

Bangladesh

Towards

**21st
Century**

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Table 1: Literacy and enrollment in Bangladesh 1980-1995

Year	Adult literacy rate			Primary enrollment rate		
	Male	Female	Total	Boys	Girls	All
1980	43	20	32	76	47	62
1985	43	22	33	67	55	61
1990	47	22	35	76	64	70
1995	49	26	38	84	73	79

Sources: - State of the World's Children. UNICEF (various reports)

- World Development Report. The World Bank (various reports)

As a signatory to the 'World Declaration on Education for All' Bangladesh is committed to attaining basic education for 80 percent of its primary school age children. The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh enshrines the right of the child to free and compulsory primary education. The Constitution was framed in 1973, but not until 1991 that the Compulsory Primary Education Act was passed. Over the past several years the country has seen increased commitment of the government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and donors to the cause of primary education. The recent National Plan of Action for Children 1997-2002 has summarised the positive developments that have taken place recently in universalising primary education:

- a. The National Programme of Action gave high priority to improving basic and primary level education;
- b. Girls education has been given priority;
- c. Establishment of a separate Primary and Mass Education Division (PMED) facilitated better attention given to primary education;
- d. A National Children Policy (NCP) was enunciated in 1994 in line with Convention on Rights of Children (CRC) goals. It emphasized the need for ensuring "proper facilities for education for achieving appropriate moral, cultural and social values".

Some of the major educational goals of NCP which have already been implemented include:

- i. Free and compulsory primary education for all children;
- ii. Free education for girls up to class viii;
- iii. Provide appropriate facilities for non-formal education for children deprived of formal schooling; and
- iv. Use of non-formal education and traditional institutions (Madrassas) to provide educational opportunities for dropouts and the unenrolled, particularly girls.

Over 37,000 primary schools with an enrollment of over 15 million students owned and managed by the government constitute the core of the national system of primary education. Approximately 17,000 similar primary schools with an enrollment of 3.8 million students, set up with local private initiative, are managed with limited government subvention. The Ebtedayee Madrassas, which are also estimated to be over 16,000, provide education with a religious focus to about 1.9 million children. Several NGOs have given special attention to primary education. The number of students served by them is estimated to be 1.4 million which includes 1.2 million of BRAC alone. The last in the category of primary level institutions are the English medium schools, collectively known as 'Kindergartens'. One estimate puts their number at 15,000.

The gross enrollment ratio is said to be around 92%. There is no reliable estimate available on the net rate but popular belief is that it is about 70%. The retention has improved; approximately 60% now complete the primary cycle, and the same proportion attend school on a regular basis. The gender gap in enrollment has disappeared. In the Madrassas, however, only 10% students are female.

In recent times the curriculum has been replaced by a competency-based one with 53 competencies to be achieved by the end of primary cycle. Assessments of basic competencies found that approximately 50% students completing five years attained the basic minimum level. This figure in conjunction with net enrollment of 70% and retention of 60% indicate that less than a quarter of Bangladeshi children are receiving some meaningful education. Other equity issues such as the difference between rich and poor, and urban and rural areas have remained, and may have increased.

Another outcome indicator is movement from primary to the secondary levels. Compared to primary, the enrollment in secondary schools is a poor 19 percent: 25 percent for boys and 13 percent for girls.

To popularise primary education, the government has recently introduced a *Food for Education Programme* through which children from poor families attending schools are given a wheat ration. Financial allocation in education has also increased over the years. The expenditure on education in terms of GDP has doubled over the years; the share of primary education has also increased in the total education budget from 46% in 1988-89 to about 55% in 1997.

The other significant development that happened in the recent past is the NGO involvement in primary education. Among the large number of NGOs, the programmes of GSS, Dhaka Ahsania Mission, Proshika and BRAC are noteworthy in terms of scale. The largest NGO primary education programme is run by BRAC, which is also one of the largest NGOs in the world.

Quality of Primary Education in Bangladesh

In the following we make a quick appraisal of the quality of primary education in Bangladesh. In doing this, we have followed an *Input-Process-Output* (IPO) framework of analysis¹. While researchers differ about the appropriateness of such a framework, our purpose is to provide an overview of the quality of primary education by nationally grouping them under this framework in view of the time constraint in developing an improved framework for this purpose.

Table 2 provides the framework. The *Input* includes the 'vision' for primary education, the stated national policies, the curriculum, infrastructure, recurrent costs and factors affecting access and equity. The *Process* comprises essentially of various elements related to the teaching-learning practices and includes particularly, the methods of teaching, assessment, parent-teacher interactions, and management of schools. The *Output* includes the more traditional outcome variables

¹ It must be emphasized at this stage that the framework used is not an all-inclusive one; only the most pertinent elements of quality in the context of Bangladesh have been included. Availability of relevant information was also a guiding factor. Although we discuss results available from the formal, non-formal and madrasa sub-systems, one should remember that they are different and hence not comparable.

The Curriculum

The curriculum of an education system is an important guiding principle for understanding its quality. The output or end-product of the system depends to a large extent upon the curriculum. In 1986, the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) initiated a long term programme of evaluation and renewal of the primary curriculum. This revision was directed towards making the curriculum competency based by defining the competencies expected to be attained by children at the end of each five grades of primary education. Textbooks were revised by experts in the relevant subjects and after field trials in about 100 selected experimental schools, these text books were introduced during the academic years 1990-91 through 1995-96.

The government has now implemented this new curriculum in all its schools. The new curriculum is expected to be followed by the non-governmental agencies as well. A comparative study of the existing curricula followed by the latter agencies in light of the NCTB-prescribed curriculum will give an indication about the existing gaps in this regard.

Most of the NGOs who started their basic education programme rather independently, initially developed their own curricula without following any rigorous curriculum development exercise. Only a few large NGOs, particularly BRAC, were in a position to mobilise technical assistance while developing curriculum for their primary education programmes. After the introduction of Mass Education Programme and subsequently the Non-Formal Education Programme by the government in the eighties with international assistance, a few NGOs have started adopting either the NFE curriculum developed by the Directorate of Non-Formal Education or the NCTB curriculum. The smaller NGOs adapted the curriculum developed by the more well-established ones. The larger NGOs have been developing their own materials as well. BRAC, which has been running a large non-formal primary education programme since the mid-1980s, has its own materials. A comparison between BRAC and government curricula was done in 1991. It showed that the range of objectives in Bangla, Mathematics and Social Studies curriculum of BRAC was far less than the coverage of these subjects in the government curriculum. On the basis of this analysis, BRAC

modified its curricula and it is reported that the present BRAC curriculum satisfies all the terminal competencies for Class III as recommended by NCTB. If the above report of BRAC is correct, then more than 80 percent of the NGO-run centres are expected to directly or indirectly follow the NCTB curriculum framework.

However, the main weakness of these NGO curricula is in their developmental process. Except for a few NGOs, such as BRAC or GSS, the objectives of the curricula in terms of behavioural outcomes are not clearly specified, and their relationship with the national curriculum or the issues related to the equivalence of the learning achievement of children coming out of the government and NGO schools are not well articulated.

The madrasa curriculum, as independently developed by the Madrasa Board, has a predominantly religious content, such as Arabic, The Hadith, Fiquah, Aquaed and The Qur'an. While these contents constitute a major part of the madrasa curriculum, other general subjects like Bangla, and mathematics have also been included in the list of contents. According to a report, only 70 percent of the NCTB recommendations are followed for Bangla and Mathematics in the madrasa curriculum. The Madrasa Board approved five sets of textbooks published by different private publishers. The principal selects one set for his madrasa. All the general textbooks, though comparable to NCTB textbooks, are much thinner and inadequate in terms of the quantity and quality of their contents, explanations, and examples. As very often uncommon terms, jargons and words of Arabic, Persian or Urdu origin are used in these texts without their Bangla translations, these words pose learning difficulties to madrasa pupils. No concrete information is available on the Kindergartens regarding the nature and type of their curriculum.

School Contact Time

Studies show that teacher-student contact time in the school is an important indicator of the quality of education. Unfortunately, this aspect is very much neglected in schools. Currently 200 school days are available for teaching-learning activities in formal primary schools. Within these working days, children of Classes I and II get only about

two hours per day for class room activities, while in other three classes, it is 3.25 hours per day. In case of NGO schools it varies from 220 to 268 days per year with two to two and a half hours per day for teaching-learning activities. A recent study conducted among a few government and NGO schools shows that government schools had the lowest contact time among the sample basic educational institutions. The above are only normative figures; the actual or effective teaching time is not known.

Effective teaching time has been found to be influenced by teacher's attitudes, management of the school and the socio-political climate in the country in general, and in the locality in particular. Unfortunately, formal schools are affected more by the above factors than NGO schools¹. A study published in 1992 reported that the effective time devoted to actual teaching-learning activities in formal schools was less than 40 minutes per day. A recent study indicated that the total school contact hours in a year in non-formal schools were 50 percent or more than that were available in formal schools. This may also be due to the fact that most non-formal centres enjoy only a limited number of holidays compared to formal schools.

The amount of time a teacher spends in class-room largely depends on the supervision and the extra activities he is expected of doing. The Food for Education Programme, for example, imposes wheat distribution on teachers thereby further reducing the time available for teaching.

The other important aspect in this regard is the timing of school sessions. The flexible timing followed in NGO schools makes a big difference to the performance and continuation in school by the children belonging to the most disadvantaged families both in rural and urban areas.

Flexible timing seems to be one of the most effective ways of attracting working children to education.

¹ Agitation programmes undertaken by political parties affect the education institutions most, particularly the ones run by government. The NGO schools are less affected; in a study carried out on the 1996 non-cooperation movement, NGO schools such as those run by BRAC functioned almost normally when the government schools were totally shut. (Chowdhury et al. 1996)

Teachers' Quality

The teacher directly influences the quality of achievement of learners and contributes to their intellectual and all round development. While data regarding the classroom practices and other related variables are not available, some information regarding their education and training are given in Table 3. Of all primary school teachers, 90.5% received some kind of teacher training. Around 50% of them have Secondary School Certificate (SSC), while another 36% have Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) and 13% are Graduates. The government has recently introduced a scheme of continuous training of teachers through the Assistant Thana Education Officers (ATEOs) and PTI instructors in school clusters. All the teachers of a sub-cluster attend a day-long training session twice a month with their respective ATEOs. A small number of sub-clusters which have been found to organise such training regularly have reported to have shown higher efficiency in overall school performance.

Female teacher-student ratio is an important factor in promoting enrollment of girls in schools. One estimate in 1992 found that only about 21% of the teachers were female, the ratio being a little higher in urban schools than in rural schools. While the government has plans to raise this ratio to 50 percent by the year 2000, this will need recruitment of 100,000 additional female teachers over the next five years which seems difficult to implement without a major change in the management system of primary schools and involving the local community.

Table 3: Educational qualification of the primary school teachers.

Educational qualification	Percentage
Secondary School Certificate	49.6
Higher Secondary Certificate	35.7
College Degree	13.4
Others	2.3
PTI or BEd training	90.5

Female teachers, who outnumber male teachers in non-formal centres¹, were found to be more effective in terms of regular attendance and creating a caring environment in the classroom. Most of the NGOs recruit teachers with SSC background. Some had to relax this condition, as enough women with SSC are not readily available in some rural areas.

The importance of good and appropriate training cannot be over emphasized. The NGOs differ in the way they train their teachers. While some NGOs prefer to have their teachers trained over a longer period, BRAC and several other NGOs prefer to provide short training of 2-3 weeks to new recruits. However, these agencies put great emphasis on monthly day-long refresher's and other forms of periodic training. An advantage of such refresher's courses is that it keeps the teachers up to date and in close touch with their supervisors. While the government has large training facilities, many NGOs do not. The in-service training provided by NGOs has, over the years, been strengthened through the provision of good trainers, good training materials, and effective training methodology.

Very few teachers in madrassas have had any pedagogic training. While most of the madrasa teachers are products of madrasas themselves, some teachers with general education background have also been recruited in recent times specifically for teaching general subjects like Bangla and Mathematics in the higher primary grades. But the percentage of such teachers is very low. Similarly, the status of training of the KG teachers is dismal.

Management and Supervision

The management of both formal and non-formal schools lies with two complementary mechanisms: the national/organizational management and the community management. The national system of primary school management is more institutionalized and structured, and is the responsibility of the Directorate of Primary Education (DPE). At the community level, the School Management Committee (SMC) and various local primary education committees play a supportive role.

¹ In BRAC schools, for example, 90% of the teachers are female.

The efficiency of primary education is largely a factor of effective management and supervision at both the levels. Although it may not have a direct academic role, the SMC is supposed to play a very important role in creating favourable teaching learning environment in the school¹. The academic and technical functions of DPE have been suffering considerably since the entire responsibility of management and supervision lies with the DPE and its subordinate offices at the district and thana levels. This includes the distribution of text books and country wide organisation of recruitment, in-service training, posting, transfer of teachers and other staff over the years. As a result, the important functions in respect of monitoring and evaluation of the school improvement programmes and development of professional competencies of the staff and support institutions did not receive the desired attention.

The Thana Education Officers (TEOs) and ATEOs are responsible for overall management of schools at the local level. The ATEOs are expected to provide direct supervision and academic support to teachers. However, in this regard, the district and thana level administrators have not been able to play the expected leadership and supportive role². A study done by Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) documented poor supervision of primary schools by these authorities.

There are variations in supervision norms among the concerned NGOs: some are more structured and equipped to provide day-to-day academic support to the teacher than others. The supervision responsibility rests with a variety of functionaries, such as School Supervisor, Programme Organizer, Area Coordinator, Development Education Worker or Universal Education Worker. It is reported that supervisors perform several activities, for example, assisting teachers in planning their teaching, guiding teachers in adopting appropriate teaching methods, monitoring the performance of teachers and students, and trying to solve problems brought up by teachers and guardians.

¹ See later for a discussion on the community management/participation of the schools

² An Assistant Thana Education Officer (ATEO) is responsible for about 20 schools but receives only Tk. 100 per month as travel allowance for traveling to these schools.

Except for a few, however, most NGOs follow a centralized model of management strategy. The authority relationship among these NGOs is not well defined and the feedback mechanism is not always effective. The monitoring and supervision system of these NGOs were found to be limited to school visits and reporting through structured monitoring formats. The BIDS study documented higher frequency of supervision of non-formal schools; 80 percent of such schools were supervised at least once per month. This percentage was much lower in the case of government primary schools.

Management of madrassas lies with designated local influential persons who constitute the management committee. There is no central mechanism for the administration of Ebtedayee Madrassas except that they are registered with the National Madrassa Board.

The existing kindergarten schools are yet to be formally recognised by the government as a network supportive of the primary education development programme, requiring governmental guidance and regulation.

Teacher-Student Ratio

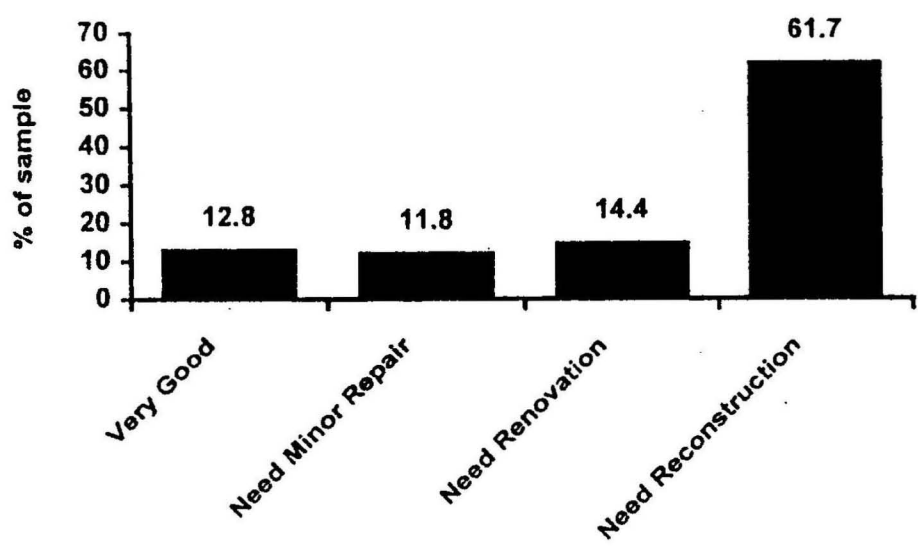
A most critical factor of school-related variable is teacher-student ratio, which is very strictly maintained in NFE system. It is critical because every learner in the school needs teacher assistance. Teacher-student ratio in primary schools is an important determining factor of the quality of education received by the pupils. It was found that there were between 10 and 100 students per teacher in a large number of primary schools. On an average, the current teacher-student ratio is 1:61 for the whole nation. However, this ratio varies between the lower classes (I & II) and higher classes (III to V): these being 1:45 for the higher classes (III-V) as reported by the government. These ratios lose much of their significance due to widespread absenteeism among students and teachers.

In the case of NGO-run primary learning centres, the absenteeism is negligible and they maintain a ratio of 1:30 on an average.

Physical Condition and Facilities

Facilities like physical condition of the school-house, availability of toilets and safe drinking water are also important factors influencing the retention and attendance of children and the quality of education. According to a PMED (Primary and Mass Education Division) report, out of 36,651 government primary schools only 12.8 percent are in ‘completely good’ condition and another 11.8 percent need ‘minor repair’ (Fig. 2). That is about 76 percent of the primary schools either need ‘major renovation’ (14.4%) or ‘complete reconstruction’ (61.7%). One calculation indicated that if all children in primary grades are to be properly accommodated in classroom, the country will need to construct 50,000 more class-rooms. The situation of school furniture and educational equipment is not satisfactory. Existence of sanitary latrines in schools also is an important factor, particularly for girls. A study indicated that 15 percent of urban schools and 58 percent of rural schools did not have any latrine. Safe drinking water is also not available in as many as 30 percent of formal schools. Seventy percent of formal schools and 45 percent of non-formal schools have play grounds.

Figure 1: Physical conditions of government primary schools.



Though school facilities are very important factors in formal education¹, the situation in non-formal education is rather different. As non-formal schools are resource-poor, they can not afford to provide the facilities that are usually available in the formal school situation. The condition of madrassas is probably much worse.

Parental Background and Private Costs

It is well acknowledged that children going to formal schools are from socio-economically better-off families. Children from poorer families are less able to take advantage of formal schools for various reasons. While schooling in formal primary schools is free, there are concealed private costs: exercise books, stationeries, various other seasonal fees such as for examination, *Milad* and sports, as well as for engaging private tutors. The NGOs tend to cater for poor families more effectively than the government is able to do through formal schools. As NGO programmes are designed through the involvement of local communities, it becomes easier for poor parents to send their children to NGO-run centres. However, even then it is not exclusively the poor that get access to these centres. Studies by BRAC indicate that approximately half the children enrolled in their schools do not actually belong to their 'target group'²

A large number of studies reveal that the socio-economic background of parents has an important bearing on the class-room performance of their children when traditional methods of teaching and assessment are followed in schools. In this respect some NGOs have proved to be effective in improving the performance of children belonging to disadvantaged families through the adoption of innovative class-room practices.

Teaching Learning Materials

There are various learning resources which need to be made available to students and teachers to facilitate effective learning. These include text books, exercise books, and stationeries for students, and visual aids, globes, charts, maps for class rooms, as well as manuals for

¹ The sitting arrangement in formal schools is organized in a 'theatre-like style'. The arrangement in most NGO schools is more like in a 'U-style'.

² BRAC's target group includes households owning half an acre of land or less.

teachers. The government provides textbooks free of cost to all students in formal schools. But, exercise books and stationeries need to be procured by the parents themselves. In most of the NGO schools, however, all these are provided free of cost by the NGOs themselves. The government is supposed to provide teaching aids such as globes and charts, but studies have shown that these materials are not adequately supplied to all schools. The incidence of actual use of these materials has also been found to be much less. In some NGO schools, the students themselves are expected to prepare their own models, charts and other aids. As a result of greater stress on academic supervision, use of teachers' manual and teaching-learning aids is greater among non-formal schools.

Processes

Teaching-Learning process : This is a very important determinant of the quality of education. Unfortunately, our understanding of the complex process of how a teacher teaches and a learner learns in the classroom is extremely inadequate due to the absence of a well-established research base either in primary sector institutes or in university education departments.

Most of our primary schools are teacher-centred and a one-way transmission of knowledge is practised, with students treated as passive listeners. There is little effort to make the process more interactive and teachers more reflective. Group work is seldom practised or even encouraged. Teaching is dominated by rote learning method, and homework is substantial. To cope with this pressure most parents, who can afford, engage private tutors to help their children¹. Non-formal schools, however, are somewhat different. Group work is promoted, punishment discouraged and homework is light. Teaching-learning practices in non-formal schools help develop learners' attitude and quality of life in respect of discipline, patience and self-esteem and self-regulation. An example of this is best illustrated by a researcher in her ethnographic study of BRAC schools:

¹ This is believed to be an important reason for the dropout of children from formal schools; the parents with poor economic condition cannot afford private tutors for their children.

Children sit in an orderly fashion, shoulder to shoulder, knee touching knee; books and supplies are placed in front in a neat bundle; every one sits and stands in unison and there are no clattering of desks or shuffling of feet. When it is time to go home, all stand and sing the “*Chutir gan*” (departing song) and march out with military precision.

Co-curricular Activities

To make teaching-learning attractive and to develop learners’ inner abilities, experts recommend that each day’s work should include co-curricular activities, such as physical exercise, singing, dancing, story-telling, and drawing. Students love these activities which seem to create a joyful learning environment and ensure higher attendance and retention in schools. While specifics of co-curricular activities are very clearly defined in the NCTB curriculum very few schools implement those seriously. Very often, various excuses are given for not adhering to the given instructions.

Singing, dancing and games are an integral part of education, not an add-on. However, in the recent past many NGO schools were criticised and attacked by religious fanatics for practicing these extra-curricular activities. Most of these extra-curricular activities are discarded in Madrassas. In some cases, even the national anthem is not sung.

Activity Record

A continuous pupil assessment (CPA) system has been adopted for formal primary schools, where teachers are expected to keep the learners’ (classes I and II only) day-to-day progress records in the CPA register. Recent research suggests that very few schools are actually geared to undertake such tasks because of the large number of students per class (Latif et al., 1996). In this system student’s psycho-social traits are not observed and recorded. For higher grades (classes III to V), terminal examination records are the only available information that can be used to analyse the quality of education output.

Maintenance of daily activity or anecdotal records in non-formal schools is not popular even though such a policy has been adopted by many agencies. Teachers and their supervisors assess the learners in their

own way but hardly record them for future use to ensure the review of progress and continuity of individual pupils.

Community involvement

In the wake of the existing problems of failure of the 'top down' policy in educational management, community participation in educational planning and management has been viewed as a key to success in developing countries. The Third Five Year Plan (1985-90) adopted this concept of involving community as a strategy to achieve universal primary education (UPE). In fact, community participation was the key element in the management of primary schools in the pre-nationalization period (i.e., before 1973). This realization led to a strong policy recommendation to involve the local people in the management of primary schools.

In government formal schools, parents, guardians and social elite are involved through local SMCs and Parent Teacher Associations (PTA). This initiative seem to have brought about some improvement in school activities. The ways in which the community can influence institutional management and enhance the quality of primary education was indicated under a BRAC project, titled, Facilitation Assistance Programme on Education (FAPE). This was one of a few projects which took community participation as a key to effective functioning of a primary school. It found that support from TEOs and ATEOs alone was not sufficient for the proper functioning of the school. When the local community in the form of SMC/PTA was organized and motivated through regular visits to the school, both the qualitative and quantitative outcomes of the school went up.

However, there is a general feeling in the rural areas that SMCs/PTAs are "Committees in the paper". A study commissioned by the Asian Development Bank indicated that these bodies were not working well. With primary school administration being concentrated at the headquarters of the government, anybody outside the government can do very little. According to the government, SMCs and PTAs were formed in 95 percent and 75 percent cases respectively but only a few were found to be active.

Non-formal education is essentially a community-based programme. Without the support of local people and active participation of the target group the system's efficiency would be jeopardized. It is the uniqueness of non-formal education that enables illiterate, poor and deprived people to get involved in the planning, management and supervision of local learning centres. They help select school premises, students, and teachers, and determine school hours and holidays. Moreover, they pledge to send their children to these centres, attend monthly parents' meetings, and provide, where needed, the school supplies. Although no study has found a cause-effect relationship of this cooperation, community support is believed to be an important factor for smooth functioning of school improvement programmes in remote areas. A study which looked at 17 government funded NGO programmes found that nearly 23 percent NGOs had 'very good' and 75 percent had 'good' relationship with the community.

Output

Student's cognitive and non-cognitive achievement in school is the ultimate result of any educational provision. This quality of achievement largely depends upon the nature of various components provided at different levels of education. After the implementation of initial UPE (Universal Primary Education) and CPE (Compulsory Primary Education) programmes in Bangladesh, the government is now concerned with providing quality education to all children. Accordingly, it has emphasized qualitative changes through competency-based curriculum, teacher training, material development and improved supervision. What qualitative change these interventions have brought about in education is yet to be seriously studied.

Researchers and practitioners of formal primary education have not been able to document any significant change in the overall achievement of children in recent times. But, some other quality indicators like improvement in enrollment and attendance, decrease of dropout rates, and increase in the number of graduates, have by now become quite visible. How far these changes in schools have a bearing on children's reading, writing and comprehension level or arithmetic attainments is not known. A few studies which have been conducted on children's academic achievement did not demonstrate any large-scale gain. The

conventional method of examination does not provide a real picture of understanding and application, but measures children's ability to memorise.

Academic Achievement

Examination, in every formal primary school, is seen as a tool for students' promotion and retention except in classes I and II where promotion to the next class is automatic. On the other hand, students and guardians perceive examinations as a panacea of life and try to attain a level which would enable them to secure a good position in the society. Such a stereotyped view of examinations makes it a mark oriented phenomenon. Nevertheless, both researchers and administrators rely on it as an indicator of achievement. High marks in examinations represent a student's quality of high attainment. To assess the quality of primary education in terms of achievement we need a nationwide survey of students' achievement in different subjects. One study conducted among 2,100 children of 11-12 years old shows that only 46 percent of primary school graduates (children completing 5 years of schooling) satisfied the criteria of basic education¹. The study called the *Assessment of Basic Competency (ABC)* include a test on reading, writing, numeracy and life skills knowledge. Year-wise analysis of the study shows that satisfying the basic education criteria increases with the increasing number of schooling year (Table 4). This result was confirmed by another similar study independently done by BIDS (Table 4). The test conducted through the ABC method was very elementary in nature and if this is the outcome of the schooling inputs then we certainly have to be concerned about our quality of education. The survey asked a series of questions on four areas of interest: reading, writing, arithmetic and life skills.

Table 5 gives literacy (the 3R's) for the same group of children. The situation improves with 61 percent of those completing class V passing the basic literacy test. The other striking information are the difference

¹ A child was considered to have 'this' if she/he satisfied the following criteria:
 - correctly answered 75% questions on a comprehension passage
 - correctly communicated a message through a letter
 - correctly answered 3 of the 4 mental arithmetic questions and
 - correctly answered 70% of the 'life skills' questions.

between rural and urban children and between boys and girls. Children living in urban areas did better than those living in rural areas.

Figure 3 gives literacy rates for those completing class V by urban-rural residence and gender. Boys are ahead of girls. This is true irrespective of whether they live in urban or rural areas. Children belonging to well-to-do households did better than those from poor households (not shown in figure).

Table 4: Percentage of children satisfying the 'basic education' criteria by years of schooling

1	2.0	Not available
2	5.0	Not available
3	12.0	23.0
4	25.0	36.3
5	46.0	44.0

Sources : Chowdhury et al (1993)

Murshid et al (1994)

Figure 2: Literacy rate (the 3R's) of children completing 5 years of schooling by residence and gender

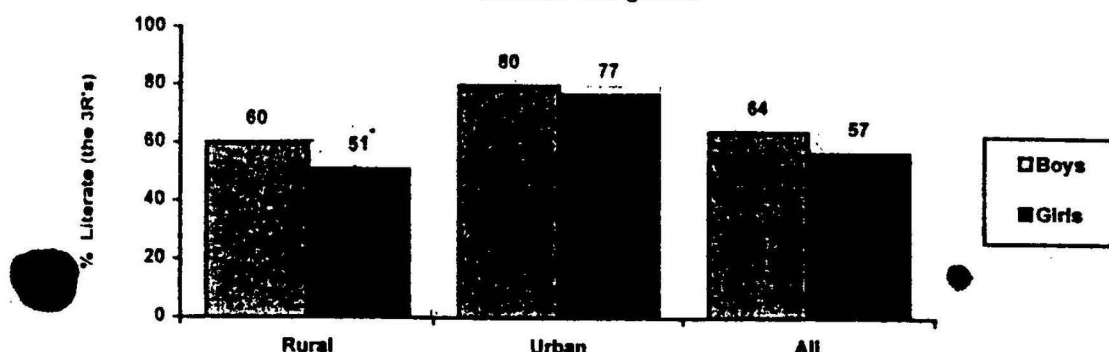


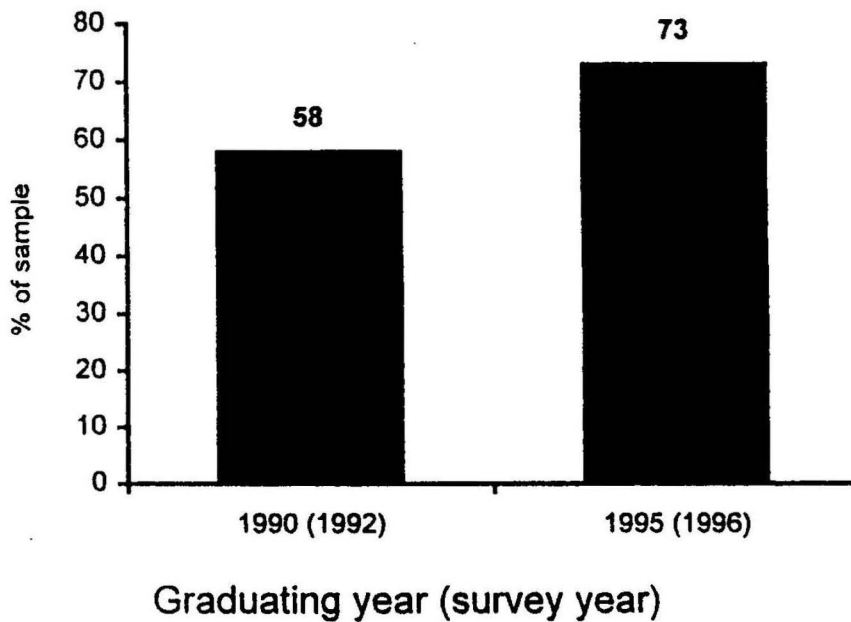
Table 5: Proportion of children satisfying the 3R's (reading, writing and numeracy) by years of schooling and area of residence, 1992.

Years of schooling	Boys (%)	Girls (%)	All (%)
1	1.7	15.4	3.1
2	5.9	21.1	7.6
3	15.7	42.4	19.0
4	30.4	58.8	35.6
5	55.6	78.1	60.9
6	70.1	93.6	77.6
All (ever enrolled)	37.2	72.7	44.6

One of the objectives of basic education in non-formal schools is to bring a quantitative and qualitative change among the targeted learners. To meet this demand, a continuous effort is given to maintain the quality of education in non-formal schools at an acceptable level. It is very difficult to show the actual academic achievement of the non-formal students studying in the NGO schools because most of these schools do not have any formal examinations.

Using the same criteria of ABC, BRAC conducted a study in 1992 on their graduates (those completing 3 years of non-formal primary education or NFPE). Fifty eight percent satisfied the criteria. A recent study done on the graduates of 1995 found that performance had further improved and exceeded 70 percent (Figure 3)¹.

Figure 3: Basic competency of children graduating from BRAC schools in 1990 and 1995



The actual achievement of elementary level madrasa students is not known. To date no systematic study has been carried out examining the competency level of madrasa students either in Bangla or Arabic. Fragmentary evidences, however, suggest that other than the Qur'anic verses the madrasa students' knowledge in Bangla language, social studies and mathematics is very limited.

Concluding Remarks

In recent times, Bangladesh has made good progress in achieving the goals of basic and primary education. Primary education has been

¹ Following the 1992 study, BRAC carried out some reforms in its NFPE in the areas of materials development and teaching methodologies. The improvement is believed to be an outcome of the reform. BRAC is still continuing the reforms.

made compulsory. Several other concomitant measures are also in place to attain the goal. The commitment of various actors including the government, NGOs and donors is much more than before. Enrollment in schools has increased substantially over the years and gender gap has been minimised. However, a number of challenges have remained.

The objective of universal primary education in Bangladesh is to provide education of comparable quality to all its citizens, but the system does not seem to be adequately prepared enough to lead the nation towards that goal. Achievement in primary education, so far made in Bangladesh, has been largely quantitative, leaving behind doubts about its effectiveness, sustainability and comparability.

To provide quality education, a nation should start with a well designed and relevant curriculum taking advantage of research findings from the field. Such curriculum should also be up to date and equivalent with other comparable streams. While some progress has been achieved in improving the primary education curriculum, the text books prepared on the basis of this curriculum suffer from various limitations. To improve the transaction of the curriculum in the classroom, there is a need to promote multiple textbooks based on the national curriculum and support its implementation with diversified teaching and learning aids and supplementary materials.

The quality of primary education in Bangladesh is largely a factor of teachers' quality. Several factors have been identified for their unsatisfactory quality. Absence of effective in-service training programme, inadequate supervision and academic support to the school improvement programme are some of the factors closely associated with the present low school effectiveness.

We need to rethink about the quality of education in terms of school environment, classroom culture and teacher's burden of unwanted activities.

Assessment of students in terms of their academic achievement is very much stereotyped in Bangladesh. In the absence of improved methods of testing and evaluation, teachers are trapped in conventional practices. As a result neither are the actual learning difficulties of pupils brought into focus, nor are improved methods adapted to remedy the

situation. More effective and simpler methods of learner assessment have to be evolved and popularized among the teachers.

Our knowledge about many factors related to quality of education is constrained by a lack of proper data base. The nation must invest more in improving the information base of our education system and give more emphasis on research.

Finally, quality of education, being the impact of several factors, can not be presented in a set of figures or in a precise description of facts. If we want to understand the quality of education we have to understand these factors more closely following both qualitative and quantitative methods and to synthesise them to provide a perception of quality. The challenge for the new century will be how we maintain and increase enrollment in primary and secondary schools respectively and to improve the quality of learning in all types of educational institutions. The new century will be the age of information; our success will depend on how well and fast we are able to embrace this change.

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