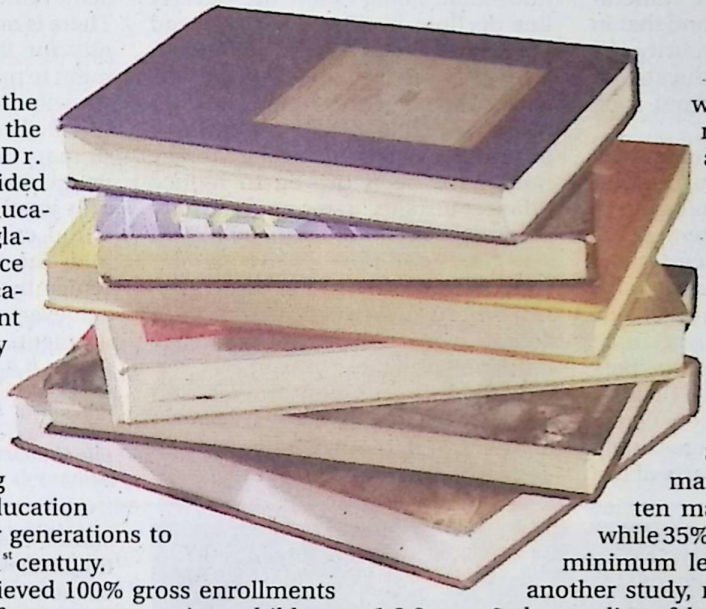
Change Needed in the Quality of Basic Education in Bangladesh

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ON March 2, 2008 the Chief Adviser of the former CTG, Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed, provided some guidelines for educational priorities in Bangladesh during a conference on Governance in Education. These were important policy statements on key educational issues. For the newly elected government, these guidelines can provide a roadmap for establishing improved quality of education and prepare our younger generations to compete in the world of 21st century.

While Bangladesh achieved 100% gross enrollments in its primary schools for age appropriate children already in 2004, the quality of learning remains questionable. "Quality" of learning achievement refers to the levels of student achievement that meet defined minimum standards. Low quality of learning achievement remains an important and major challenge in the nation's basic education system. This has dire implications for the educational system, as well as for the economic, social and political potentials of Bangladesh.

Since becoming independent in 1971, Bangladesh has made impressive gains in economic growth and educational opportunities. And, in less than thirty-five years, Bangladesh has become one of the most successful developing countries in creating educational opportunities for schoolage children. Despite these achievements, much remains to be done, especially in the area of quality of education children receive.

Quality of Learning: Quality of education has not only lagged behind in Bangladesh compared to its achievements in access to education, but it has actually deteriorated.

After five years of primary education, primary school students master only about two to three years of the content. In a study conducted in 1992 among 2100 children age 11-12 years, UNICEF found that children who have completed five years of basic education, have mastered the minimum basic elements of 73% of reading, 28% of writing, 63% of oral arithmetic and 44% of written arithmetic, while the minimum level in all four areas were achieved only by 22% of the children. When these skills were tested among the children who had finished the five grades and continued to secondary school, the results were somewhat improved: reading was at 85%, writing at 50%, oral mathematics46%, and written mathematics stood at 60%, while 35% of students have achieved minimum levels in all four areas. In another study, researchers found that by 1998 the quality of learning achievements has actually dropped. Only one in three has mastered the basic skills, with an achievement of 58% in reading, 13% in writing and 37% oral arithmetic. The quality of learning achievements was found to be much lower for girls and in rural areas. Girls in rural Bangladesh, performed poorly in all four tests, and were at 10 percentage points or below the boys. Having achieved parity in enrollments, Bangladesh now must confront the new challenge.

Importance of Quality of Learning Achievement: Unlike access to education, a problem of quality at the basic level, such as one in Bangladesh, will remain at all levels of educational system and beyond. Unable to read and write at the level they are, children will not be able to learn increasingly more complex material that builds upon prior skills and will have to eventually drop out. Soon, there will be a shortage of qualified students to attend upper level education, and the country will lack a qualified and skilled workforce, and more importantly, an educated citizenry.

Education is a basic human right. EFA Global Monitoring Report (2000) further proposes that education is for personal development and fulfillment as well as for the development of cognitive and functional skills, and that education is vital for building democratic citizenship.