a stronger will to resist extraneous vested interests than has been seen so far. The slow and halting pace of progress witnessed in the five years since the 2015 EFA goals were adopted must shift to a different cadence.

It is our sincere hope that the findings about the problems and the school will lead to greater efforts in shaping reforms and implementing them. It would be necessary to look again, in the light of the findings, at what have been planned and how these can be implemented effectively and professionally. All organizations and institutions in the country, willing and able to contribute to this effort, should be involved. We also hope that the seven-point agenda for primary education with quality and equity recommended by the *Education Watch* Team will receive the backing of the policy-makers so that these can serve as a guideline.

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# Quality with equity Seven action priorities

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AS cautioned by UNESCO's latest EFA Monitoring Report, published in November 2004, Bangladesh will not reach its EFA goals for 2015 with a "business as usual" approach. Ambitious goals have been set for PEDP II, the umbrella development programme of the government in primary education for the period 2003/4 to 2008/9, on which much hope is pinned.

As far as the government is concerned, PEDP II is virtually synonymous with primary education development in the country until 2009. At the beginning of 2005, one and a half year past its formal launching date in July 2003, the programme is still in the process of getting off the ground. Progress has been lacking or very slow on meeting key conditions for release of donor resources. These include a comprehensive institutional and organisational analysis of primary education management, as the prelude to organisational reforms in the sub-sector, and measures regarding establishment of a separate primary education cadre to promote professionalisation and capacity building in the sub-sector.

Establishment of non-formal learning centers to serve up to two million out of school children through the Reaching Out-of-school Children (ROSC) project is expected to complement PEDP II, sine PEDP II is confined to formal public sector primary education. The ROSC project signifies the recognition by the government of the need and legitimacy of non-formal approaches, so far supported only by NGOs, as essential complement to formal schools. However, in working out the implementation of ROSC, it appears that not much has been learned by the authorities and the donors supporting the project from the sad experience of literacy and post-literacy programmes of the discredited and disbanded Directorate of Non-formal Education. A model similar in essence to contractual arrangements with NGOs managed by officials that was the cause of DNFE's undoing should not be followed in ROSC.

The *Education Watch* research team has recommended seven action priorities aimed at moving from the business-as-usual approach and injecting a renewed

sense of urgency about fulfilling the promise of quality primary education for all children.

1. *A recognition of inequity and deprivation in primary education as a serious problem and a commitment to deal with it.* A genuine commitment to removing deprivation and inequity has to be reflected in:

- Applying poverty impact and consequences as a component in education programme allocation,
- Assessment and evaluation,
- Supporting research, experimentation and analysis of experience about how the poor can be effectively served and the programme outcomes enhanced

2. *Addressing at the school level the syndrome of poverty and disadvantage affecting student performance.* The locus of action for this effort has to be the school where the education authorities can reach the child, the parents and the teachers and work out appropriate measures responding to specific circumstances of disadvantage. The elements of this response would be:

- Identifying the disadvantaged children and their particular difficulties,
- Extra help in studies in class or out of class to first generation and "slow" learners,
- Providing learning materials (notebooks, workbooks, pencil, paper etc.) and elimination of all cash costs to children from poor families,
- Regular communication of school with the parents of the disadvantaged, designating a teacher for a group of these parents for maintaining contact,
- Preparing managing committees, teachers, and community about this special effort,
- Provision of budget to be managed by school for this purpose redirecting stipend funds for this purpose would be a wise step.

3. *Effective implementation of competency-based primary education.* The promise and potential of curricula and teaching-learning based on essential learning continuum and competencies, even after a decade, have not been fulfilled. The concept remains sound and valid. A concerted effort needs to be made to implement competency-based curriculum, classroom work, and learning assessment. The components of this effort will include:

= Critical review of "terminal" and intermediate competencies for students.

= Using time and resources optimally to ensure student achievement in basic skills; a case in point is wasting scarce student and teacher time in the attempt to teach English from grade 1, when most teachers cannot speak English.

= Planning and support for technical work, including action research, on translating competencies into classroom activities, lesson plans, learning aids and continuing assessment methods in classroom, and pre-service and in-service training of teachers.

= Support for professional work on competency-based curriculum development, textbooks and learning materials.

4. *Decentralisation, local planning and management trial.* The absence of any oversight responsibility and planning of primary education involving all service providers at the local level and lack of management authority with accountability at school level have been identified as major impediments to quality and equity in primary education. At the same time, there is apprehension about the problems decentralization. The appropriate way to deal with this dilemma is to initiate development and trial of decentralised planning and management in six districts in six divisions. The components of the trial can include:

- Defining tasks, responsibilities, capacities and accountability process at district, upazila and school levels,
- Developing upazila primary education planning and school improvement plans, as anticipated in PEDP II, including technical and professional support for these,
- Working towards a unified approach to ensure core quality standards for all
- Managing at school level learning time and calendar, academic programme, and teacher's performance of duties,
- Capacity- building at district, upazila and school level including capacity to manage and use information.

Implementation of PEDP II programme in a decentralised mode in the selected upazilas and districts with trial and demonstration of effective implementation of the programme should be a key objective of the trial.

5. *Supporting development and use of professional capacity.* The management structure and decision-making process at present allow little room for development and effective use of professional capacity in primary education. Personnel recruitment and deployment policy and practice hinder development of centres for professional and technical expertise in the sector in institutions such as NAPE and NCTB and at central and field levels of DPE. Institutions including IER of Dhaka University, IED of BRAC University, NAPE and NCTB should be supported to work together on developing strategy and plan for professionalisation and professional capacity development in primary education. This effort should be linked to and complemented by measures anticipated under PEDP II. The elements of this activity would be:

- = Undertaking institutional and organizational analysis of primary education management required in PEDP II.
- = Establishment of a primary education cadre - a condition of PEDP II donor support.
- = Development of need-based short and longer specialised training and professional development courses,
- = Rethinking and redesigning in pre-service and in-service teacher training and action research to cope with huge needs in terms of quality and quantity.

6. *A greater voice of stakeholders at all levels.* In the education system, more than in all other social enterprises, the participatory approach, transparency in decision-making and a high degree of accountability should become the norm. Openness and sharing of information and dialogue in public forums should be practised at school, union parishad and upazila regarding objectives, plans and progress, and budgetary allocations in the school, and for the upazila. The process of transparency and participation of all stakeholders should include:

- = Periodic sharing of information and plans, and monitoring of progress, e.g., of school's annual work plan, upazila primary education plan and use of funds received from government and other sources, performance evaluation of schools in public forums organised for this purpose.
- = Parent Teacher Association.
- = Transparent and public selection/election of school managing committee and upazila education committee members.

7. *Addressing governance issues.* Political interference and undue involvement of politicians, institutionalised by government regulations about managing committees, have been identified as a major contributor to corruption, mismanagement, waste and obstacle to good management practices in general. Support is needed from the Prime Minister, in her capacity as the Minister in charge of Primary and Mass Education, to develop a consensus and adopt and abide by a policy decision to make education, especially primary education, free from political interference, which will help reduce mismanagement and corruption. Support and encouragement from the highest political level is essential for implementation of this seven point agenda.

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# Nature of deprivation Key findings

SAMIR R NATH

= A survey of households and selected government, registered non-government, and non-formal primary schools and Ebtedayee madrasas in 10 upazilas provided insights into the nature of deprivation of children from primary education. Key findings are listed below.

= The good news is that a broad-based gender parity has been observed across the board among catchment areas, upazilas, school types, and socio-economic groups. This accomplishment needs to be deepened to improve learning outcome for both girls and boys, and extended to include all who still remain left out.

= However large-scale deprivation persists.

- One out of five children does not enrol in primary school.
- One out of three of those enrolled drops out before completing primary education.
- One out of three who complete five years of primary schooling still remains non-literate or semi-literate.
- Therefore, the large majority of children, two out of three, mostly poor and disadvantaged in other ways, grow up without basic skills and preparation for life.

= The most pronounced differences were among socio economic categories in respect of enrolment, repetition, dropout, and participation in primary education, which delineated the magnitude and nature of the problem of deprivation in primary education. Self-rated food security status of households was taken as the proxy for socio-economic grouping.

= Studies of the category labelled as ultra poor, which consists of 20 percent to one-third of the population depending on criteria, showed net enrolment of 65 percent compared to around 80 percent nationally.

= In the surveyed upazilas, a child from an "always in deficit" family had a 30 percent less chance of being enrolled in a school and five times more chance of dropping out from school compared to a child from a "surplus" family.

= A quarter of the non-enrolled children cited poverty as the reason for non-enrolment. Over forty percent who dropped out indicated poverty as the reason for dropping out.

= Children not "liking school" was an important cause for not enrolling and the most important reason for dropping out. This indicates problems about how the school functions.

= It was not one or another cause that could be identified and fixed, but a *syndrome of poverty and disadvantage* including child labour, first generation learner, inability to afford private tutors, and causes related to children's absenteeism that need to be addressed.

= In the 6-14 age group of the poorest economic category, one-third of the children were non students and at work or unemployed, and 30 percent

were students and working at the same time.

= Forty-seven percent of the mothers and 43 percent of the fathers of primary school children in the upazilas were without any schooling. Both parents were without education for a quarter of the children. Over forty percent of the children can be regarded as "first generation learners" if the criterion regarding both parents' education is applied.

= Private tutors for primary school children have become a norm. Forty three percent of the children had private tutors; they paid an average of Tk 152 per month for eight months in a year. Children who needed extra help with their studies most, first generation learners, could afford it the least.

= Low average school attendance, about 60 percent, was linked with factors related to both the operation of the school and the family situation of the child. Causes identified were children's need to help at home either regularly or for seasonal farm work, ill health or sickness of child or a parent, acute family economic problems, and falling behind in lessons with no help to catch up from teacher or at home. Any interruption in schooling, set in motion for the poor a vicious spiral of further lag, more absences, and eventually dropping out.

= Children with special needs, especially those with disabilities, and children of ethnic minorities whose mother tongue is not Bangla, are special dimensions in the picture of deprivation in primary education.

= Stipend recipients (who should be the identified poor) were roughly evenly divided between four socio-economic categories (based on food security criteria used in this study). Over two-thirds of the children from the poorest category were not selected to be recipients of stipend; but 27 percent of children from affluent households received the stipend.

= Household survey revealed that forty percent of the recipients were paid Tk 200 or less instead of Tk 300 as a quarterly payment. Students from "rich" households received on average Tk 260 and those from "poor" households were paid Tk 225.

= Targeting the poor, the principal rationale of the stipend program, does not appear to be working, at least in the upazilas under study. There are also major problems in the management and administration of the program, one manifestation of which is "cuts" taken from stipend. A basic dilemma of the programme is: Are there ways of spending scarce money to help the disadvantaged children perform better in school and attend school regularly rather than subject them to criteria which they find difficult to meet. Non-formal education programmes run by NGOs have attracted and helped poor children in school and helped them to perform well without stipend as an inducement.

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# Provisions and quality Key findings

EDUCATION WATCH RESEARCH TEAM

*Education Watch 2003/4* report is based on a survey of 8,212 households and 47 institutions, 73 focus group discussion, 22 case studies of children and discussion with key informants about primary education in 10 Upazilas. The highlights are presented below.

## A. Education provisions

= There is a serious insufficiency of provisions, creating a deficit of the order of 50 to 60 percent in terms of schools, classrooms and teachers, if criteria for acceptable quality of provisions, such as a class room with no more than 40 children with a qualified teacher, are applied.

= Schools, especially GPS and RNGPS, which served over 80 percent of the children, were not distributed according to set criteria and were not related to child population or area of the upazila. Nor was the ratio between GPS and RNGPS based on criteria or a discernible pattern.

= There was no planned effort to develop complementarity between GPS and RNGPS, on the one hand, and the other types of institutions, such as madrasas and non-formal schools, to ensure adequate provisions for all children.

= The GPSs had on an average one more teacher than the RNGPSs, (average of 4.5 and 3.8 teachers respectively), but both had teaching personnel to run schools only in two shifts; the gender imbalance in teaching positions remained high (37 percent female teachers) in spite of the policy of affirmative action in recruitment.

Concourse

## B. Education resources in schools

= Fifteen percent of the schools in the 10 upazilas were rated by the research team as "good" with safe, sturdy and clean roof, walls and floors. About half were "fair" and 35 percent were rated as "poor," - judged by very basic criteria applied. Hazardous and definitely unsafe conditions were observed in some GPS and madrasas.

= Toilet facilities did not exist in 15 percent of GPS and RNGPS, based on the research team data from sample schools. One-third of the schools had separate functioning toilets for males and females and half had the same facility for both sexes. Clean water availability was "fair" to "adequate" in 80 percent of the schools.

= Construction and repair jobs done with the periodic government grants were handled by LGED without much say of school and upazila education office and was regarded almost unanimously as highly unsatisfactory, characterized by "shoddy work, waste and corruption."

= Two-thirds of the schools, as rated by the research team, had sufficient light and visibility in classrooms but one third did not meet this very basic condition. Two-thirds had an electric connection, but not necessarily electricity in all classrooms.

= Learning aids, other than blackboards and textbooks, were generally scarce, except in non-formal schools, and were not used in class, even when some were available from development projects. There were a few exception to the rule where these were used and even teachers developed their own.

= Insufficiency of teachers was a common problem. Eighty percent of the schools had four or less teachers, 21 percent three or less. On an average, 30 percent schools had more than 60 students per teacher; over two-thirds had more than 40 students per teacher.

## C. Quality in the classroom

= An inflexible and uniform centrally imposed daily school time-table fragmented the school day in very short blocks of time for up to eight separate school subjects every day, with little

time for anything other than a mechanical routine in the class, even for children of grades one and two. In two shift schools, over 90 percent of all schools, this meant no more than 20 to 25 minutes of learning time in a class period, which was not sufficient to complete a lesson sequence.

= The process of teacher recruitment was seen by stakeholders at the local level as a major impediment to improvement of quality in primary education. SMC members, parents, teachers, AUEOs and UEOs all expressed concern about infractions and manipulation of rules and regulations regarding the recruitment of both GPS and RNGPS teachers leading to recruitment of teachers who were not qualified to be teachers.

= Most GPS teachers are trained but most RNGPS teachers are not. With an annual capacity of 6,000 in PTIs and at least 100,000 primary school teachers in need of training, the demand cannot be met by current training approaches. Moreover major overhaul is needed in PTI training to make it more effective, since studies have shown no significant impact of this training in student performance.

= Two main initiatives for in-service training - sub-cluster training and URC subject-based training - are not working well in the 10 upazilas. Professional deficiency of AUEOs who are the trainers for this event, and inadequate follow-up of outcomes of training at the school level rendered the sub-cluster training into a monthly social gathering of teachers. URCs nominally exist in the ten upazilas but four are not functional yet and three had stopped due to lack of fund (since the development project funding ran out).

## D. Management of schools

= AUEOs are the frontline supervisors for primary schools with the charge of giving teachers professional support and advice to do their job properly. Most informants in focus groups and interviews thought this promise is not fulfilled. Large number of schools, counting only GPS, RNGPS and community schools, in the charge of an AUEO (average of 41 and a range of 16 to 212 in the ten upazilas), no budget for mobility, lack of training for offering professional supervisory support to teachers, and filling out long inspection forms about compliance with rules rather than advising on effective teaching were identified as the problems. In addition, complaints were rampant that extorting pay-

ments and favours from teachers on threat of punishment was a common practice.

= Union Parishad - the only local government tier existing at present, has almost no role in primary education. Chairmen and members mostly said they did not know of any significant role in primary education that has been assigned to them, although many were willing to be involved.

= SMCs have been given a broad and sweeping role in primary school management, but with little real authority. Political control now institutionalized by giving the local MP a role, and cronyism of head teachers in the case of GPS and of the founding group in the case of RNGPS, have led to formation of SMCs with mostly the wrong people for such a committee.

= No one has the responsibility and authority to maintain an oversight of primary education in the upazila. There was no common or comprehensive source of information about education in the upazila, nor was there any focal point for promoting or planning for compulsory primary education or EFA goals in the upazila. The madrasas, for example, remained virtually without any supervision although they enrolled 9 percent of the students in the upazila. In fact, there is no focal point of responsibility to protect and uphold public interest in the sphere of education in the upazila.

= Most stakeholders at the school and upazila level were in favour of much greater and meaningful decentralization of education management. They were, at the same time, apprehensive that local pressures of vested interests would increase; and that resources were scarce at the local level, which had to come from the central authorities. On balance, however, they favoured a genuine shift towards devolution of authority and decisions to district, upazila and school levels. This would require, according to them, defining power, authority and control over resources at different levels and trying out ways of making this work. It was not clear to all stakeholders what form decentralization should take and how it was to be achieved; hence the importance of trying out approaches in selected locations.

The research team led by Samir R Nath included Altaf Hossain, Md Mahbubul Kabir, Md Abul Kalam, Mirja M Shahjamal, Rosie Nilufar Yasmin and Tata Zafar.

