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# Quality of primary education still a major concern

WASIM BIN HABIB

**A**LTHOUGH significant progress has been made in primary education over the past few decades, its quality remains a major concern in Bangladesh. On one hand, high enrolment in primary schools, achieving gender parity, timely supply of new textbooks, dazzling pass rates and results of primary terminal examinations made the nation happy. At the same time, high dropout and low completion rates, and inappropriate teaching-learning methodologies have contributed to poor quality, preventing the country from being euphoric.

*Apart from increasing teachers' salary and status, they will have to be provided with more training with new approaches that combine theoretical and practical knowledge.*

One of the main causes of these is lack of quality teachers and teaching as well. Currently, more than 3.95 lakh teachers are teaching more than 1.92 crore primary education students in around 80,000 primary schools of all types across the country. These are big numbers, but not big enough with adequate and qualitative facilities for a nation of more than 15 crore population. The teacher-student ratio stands at 1:46 while the total learning time in a year in primary school is yet far behind the international standard of a thousand hours. Besides, a primary teacher alongside teaching has to carry out many other tasks like birth registration, population survey, many

four teachers and if a teacher attends training, falls sick or goes on leave for some other reason, the classes in many cases get cancelled. Every year, an average of 19,000 teachers from government, registered government and community primary schools take part in the yearlong C-in-Ed training, said the ministry sources. Over 5,500 female teachers take maternity leave each year and around 5,500 teachers take leave for medical reasons, or to attend religious festivals such as the hajj, they said. Besides, a number of assistant teacher posts and headmasters of government primary schools also fall vacant and it can take several months to fill the posts

other social surveys and polling duties during elections. Any analysis into this situation would suggest increasing the teaching force from the present number for ensuring standardized education in terms of class size, teacher-student ratio, and sufficient interaction and learning time in school. But the scenario in Bangladesh is quite different. According to sources of primary and mass education ministry, a vast number of teaching posts fall virtually vacant for a temporary but significant amount of time due to maternity leave, professional training and medical leave of teachers, hampering studies of the students. In each primary school, there is an average of three to

on a temporary basis. Although the present government has appointed around 70,000 teachers in schools but that is not adequate for teaching a large number of pupils in the current context. Another major reason behind the shortage of quality teachers at primary level is poor salary and remuneration. Unlike any other occupation, teachers have a unique role in laying the foundation of children's education but the level of reward and social esteem for a teacher simply does not attract enough intellectually capable young people to this profession. Currently, a non-trained assistant teacher of a government primary school earns around Tk 8,000 in total. The basic salary of a non-trained assistant teacher starts with Tk 4,700 while for trained ones it is Tk 4,900 per month. On the other hand, the basic salaries of the newly recruited trained and non-trained headmasters are Tk 5,200 and Tk 5,500 respectively.

Many teachers said that the poor salary fails to attract bright students to join in this profession and those with good academic results take up the teaching career do not continue in it for long because of the low remuneration. Besides, they said, the teachers are unhappy with their status of Class III government employee which remained unchanged since the nationalisation of primary education in 1973. "How can we expect meritorious students to become primary school teachers? A university graduate does not want to be a Class III government employee with these poor salaries," said an assistant headmaster of government primary school.

They said that teaching has now become a transit profession for many meritorious students who take up the profession for a transitional time and look for better job, dignified position and social status. Educationists said that although the quality of teachers improved, especially with the new recruits, the level is not satisfactory. They said apart from increasing teachers' salary and status, they will have to be provided with more training with new approaches that combine theoretical and practical knowledge. "There should be change in the approach of existing trainings and teachers should be given more hands-on training," said Prof Siddiqur Rahman, a teacher of the Institute of Education and Research of Dhaka University. Shyamal Kanti Gosh, Ddirector General of Directorate of Primary Education (DPE), said the quality of teachers recruited in recent times is better comparatively and they are giving training to the teachers under many projects and programmes.

Introduction of Diploma in Primary Education is one of such activities which is being run in seven districts on pilot basis with the aim to producing teachers who would ensure acquisition of learning for every child. Introduced by Primary Teachers Institute (PTI), this programme combines PTI-based teaching with practical teaching experience in the training school in more or less equal proportions, and links the types of knowledge through its assessment and teaching. But, education experts say classes are not being taken on all 252 school days. The actual learning hours is very less than the government statistics. In many cases, it can be noticed that teachers are often late to come to classroom. Moreover, schools remain closed or teaching is suspended under many excuses like--social, cultural and political programmes as well as terminal and annual exams, said Dr Manzoor. Whatever development is made in infrastructure or building teachers' capacity, quality education will not be ensured unless the interactive learning contact hours between the students and teachers is increased, said Rasheda K Choudhury. Talking about the teachers: students ratio, Dr Manzoor said large classes, with a teacher looking after 60 to 70 students or more in some cases, also reduce effective contact between teacher and student. The students belonging to affluent families can have private tutoring to make up for lost class hours. But the students of the underprivileged section of the society lag behind in terms of learning lessons and perform poorly in examinations. "When these students poorly perform in examinations, they lose interest in study and start absenting themselves from school. This is one major reason for high dropout rate," said Dr Manzoor. The children of urban areas and from affluent families are advancing with the help of coaching or private tutors, while the underprivileged children are lagging behind, said Rasheda K Choudhury. She also recommended for maintaining the ratio of teachers and students at 1:30 or 1:35 at primary level and increasing contact hours for ensuring quality education. Responding to the question, DG DPE, Shyamal Kanti Gosh said the government is working to increase the number of teachers and classrooms to minimise the gap between the teachers: students ratio.

## Low teacher-student contact hours peg progress

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PANKAJ KARMAKAR

**L**OW contact hours between students and teachers at primary level is one of the major setbacks in ensuring quality education in Bangladesh. Children are deprived of proper learning due to the low contact hours which also contributes to dropout especially in rural areas, said experts. While international standard suggests providing at least 1,000 hours of effective learning to every student in classroom annually, the primary school children of Bangladesh get much less than that, said primary education expert Dr Manzoor Ahmed. "Non-government surveys show the actual amount of effective learning hours is significantly less than 500 hours in Bangladesh," said Dr. Manzoor, the senior adviser of Institute of Educational Development at BRAC University. Rasheda K Choudhury, executive director of Campaign for Popular Education, said low contact hours create discriminations between urban and rural areas, rich and poor children, in terms of quality education. The government officials concerned, however, say the actual contact hours in single shift primary schools are satisfactory, but it is quite less in double shift primary schools.

In 252 school days annually, students of class one and two of single shift schools get 943.5 hours of learning in classroom, while the students from class three to five get 1701 hours. Students of class one and two of double shift schools get 693 hours, while students from class three to five get 1071 hours, said Shyamal Kanti Ghosh, director general (DG) of Directorate of Primary Education (DPE). But, education experts say classes are not being taken on all 252 school days. The actual learning hours is very less than the government statistics. In many cases, it can be noticed that teachers are often late to come to classroom. Moreover, schools remain closed or teaching is suspended under many excuses like--social, cultural and political programmes as well as terminal and annual exams, said Dr Manzoor. Whatever development is made in infrastructure or building teachers' capacity, quality education will not be ensured unless the interactive learning contact hours between the students and teachers is increased, said Rasheda K Choudhury. Talking about the teachers: students ratio, Dr Manzoor said large classes, with a teacher looking after 60 to 70 students or more in some cases, also reduce effective contact between teacher and student. The students belonging to affluent families can have private tutoring to make up for lost class hours. But the students of the underprivileged section of the society lag behind in terms of learning lessons and perform poorly in examinations. "When these students poorly perform in examinations, they lose interest in study and start absenting themselves from school. This is one major reason for high dropout rate," said Dr Manzoor. The children of urban areas and from affluent families are advancing with the help of coaching or private tutors, while the underprivileged children are lagging behind, said Rasheda K Choudhury. She also recommended for maintaining the ratio of teachers and students at 1:30 or 1:35 at primary level and increasing contact hours for ensuring quality education. Responding to the question, DG DPE, Shyamal Kanti Ghosh said the government is working to increase the number of teachers and classrooms to minimise the gap between the teachers: students ratio.

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# Good text books key to good learning

WASIM BIN HABIB

**T**HE role of textbooks in learning is immeasurable. Textbooks largely shape the knowledge the students acquire. Besides teacher's lectures, textbooks play the pivotal role in the teaching-learning process because it provides the basis of what the students aspire to learn. Sadly, improving the quality of textbooks, especially at the primary level, did not get that much priority what it should have been in Bangladesh. Till the end of year 2012, students read textbooks whose curriculum was formulated by National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) 17 years ago. By this time, a lot of changes have been made worldwide especially in the field of technology, but the textbooks of the country did not have the reflection of it. However, now children across the country are supposed to get a new set of textbooks with modified curriculum as the government brought major modification to the national curriculum after long 17 years, trying to improve textbook contents as well. The changes, in line with the recommendations of the National Education Policy 2010, were brought to 111 textbooks from primary to secondary level, keeping pace with the demand of time at home and abroad.

According to the officials concerned, curriculum and textbooks were designed reviewing the curricula of different countries, revisiting the earlier set competencies a child used to achieve. "We formulated curriculum in a way that would help develop children's thinking capacity and problem-solving skills," said Shyamal Kanti Gosh, Director General of Directorate of Primary Education (DPE). He said that chapters like climate change, information technology, and concept of globalisation have been included in easier language so that the children have primary notion about the recent phenomenon. Besides, he said, culture and lifestyle of different countries have also been included so that the children can get an idea about diversity of culture in the world.

Apart from primary textbooks, the government also modified curriculum in secondary textbooks. Subjects like Population and Development Studies, Human Resource Development, Human Rights and Gender Studies, Tourism and Hospitality have been included as optional in class XI and XII to keep with the demand of the world, they said. They also said that some new chapters like climate change, reproductive health, autism, and right to

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information have been included in some subjects at secondary level. Six subjects--Bangla, English, Mathematics, Bangladesh O Bishwa Parichay, Information and Communication Technology, Life-oriented education--have been made mandatory for students of class VI to class X of all mediums including madrasa, according to the NCTB and education ministry sources. Educationists hailed the government's initiative, and said curriculum revision is a continuous process which needs to happen at a reasonable interval. They, however, stressed the need for making the class lessons more interactive to educate students effectively. For this, they said providing vigorous training to the teachers along with a manual is a must. "The quality of textbooks improved significantly in terms of printing, colour and illustration and even content wise. But that's not enough. Teachers should also be trained up so that they can make the class

lectures participatory and interactive," said Rasheda K Choudhury, an expert in primary education. She, also as the executive director of Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE), told The Daily Star that since it takes time to train up all teachers, teachers manual should be provided on urgent basis so that they can teach the students well. He also stressed the need for reorganising the class hours as it is quite impossible to make the classes interactive in a fixed 40 to 45 minutes class hours. Besides, he said, the students should also be provided with supplementary reading materials and encouraged to read those. Asked, DG Shyamal Kanti Gosh said the teachers will try their best to make the class lectures participatory and interactive as much as possible.

## 'Inclusive Education' yet to be implemented

PANKAJ KARMAKAR

**D**ESPITE a decade-long demand from educationists and child rights activists, the much talked about inclusive education still remains at initial stage, depriving thousands of children of quality education. In absence of this system, children with disabilities, and from disadvantaged groups, remote areas in general and female children in particular, indigenous communities, also from brothel and other diversified sections get less access to quality education compared to mainstream children, viewed by educationists. Lack of necessary teaching aids and equipment, skilled teachers, social awareness, limitations of infrastructure, among others, are the major barriers to implementation of inclusive education system in Bangladesh, said experts and government officials concerned. Inclusive education is such a strategic and technical process where all types of learners irrespective of variation and diversity can receive education in a congenial and cooperative environment. "Overall quality of primary education is not satisfactory in Bangladesh. Moreover, absence of inclusive education has narrowed down the opportunity of education to these excluded children," said Dr Manzoor Ahmed, Senior Adviser, Institute of Educational Development at BRAC University.

Inclusive education system remains in planning and idea sharing stage till now; no significant development has been done to implement it, he said. Tariq Ahsan, assistant professor of Institute of Education Research (IER) of Dhaka University, said, "A large portion of children are remaining out of education due to absence of inclusive education in Bangladesh." However, Director General (DG) of Directorate of Primary Education Shyamal Kanti Ghosh said government started working to implement inclusive education since 2008 under the Second Primary Education Development Program (PEDP-II). Inclusive education mainly focuses on children with disabilities and from indigenous groups, he said.

*Inclusive education mainly focuses on children with disabilities and from indigenous groups. The approach aims at removing all barriers to learning and acknowledging individual children's needs and potential.*

"We have trained up teachers and arranged different facilities to bring the children with disabilities to schools. Many children belonging to this group are now coming to schools and attending examinations," said Shyamal. With the aim to facilitate children of indigenous communities, the government will publish text books initially in six indigenous languages which have their own alphabets. These books will be supplied in 2014, he said. Inclusive education approach aims at removing all barriers to learning and acknowledging individual children's needs and potential. Such barriers include culture, gender, work, negative attitudes, illness, school facilities, location, language, disability, lack of awareness about the importance of education, race, malnutrition and poverty. Khairul Anam, assistant teacher of Government Laboratory High School in Kotbari of Comilla suggested arranging suitable teaching aids, special resources, motivation, interpersonal communication, collaboration, flexible contents in curriculum and effective co-ordination among the teachers, students, guardians, school managing committee and local elites for overcoming the barriers. Dr Manzoor Ahmed stressed the need for collaboration between government and non-government organisations to implement inclusive education system. Child-Friendly Schools Under a global campaign called 'Child-friendly Schools', Unicef has launched a project titled 'Child Friendly School in Kaptai Lake, Rangamati' in 2012. Under this project Unicef has targeted around 2,000 children of 22 primary schools of that area to provide quality education. "Children of this area are lagging behind in educational achievements due to poor transport facilities, poor school infrastructure and water-sanitation facilities and lack of classroom environment conducive to learning. They have less access to education compared to the children of plain lands. That is why, we have targeted these children to enable their access to better quality education," said Laila Farhana Anan Banu, education officer, Chittagong zone office, UNICEF. Unicef has arranged shuttle boats for children and also swimming lessons for them to be able to commute safely and provides support to minor repairs of school infrastructure and arranged water sanitation facilities for the schools as well. The project, implemented by the Rangamati Hill District Council, will continue till 2015.

# Corporal punishment still in vogue

AKRAM HOSEN

**T**HE well-known Bengali saying, "There is no better medicine than a good beating," perhaps best demonstrates the traditional mindset of many Bangladeshis about corporal punishment to discipline children. Despite a ban on corporal punishment to the students at educational institutions imposed two years back, students still are subjected to beating, caning and other forms of physical and mental torture as punishment. Even reports of committing suicide by student due to these have often been seen in the newspapers. Soon after the High Court's order to stop corporal punishment in schools, the government on August 2010 slapped an outright ban on punishing students. Sadly, the incidents are still occurring occasionally in different parts of the country as the teachers only receive verbal instructions about corporal punishment without any formal training on imparting lessons and classroom management till now. Following public outcry, the education ministry decided to prepare a

manual for teachers with guidance for classroom management last year and asked Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education (DSHE) to come up with a draft. But, the ministry has not been able to finalise the manual yet. Asked about the progress of the manual, Prof Taslima Begum, Director (training), DSHE, said, "The ministry has approved the draft we made on methodologies of training teachers on classroom management."

"We are in the process of running a pilot project on training teachers. If it turns out to be effective, we will launch a project of training all teachers on classroom management," said Taslima. Meanwhile, in absence of specific guidelines and awareness about the dangers of punishing youngsters, some appalling incidents have taken place at different schools across the country. On October 2 this year, teachers of Blue Bird School and College in Sylhet allegedly tortured a class IX student Md Mahubb Gofur Abir and confined him in a locked room. When his parents failed to elicit any action from the district administration, they filed a case against three teachers of the school at the chief judicial magistrate's court, informed Shamsul Islam, father of Abir. It is not only that the victims may

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suffer physical injury. It harms their personality as well. "It is very hard for a young student to take insult in front of his/her peers. As a result, the punished student remains angry afterwards. It harms the normal development of the student," said renowned writer and human rights activist Selina Hossain.

# Unconscionable politics hampers education

AKRAM HOSEN

**T**HE prevailing political turmoil in the country is one of the major reasons for lessening the learning hours in schools as the classes often get postponed due to the political programmes like hartal, said educationists and experts. "Compared to other countries, primary school students in Bangladesh generally do not get enough learning hours in primary schools," said Dr Manzoor Ahmed, senior adviser of the Institute of Educational Development, Brac University. Moreover, he said, political programmes like hartal further decreases the time the children get to spend with the teachers. The recent countrywide hartals enforced by different parties are the examples of how the normal procedure of education is disrupted by political programmes. The hartals were enforced at a time when annual exams were going on in most of the schools in the country. As a result, the schools in the major cities rescheduled their exams and students took the makeup exams on the weekends. "The makeup exams or classes on the weekend affect the minds of children in a negative way, because they take up the little leisure time the children get once a week," commented by Rasheda K Choudhury, executive director of Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE) and a former adviser to the caretaker government. The recent hartals affected students in more ways than one. For example, students prepared for one exam but had to sit for another, explained Manju Ara Begum, principal of Viharunisa Noon School and College. "Hartals also make it harder for us to finish the syllabi within the academic year," she added. Violence on the streets during the hartals, demonstrations and protest rallies have made the parents apprehensive about the safety of their school-going children. "After watching the murder of Biswajit in broad day light, I can't help being anxious about my teenage daughter's safety while there is so much tension among political parties," said Nina Ahmed, a guardian. Nina now takes her daughter from Sutrapur to the school at Motijheel everyday after watching the brutal incident on television. Hartals are not the only disruptions in the normal procedure of education. School premises are often used as polling centres during the parliamentary and local government elections. Teachers, who work at the polling centres, need to take training for the job. "The regular process of teaching gets hampered for almost an entire week during elections," said a high school teacher unwilling to disclose her name. As Manzoor Ahmed pointed out, politicisation of the management of schools and interference on the recruitment of teachers is a common phenomenon in the country. "It's as if the very process of education

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is of minor concern to everybody, while everything else gets prioritised," asserts Ahmed. Moreover, in our country there has always been a practice of lining up students on roads to welcome lawmakers and other dignitaries. The government directed the educational institutions to stop the custom in 2009. Notwithstanding this, the practice has been noticed in quite some areas in recent times. "We had to line up our students with flowers when the local MP visited the area last year," said a teacher on conditions of anonymity. His school is located in Shibpur, Narsingdi. He added that students of the villages are generally unwilling to attend school. "When the classes are dismissed for some political programme, it becomes harder for us to make the students return to class". Political programmes on the streets are quite natural in the democratic societies but children's education should not be affected by them, said Rasheda K Choudhury. "The parties should remember that their programmes have serious repercussions on the education of future generation of the country," she said.

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