

POLICY ROUNDTABLE

Education as a Human Right: Where are we?

Increase resources for education

FROM PAGE 3

five or they do not go on after completion of class five?

I do not want to go into the figures for literacy. But my impression is that we are working with two different definitions. That creates a problem. And there may be a question of different age groups. When the government announced the rate of 64 percent, they were talking only of adults of the age 15 to 45 years. UNESCO has a definition and there are other definitions. When we talk about 'functional literacy,' that's a very different thing altogether. In 2000, a writer said that 'functional illiteracy' in USA was 20 percent, which meant 80 percent of the population was functionally literate. In United Kingdom, it was said that 19 percent were functionally illiterate.

Dr. Manzoor Ahmed

I think these are very important questions. On primary education completion, when we said more than half do not get a full primary education, we meant more than half do not complete class five. Government data at present show that about 10 percent of the age group [6-10 years] doesn't even come to school. Of those who come into school in class one, by class five, about half drop out. This is from the government's own EMIS, Education Management Information System, data of DPE and also supported by a 'Baseline Study' done under PEDP II for 2005. This showed 47-48 percent of children dropping out between classes one to five. If you add 47-48 percent dropout of students and 10 percent of eligible children who don't even come to school, that adds up to more than half of primary age children not getting a full cycle of 5 years of primary education. We are not even talking about the quality at all. It is just the numbers.

At the secondary level it is a similar situation. I am talking of students in classes six to ten and up to SSC examination. Eighty percent of those who start class one drop out, that is, they do not pass the SSC examination. About half of them, 40-50 percent reach class ten. And then, some drop out before they sit for SSC and those who take the examination, about half pass. These are all based on official data. We are not producing the data ourselves.

On literacy, I think it is unfortunate that it has become, unnecessarily, a very controversial issue. Yes, there are questions of definition and problems of measurement. Yes, the figure of 60 percent is claimed for Pakistan and a higher number for India and so on. What the definition is and how it is measured are problems not just in our country.

I think Pakistan's data of 60 percent and India's data of 70 percent or so, are also not really credible or meaningful. And here, the numbers have come from *Education Watch* and Ahsania Mission surveys on the basis of a very simple literacy-numeracy test applied to a scientifically selected nationwide sample. The definition taken is that one should be able to read and write a meaningful and useful sentence. It's not a very complicated test and not really a measure of functional and sustainable skill. Basically, it is the ability to read and write some simple sentences. And that is the basis on which the test was constructed, and on that basis it was found to be 41-42 percent.

The age structure may be a bit different in the government data. As I understand, the government data are from two sources. One is the census, which is just asking people 'can you read and write?' And if they say 'yes,' then they are literate. That is the census definition. The other government source is the literacy programme. There are so many centres and if learners come to the centres, and there is some sort of testing, they are all counted. There are lots of questions if this really measures what they learn. And then children who have completed or attended primary school upto the third grade are added up. So that is the basis. If you go by an objective, scientific measurement, then this source is not quite credible.

I think the important thing is not to have a fixation on a percentage, 62 or 65 or 41. I think we have a big problem here of getting functional and usable literacy for our large population. We should really concentrate on how to make literacy skills available to a large population, to have some sort of functional education for all and also to eliminate the discrimination in gender and urban-rural gap in this area.

Dr. Saadat Husain

There is no reason to say all of a sudden that we do not believe in government figures. Government figures have also come through rigorous exercises. We have carried these out with the help of consultants, who have been fielded by the donor agencies, some 8-9 donors.

Now when Dr. Manzoor says that this figure or that figure is not a big thing, I say this is a big thing! Because 64 percent is not the same as 41 percent. If we say that Ahsania Mission has done something or CAMPE has done something, then we should also say that the Government has also done these things. Now when you say 64 percent [are literate], that means two-thirds of the population are literate; and when you say 41 percent [are literate], that means two-thirds of the population are illiterate. This is a big difference.

I still say that Bangladesh is a leader in the field of adult literacy and in primary education. And some figure is shown as if we have done nothing. There may be a committee to reconcile different figures. Or we should cite all the figures that are provided by the government, World Bank, and BBS. I still feel that in the case of primary education and adult literacy Bangladesh stands far above many other countries.

Kazi Rafiqul Alam

President & Chief Executive, Dhaka Ahsania Mission (DAM)

I shall not contest any of the figures. But I shall discuss a few basic things.



Of the primary age group children, 85 percent are enrolled in school. So, in that group we cannot reach 15 percent. The dropout rate is 25 to 32 percent. Therefore, our completion rate is 55 to 60 percent. Among the students who complete, the competency/achievement level is so low, including their reading ability, that students forget the lessons very soon.

The literacy programme is now almost non-existent. The different programmes that we helped to run did not have any follow up. Due to this absence of continuity, I suppose much of what is learnt is forgotten. So we cannot accept it to be 65 percent as Dr. Saadat claimed. We need to admit the fact that the literacy rate now is closer to 45 percent. When *Education Watch* and Ahsania Mission conducted research, we found that most people could not read.

Secondly, about the definition. There was a bureau called DNFE (Directorate of Non-formal Education) under the Division of Primary and Mass Education. The books it published (for the literacy programme) were designed to achieve a high skill level. But during census they just ask whether a person could read or write. So the census results and our research based on competence cannot be similar.

Since DNFE was closed down a few years ago, NGOs have been trying to carry on the literacy programme. But we need support from the government in this regard. We are failing to provide facilities to male and female young adults who are eleven plus and have passed the primary school. So they are relapsing into illiteracy. I think the group here may conduct advocacy to receive support and leadership from the government.

By 2015 we need to reduce the illiteracy level to 30 percent. We need to set a target and we have eight years to achieve it. I would suggest that we need to re-start the total literacy movement. We may concentrate on a particular division instead of the whole country at a time. We can use the 1st year to build up a cadre and for capacity building in the concerned division. Then from the 2nd year we can start the programme. We have both government and non-government organizations and a campaign can help mobilise people's support.

Improving Access and Equity for All

Mahfuz Anam

I would take this opportunity to say that we have two very experienced former Education Ministers here. Between the two, who have been at the helm of affairs for five years each, they together have a 10 years' perspective. Perhaps you can share with us, in the tenure of 5 years for each of you, what were your most serious challenges as a Minister, what were the government actions that worked well, and what you could not do due to structural constraints, rather than indulging in claims and counter-claims. Thank you.

Dr. M. Osman Farruk

Former Education Minister, Govt. of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

I was an Education Minister exactly six months ago today. Mr. Saadat, I think you haven't lost some of the fire you had as a student leader.



On the issue raised in the beginning about where we are, I mostly agree with Mr. Saadat that this paper seems to say that nothing has been done in the country. We have achieved a lot, but we have many unfinished businesses as well. About the questions that have been raised today on enrolment, dropout, illiteracy rates etc., many are actually definition issues. There are other matters on which we do not have any dispute.

On enrolment in primary education, we have to see where we had been 10 to 20 years back and where we are now. We have to see the improvement made in the infrastructure. If you go to the villages, you will not get any primary school without a masonry building. I rather object to the BRAC primary schools. We have long passed that stage when students were required to sit on the floor mat. Regarding BRAC primary school standard, they have to graduate from what they are doing.

Even if the completion rate is 65 percent in primary schools, I think 35 percent dropout rate is a very serious concern for us. We have not yet analyzed through empirical tests in the field why the students dropout. It may be due to poverty, or due to infrastructure, or pedagogy might be a reason.

PEDP-II has an expansion plan for physical facilities. I say that in primary level the main reason for dropout is inadequate infrastructure facilities. There are 70 to 80 students in a class in

rural schools. It is an impossible situation. They are crammed together. They sit in the verandah or hang from the railings. A primary school for a child should be an attractive place. A child should feel inclined to go to school in the morning. The infrastructure, teaching method, textbooks etc. of our schools do not provide that attraction. There is also a question of distance. We expect that our children will go to primary or secondary schools walking many kilometers. We need to review our primary school strategy from the point of view of infrastructure and quality of facilities in the school.

Another aspect is the type of materials used in the school. If you compare the primary schools even in India, Pakistan or Sri Lanka with those in our country, you will see that their provisions are very different from ours. We need to review the quality of teachers, what they teach in the class, how they teach, as well as the learning aids available.

We have to look at the problem in its entirety, which should include infrastructure, curriculum, pedagogy and teacher's quality, etc. We need to think about school meal too. Children cannot study in an empty stomach.

We have to find out what the key factors are for the gap between urban and rural children and the rich and the poor. Do most of the dropout children come from poor families? Is distance a factor? Is the lack of food a factor? Is there a video shop in front of the school creating loud noise? We need to examine all those.

On the literacy issue, there is a question of definition. I think there is a World Bank definition for literacy that says, you should be able to read and write in any language. You should be able to write a few lines. If we take this as the basis, then literacy rate will be lower than many cited numbers.

Mahfuz Anam

Don't we have a governmental definition of literacy now?

Dr. Saadat Husain

Our definition is "Read, Write and functional knowledge, basic life skill knowledge".

Our definition is more rigorous than UNESCO's. There are eight definitions in all and our definition is more rigorous than the UNESCO definition.

Dr. M. Osman Farruk

Then we got to see how many really meet this definition. I also have genuine doubts about it. When I go to the villages, I talk to people. In one instance, I was told that in that village total literacy had been achieved. But it was found to be incorrect.

Combating Unequal access: Core Standards in All Institutions

Dr. M. Osman Farruk continues

In any case, I think we should have one benchmark definition. And in light of that definition, we should do empirical tests and fix the rate. There is no point in being happy with an inflated number. There is lot more work that should be done to establish the benchmark based on a reality check.

On the question of quality improvement, I would say, the major achievement in education has been in expansion; on the quality side we have not gained much, whether it is primary, secondary, or university education. Let me tell you something that might be of some consolation. I got a book containing the convocation addresses since the establishment of Dhaka University. Each address focused on quality, international linkages, science and research. So, these have been issues since 1922. But today, especially in the era of globalization, if we cannot ensure quality in education, we will be nowhere.

One of the points was that education system is now a vehicle for reinforcing social division. We got to examine it, whether it is really reinforcing it, and if so, to what extent? If we consider English medium schools responsible for social divisiveness, then we got to examine that. I do not think that there is any feature within our general education system, outside the English Medium system, which exacerbates divisiveness. But it is not only the education sector; there are elements which promote disparity in industrial sector, commercial sector, everywhere in society.

I appreciate the point about introducing general education in Madrasas. It was rightly said that Madrasas cannot be abolished. The British established the Alia Madrasa. The system continued to flourish. My predecessor Education Minister and we both tried to remove the existing non-equivalences in Madrasa education. I tried to introduce English, math, vocational courses, and computer training. That should be the trend - to bring the two curriculums, teaching methods, facilities, and teachers to a common standard.

On one Ministry and a Permanent Education Commission

Mahfuz Anam

One Ministry and one Government Commission?

Dr. M. Osman Farruk

Let me first talk about the one Ministry issue. I was Education Minister, and was not dealing with primary education. But I used to get involved out of my interest. Education Ministry that looks after secondary education is very large. My illustrious predecessor used to preside over both primary and secondary education. I doubt if there is any administrative benefit in combining these two ministries. On the other hand, I strongly feel that the primary cycle should be extended up to class eight. I understand they have extended it to class nine in India and in China also it has been extended. ADB also had a

CONTINUED ON PAGE 5