

All that’s wrong with the national school curriculum

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One summer afternoon in class 9, our Physical Education teacher faced the biggest conundrum of his career as had to talk to some 17-year-olds about menstruation. Hesitantly, he talked about adolescence for 10 minutes.

Even if I dare call those uncomfortable minutes a National Curriculum and Text-book Board (NCTB) approved version of sex education, words such as periods, menstruation, or sanitary pads were completely prohibited. After finishing an entire chapter within minutes, he excitedly went on to teach us the measurements of a handball field, a sport none of us had the opportunity of trying out in real life.

If we excuse the inadequacies of his attempt at teaching us about sexual health without acknowledging any of the terminologies related to it, the incomplete nature of our sex education syllabus is just the tip of the sunken ship that is our high school curriculum.

Our curriculum also caters to our culture’s fixation with choosing science over commerce or arts as students’ preferred lane of education. Most schools make students with good grades pursue science and force students with poorer grades to choose the rest, regardless of their ambitions. Not only is this discriminatory towards students with low grades, an established culture of prioritising science has created a perception that only the most academically gifted can be allowed to pursue the subject. As a consequence, parents expect their children to choose science regardless of their children’s interests.

“There is a false narrative that commerce is inherently easier than science, which is simply not true,” says Anindya Alam, an undergraduate student at BUET. “Students with holistically poorer grades have to study subjects that might actually be much more difficult for them than science might’ve been.”

A majority of educational institutions don’t even have options for commerce or arts available until college. Once a student is forced to choose science in class 9 and stick to it until SSC exams, the shift from science to commerce in college becomes a difficult choice.

Meanwhile, the opposite – from commerce or arts to science – is practically impossible. The consequences are noticed in university entrance exams where a large number of students from science backgrounds migrate to commerce or arts majors every year. This substantiates the inefficiency of our current system.

Another crucial failure of our high school curriculum is its inadequacy to identify mental health issues and make students aware of it from a young age.

“Mental health is probably the most ignored topic in the whole academic life of a student,” says Tasmin Khan, another student at BUET. “Some theoretical lessons are found in books but they’re neither sufficient nor taught by people who’re professionals in dealing with mental health. Students also aren’t getting any counselling for learning to care for their emotions and master cognitive behaviour.”

While our society fails to identify mental health as a part of our well-being, our high

school curriculum introducing mental health issues in the course syllabus can help guide our kids into handling their emotions responsibly and in the process, start normalising mental health on a larger scale.

Ironically, the biggest shortcomings in our curriculum are evident in traditionally prioritised subjects like Physics, Chemistry, and Mathematics. Board approved books on Mathematics aren’t application-oriented and focus heavily on solving problems. They lack explanations of mathematical theories which ought to develop the fundamentals, before approaching mathematical problems. The same goes for Chemistry and Physics as well.

“Board-approved Physics textbooks lack elaborate explanations and students need to take help of college-level books or tutors to understand the concepts,”

specific information from stories or poems which doesn’t fairly evaluate the examinee’s comprehension of the text. English for Today, the board-approved English book is constantly made fun of owing to its bland choice of essays and poems, its futility in comprehending the linguistic capabilities of its readers, and its consequent failure in developing students’ proficiency in English. The tests don’t include aspects such as vocabulary or discourse analysis which are crucial factors in learning the language. The result is our students’ subsequent anxiety, discomfort, and inefficiency regarding English.

Subjects like “Work and Life Oriented Education”, “Career Education” and “Agricultural Studies” were intended to help develop a student’s competence in the more practical side of affairs. However,

class performance, and the remaining 50 percent based on public exams. However, the remaining five subjects – Life and Livelihood, Religion, Physical and Mental Health, Arts and Culture, and Science and Technology will have their entire marks based on school performances.

This new curriculum might have detrimental repercussions according to multiple school teachers like Habib Ullah, senior teacher at Ideal School and College.

“With 5 of the 10 major subjects being graded entirely based on class performances, these subjects will lose their value as students will focus more on the remaining five subjects that’ll be included in the public exams,” Habib explains. “Consequently, these subjects might prove to be impractical owing to the grading sys-



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in reality, students consider these subjects to be nothing but hassles compared to Science or Mathematics. Our culture of coaching classes has already contrived a way to capitalise on these courses included in the curriculum. The fact that high school students are considering taking tuition on a subject that’s meant to prepare them for their careers depicts a dark portrayal of our collective understanding of education. It also portrays NCTB’s shortcomings in devising the course content of these subjects.

NCTB plans to initiate a new curriculum by 2025 which will reportedly emphasise competence rather than theoretical knowledge and remove separate streams of education in classes 9-10. The Ministry has identified 10 such sectors of competence that they believe students should master by the time they pass the class 12. According to the proposed curriculum, students of classes 9 and 10 will get 50 percent of their marks in Bangla, English, Maths, Science and Social Science based on

tem. Scopes of corruption might also be an issue if the grading’s left in the hands of the schools.”

The Ministry also plans to implement the same strategy in classes 11 and 12 where 30 percent will be based on class performance and 70 percent based on public exams.

The development of our national curriculum is an extensive and cumbersome process. The only silver lining is that NCTB is aware of the problems and intends to redefine our entire education system. With revised course contents, rewritten board books and new subjects prioritising students’ skills and competence outside bookish theories, the success clearly depends on its proper execution. Unfortunately, when it comes to the precise execution of proposed ideas, NCTB doesn’t have a decent track record.

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Students lucky enough to attend a private school will never understand Jhuma Akhter, a student of class 7 at Kurni Jalal Uddin High School, Mirzapur, Tangail. Jhuma, who loves everything about her school and wants to become a doctor, cannot bring herself to believe that her school does not have a Biology lab.

As the budget for our education sector shrinks with each passing year, the maladies of our government-funded schools pile up, and students like Jhuma question the development this sector has gone through in the last decade.

In the fiscal year 2021-2022, the total budget allocated to the education sector was Tk 71,951 crore – 11.9 percent of the national budget. In that, Tk 36,486 crore, Tk 26,311 crore, and Tk 9,154 crore were allocated for secondary and higher education, primary and mass education, and technical and madrasa education, respectively.

The entirety of the budget allocated for education makes up a mere 2.08 percent of the GDP, reduced from the previous year, despite the education sector being adversely affected by the pandemic.

Not only are we far from the standard public expenditure on education set by UNESCO, we are also lagging behind compared to other South Asian countries. In 2015, UNESCO set the average public expenditure for education to 4 to 6 percent of GDP, or 15 to 20 percent of total budget. A 2020 report by UNICEF denotes Bangladesh to be the lowest spending country in the region where others such as Bhutan, Nepal, and Afghanistan spent 6.6 percent, 5.2 percent, and 4.1 percent respectively.

Lack of resources is often cited as the key reason behind our below-average budget for education. This is not entirely true.

Dr Manzoor Ahmed, Professor Emeritus of Brac University and vice chairperson and advisor to Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE) states, “As a low-income country, there is no denying that we lack resources. But even with the available resources, we can afford to allocate a bigger percentage of the budget to the education sector. How can we justify our budget when countries with far less can afford to allocate a bigger budget for education? Then, it comes down to priority.”

A below-average budget is not the only reason our public schools are facing so many challenges. Dr Ahmed reasons, “The Ministry of Education is supposed to give a plan depicting how they want to spend their budget. Based on this plan and proposal, the Ministry of Finance will allocate the budget. In reality, we fail at the planning stage.”

The lack of planning and proper execution is evident in the rate of expenditure throughout the year. A 2019 World Bank report shows that although around 90 percent of the allocated budget is utilised each year, it’s not done systematically throughout the year. The same

report states that half the total expenditure is carried out in the last quarter, with extremely high expenses in June.

Moving on to the consequences of such a budget, Rasheda K Choudhury, executive director of CAMPE mentioned in a 2018 interview with The Daily Star, “There are three main weaknesses that are common to many of our educational institutions. First is the quality of teachers. Thousands of teachers are recruited every year and sent straight to classrooms without any training.”

Besides efficient training, under-compensation also contributes to the lack of quality in our classrooms.

Md. Abdul Karim, headmaster of Bindubasini Govt. Boys’ High School, Tangail comments, “Government school teachers get paid according to a pay scale. But it is not enough. So, they often engage in other economic activities or maintain a side job. As promotions take a long time, the salary doesn’t increase annually. Even when one gets a promotion, the salary does not increase much, so it doesn’t make much difference.”

Md. Atowar Rahman, senior teacher at Anjuman Adarsha Govt. High School in Netrokona, adds, “Although we get our salaries regularly, we are often denied additional allowances like travel allowances due to insufficient funds.”

The inefficient training, inadequate compensation and non-existent accountability produces ill-qualified and unmotivated teachers.

A student of Rajshahi Collegiate School, Zobaer Bin Zoha, expresses, “Although some of my teachers are good, most of the teachers hardly explain things in class. As a result, we have no choice but to get private tutors or be admitted into coaching centres.”

The challenges of our public schools do not end here. The schools are often ill-equipped. As Jhuma from Kurni Jalal Uddin High School mentions, “We do not have any labs or computer facilities in our schools. We are also not given tiffin from the school like other government schools.”

Furthermore, the National Education Policy of 2010 stating the teacher-student ratio to be 1:30 is yet to be implemented in most government schools across the country. According to UNESCO Institute for Statistics, as of 2018, the ratio remains 1:35 for secondary schools while primary schools show signs of improvement at 1:30. The picture on the ground, however, speaks a more complex truth as students like Zobaer and Jhuma states having 50-60 students per class.

Public expenditure in the education sector also fails to accommodate the entirety of our student body. According to the Directorate of Primary Education’s 2017 report, 77.7 percent of primary level students go to government-run schools. However, almost a third of the student body seeks pre-primary education from privately-owned institutions, such as private or NGO-run kindergartens.

The situation is worse in secondary education sector. According to a 2018 report by the Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (BANBEIS), a

staggering 98 percent of the secondary institutions are privately owned or managed; 82 percent of these institutions receive Monthly Pay Orders (MPOs) as teacher salaries. Although the number illustrates a significant percentage, only a handful teachers from subsidised schools receive this salary.

Considering the myriad problems inflicting our government-funded schools, it is not surprising that those who can afford it are opting for private or hybrid schools instead. This shift from public to private schools is causing the loss of equity and inclusion in our education sector.

Things changed for the worse when the Covid-19 pandemic hit. Not only did students drop out, those who continued to study experienced difficulties grappling with advanced class materials. While the academic year moved on, many students could not learn online.

Zobaer shares his experience, “I am suddenly in class 8 when I hardly learned anything in class 7 during on-line classes. Now I do not understand what the teachers are trying to teach.”

The teachers also face difficulty teaching ill-prepared students. Lubna Jahan, senior teacher at Viqarunnisa Noon School and College says, “My students of class 3 were admitted into school mid-pandemic. They had passed classes 1 and 2 online. Now, in class 3, I can see that most of them have not been able to grasp the materials of previous two academic years.”

Given the education sector is recovering from the damage caused by the pandemic, Dr Ahmed suggests, “While planning the budget, we first need an assessment and remedial plan. The remedial plan needs to address the knowledge gap that students are facing. Secondly, we need a few months of intense schooling so they can catch up, which can be easily done by shifting the academic year from June to September.”

Admittedly, the education budget is not the only reason behind the shortcomings of our public school sector. However, if we are to ensure equity, inclusion, and quality education – change needs to start from here, and soon.

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