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Giving the noble profession its due

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Possibly most people with some degree of familiarity with the state of education in primary schools in Bangladesh would acknowledge that the quality of teaching in most of our schools is far from expected. In recent times, the Ministry of Education launched an initiative of distributing multimedia computers in primary schools around the country and teachers are being actively encouraged to use PowerPoint slides to enhance the quality of instructions in their classroom teaching. The public statements of the Ministry of Primary Education indicate that the government is pinning high hopes on the delivering capacity of the introduction of this electronic device in improving the quality of teaching in classrooms.

While the use of PowerPoint slides in proper conditions and with proper objectives may enhance the quality of learning in classrooms, any experienced teacher would also be acutely aware of its pitfalls; particularly its use for the sake of use only. While many in our country find a simplistic positive correlation between the use of technology and enhancement of the quality of learning, PowerPoint slides may often mean less interaction between the teacher and students, or a machine taking over the classroom where the teacher becomes a peripheral observer whose only job is to supply the contents. In other words, the teacher may virtually delegate the task of teaching to the teaching aid technology. The successful use of PowerPoint slides requires not only mastery of the relevant technology and topics covered but also very meticulous planning and investment of time and effort on the contents of the slides. Indeed, it would require so much time and effort that it is difficult to imagine that most of the teachers in primary schools, who are time pressed and awfully inadequately remunerated, are in a position to invest that.

It is common knowledge that teachers in primary schools are so inadequately paid that it is next to impossible to attract talented candidates to teach in these schools. And most teachers have little option but to look for additional earning from private tuition and other activities. Hence, one of the interventions badly needed in the primary education sector is the substantial increase of salary and reduction of non-teaching related administrative burdens of teachers. The administration is lucky that the union of primary school teachers in this country, which by the sheer number of its members should have significant clout, has never been able to pull its weight in improving the pay and working conditions of the teachers. Often adverse impacts of unions in this country may make many of us feel that the failure of unions to really struggle for the cause of improvement of financial incentives and overall working condition of primary school teachers is not necessarily a bad thing. The trend in our country is quite different from many western countries where the union of school teachers is politically quite powerful because of their numbers and also because the administration recognises the importance of paying attractive salaries to teachers. They also recognise that the quality of teaching in primary schools is no less

important a concern than that of colleges and universities. Hence, teachers in primary schools enjoy a decent salary in almost every economically advanced country and they are rarely encumbered by non-teaching related administrative activities.

In contrast, teachers in primary schools in our country, particularly those in government primary schools these days, are as much (if not more) burdened with clerical or administrative tasks as they are with their core responsibility. Some readers may not be aware that the teachers are engaged in activities as diverse as updating the electoral list, preparing catchment area map (map of the areas covered by the school), children census, awareness building on sanitation, tree plantation, vigilance on prevention of child marriage, formation of student councils and so on. Most of these activities have little or no nexus to education. Thus, often teachers in government primary schools are the public administration's default choice in launching popular campaigns or conducting surveys and for many of these activities they do not even have any financial or other incentives. Even when there are financial incentives, surely teachers being required to invest their time in this type of non-teaching related task would be unable to invest adequate time in teaching. In the current state of things, it is quite natural that time-pressed teachers cannot deliver their true potential.

Overall budgetary allocation of primary education is inadequate, and a comprehensive study could have revealing findings about where it actually goes. Currently, all the hullabaloo about the working salary and working condition of teachers is basically about the salary and status of public university teachers - for very justified reasons - but the situation of teachers of primary schools cannot remain ignored. Numbers and public relation exercises would not do any good to the millions of kids who are mostly from the underprivileged sections of the community. Like any other country, we need high quality teachers who are allowed to remain teachers.

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