

FROM CHALLENGED BEGINNINGS TO STANDING TALL

DHAKA THURSDAY FEBRUARY 11, 2021, MAGH 28, 1427 BS

Finding a new trajectory for education



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As we step into the second decade of the 21st century and Bangladesh is poised to become a middle-income country, a pertinent question about the education system may be whether the glass is half-full or half-empty. Many will argue that as far as the nation's education system is concerned, a half-full glass is not good enough, especially as the world faces existential challenges from the global pandemic and a new phase of globalisation and automation.

The education system in Bangladesh consists of 40 million students, 200,000 institutions and over a million teachers—one of the largest in the world. There are also non-formal primary education centres and quomi (indigenous) faith-based madrasas enrolling large numbers of adolescents and youth not included in the official education statistics. Primary and secondary level institutions naturally form the bulk of the system with approximately 20 million students in primary education (including Ibtedayee madrasas recognised by government and private institutions); 15 million students at the secondary level (including technical and vocational institutions and government recognised madrasas); and roughly five million in general tertiary education and professional higher education (estimate based on Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics 2019 data).

At the primary level, close to universal enrolment has been achieved, though a proportion of those enrolled still drops out before completing primary school. Gender equality in enrolment at the primary and secondary levels is another accomplishment. Adult literacy rate has reached three quarters of the population over age 15. The country is enjoying a "demographic dividend" with a decreasing dependency of non-working to working age population.

All this is in sharp contrast to the situation five decades ago, at the birth of the nation from the anvil of the Liberation War. Only one out of four children completed primary education then, one out of five adults could read and write, and barely one of 20 young people could participate in higher education. Progress in expanding the school system has been commendable, both for girls and boys, which is an exceptional achievement among developing countries. Could more be done to equip young people with skills, competencies and values necessary for the 21st century?

The coronavirus pandemic has been raging globally for a year and the end is not yet in sight. It has brought us face-to-face with the urgency of figuring out its immediate and longer-term impact. In this setting, the new phase of globalisation and automation emerging from the 4th Industrial Revolution has to be included. How should the trajectory of progress in education change, so that the education system can help the nation face the new challenges and fulfil its aspirations?

Within the limits of a short article, the question about how the system need to change is discussed by examining what may be described as cross-cutting issues of the education system as a whole, rather than looking at problems discretely in various subsectors with a fractured view.

CROSS-CUTTING SECTOR-WIDE ISSUES IN EDUCATION

Various cross-cutting issues, which present both difficulties and potentials



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for the education sector, have come up in education discourse. These include: teachers' professional competence and numbers; promoting ethics and values through education; implications of climate change and natural and man-made emergencies; ICT for and in education; implications of the 21st century skills and the Fourth Industrial Revolution; serving children with special needs; and promoting inclusive access. Besides these purpose and quality-related issues, there are two other concerns which need attention to deal with the substantive issues—education resource adequacy and education governance and system management.

Teachers: The need to think afresh about attracting and keeping talented people in the teaching profession is recognised as a major challenge for improving education system performance. Bangladesh along with countries in South Asia, unlike other regions of the world, does not have a well-established pre-service teacher education programme. This is so even though school teaching is the single largest field of employment for college graduates. To place a properly qualified and certified teacher in a classroom in front of students as a standard requirement is more an exception than the rule. School teaching is not the first choice as a career for the more talented higher education graduates.

A concurrent professional teacher development approach is the practice in many parts of the world as a step to break the vicious cycle of poor teacher quality and poor student learning. It combines general education and pedagogy in the four-year degree programme, instead of the sequential model which is the pattern in South Asia including Bangladesh. To realise the benefit of the concurrent training approach, it has to be accompanied by

other necessary steps. These include enhancing incentives, status and career path of the education workforce. Equally important is to ensure the quality of the concurrent programme itself. A beneficial effect of this move, if properly implemented, would be to show the way for a qualitative change in the colleges under the National University.

Promoting ethics and values in school: As Bangladesh moves up the ladder of development, it has to be kept in view that the true measure of development is not just total GDP or per capita income. The real measure is how people are empowered and their dignity and rights are enhanced. For the education system, it means producing learners who are competent, skilled, purposeful, wise, and equipped to fulfil their own personal goals and their duty to society. They must be capable and willing to make their community and the world a better place. The new generation must be sensitive to the changing global world, accept and respect diversity and the plural human identities.

In the general social environment of declining morality and ethical standards,

succeeds, not in isolation, but in a social setting in partnership with parents, community and the larger society (Ahmed and Kalam, 2018).

Response to climate change and emergencies: Bangladesh is one of the most vulnerable countries in the world to the effects of climate change. Educational institutions are affected by multiple natural disasters, often simultaneously, disrupting children's learning and placing them in danger. Educational development plan, operating plans and budgets must provide for these recurring hazards. Education content and learning activities also need to address understanding and coping with climate change and disaster preparedness. The Covid-19 pandemic, shutting down schools across the world, points again to the critical importance of emergency preparedness and promoting resilience as a necessary theme in the education system.

ICT in and for education: Vision 2021 and Vision 2041 of Bangladesh embracing the Digital Bangladesh agenda envisage application of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in all spheres of

energy in the industrial assembly line. Simultaneously, today most people are into the third industrial revolution through the penetration of mobile phone technology. However, 4IR—a combination of automation, robotics, artificial intelligence, radical change in the nature of work, and innovation in economic production and services—has arrived. It has major implications for education, skill development, employment and entrepreneurship, which must figure in education content and methods, planning and strategies (Schwab, 2016).

Children with special needs: The key element of the principle of inclusive education is that the children with special needs including those differently abled are brought into the ambit of quality education services.

BANBEIS statistics of 2018 show that about 46 thousand children with different types of disabilities were enrolled in government primary schools including 21 thousand girls. These numbers are meagre; and data on access to non-government schools or to secondary or tertiary level education institutions are currently not available.

Inclusion of the disadvantaged: The government spends a large share of its education development budget as incentives for the disadvantaged groups through programmes such as school feeding, different kinds of stipends, and free distribution of textbooks at primary and secondary levels. In recent years, school feeding and stipends respectively have claimed between 10 and 20 percent of the total education sector annual development budget.

With growing household incomes, and need for larger resources in quality enhancing inputs including more and better teachers and better facilities, it is time to re-examine the growth trajectory of incentive spending and how incentives may be more specifically targeted to the disadvantaged groups.

Education finance and resource management: A persistently low level of public investment for education remains a challenge; so is making better use of these resources. Under USD 250 is currently spent by the government per school child. This is slightly over a quarter of what is spent on average in the South Asian region (World Bank, 2019).

Larger resources and budget provisions for improved school infrastructure, school feeding programmes, better learning materials, and more and better paid teachers should result in better learning outcomes. However, the evidence is not unequivocal—it is very much conditional on factors relating to efficiency of resource use, effective management and accountability. It also can be argued that there is a threshold or minimal level of resource inputs that is critical to affect results positively, otherwise the resources and inputs may be wasted.



a hopeful sign is the role that teachers can potentially play—individually and collectively. His/her capabilities, professional competence, and ethical principles can make a difference. Because, they touch the lives of young people in classroom and outside and can be the role model for the young people. This can happen if thinking afresh about the teaching profession can be undertaken.

A study on promoting ethics and values in school in Bangladesh underscored various actions needed on specific areas of school operations and organisation. But there is a common thread of teachers' role and responsibility that ties the proposed actions which comprise: i) a forward-looking and rationality-based approach with a commitment to dignity and rights of all human beings, and acceptance of diversity and plural identities of people; ii) the whole school, its culture and environment, not just the classroom, contributes to cognitive, social, emotional and moral development of students; and iii) school functions and

development. ICT capacity development of teachers, trainers, curriculum developers, and education managers needs to be improved and be part of an ongoing capacity building programme. Knowledge acquired by training attendees, after they returned to their institutions, need to better apply what they learn and share the knowledge with colleagues. With the spread of ICT resources, real-time monitoring, feedback, and reporting mechanisms can be introduced in education institutions as an education management information system (EMIS). The shutdown of schools due to the Covid-19 pandemic illustrates the role and potential of ICT-based learning.

21st century skills and the 4th Industrial Revolution (4IR): Life and the livelihoods of the majority of people in Bangladesh are still characterised by the use of the second or even the first industrial revolution technologies. These comprise respectively of augmenting mechanically animal and human muscle power (such as pulling rickshaws) and the use of electric



Children attend a class wearing protective masks at a school in Dhaka.

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