

'We're scraping the bottom of the barrel for school teachers'

Manzoor Ahmed, professor emeritus at BRAC University and formerly founder-director of BRAC Institute of Educational Development, is a leading expert on primary education and educational planning in the country. In this interview with Badiuzzaman Bay of The Daily Star, he talks about the government's recent decision to discontinue exams in grades I, II and III, public assessment of student learning and the existing primary education system.

The Ministry of Primary and Mass Education has recently decided to discontinue exams at grades 1-3, which means students of those classes will no longer have to sit for formal exams. How do you see this development?

It is a good decision, and it should have come a long time ago. In fact, the National Education Policy 2010 suggested such an approach because the pedagogy for young children should encourage their natural curiosity and joy of learning and not pressure them to perform in a set way. But as in all decisions in the education sector, whether the benefits will be realised depends on how the decision is implemented and whether other complementary steps are taken.

A measure has been decided, but this has to be seen as part of a holistic approach to student learning and assessment. Keeping the high-stakes PEC [Primary Education Completion] public exam intact, the spirit and purpose of doing away with formal written exam in early grades are not likely to be realised. Apparently, this decision came after a call by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on March 14, at the launch of the Primary Education Week, not to put extra pressure on the children for studying and instead make learning interesting for them. This episode points to a problem of education decision-making. Are the education authorities failing to consider complex and interconnected issues of educational decisions and waiting for signals from the top?

Let's talk about the PEC exam held at the end of grade five. Despite repeated calls by experts for doing away with it and even a decision "in principle" by the ministry to scrap grade V terminal exams as the primary level was extended to grade VIII, students will still have to sit for the PEC exam. Do you find it strange that formal exams in earlier grades were scrapped but the PEC exam was not?

Indeed, education experts and academics have been critical of the PEC exam ever since it was introduced in 2009. This decision was also



Dr Manzoor Ahmed

an *ad hoc* one and surprising to us because most countries, advanced and developing, had been moving away from formal public examinations at the end of the primary stage.

Public assessment of student learning has now shifted towards the assessment of basic skills such as literacy and numeracy, rather than tests of all the subjects and textbook contents, which is the normal job of the school. The focus in public assessment moved to how the system was performing rather than grading and labelling individual students—subjecting young children to intense pressure and competition.

The fear of the critics about PEC all came true. This is evident in the way students, teachers, and parents remain extremely preoccupied with PEC exams; heavy reliance on private coaching and memorising guidebooks; and turning students into test-takers rather than learners.

Continued advocacy of the education professionals had persuaded the ministry to at least defer the exam to the end of grade VIII as recommended in the Education Policy. But the proposal was shot down in the Cabinet when it was presented there in May 2016—another example of *ad hoc* decision-making without regard to technical and professional vetting.

How reliable is the PEC exam as a measure of student learning?

A reasonably rigorous national student assessment (NSA) of the students of grade V in 2017 indicate that 88 percent and 83 percent of students, respectively, performed below expected level for grade V in Bangla reading and mathematics. This is in sharp contrast to the over 95 percent pass rate in PEC exams in recent years. So, one may legitimately ask: what does the PEC exam actually measure and how valid is it as a measure of student learning?

There has been a major expansion of primary education opportunities with over 95 percent of the children entering school, although around 20 percent, by official estimates, are dropping out. Children are in school but do they learn to read and count, which is the very basic task of primary education?

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We clearly need to redirect our efforts to improving teaching and learning in school and classrooms rather than be obsessed with testing as the means of improving quality.

Besides the problematic performance evaluation mechanism, what are the issues currently dogging our primary education system?

There are major structural issues in primary education including common unified service for all, ensuring quality with a focus on teachers, extending universal education to grade VIII and beyond, and decentralising planning and management of school education. I will discuss the first two related points.

First, the National Education Policy envisaged a unified system with acceptable quality for all children. There are today at least four major categories with various sub-categories of primary education services with varying quality and learning content: government and recently nationalised primary schools; government-supported madrasas (and Qawmi madrasas); private kindergartens; and NGO-run non-formal primary schools. About two-thirds of the students are in the government schools while the rest are divided among the other categories.

The government needs to ensure the quality of learning and teaching provisions for mainstream schools so that the large majority of children have access to services of acceptable quality. The non-government schools then will have a benchmark of quality to follow and parents would not feel the compulsion to run away from the public system.

The second point follows from the first. Quality improvement of the primary school ultimately depends on the quality, skills and motivation of the teaching force. Teachers' salary has improved but many feel that a parity of esteem has not been established with other public servants. Moreover, only the teachers of old government schools are the beneficiaries of the enhanced salary, leaving almost half of the teachers out.

More importantly, does school teaching attract the most capable and talented of graduates? A peculiar legacy from the colonial times in the South Asian sub-continent is that teachers are appointed first (mostly college graduates now) in a school and then sent to pedagogy training—unlike the general practice in other parts of the world.

Future teachers in most countries have to go through a general college degree programme along with teacher training in a four-year course. This "concurrent" model, rather than the "sequential" model as in our case, allows for the young people after high school to be identified as future teachers and taken through a long academic, social, emotional and ethical moulding for the teaching profession, as in other professions such as medicine, engineering, law, etc.

In our case, for the college graduates, school teaching is the last occupational choice. We are actually scraping the bottom of the graduates' barrel for recruitment into teaching. Professional training such as Dip-in-Ed, or a plethora of in-service training cannot compensate for basic capability deficits.

The best and the brightest have to be attracted into a four-year "concurrent" teacher preparation course, with the incentive of stipends. Simultaneously, two other steps are needed: all measures for quality assurance have to be enforced in a hundred degree colleges, where the four-year course may be introduced; and a national teaching service corps has to be established with appropriate remuneration, status, and career path for the graduates of the new course. In ten years, we will begin to see the results in performance of schools and students.

Why do you think the National Education Policy couldn't be implemented even after nearly 10 years?

There has never been a systematic and concerted plan of action to implement the education policy—only a piecemeal and fragmented effort has been made, which often failed to produce the desired result or created new problems. The policy itself had provided for a permanent commission to oversee and guide the implementation of the policy and monitor progress. It is high time that such a commission with genuine professionals and empowered with required authority be appointed.

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The Mueller Bait and Switch



ELIZABETH DREW

22, that he had received special counsel Robert Mueller's report and would provide a summary of its findings to certain congressional leaders over the weekend.

We should have asked: Why Barr's summary and not Mueller's? Presumably, Mueller had attached one to his report. It turned out there was a propagandistic reason for this unusual arrangement: Barr issued the best possible interpretation of Mueller's report—from the president's standpoint—including perhaps even a twist on what Mueller had said and intended. This allowed the president and his backers to propagate and celebrate what Mueller didn't say: that the report's conclusions were a "total exoneration" of Trump. In fact, even Barr's brief summary, quoting Mueller's report, said, "While this report does not conclude that the President committed a crime, it also does not exonerate him."

A version of Mueller's report for release is supposedly in the works—scrubbed of classified material, grand jury testimony (which is always supposed to remain secret), or information on ongoing investigations. No one exactly knows when it will appear. Meanwhile, Trump and his boosters, including most of the Republican Party, get to carry on about the president's supposed total exoneration, implanting the idea in the mind of much of the public. As is often the case with Trump's presidency, the truth will have a hard time catching up.

Barr's independence had already been in question. Last November, Trump finally rid himself of his first attorney general, Jeff Sessions, with whom he'd been furious for (properly) recusing himself from the special counsel's investigation into Russia's interference in the 2016 election, whether the Trump campaign had cooperated with Russia, and whether Trump had obstructed justice by impeding the investigation. Months earlier, in June 2018, Barr appeared to apply for the job by sending a long, unsolicited document to the Justice Department criticising Mueller's inquiry into whether Trump had obstructed justice as "grossly irresponsible," "fatally misconceived,"

and "potentially disastrous."

Democrats, journalists, and others are anxious to see Mueller's actual report so that they can read what Mueller weighed as reasons for saying that the president obstructed justice, even if in the end he decided to not charge him for it. And they want to see, if it's in the report, why Mueller decided not to be the one to decide whether or not to charge Trump—a prosecutor's job. Most legal observers assume that Mueller was leaving the decision to Congress, not to the attorney general.

Several experts speculated that Mueller made this choice because of a Justice Department rule—more weakly grounded than is generally believed—that a sitting president cannot be indicted. (This creates a strong incentive for a president to remain in office as long as possible.) Barr's letter said that "most" of Trump's attempts to obstruct justice were publicly known—thus fuelling intense curiosity about what *unknown* attempts there might be. In any event, US law sets a high bar for prosecuting obstruction of justice:

(who owe their wealth to the Kremlin)—102 in at least 28 meetings, by one count—might not count as cooperation with Russia's "government."

Further doubt about this distinction stems from the fact that various Trump aides have been convicted of lying about such contacts. These include Trump's former national security adviser, Michael Flynn, who lied about his conversations with the Russian ambassador during the transition (probably about lifting sanctions that President Barack Obama had imposed on Russian businesses). Moreover, the president's son, Donald Trump, Jr., along with other top campaign officials, met in Trump Tower with a Russian intelligence agent with ties to the Kremlin who had promised "dirt" on Clinton.

It had been widely expected that Trump's son would face indictment as well—even Donald, Jr., had said so—but Barr's announcement ruled out further prosecutions. Another prominent escapee from the special counsel's hammer was Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, who is widely believed to have used his White



US President Donald Trump and Special Counsel Robert Mueller.

the person has to be known to have had "criminal intent," and, as in any conviction, to have done so "beyond a reasonable doubt."

Barr may well have used another formulation—possibly the same one as Mueller—in sparing Trump and his aides a charge of conspiring with Russia to help them win the 2016 election: they hadn't cooperated or collaborated with the Russian "government" (something the Mueller report did confirm). The problem is that the numerous known contacts between campaign officials and Russian intelligence agents and oligarchs

House role, especially in foreign policy (in which he'd had no experience), to attend to his family's need for funds to pay off a huge real-estate debt.

Trump himself is still vulnerable to investigations initiated by or handed off to federal and state prosecutors outside of Washington. The US Attorney's Office for the Southern District of New York and the New York state attorney general, for example, are investigating the collection and distribution of unusually large funds for the presidential inauguration, the Trump family business and foundation (which has been forced

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to shut down), the payment of hush money before the election to keep a porn star quiet about an affair with Trump, Trump's taxes, and other issues. There can be little doubt from his own behaviour that Trump has somehow been compromised by Putin, in part because of Trump's eagerness to build a hugely lucrative Trump Tower in Moscow. Discussions about the project were ongoing during his election campaign, even as Trump was telling the public that he had no business with Russia.

Rather than simply exult in his ostensible vindication, Trump has been playing the victim and vowing vengeance. He has called for an investigation into what he calls "an illegal takedown that failed," by "the other side," which should be "looked at." The Trump re-election campaign sent a memo to television producers advising caution about booking certain lawmakers and others who had said that the Trump campaign had colluded with Russia. Journalists, too, were targeted for revenge. And Hillary Clinton, about whom Trump still obsesses, will continue to be a target. Trump's base loves that, and the base is critical for Trump's re-election, which now does not seem as out of the question as it did before.

Elizabeth Drew is a Washington-based journalist and the author, most recently, of *Washington Journal: Reporting Watergate and Richard Nixon's Downfall*. Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2019. www.project-syndicate.org (Exclusive to The Daily Star)

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