

Expand vocational/technical skills

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recommendation to extend it up to class eight.

We have infrastructure and other difficulties. So, if one ministry looks after up to class eight, the problem of coordination between primary and secondary school will be removed. And there will possibly be a better chance of improving the quality of education at the basic level. I think without wasting time over the number of ministries, we should look at the entire policy in relation to whether primary education should be confined to class five or it should be extended up to lower secondary or class eight.

Mahfuz Anam

What was the experience in this regard? The primary education was put into the portfolio of Prime Minister with a high hope that it would function better there. Due to her busy schedule, this appeared to have been neglected. So we may have two ministries but not attached to the Prime Minister's Office.

Dr. M. Osman Farruk

But that is a different issue which I do not want to discuss.

Mahfuz Anam

Could you share any of your experience relating to this?

Dr. M. Osman Farruk

I am saying from my experience that there has to be better coordination. Because, primary education is the base on which you build up and you need to have necessary coordination. Perhaps, instead of combining two ministries, secondary, higher secondary and university education could be kept together. In many countries, they have completely separated higher education and have established the Higher and University Education Commission. I suggest that primary education be extended upto class eight. There is a need for meticulous planning.

On major decentralization, there are many things in its favour. Considering the ground realities, you can go up to a certain degree in decentralization. But, there is no benefit in only decentralizing the education ministry, unless you also decentralize all the line ministries. Decentralizing only one ministry will be difficult.

I have reservations about the point made about expansion with highly politicized and centralized governance. I don't know what the definition of 'high politicization' is. When the political government is in power, all NGOs and donor agencies say that political commitment and leadership are important. When the political government is not in power, they say that politicization is the problem.

I accept that partisan politics which affects quality should be avoided. But if you are asking for local level leadership, the political workers and leaders at the local level are the ones who can provide this leadership. It is misleading to say that education cannot be politicized. The chairman of the union council used to look after the primary school in the old days. He was a political figure. But, I agree that partisan politics must be avoided.

We need centralized governance without centralized government. Our primary and secondary education is decentralized. 98 percent of the secondary schools in this country are not government school and they are managed by decentralized committees elected locally. That has created major problems in running the schools. Because, the persons interested in becoming committee member spend up to five lakh taka in postering and campaigning. If you want local stakeholder participation, that is already there in school committees and it's not working.

One of the co-participants spoke about the need for the monitoring and supervisory board. During our administration, we established a monitoring and supervisory board, where politicians were excluded. They moved to court and stayed the supervisory board. So there are pitfalls in decentralization. But I agree on the need for improving day-to-day management. Now-a-days the schools do not have guardians as such. The management committee is not interested in the school at all. Their interest starts when there are recruitments or tender floating at schools. They also get interested when filling up forms for public examination starts. Otherwise they are not interested.

You need to give responsibilities to the local stakeholders through decentralization. But how do we do it? Nothing has worked in the past. We wanted to involve local intelligentsia, but it did not work either. It is quite a difficult task.

About a Permanent Education Commission, there are arguments both for and against. There have been many commissions and bodies before. You all have seen how they have functioned. I have no reason to believe that a Permanent National Education Commission, whether it is statutory or non-statutory, will function any better. I think instead there has to be a mechanism for continuous review and monitoring of education, which is absent at present. When we set up an education commission, it takes some of the provisions from its predecessor, thereby concoct a new report, and it never becomes acceptable to all.

We cannot have an annual or five yearly national education commission, which will provide solutions to everything. We should set up a mechanism for continuously reviewing and monitoring of policies, quality and other aspects of education.

Professional capacity building is very important. I don't

care whether it is there at the ministry level, but it has to be there at the teachers' level. Somebody spoke about the need for NCTB staff working continuously for 10 years or so. Those who go to NCTB are all civil servants from the education cadre. Their service rules are such that we cannot keep them at one place for more than three years. We need to view this thing in broader terms. The main professionalism you got to introduce is at the level of teachers and headmasters.

Resource allocation for education currently is 2.5 percent of GNP, which is not enough. We also should see how it is being utilized. Salaries and wages represent 80-90 percent of our expenditure, whether it is at primary school, secondary school, or the university. How will you then provide books for children? How should we get allocation for libraries? How shall we buy computers? It is not only a question of increasing the quantum, but also a question of how it is allocated between the education purposes and non-education purposes. So much expenditure on salaries and wages cannot be supported.

Mahfuz Anam

It was very enlightening. I had to give the former Minister a bit more time. I am afraid I am losing control of these proceedings, because many will speak and time is running out. I offer now the floor to the other Education Minister.

Common Standards, Governance and Decentralisation

A.S.H.K. Sadique

I agree with most of the opinions so far given. It was said that there was no discussion on education before. In my opinion it is not required. Because, education is mainly a matter of political commitment and it is to be implemented with a political perspective. I do not mean partisan politics, I am talking about the political government. We prepared an education policy in the year 2000; I do not know why it was not implemented. From the words of the immediate past minister, I find that he had no serious disagreement with whatever we wrote.

We also said that primary education should be up to class eight. We said English, Mathematics, Bangla, science & technology should be introduced in the madrasas in line with standard curriculums. Unfortunately, I did not get a copy of the new education policy [prepared under BNP government], which was not much circulated.

Now I shall talk about the main point which is 'Quality'. In the 'Jomtien' document only numbers were emphasized. Later when we went to 'Dakar,' where the minister from Egypt was there, we both forcefully said that we did not believe only in 'Education for All'. It should be 'Quality Education for All'. There was a lot of opposition against adding 'quality' in the declaration, especially from the donors and the developed countries. My hats off to the Egyptian Minister. We both talked to all the ministers and delegations and persuaded them to include 'quality' in the Dakar goals. We were very much helped by the DG [of UNESCO].

One of our major weaknesses which will linger on is that the female teachers in primary school need to pass class ten, but male teachers need to be intermediate. This weakness is still there and I tried to alter it, but failed for reasons I cannot discuss in public. Moreover, the rule says 60 percent of new primary school teachers must be women.

The buildings in primary schools were so derelict that students did not like to go there at all. A lot has been spent on making primary school buildings pucca. We had a resource mobilization plan, but unfortunately, we did not get enough support from World Bank or other donors commensurate with the population increase. There are definitional issues about the numbers which should be reconciled, before we can discuss these sensibly.

On the professional weakness of NCTB, if you know the history of NCTB, it was started during Ayub Khan's time. He tried to introduce a policy about promoting national cohesion and integration through school textbooks. NCTB has its weakness, because, it is run by Education Cadre of the civil services, who do not stay long on their job. That is a problem. We have to see whether NCTB is required now and in what form. And then decide who should be there.

I agree about decentralization also. Decentralization is necessary; but we have to examine whether decentralization will create or solve problems. Let's look at the management committee. In the past, a local person worked as secretary, who had no personal interest in it. Now the headmaster has become the secretary. Often he wants to have a committee of his choice and an election that serves his choice. We need to examine everything thoroughly, not superficially.

We need to be clear about what we want. If we do not provide quality education at the primary level, then even the university will remain weak. The changes require a long-term commitment. We must have a political and social consensus. I believe that failing to have a consensus will be disastrous for the country. I agree that we have adhocism in our country. There are many reasons for that - mostly political.

There are serious resource constraints. I do not know the present situation. But back then the ratio of expenditure between the developing and developed countries were 1:37 meaning while they spent 37 units, we spent 1 unit per student. Ten years after Jomtien, that ratio became 1:137. However, quality is being discussed also in United States, in UK and other countries. You may

remember that in the US presidential election, John Kerry said that his priority would be education, education and education. I agree that political differences will be there. But partisan politics should be avoided. We should have a consensus on that.

Inclusive Education

Khandaker Jahurul Alam, President, NFOWD



I am president of the Forum for the Disabled. I shall mainly speak on the education of disabled persons.

According to a research done under the esteem project, only 11 percent of the disabled children went to school in the areas where there was some service offered for the disabled. In areas without special services, only 4 percent went to school. In Bangladesh as a whole, 90 percent of the localities are without any service for disabled people; therefore their rate of participation in education is only four percent nationally. The greatest problem in this regard is the government rules of business. Till now education for the disabled remains the function of the Ministry of Social Welfare. Due to this, during my 17 years as the president of the forum I could meet the prime minister - and on 25 April 2007 I could talk to the chief Advisor of the Caretaker Government - but I could not meet the Advisor for Education Ministry. We have requested Dr. Akbar Ali Khan for his co-operation so that we may be able to meet the Advisor responsible for primary and higher education.

The government claims that PEDP II project will extend opportunities for primary education for children with disabilities. But its plan includes only children with moderate disabilities. What about the blind, deaf, autistic children and persons with cerebral palsy? And there is no mention about the need to train teachers for this purpose. The external consultants of PEDP II do not have any idea about our environment and the context, situation etc. We need to understand that the problems faced by the blind, the deaf, the physically disabled and the intellectually disabled are not the same.

Another problem is the question of accessibility. When we talk about accessibility, everybody thinks of a ramp! Accessibility has to be viewed more broadly.

Bangladesh has a fantastic ICT Policy, but there is not a single word about the disabled there! The disabled people including the blind could access quality education through use of ICT. This needs our attention.

In Bangladesh we have 1.6 million disabled children who need to go school today! They are sitting idle in their homes. The responsibility has been given to Ministry of Social Welfare, who has the capacity to educate only 1100 persons. How can we achieve MDG by 2015?

We were told by the Chief Adviser that Tk 810 million are spent on services for 10.4 million disabled persons! How much is being spent for education out of it?

I am very tense today because the UN convention on disabled is being raised to the cabinet for the second time today for ratification. Several of the people who have worked on this are in this roundtable. I hope to get the news of the Cabinet decision very soon. However, I am requesting you to take necessary steps to change the Rules of Business, so that the disabled can access main stream education.

Mahfuz Anam

A piece of good news. I have just been given a slip with good news which I want to share with you. The Advisory Council has decided to sign the UN Convention on People with Disability. We journalists have a bad habit of finding dark spots in good things. We have signed many documents before. We signed yet another, which is good and I welcome it.

Gender Gap

Ayesha Khanam

General Secretary, Bangladesh Mohila Parishad

I would say at the outset that we have had a very lively discussion with two of our ex-policy makers. I wish this discussion by these respected persons could be held in our parliamentary standing committee or in the parliament itself.

Many of our educationists are here. I am happy to note that the real problems are being identified. There may be a debate about numbers.

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