

Building the classroom around children

The purpose of primary education is to put together enabling arrangements in a safe environment that would optimise emotional, cognitive, social and physical development of the child. It is critically important that the school, in particular the classroom, is ready for learning to take place.

F. R. MAHMOOD HASAN

AS the classroom is the focus of concern of PEDP II, our purpose is: first, to explain the relevance of organising the classroom around what children are like and how they learn; and second, indicate what needs changing and how.

We examine characteristics of children that show why it is important to organise the classroom and teaching learning around them. Advanced "active teaching learning" helps release the best and the most creative energies of children.

Children learn from their perceptions of the surrounding environment. They learn to distinguish between different tastes, and get to identify different types of objects, shapes, sounds and colour. As they relate to these experiences they acquire skills, abilities and knowledge. This process continues until they are able to comprehend realities in the abstract.

By the time they are about 8, children learn close to 80% of what they learn in their lifetime, including development of their language. The purpose of primary education is to put together enabling

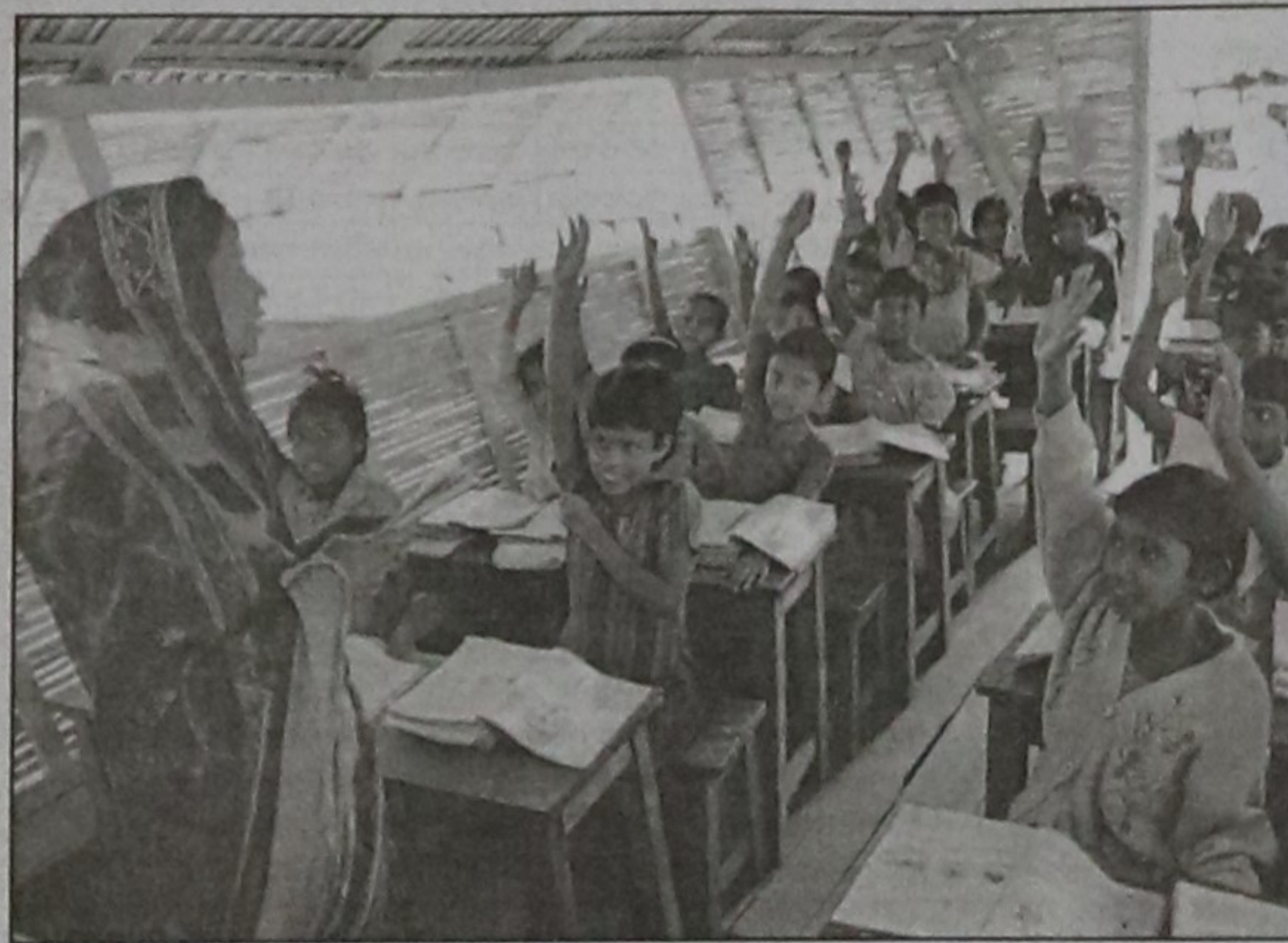
arrangements in a safe environment that would optimise emotional, cognitive, social and physical development of the child. It is critically important that the school, in particular the classroom, is ready for learning to take place.

This would mean that, in conventional classrooms, children do not and cannot concentrate for about 35 out of a 40-minute period. As a result, they are inclined to drop-out. This wasteful time in the classroom, is known as "passive learning."

Passive learning allows the teacher to assume that the majority of the children had followed the lesson. In reality, however, different children will have followed lessons up to different levels.

The teacher's assumption leads to wrong judgement, the most unfortunate of which is labelling those who failed to keep up with the lesson as "slow learners" in need of "remedial lessons." Thus, it is the lack of knowledge and understanding of how learning takes place that directly contributes to learner abuse.

When children get together, they naturally share their experiences and talk about what they know and are able to do.



Let them enjoy learning.

They observe, examine, analyse, draw conclusions or form hypotheses, test validity and build knowledge hands-on. This is the process of knowledge generation.

When children in the classroom sit in rows, and the teacher asks them to keep quiet and listen, it denies what comes naturally to children. It also denies them learning opportunities. It is not hunger but boredom and intimidation that drive them to drop-out.

Some children are interested in mathematics, some in language, others in music or art or sports. As a result, different chil-

children learn different skills and competencies at different paces, and it is critically important that the opportunity is created inside the classroom for every child to proceed according to her/his interest, ability and pace. Most importantly, this means that the teacher must assess individual learner progress and performance for lesson planning and that syllabus driven lesson planning is inappropriate in the early years.

The assumption that if the teacher finished the syllabus all the children would automatically learn the content is wrong. This leads to differential levels of

"cumulative deficit" on the part of the learners. This is also why so many children fail or drop-out.

The more learners there are in the classroom, the more difficult it is to attend to their individual needs. Our experience suggests that 30 learners are just about the maximum a trained teacher can tackle.

The issue of individual teaching and learning also influences decision on the number of shifts a school could have. Institutionalising a single shift on the assumption that it would help increase the contact hour, disregarding the issue of learner-teacher ratio, could have disastrous consequences for learning. The relevance of contact hour is to be seen in the context of active and passive contact hour.

A conventional classroom denies attention to children's emotional needs. It divides the learning environment into teacher and student. The table and the chair formalises the division, encouraging a relation of domination and subordination. Use of force, corporal punishment, and other forms of teacher abuse are some of the effects of this relation.

The need for emotional support has implications for learner-teacher ratio, classroom environment and reading materials. Only a low ratio, for example a maximum of 30: 1, would allow the teacher to attend to the emotional, social and cognitive needs of the individual learner.

Second, it is important that children are able to display their classroom activities such as creative writing and project

work on classroom walls, creating opportunity for them to have a sense of recognition. Lastly, the books need to be not only colourful and interesting but also developmentally appropriate.

One of the indicators is that children must be able to finish a book in a single session so that they have a sense of accomplishment. This would encourage them to want to read more books.

Briefly, the challenge is, first to put in place an environment inside the classroom that is non-threatening and non-stressful to the learners. Second, allowing children to sit across or around the table facing one another so that they can interact both among themselves and with the teacher. This enables them to share, help each other out, and develop confidence to raise questions.

Third, providing the learners with a choice of activities inside the classroom so that they can move from one activity to another and not get bored. Fourth, making activities purposeful by linking them to acquisition of the defined competencies and ensuring that children learned by doing. Fifth, making available a wide selection of books that are attractive, interesting and developmentally appropriate.

Sixth, allowing learners to put on display what they had done both independently and in groups. Seventh, placing a qualified teacher, preferably a woman, in an active learning classroom.

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Small is beautiful

Most political and administrative experts believe that the public sector should be kept as small as possible. Of course, some advocate the principle of "rightsizing" government. So a new journey in the "happy new year" brings a message of change.

MD. SHAIRUL MASHREQUE

SMALL is not only beautiful but also manageable. Starting with a small cabinet is undoubtedly a good beginning. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has taken the right course in keeping with the idea of downsizing government. It is a clean cabinet with a host of new faces, devoid of any misdemeanour.

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journey in the "happy new year" brings a message of change.

This is, of course, promising, showing us a smooth path to the desired goal. It speaks volumes for the sincerity of the honourable prime minister, who would like to set a sparkling example of good governance for the greatest possible good.

Comments of some erudite citizens are given below:

The prime minister has shown "her political wisdom by forming her new cabinet" -- all to the surprise of her party

stalwarts. "She came up with a small cabinet with new faces." The *mahajote* has just made a historic change that came in the phase of transition. It is really "surprising to notice the size of the new cabinet."

Some might ask "whether it would work with such young cabinet members, leaving quite a few high profile MPs completely out of the picture." By forming a 32-member cabinet, Hasina took an

important and judicious decision. The cabinet in Britain is composed of the prime minister and not more than 20 ministers. In France, the government led by the president is composed of the PM, 15 ministers and 4 state secretaries. Japan has only 14 ministries (Roushan Zaman, 2007). The caretaker government held the helm firmly with only 10 advisors assisted by experts.

During the alliance regime (2001 - 2006), there was an exceptionally over-

sized cabinet with about 65 ministers/state ministers/deputy ministers. The bureaucratic establishment was vast, with numerous departments, directorates and their local chapters. The government expanded far into commercial activities with mushroomed growth of public organisations.

Maximising government, in many cases, was motivated more by political considerations and less by public welfare. The oversized government accommodated more than intra-party groups and offered more ministerial positions and, of course, also created more jobs to be dispensed by political leaders. It put a heavy strain on the public exchequer.

Creating unnecessary ministries and divisions/departments to accommodate diverse interests of high-profile political actors of the ruling party can only serve political purposes. There is no point in overstaffing the government with the

vertical and horizontal expansion of arms and auxiliary bodies.

Each ministry, along with its attached offices and field staff, is funded from the public exchequer. New but unnecessary public offices are "white elephants."

Mahajote means a "big alliance." In contrast to this, the *mahajot* cabinet is a small one. The grand alliance cabinet based on understanding and consensus can manage things efficiently with the Prime Minister at the command.

Small size matters little. What matters much is good governance with a robust cabinet. We do not want any quantitative expansion for providing prize posts to some political elites who are power hungry, fortune seekers, and men of straw.

Vital policy matters at the summit of the government may be well-managed with a few persons expressing similar views to arrive at a consensus. The thing is that "too many cooks spoil the

broth." Experience shows that decisions with too many interventions become difficult to take. In an era of global recession, minimal state intervention is an acceptable doctrine.

The new government may go for reformation of the public sector by emulating the private sector, making the government smaller but efficient and dynamic, and applying market practices in service delivery with a flexible bureaucracy, insisting on results not on rules and rituals.

The Digital Bangladesh that we dream of is not a distant dream. A state functioning well with a small staff, modern ICT, prompt service, and citizen's charter can help Bangladesh reach a digital stage.

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Combating leprosy

Leprosy carries with it disabilities beyond the stigma. There are economic, social, physical, spiritual, psychological and emotional components in this issue. All these areas require different interventions if the affected person is to be cured.

MARTIN ADHIKARY

LEPROSY is a health hazard as well as a sociological problem. Although it is not an infectious disease, it causes deformity if treatment is not received at the initial stage.

A Norwegian, Armauer Hansen, first identified the leprosy bacillus in 1873 but the cure was not discovered until 1941. The WHO-recommended Multidrug Therapy (MDT) is the most powerful medication against leprosy.

Leprosy used to be a stigma in the past. A prejudicial Act, "the Lepers Act," was enacted in 1898. Three or four decades ago rickshaw pullers refused to carry leprosy patients for fear of losing other

passengers. However, this is decreasing as a result of the work done by various organisations, especially the Leprosy Mission Bangladesh.

Stigma still remains

Often, affected persons (especially females) can face divorce. Sometimes, affected people are segregated from the society. Recently, our government has made special provisions for the transportation of disabled people. However, we need to see how this is affects people handicapped due to leprosy.

Dr. Paul Brand, pioneer of reconstructive surgery, deeply felt the anguish of the leprosy-affected. He observed, "The person with leprosy loses touch in more

than one way. Not only does this horrible disease get into the nerves of his arms and destroys them and strangles them so that he can never again feel with his fingers, but somehow, and for some reason I cannot understand, this same germ gets between him and his friends, gets between him and his employer, gets between him and his community and builds a barrier so that a man who had experienced the loving warm greetings of his friends before, who had a job and could earn his living, finds that people turn away, that the children will run from him because they have been told by their parents they mustn't associate with this man who has leprosy. He is treated with a superstitious kind of fear. And so it is said that leprosy is a lonely disease."

Leprosy carries with it disabilities beyond the stigma. There are economic, social, physical, spiritual, psychological and emotional components in this issue. All these areas require different interventions if the affected person is to be cured. Leprosy devastates life. There are

around 6-7 thousand cases yearly in Bangladesh. The Leprosy Mission Bangladesh (TLMB) offers services like awareness building, case detection, health education, treatment, socio-economic rehabilitation, prevention of disability and advocacy for human rights to affected people.

We work toward our vision, "A world without leprosy." With cooperation received from all stakeholders, at home and abroad, TLMB has achieved its goal of healing and restoring people to a life of dignity.

Public awareness

People need to know that leprosy is a curable disease, that treatment is available at leprosy clinics/hospitals and at *upazila* health complexes, and that there is no place for discrimination against affected people.

An ancient Hebrew sage said: "Open your mouth for the dumb, for the rights of all who are left desolate; Open your mouth, judge righteously, maintain the

rights of the poor and needy" (Bible: Proverbs 31:8-9).

Self-advocacy

Advocacy means raising awareness and motivating the people who influence and make decisions. The best way to advocate for people affected by leprosy is to create a spirit of self-advocacy. TLMB ensures social inclusion and access to all services and resources for leprosy sufferers through self-help groups for promoting various activities through social mobilization.

Political will for legal/policy change

There is a need for commitment on part of the government and the people. One of the most important areas is legislation against exclusion and discrimination and in favour of integration. The Lepers Act 1898 needs to be repealed. Leprosy treatment should be included in the general hospitals.

A development issue

Advocacy for leprosy-affected people is a

development issue, going beyond the administration of MDT and reconstructive surgery. It includes socio-economic rehabilitation of the affected and restoration of their human rights.

Until the affected are empowered and socio-economically rehabilitated, giving them dignity, the issue of leprosy will continue to linger. In Europe, even less than a century ago, there were many people who had leprosy. But today there is none. This is due to the improvement in health, nutrition and sanitation.

At present, many more patients are found in the north-west than anywhere else in Bangladesh. This is because those areas are very underdeveloped socio-economically. Addressing the root cause of leprosy means addressing poverty and developing the socio-economic condition of the poor people.

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Greeting cards for office workers



THE flow of holidays continues. Have you seen the huge choice of greeting cards now available for special purposes? At a bookshop the other day, I found a card which said:

"Happy Birthday to My Favourite Cousin." I bought the card, but since I have eight cousins, I asked the shopkeeper for seven other cards saying: "Happy Birthday to a Non-Favourite Cousin."

Unfortunately all those were out of stock. Just my luck!

I also found cards ranging from "Well done in your exams" to "You have a new baby" -- useful for people who have given birth without noticing.

There was also a card which said "You've passed your driving test!" I am thinking of buying one of those for my niece. It would be much cheaper than paying for driving lessons and she could show it to police officers who stop her on the road. "See? I got this card."

The problem with all these

cards, it seems to me, was that the language of the sentiments was simply too twee for modern workers, with the valentines' cards being the worst offenders. They'd be fine for a world of poets, but most of us toil in offices for a living.

It is possible to express love in a businesslike way. I recall reading a memorable marriage proposal between two financial types in a PG Wodehouse novel.

"Do you like money?" he said.

"I do," she replied.

"Have mine," he said.

That was it. It occurred to me that modern business people should have cards designed with special slogans just for them, so I jotted down some ideas, which I plan to send to the Hallmark card company.

When you meet Mr. or Ms. Right: "My level of interest in you is above LIBOR."

When romance starts to blossom: "You cause a rise of 40-plus basis points in my pulse rate."

When you anticipate that first kiss: "Rising indicators suggest my lips and yours are destined for a non-hostile

merger." When "like" turns to "lurve": "Every time I see you my knees suffer unprecedented liquidity."

When it's time for seduction: "Come up and see my pleasantly extensive portfolio some time."

When you're ready for commitment: "I want you to classify my heart as a receivable."

When you get engaged: "Will you be my long term liability?"

When you get married: "For better or worse, till death us do part, you are my legally

wedded hybrid annuity." When you decide you want to hear the patter of tiny feet: "Darling, be the co-parent of my incubatees."

Okay, so these slogans for financial types may be less flowery than the traditional messages, but I think there should be a place for non-sentimental greetings.

But here's a warning. Always choose your words carefully. Don't just put the first thing that comes into your head. Here are some examples NOT to follow:

1) "Congratulations on your engagement. We all

thought it would never happen."

2) "Please accept our condolences on your bereavement. It told you he was ill."

3) "Get well soon. We're fed up of doing your job."

4) "Congratulations on your pregnancy. We're dying to hear who the father is, if you know."

Now if you'll excuse me, I need to get home to my wife/laminate director because if I am late home, I am liable to suffer what some might call "significant fallout risk".

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