

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF EDUCATION

The introduction of the new school curriculum has met with confusion and intense debate among all relevant stakeholders. Amid this controversy, three educationists share their anxieties about and expectations from Bangladesh's new school curriculum with The Daily Star.

New curriculum is detached from reality

The recent introduction of a new school curriculum has stirred controversy among all parties involved. But instead of addressing the concerns raised by these parties, the government has taken a hard-line approach, resulting in the arrest of some parents. Criticism of the curriculum has been silenced using various tactics. Even Dhaka University teachers were not allowed to hold a discussion on the new curriculum. It is surprising how the government has reacted, as this could have been an opportunity for them to use stakeholders' inputs and improve the curriculum further.

The government claims that the old curriculum created dependence on coaching centres, guide books, memorisation, and examinations, whereas the new curriculum has been created to free education from these. We have been saying for a long time that our education system exerts too much pressure on students. There is the pressure of textbooks and exams, while the reliance on guide books and coaching centres has gotten to an extreme state. We wanted changes so that students could feel the joy of learning, instead of it being a source of pressure year-round. So if the government is trying to solve these problems, we can appreciate the steps involved. However, the manner in

which the new curriculum is being implemented raises the question of whether this would further complicate old issues instead of resolving them.

Everything that the government has said about the old curriculum is true. But the question is, who introduced that curriculum? This government has been in power for a long time, and the curriculum that they are criticising now was developed by them. Last time, too, the government claimed that the new "creative curriculum" would solve the guide book issue, reduce cheating in exams, and remove the need for private tuition. Clearly, none of those happened.

This government's 2010 education policy proposed primary education up to Class 8 and secondary education up to Class 12. This was not implemented, either. Instead, things that were not mentioned in the education policy, such as board exams in Classes 5 and 8, were implemented. It is because of this increased number of exams that the business of guide books and coaching centres flourished.

Another reason given by the government is that other countries that have implemented such curriculums have seen widespread success—for example, Finland and

Japan. Yes, they have very good education systems. But the context of these developed nations and that of Bangladesh are so different from each other that we need to make drastic changes in several fields to fit into the category of these countries.

First of all, none of the countries mentioned have so many different streams of education as Bangladesh does. We have Bangla medium schools and colleges following the national curriculum, which also have English versions—this is the mainstream education system. Then we have English medium schools, and madrasas—Qawmi, Aliya, and English medium cadet. Then, among English medium schools and madrasas there are highly expensive ones and less expensive ones. Inequality and deprivation are major features here.

Second, in Bangladesh, policymakers don't have to worry about the consequences of their actions since their children don't participate in mainstream education. They go to either English medium schools or abroad for education. Thus, the decision-makers themselves are not as connected to the mainstream education system as they should be.

In countries like Finland or Japan, education is free for all citizens. There is no scope for any profit-hunting businesses to operate in this sector.



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From books to electronic devices, including computers, to transport like school buses—everything is provided for; thus, the cost of education is not something students or guardians have to be concerned about. But in Bangladesh, whenever there is some sort of policy-level change, the financial implications for those who are going to be affected by that change are extremely important.

There is also a big difference in the teacher-student ratios. The successful countries have a teacher-student ratio of around 1:20 to 1:25.

This is unimaginable in Bangladeshi mainstream education, where we see 50 or 60 or even 100 students per teacher. These other countries also have the most updated and developed infrastructure in education, while our schools and colleges lack proper laboratories, libraries, sufficient number of teachers, regular training, etc. Thousands of teaching posts are kept vacant despite high demand.

In countries like Finland, teaching is one of the most attractive, dignified, and well-paying professions. Primary school teachers are treated with a great amount of importance and respect as they create the foundation for the new generation. In contrast, our teachers' salaries are so low that they cannot even survive without other jobs, including private tuition, commission from guide books, etc. Teachers are paid poorly even in government schools in Bangladesh. Non-government teachers are suffering from absolute poverty and they recently staged a hunger strike to demand proper wages.

Those other countries devote a huge amount of time and resources to the teachers, students, and other parties involved in making any changes. They invite different opinions and improvise over time to find the best solution for all. What

is happening in Bangladesh is a top-down approach: a decision has been made and the required action has been imposed upon all. Discussions or suggestions are not being welcomed.

Considering all these facts, if we want to appropriately improve our education system, we have to first look at the reality. Without addressing fundamental problems like low salaries of teachers, poor infrastructure, shortage of teachers, high student-teacher ratio, and multiple streams of education, imposing a completely new curriculum will only create more problems and confusion.

So, the educational infrastructure has to be reformed, new teachers have to be employed, and the pay structure and benefits for teachers must be upgraded. Teachers need to have a comfortable enough income so they don't have to look for other sources of income. Additionally, opinions of teachers, students, and guardians need to be taken into account when a curriculum is designed so it can be truly inclusive and actionable. Given the current state of the government initiative of an experiment with millions of students, we are looking towards a potential repeat of the old results.



ILLUSTRATION: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

New curriculum fails to match our needs

With the passage of time, what we want and need, both domestically and globally, change. So, even if not frequently, it is necessary to update the curriculum accordingly. This change is of two types: one is to reform the existing curriculum, while the other is to update the curriculum as the world modernises and adopts newer technologies—that is, curriculum development. In 2012, we reformed the curriculum; what the government is doing now is curriculum development. With our economic growth and as per the needs of today, we had to change the curriculum.

However, while I appreciate the government's intent, I can't say the same about its method. I might be wrong, but it seems to me that the government, having been inspired by the education curriculum of Finland and other Scandinavian countries, has tried to copy and paste them. If you simply copy and paste another curriculum, that is "adoption." What we needed was "adaption"—to reconfigure the curriculum according to the sociocultural and economic realities of our country. And here is where the problems start. It will be difficult and, in some cases, impossible to implement it given the realities of our country.

There are many challenges to successfully implementing this new



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curriculum in Bangladesh. First, it does not exactly match our needs. Second, with respect to our teachers, it is difficult to implement this new curriculum given their quality and skills. At present, only a quarter of our teachers are capable enough to implement the new curriculum. Third, in the cities, there are 80-90 students per class. In rural areas, it is mostly around 60-70 students per class. In the countries whose curriculum we are trying to adopt, the class size is around 20-25 students, making it possible for teachers to pay attention to each and every student, identify their shortcomings and rectify them. That

is not possible here.

Fourth, the evaluation system that the authorities have talked about is inadequate. It is mostly dependent on continuous evaluation—which I support. But they are placing too much weight on it. They have been unable to grasp the main concept of continuous evaluation. Having given students lessons, it is important to identify who has failed to fully grasp them, and also provide remedial coaching to make pupils competent. Only then can the teacher move on to the next lesson. In the new curriculum, nothing has been said about remedial coaching. Then, what is the point of continuous evaluation? The way they have introduced it is incomplete, because the main purpose of it is missing here.

It is important that we place equal importance on learning from experience and on learning by reading books. The new curriculum talks about learning from experience. But you cannot learn everything from experience alone. There are many subject matters that have to be taught theoretically, by explaining the concepts clearly to students. While we are focusing on students learning from experience, it is important to recognise that they are increasingly losing interest in reading. The lack of interest in

reading books is not good. It is essential to maintain a balance between the two. I'm not talking about students being dependent on notebooks. Learning from textbooks, alongside their teachers explaining the concepts, should be enough.

But then we have to shift focus to our textbooks. We have some good textbooks, but we also have textbooks which don't benefit students much. And in some cases, they have quite a few errors. Without addressing this and other issues, it is not possible to successfully achieve the objectives that we are aiming for.

The National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) is responsible for preparing the curriculum and textbooks. Training teachers to implement the new curriculum is the responsibility of the Teacher's Training College. While the line directorates—Directorate of Primary Education and Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education—are responsible for implementing the curriculum, there has to be greater coordination among all the stakeholders. Those responsible for the implementation phase must be better aware of what's in the curriculum, and vice versa. Otherwise, these discrepancies will continue to persist. And there is a lot to be done in this regard.

Good for students, good for teachers

I believe the new school curriculum is a landmark and timely advancement, aligning with similar approaches already adopted by 156 countries. Our government has dedicated considerable efforts to designing and implementing this curriculum and, if embraced by students, it has the potential to revolutionise their learning experience.

Unlike the previous curriculums which heavily emphasised rote memorisation and bookish knowledge, the new curriculum prioritises practical education. For example, instead of simply calculating the area of a field based on textbook dimensions, students actively engage in real-world scenarios. Using measurement tools and applying maths, they now measure the area of actual fields.

The new curriculum discourages rote learning and dependence on private tuition. Attendance becomes crucial, as teachers directly guide students through the new learning process. This eliminates the need for parents to spend exorbitant amounts on private tuition and empowers teachers to deliver first-hand instruction, potentially leading to significant improvement in students' capabilities.

Indeed, there are challenges to implementing anything new. When the creative method was first introduced, many teachers could not fully comprehend the concept. However, from what I understand, the teachers have received training in two phases and have better understanding of the new curriculum, compared to the creative approach. So I hope there will be no problem.

The ratio of students and teachers and the ratio of students and classroom resources are also another persistent issues. However, as far as I know, the government is already working on this. In government schools, there were 60 students per section in the previous year. But from this year, the number of students has been reduced by five; now, there are 55 students in each section. Next year, it will be decreased by another five students. Eventually, there will be 40 students per section. I believe that will help implement this curriculum and will increase class engagement.

I think students are also showing enthusiasm about this new curriculum. There are now different parameters of achievement, without competition. The shift from competition fosters a more inclusive atmosphere, where students no longer hide in the back or fear being called on by teachers. And in teamwork, everyone actively participates and expresses themselves freely.

Parents, on the other hand, were wary of the new curriculum at first as there was misinformation doing rounds on social media platforms. There were allegations that the new curriculum would only teach how to cook or something like that. But now they can see for themselves what the textbooks contain. Perhaps in one of the sections, there are lessons on cooking, but there are many other lessons, too. I believe, in order to be a complete person, students have to learn how to cook, how to present an idea, how to practically implement maths equations in real-life scenarios, and so on. I think we can rest assured because many highly capable education specialists were involved in formulating this curriculum. Surely they don't want to do anything that can lead our children astray. The apprehension about this curriculum among parents, I think, will gradually go away. And people will realise that the new curriculum is actually good for students.

I think what is needed now are physical changes in the classroom setting. This is a very practical and new way of education, so our classrooms must adapt, too. I believe the government will gradually work on that and we can have a better environment to implement this curriculum.



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