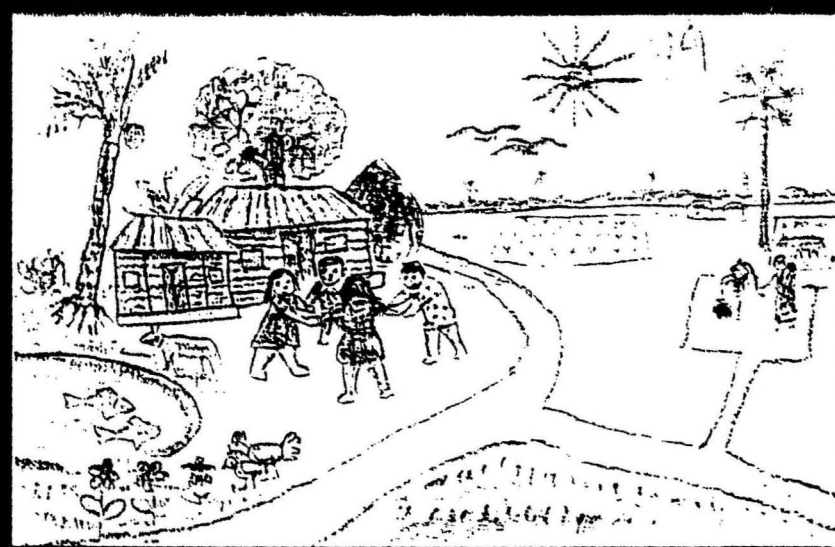
Getting Started

1997

UNIVERSALISING QUALITY PRIMARY EDUCATION IN BANGLADESH



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QUALITY OF PRIMARY EDUCATION IN BANGLADESH

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Introduction: A Framework for Quality Analysis

There are several categories of schools for primary education in Bangladesh. Over 37,000 grades I to V 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 Ebtedaiye madrassas, which are also estimated to be 16,000 in number, provide education with a religious focus to about 1.9 million 5 to 10 year old children. Several well-known non-governmentalal organizations (NGOs) have of late also been giving special attention to primary education. The total number of students served by them is estimated to be 1.3 million.[1] The last in the category of primary level institutions happens to be the English medium primary level schools, collectively known as Kindergartens or KGs. One estimate puts their present number to be 15,000.

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This paper makes an attempt to make a quick appraisal of the quality of primary education in Bangladesh. In doing this, the authors have followed an Input-Process-Output (IPO) framework of analysis.[2] While researchers differ about the appropriateness of such a framework, our purpose here 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.

Figure 1 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 such as enrollment, retention, attendance, and cognitive and non-cognitive achievements. However, there are a dearth of reliable information on many of these

Figure 1: Quality of Education: an Analytical Frame

Inputs/Programme effort	Process	Output/Outcome
Vision	Teaching learning processes	Pupil achievement
Policy	Co-curricular activities	Enrollment, attendance,
Financing	Activity and pupil records	retention and
Curriculum	Classroom organisation and	successful completion
Contact time	management	Quantum and quality
Quality of teachers	Community involvement	of the assistance
Management &	Academic leadership role of	received from the
Supervision	the head teacher/ supervisor	local community
Physical facilities	Quality of in-service	General upkeep of
Teacher-student ratio	training of teachers	the school
Teaching-learning		Student mobility to
materials		higher levels and
Equality of access		world the of work.

issues. Whereas some information are available on the government and NGO sub-systems, very little is available on the Madrassa and KG schools. Aspects such as finance, management, community-participation and enrollment and drop-outs have been adequately covered in the other papers presented in the Conference.

Inputs

THE VISION

Every nation has a vision of a preferred future and every education system has a goal, a goal leading the nation to that future. This is one of the most important inputs to the content and process of education and ultimately its quality. The Constitution of Bangladesh states, "The State shall adopt effective measures for the purpose of relating education to the needs of society and producing properly trained and motivated citizens to serve those needs." Although it is implicit here that education should serve 'the needs of society', it is not clear what kind of a nation we want to build through our education system nor what those needs are. More explicitly, our educational goals do not tell us how our children should grow and develop through the education system.

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 NCTB adopted several measures to achieve a

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 NCTB curriculum. The smaller NGOs adapted the curriculum developed by the more well-established ones. Table 1 illustrates the extent of dissemination of Government and NGO curricula among the NGO-run primary education programmes. The larger NGOs have been developing their own materials. BRAC, which has been running a large non-formal primary education programme since the mid-1980s, is well-known for its own materials. A comparison between BRAC and government curricula was done by Corey in 1991. He showed that the range of objectives in the Bangla, Mathematics and Social Studies curriculum of BRAC was far less than the coverage of these subjects in the government curriculum (Corey, 1991). 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 3 as recommended by NCTB. Table 1 shows that in primary education, NGOs use NCTB, BRAC, DNFE, or DAM curricula for their centres. 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 madrassa curriculum, as independently developed by the Madrassa 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 madrassa curriculum, other

certain acceptable standard in terms of quality. The measures adopted during the preparatory stage of the textbooks included:

- Orientation of writers prior to writing of these books.
- Selection of contents from the real life situation.
- Requirement of making the presentation simple.
- Emphasis on the competencies that were pre-set for different classes.
- Incorporation of follow-up classroom practices.

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 big NGOs, particularly BRAC, were in a position to mobilize technical assistance while developing its curriculum for its primary education programme (Lovell and Fatema, 1989). After the

Table 1: Percentage of NGO's Following Different Curricula in Primary Education

Curriculum in use	% of NGOs n=299
NCTB	36.5
DNFE	11.4
BRAC	36.5
DAM	5.4
GSS	3.7
VERC	1.0
Other's or own	5.7

Source: CAMPE (1995)

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 madrassa curriculum. The Madrassa Board approved five sets of textbooks published by different private publishers. A principal selects one set for his madrassa. 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 the madrassa pupils.

Nevertheless, the madrassa curriculum has also undergone changes. As in the case of some NGOs, the developmental process of madrassa curriculum also suffer from serious technical weaknesses. Moreover, the introduction of private publishers, who have practically no professional experience in the preparation of text books, has also contributed to the prevalent low quality of the general education component in *madrassa* education.

No concrete information is available on the Kindergartens (KG school) regarding the nature and type of their curriculum. It is estimated that there are 15,000 KG schools in the country, most of which are in the pre-primary. Only about 10% have classes up to grade 5; most of them are reported to satisfy the competencies recommended by NCTB.

SCHOOL CONTACT TIME

Research shows 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 grades 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 (UNICEF, 1995). In case of

NGO schools this 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 showed that government schools have the lowest contact time among the sample basic educational institutions (Table 2). 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 teachers' 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 schools.[3] 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 (Karim, 1992). 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 (Alam et al., 1996). 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

Table 2 : Daily School Timing in Primary Schools Managed by Selected Organizations

Type of Organizational Schools	Daily school time (min.)
Dhaka Ahsania Mission	150
BRAC	180
GSS	165
Proshika	180
DNFE Schools	120
Formal Primary School (Class I & II)	120
Formal Primary School (Class III -V)	240

Source: Habibullah et al., 1996

doing. The Food-for-Education programme, for example, imposes wheat distribution on the shoulder of teachers thereby further reducing the time available for teaching.

The other important aspect in this respect 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.

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 about 13% have Degree certificate. 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

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

Source: UNICEF, 1995

number of sub-clusters which have been found to organise such training regularly have reported to have shown higher efficiency in overall school performance (UNICEF, 1993).

Female teacher-student ratio is an important factor in promoting enrollment of girls in schools. One estimate in 1992 found that only about 21% 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 system of management of primary schools and involving the local community around each school.

Female teachers who outnumber male teachers in non-formal centres[4], have been found to be more effective in terms of their regularity in attendance and creating a caring environment in the classroom. In respect of educational background, most of the NGOs recruit teachers with SSC background. Some have 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 (DPC, 1994), BRAC and several other NGOs prefer to provide a shorter duration training over two to three weeks to their newly recruited teachers. However, these agencies lay great emphasis on monthly one-day refresherís 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 of the teachers in madrassas have had any pedagogic training. While most of the madrassa teachers are products of

madrassas, some teachers of general education background are also recruited in recent times specifically for teaching the 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 complimentary mechanisms: the national/organizational management and community management. The national system of primary school management is more institutionalized and structured, and is the responsibility the Directorate of Primary Education (DPE). At the community level, the School Managing Committee and various local primary education committees play a supportive role. 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 school management committee is supposed to pay a very important part in creating favourable teaching-learning environment in the school.[5] The academic and technical functions of DPE have been suffering considerably since the entire responsibility of management and supervision lies with the Directorate of Primary Education (DPE) and its subordinate offices at the district and thana levels. This includes the distribution of text books and country-wide organisation of in-service training of teachers, recruitment, 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 Officer and his/her assistants (the ATEOs) are responsible for overall management of schools at the local level. The ATEOs are expected to provide direct supervision and academic support to the teachers. However, in this regard, the district and thana level administrators have not been able to play the expected

leadership and supportive role.[6] A study by Alam et al. (1996) documented poor supervision of the 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, Universal Education Worker. It is reported that supervisors perform several activities, for example, assisting teachers in planning their teaching, monitoring their and students' performance, guiding teachers in adopting appropriate teaching methods, and trying to solve problems brought up by teachers and guardians (Ahmed et al., 1993).

Except for a few, however, most of the 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. In their Annual Monitoring Report on 17 GEP funded NGOs, the DPC found only three with well designed organogram and authority relationship specifics (DPC, 1994). The monitoring and supervision system of these NGOs were found to be limited to school visits and reporting through structured monitoring formats. The study by Alam et al (1996) 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 Ebtedaiye 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

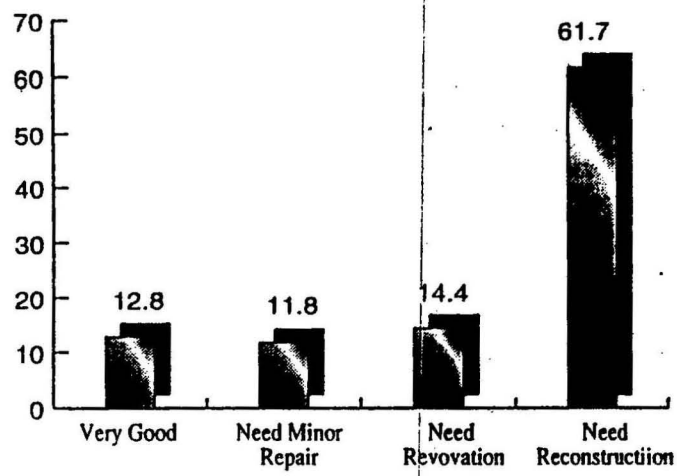
A most critical factor of school related variable is teacher-student ratio, which is very strictly maintained in NFE system. It is critical because every learner in the school needs teacher's assistance. Teacher-student ratio in primary school is an important determining factor of the quality of education received by the pupils. It is found that there are between 10 and 100 students per teacher in a large number of primary schools. On an average, the teacher-student ratio is 1:61 for the whole nation. However, there is some variation in this ratio between the lower grades (I & II) and higher grades (III to V): these being 1:45 for grades I and II and 1:40 for the higher grades III-V, as reported by the government. These ratios lose much of their significance due to wide-spread absenteeism among students and teachers.[7]

In the case of NGO-run primary learning centres, the absenteeism is negligibly small 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, safe drinking water, etc, 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 schools are in 'completely good' condition and another 11.8 percent need 'minor repair' (Fig. 2). That is about 76 percent of primary schools either need ëmajor renovationí (14.4%) or 'complete reconstruction' (61.7%). One calculation indicates that if all children who are involved in primary grades are to be properly accommodated in classroom, the country will need to construct 50,000 more classrooms. The situation of school furniture and educational equipment is not satisfactory (DPC, 1993). Existence of sanitary latrines in schools also is an important factor, particularly for girls. A study (FREPD-FORD Study, 1988) indicated that 15 percent of urban schools and 58 percent of rural schools did not have any latrine. Safe drinking water

Figure 2 : Physical Conditions of Government Primary School



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 (Alam et al., 1996).

Though school facilities are very important factors in formal education[8], 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 poorer families more effectively than the government is able to do through formal schools. As NGO programmes are designed through the

involvement of the local communities, it becomes easier for poorer 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 BRAC schools do not actually belong to their 'target group'.[9]

As is well known from a large number of research studies, the socio-economic background of parents has an important bearing on the classroom 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 classroom 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 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 (DPC, 1993). 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. In order to cope with this pressure most parents, who can afford, engage private tutors to help their children.[10] 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 Khan (1995) in her ethnographic study of BRAC schools:

> . . . 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. (p. 11)

CO-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

In order to make teaching-learning attractive and to develop learners' inner abilities, experts recommend that each dayís 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 practising these extra-curricular activities. Most of these extra-curricular activities are discarded in madrassas. In some cases, even the National Anthem is not sung (Momen, undated).

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 students' 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 in general. The Third Five Year Plan (1985-90) undertook 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 Bangladesh as well (Planning Commission, 1994).

In government formal schools, parents, guardians and social elites are involved through local School Managing Committees (SMC) and Parent-Teachers Associations (PTA). This initiative seem to have brought about some improvement in school activities (Haq and Booth, 1994). 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 (Latif, 1991). It found that support from TEOs (Thana Education Officer) and ATEOs (Assistant Thana Education Officer) 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 (Haque and Haq, 1992).

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 (Haq and Booth, 1994). According to the government, SMCs and PTAs were formed in 94 percent and 75 percent cases respectively (National Plan of Action, 1992), 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 GEP funded NGOs found that nearly 23 percent NGOs had 'very good' and 75 percent had 'good' relationship with the community (DPC, 1994).

Output

Students' 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 drop-out 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

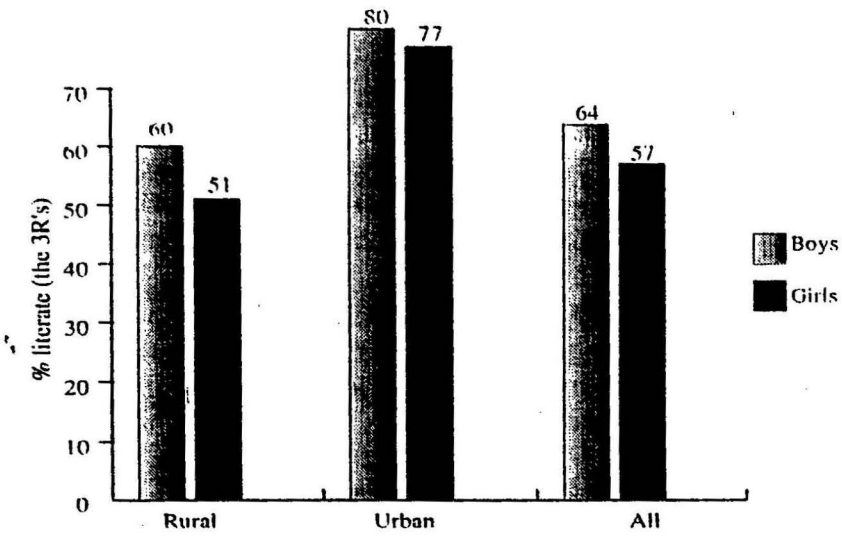
Examination, in every formal primary school, is seen as a tool for students' promotion and retention except in grade I and II where promotion to the next grade is automatic. On the other hand, students and guardians perceive examinations as a panacea of life and try to attain a level which would enable them to secure a good position in the society. Such a stereotyped view of examinations pushes them further towards the unproductive end. In other words, the whole system becomes a mark-oriented phenomenon. Nevertheless, both researchers and administrators rely on it as an indicator of achievement. High marks in examinations represents a student's quality of high attainment. In order to assess the quality of primary education in terms of achievement we need a nation-wide survey of students' achievement in different subjects. One study conducted among 2100 children of 11-12 years old shows that only 46 percent of primary school graduates (children having completed 5 years of schooling) satisfied the criteria of basic education[11] (UNICEF, 1992). The study called the Assessment of Basic

Table 4: Percentage of Children Satisfying the 'Basic Education' Criteria by Years of Schooling

Years of Schooling	Percent achieved 'basic education'	
	National sample*	5 district sample+
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

Source: *UNICEF, 1992; +Murshid & Ali, 1994

Figure 4 : Literacy Rate (the 3R's) of Children Completing 5 Years of Schooling by Residence and Gender



Competency (ABC) include a test on reading, writing, numeracy and life skills knowledge (Chowdhury et al., 1994). Year-wise analysis of the study shows that satisfying the basic education criteria

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	Rural	Urban	All1
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

Source: ABC Study (1992) (Unpublished data)

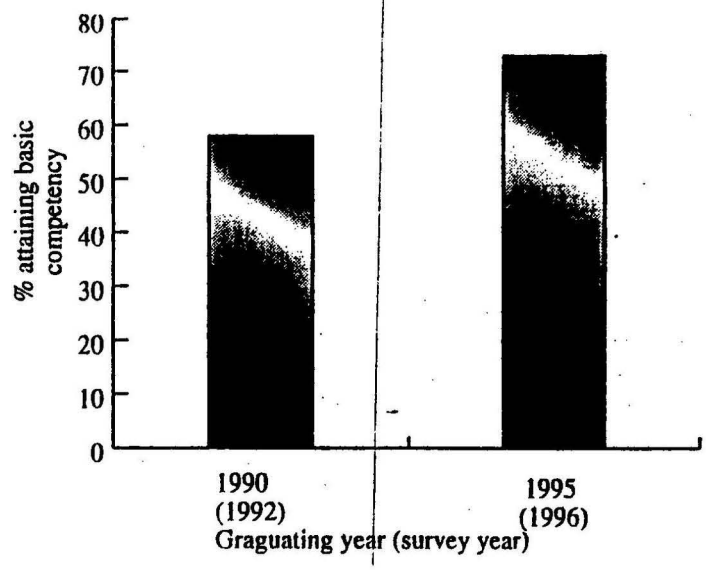
Table 6: Median Score in Bangla, Maths and General Knowledge of Primary School Students

Subject (maximum score)	Median score in classes				
	Class I N=734	Class II N=790	Class III N=765	Class IV N=700	Class V N=623
Bangla (20)	8	8	8	10	12
Mathematics (20)	8	9	5	7	6
Gen. Knowledge (10)	3	5	4	6	3.5

Source: DPC, 1994.

increases with the increasing number of schooling year (Table 4). This result was confirmed by another similar study independently done by BIDS (see also Table 4). The test conducted through the ABC was very elementary in nature and if this is the outcome of the schooling inputs then we certainly have to be concerned about our

Figure 5: Basic Competency of Children Graduating from BRAC Schools in 1990 and 1995



quality of education. The survey asked a series of questions on four areas of interest: reading, writing, arithmetic and life skills and Annex 1 gives achievement of students in different classes on each of the questions asked.

Table 5 gives literacy (the 3R's) for the same group of children. The situation improves a little with 61 percent of those completing grade 5 passing the basic literacy test. The other striking informations are the difference between rural and urban children and between boys and girls. Children living in urban areas did better than those living in rural area.

Figure 4 gives literacy rates for those completing grade 5 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 poorer households (not shown in figure).

A World Bank sponsored study tried to measure learners' academic performance in three subjects: Bangla, Mathematics and General knowledge. The result showed that students' achievement in all the subjects were very low; 50 percent of children could achieve only around 40 percent or less of the total score (Table 6). It was observed that the aggregate achievement of the learners in all the three subjects was better among urban students than their rural counterparts, thus confirming the results of the ABC study. In the same way, Latif, Khan and Haq (1996) also observed similar performance among the students of lower grades (I and II) in primary schools. They administered standardized achievement tests (Haq, 1994) of Bangla and Mathematics among the students of grades I and II in 25 government primary schools across the country. Students' average achievement in this test was 50 percent or below.

One of the objectives of basic education in non-formal schools is to bring a quantitative and qualitative change among the targeted learners. In order 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 school do not have any formal examinations.

Using the same criteria of ABC, BRAC in 1992 conducted a study on their graduates (those completing 3 years of non-formal primary education or NFPE). Fifty eight percent satisfied the criteria (Nath et al., 1992). A recent study done on the graduates of 1995 found that performance had further improved and exceeded 70 percent (Figure 5)[12] (Nath et al., 1996).

A three-year long monitoring survey among 17 NGOs receiving government subvention studied the NGO students' academic achievement in Bangla, Mathematics and General Knowledge. Results of this study showed much variability among NGO schools which varied from very low to very high achievement. The average achievement of the students in NGO schools was 'satisfactory'. That is, a large number of students scored more than 50 percent marks in these tests (Table 7).

Table 7: Median Score in Three Subjects of Some Selected NGO Schools in Bangladesh

Class	Bangla (tot. mark 20)	Mathematics (tot. mark 20)	Gn. Knowledge (tot. amrk 10)
Class I	15.00	13.03	6.44
Class II	13.83	10.51	6.95
Class III	14.90•	11.94•	15.65•
Class IV	13.84	13.59	7.91
Class V	14.05	13.59	8.73

• Separate tests were administered for class III. The total marks for these tests were 18, 15 and 20 respectively.

Source: DPC (1995)

The actual achievement of elementary level madrassa students is not known. To date no systematic study has been carried out examining the competency level of madrassa students either in

Bangla or Arabic. Fragmentary evidences, however, suggest that other than the Qur'anic verses the madrassa students' knowledge in Bangla language, Social Studies and Mathematics is very limited (Momen, undated).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

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.

In order to provide quality education, a nation should start with a well-designed and relevant curriculum taking advantage of research studies tested in the field. Such curriculum should also be up to date and equivalent with other comparable streams. While some progress have been achieved in improving the primary education curriculum, the text books prepared on the basis of this curriculum suffer from various limitations. In order 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 teachers' 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.

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.

This paper reviewed quality of primary education in Bangladesh in terms of selected indicators and determinants. Other important issues related to the concept of quality, such as financing, management and system efficiency, have been adequately dealt with in other papers presented in this volume. One constraint faced by the authors in this endeavour of documenting quality is the paucity and inaccuracy of relevant information. This is true in case of all the systems of primary education: government, non-formal, private, madrassa or kindergartens. Serious gaps in information exists particularly in case of the latter three, viz., private, madrassa and kindergartens. Considering the size of these sub-sectors, which enrols nearly a quarter of all enrolled, independent documentation of their performance in light of national primary education goals need to be undertaken on an urgent basis

Notes

1 One of such programmes is run by BRAC with a total enrollment of over 1.1 million (1996).

2 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. Availabilty of relevant information was

also a guiding factor. Although we discuss results available from the formal, non-formal and madrassa sub-system, one should remember that they are different and hence not comparable.

3 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).

4 In BRAC schools, for exampl, 90% of the teachers are female.

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

6 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.

7 The absenteeism is said to be up to 30%. See Alam et al (1996) for more information on this.

8 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'.

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

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

11 A child was considered to have ëbasic educationí 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 ëlife skillsí questions.

12 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.

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Comments of Mr. A.H. Latif, Invited Discussant, on the paper by Chowdhury et al.

The authors have followed a framework which they call 'input', 'output process' and 'output' of education, and tried to show us the present status of the quality of education in Bangladesh. In this country we have not given much attention to the process and output of education. That is why Mr. Mustaque Chowdhury has mentioned the dearth of information.

The recommendation part in the paper is very brief, and I would have liked the authors to have raised more questions and issues on the quality of education. I would myself like to raise a few questions. My first question is on the curriculum. I would like to know why the Government has so far not questioned the failure on the part of the kindergarten and the Madrassa to use the NCTB curriculum. I wonder why the Government Departments have not questioned this yet since they are so critical of the curriculum followed by the NGOs. This is the time that we have to raise the question of whether they follow the NCTB curriculum or the terminal competencies that they have in their curriculum.

With regard to Mr. Sadiqul Hoq's paper, it seems that we are very satisfied with the quality that has been achieved. Some of the Government interventions are very important, e.g., the continuous assessment of children of grade I and II which was to identify the weak students and provide remedial coaching. But the question is how far do these interventions work at the school level ? We need to find out.

The paper says that the contact time is very important. The contact time in Government schools is 200 school days -- for the NGOs it is a little bit more. If we want to increase the contact time we have some options: one is to reduce the holidays, or we can increase the number of classes in the schools.

Another question that has been raised in the paper is on the academic supervision by the Head Teacher. Most of the teachers who are recruited have passed their S.S.C. or H.S.C., and recently some

graduates have been recruited. If we want the Head Teacher in the primary school to take on the responsibility of the academic supervisor, we should also raise their qualification requirement to graduate level.

There is a point in the paper about 'classroom culture'. In most Government schools we have traditional classrooms, the teaching-learning is teacher centred, and the environment is very dull. NGOs claim that they provide quality education. Therefore we expected that some elements of this 'quality education' should have been mentioned in the paper in order to get some idea about what type of classroom situation we have.