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Quality of Primay Education in Bangladesh

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The paper gives a succinct and comprehensive review of the progress and development of Universal Primary Education in Bangladesh. Using the Input-Process-Output Framework, it processes the quantitative and qualitative information available on most all aspects related to providing Basic Education to primary school children under the National Plan of Action—1992 that was developed by the Government of Bangladesh as a strategy to achieve education for all by 2000.

Introduction: A Framework for Quality Analysis

There are several categories of schools for primary education in Bangladesh. Over 37,000 primary schools (grades I to V) 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 Ebtedeyee madrassahs*, 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 nongovernmental 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 million¹. 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.

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, stated national policies, curriculum, infrastructure, recurrent costs and factors affecting access and equity. The Process comprises essentially various elements related to the teaching-learning practices and includes particularly, 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 is a dearth of reliable information on many of these factors at best.

Inputs/programme effort	Process	Output/outcome
Vision	Teaching learning processes	Pupil achievement
policy	Cocurricular activities	Enrollment, attendance, retention
Financing	Activity and pupil records	and successful completion
Curriculum	Classroom organisation and	Quantum and quality of the
Contact time	management	assistance received from the
Quality of teachers	Community involvement	school
Management & Supervision	Academic leadership role of	General upkeep of the school
Physical facilities	the head teacher/supervisor	Student mobility to higher
Teaching-learning materials	Quality of inservice training	levels and the world of
Equality of access	of teachers	work

FIGURE 1

Quality of Education: An Analytical Frame

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 citizen 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 textbooks were introduced during the academic years 1990-91 through 1995-96. NCTB adopted several measures to achieve a certain acceptable standard in terms of quality. The measures adopted during the preparatory stage of the textbooks included:

1. Orientation of writers prior to writing of these books.
2. Selection of contents from the real life situation.
3. Requirement of making the presentation simple.
4. Emphasis on the competencies that were preset for different classes.
5. 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 nongovernmental 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 Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), were in a position to mobilize technical assistance while developing its curriculum for its primary education programme (Lovell and Fatema, 1989³). After the introduction of Mass Education Programme and subsequently the Nonformal 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 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, 1991⁴). 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, Department of Non-Formal Education (DNFC), or Dhaka Ahsania Mission (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.

TABLE 1

Percentage of NGO's Following Different Curricula in Primary Education

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

Source: CAMPE (1995)

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 *madrassah* curriculum, as independently developed by the *Madrassah* 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 *madrassah* curriculum, other general subject 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 *madrassah* curriculum. English is not taught in the *madrassahs*, the *Madrassah* Board approved five sets of textbooks published by different private publishers. A principal selects one set for his *madrassah*. 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 *madrassah* pupils.

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

Let us take the case of the kindergartens (KG school). No concrete information is available 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 the 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. In the 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 sampled basic educational institutions (Table 2). These are only normative figures; the actual or effective teaching time is not known.

The effective teaching time has been found to be influenced by teacher's attitudes, management of the school and the sociopolitical climate in the country in general and in the locality in particular. Unfortunately, the formal schools are affected more by the above factors than the NGO schools. A study published in 1992 reported that the effective time devoted to actual teaching-learning activities in formal school was less than 40 minutes per day (Karim, 1992⁵). A recent study indicated that the total school contact hours in a year in nonformal schools were 50 percent or more than that were available in the formal school (Alam, et al., 1996⁶). This may also be due to the fact that most nonformal centres enjoy only a limited number of holidays compared to the formal schools.

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

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.* 1996¹²

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 the 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 Primary Training Institute (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, has reported to have shown higher efficiency in overall school performance (Karim, 1993⁷).

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 the 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.

TABLE 3

Educational Qualification of 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 B.Ed training	90.5

Source: UNICEF, 1995

Female teachers who outnumber male teachers in nonformal centres, 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 women with SSC are not readily available in rural areas.

The importance of good and appropriate training cannot be overemphasized. The NGOs differ in the way they train their teachers. While some NGOs prefer to have their teachers trained over a longer period (DPC, 1994⁸), BRAC and several others 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 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 inservice 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 *madrassahs* have had any pedagogic training. While most of the *madrassah* teachers are products of *madrassahs*, nowadays some teachers with general education background are also recruited, specifically for teaching the general subjects like Bangla, 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 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 Managing Committee and various local primary education committees play a supportive role. The efficiency of primary education is largely a result of effective management and supervision at both the levels. Although it may not have a direct academic role, the school management plays a very important part in creating favourable teaching-learning environment in the school. 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, which includes distribution of textbooks and countrywide organisation of inservice training of teachers, recruitment, posting, transfer of teachers and other staff over the years, the academic and technical functions of DPE have been suffering considerably. 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 the 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 an expected leadership and supportive role.

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, etc. It is reported that supervisors perform several activities like assisting the teachers in planning their teaching, monitoring their performance and that of students, guiding the teachers in adopting appropriate teaching methods, trying to solve problems brought up by teachers and guardians, etc. (Ahmed, *et al.*, 1993⁹).

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 General Education Project (GEP) funded NGOs, DPC found only three with well designed organogram and authority relationship specifics (DPC, 1994¹⁰). The monitoring and supervision system of these NGOs was found to be limited to school visits and reporting through structured monitoring formats. A higher frequency of supervision of nonformal schools has also been reported; 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 *madrassahs* lie with designated local influential persons, who constitute the management committee. There is no central mechanism for

the administration of *Ebtedayee madrassahs* except that they are registered with the National *Madrassah* 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 variables is teacher-student ratio, which is very strictly maintained in the NFE system. It is critical because every learner in the school needs teacher 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 widespread absenteeism among students and teachers.

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 Conditions and Facilities

Facilities like physical conditions of the schoolhouse, 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 'major renovation' (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 also not satisfactory (DPC, 1993¹¹). Existence of sanitary latrines in schools is also an important factor, particularly for girls. A study (Habibullah, *at al.*, 1996¹²) 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 nonformal schools have play grounds.

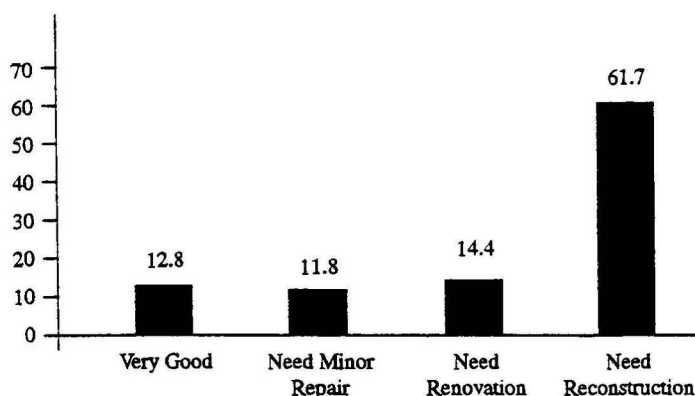


FIGURE 2

Physical Conditions of Government Primary Schools

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

Parental Background and Private Costs

It is well acknowledged that children going to formal schools are from socioeconomically 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, stationery, various other seasonal fees, such as for examination. Milad and sports, as well for engaging private tutors. NGOs tend to cater for poorer families more effectively than the government is able to do through the formal schools. As the 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 on BRAC indicate that approximately half the children enrolled in BRAC schools do not actually belong to their 'target group' (BRAC's target group includes households owning half an acre of land or less).

As it is well known through a large number of research studies, the socioeconomic background of parents have 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 of the 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 textbooks, exercise books, and stationery for students, and visual aids, globe, charts, and maps for classrooms, and manuals for teachers. The government provides textbooks free of cost to all students in the formal schools. Exercise books and stationery need to be procured by the parents themselves. In most of the NGO schools, however, all these are provided free of cost by 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, 1993¹³). The incidence of actual use of these materials have 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' manuals and teaching-learning aids is greater among nonformal 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 the primary sector institutes or in the university education departments.

Most of our primary schools are teacher-centred and a one-way transmission of knowledge is practised with the 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 engage private tutors to help their children. The nonformal schools, however, are somewhat different. Group work is promoted, punishment discouraged and homework is light. Teaching-learning practices in nonformal 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 (1995¹⁴) 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)

Cocurricular Activities

In order to make teaching-learning attractive and to develop learners' inner

abilities experts recommend that each day's work should include cocurricular activities like physical exercise, singing, dancing, story-telling, drawing, etc. Students love these activities which seem to create a joyful learning environment and ensure higher attendance and retention in schools. While specifics of cocurricular activities are very clearly defined in the NCTB curriculum, very few schools implement them 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 extracurricular activities. Most of these extracurricular activities are discarded in madrassahs. 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' (of 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. In this system student's psychosocial 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.

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. (Draft Report of the Primary Education Task Force (1993-94), headed by Mokammel Huq.)

In the government formal schools, parents, guardians and social elites are involved through the local School Managing Committees (SMC) and Parent Teachers Associations (PTA). This initiative seems to have brought about some improvement in the school activities (Haq and Booth, 1994¹⁵). 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 had taken community participation as a key to effective functioning of a

primary school (Latif, 1991¹⁶). It found that support from the TEOs (*Thana* Education Officer) and the 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, 1992¹⁷).

However, there is a general feeling in the rural areas that the SMCs/PTAs are "Committees on the paper". A study commissioned by the Asian Development Bank indicated that these bodies were not working well. With the primary school administration being concentrated at the headquarters of the government, anybody outside the government can do very little (Haq and Booth, 1994¹⁷). According to the government, SMCs and PTAs were formed in 94 percent and 75 percent cases respectively (Government of Bangladesh, 1993¹⁸), but only a few were found to be active.

Nonformal education is essentially a community based programme. Without the support of the local people and active participation of the target group the system's efficiency would be jeopardized. It is the uniqueness of nonformal education that enables the illiterate, poor and deprived people to get involved in the planning, management and supervision of the local learning centres. They help select the school premises, students, 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, the 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, 1994¹⁹).

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 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 the 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 through any recent interventions. But some other quality indicators like

improvement in enrollment and attendance, decrease of dropout rates, 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; rather it 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 pushed 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 represent a student's quality of high attainment. In order to assess the quality of primary education in terms of achievement, we need a nationwide survey of students' achievement in different subject. One study conducted among 2100 children of 11-12 years old showed that only 45 percent of primary school graduates (children having completed 5 years of schooling) satisfied the criteria of basic education²⁰ (UNICEF, 1992²¹). The study called the Assessment of Basic Competency (ABC) include reading, writing, numeracy and life skills. 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 (see also Table 4). If we consider this ability to be 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. 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 information 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 were 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 these from poorer households.

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

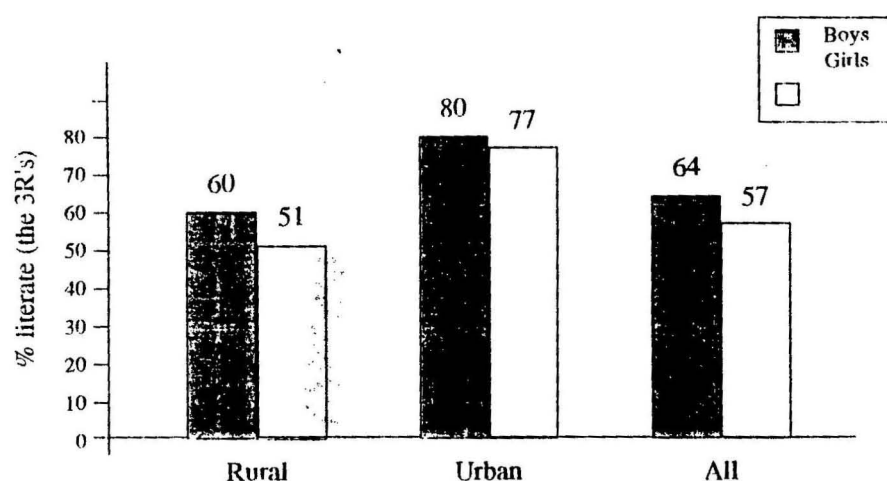


FIGURE 4
**Literacy Rate (the 3R's) of Children Completing Five Years of
 Schooling by Residence and Gender**

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 of the total score (Table 6).

TABLE 5

Percentage of Children Satisfying the 3R's (Reading, Writing and Numeracy) by Years of Schooling and Area of Residence

Years of schooling	Rural	Urban	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

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, 1994⁸

It was observed that the aggregate achievement of the learners in all the three subjects was better among the urban students than their rural counterparts. They administered standardized achievement tests (Haq, 1994²²) 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 nonformal school is to bring a quantitative and qualitative change among the targeted learners. In order to meet this demand, a continuous effort is being made to maintain the quality of education in nonformal schools to an acceptable level. It is very difficult to show the actual academic achievement of the nonformal students studying in the NGO schools because most of these schools do not have any annual examination.

Using the same criteria of ABC, BRAC in 1992 conducted a study of their graduates (those completing 3 years of non formal primary education or NFPE). Fifty eight percent satisfied the criteria (Nath, et al. 1993²³). A recent study done on the graduates of 1994 found that the performance had further improved (Nath et al., 1996²⁴).

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)	Gen. Knowledge (tot.mark: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, 1994⁸

The actual achievement of elementary level *madrassah* students is not known. To date, no systematic study has been carried out examining the competency level of *madrassah* students either in Bangla or Arabic. However, the common experience shows that other than the *Quranic* verses these *madrassah* students' knowledge in Bangla language, social studies and mathematics is very limited.

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 the research studies tested in 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 textbooks 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.

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 inservice training programme, inadequate supervision and academic support to 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, the actual learning difficulties of pupils are not brought to the focus and improved methods are not adapted for remedying 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.

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Source for Annex on the next page: Chowdhury A.M.R., *et al.* Assessing basic competencies; A practical methodology. *International Review of Education*, 1994, 40, 437-454.

ANNEX 1

Percentage of Children Who Correctly Answered Different Individual Questions by Years of Schooling

Question item	Years of schooling						
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6+
A. LIFE SKILLS							
Treatment for diarrhoea	55.6	63.5	60.5	67.2	70.1	79.1	90.1
Prevention of night-blindness	9.8	16.8	16.9	21.6	32.0	45.2	61.1
How to clean water	28.4	36.8	41.9	41.0	55.4	67.3	77.2
Water for drinking	89.3	93.0	95.9	97.4	98.6	74.4	95.2
Place of defecation	66.6	69.7	72.7	80.6	86.0	91.2	92.6
Benefits of vaccination	12.6	18.4	22.4	28.0	68.8	48.2	71.0
Ideal family size	46.1	44.3	47.1	53.7	58.3	66.8	74.2
Gender issue	84.0	88.1	89.0	92.2	93.2	93.6	94.7
How to prevent disease in poultry	35.4	38.9	54.1	54.1	58.6	64.6	68.9
First aid for high fever	24.4	28.6	30.2	34.3	39.9	48.9	58.3
B. READING SKILLS							
Mother	3.9	29.2	66.9	84.3	95.3	98.3	99.8
Marriage	1.1	8.1	38.4	56.7	77.0	91.6	97.7
Pond	1.4	11.9	38.4	58.2	79.9	94.1	98.8
Barsha (Seasons name)	0.8	5.9	26.7	45.1	65.8	86.0	95.4
Enjoyment	0.6	5.9	30.8	45.1	70.1	86.7	96.3
Savings	0.6	1.1	8.7	14.6	37.8	61.4	82.9
Freedom	0.3	3.2	15.7	22.0	50.7	71.7	88.5
Cooperation	0.8	4.3	17.4	33.6	56.8	81.8	94.2
Sentence: A	1.1	6.5	21.5	42.9	67.6	86.2	97.7
B	0.3	4.9	14.0	24.3	50.7	74.2	90.1
Passage Q#A	0.8	5.4	28.5	50.0	72.3	91.4	98.6
Q#B	0.8	5.9	24.4	49.9	68.3	89.4	98.2
Q#C	0.6	5.4	15.1	33.6	57.6	77.1	86.4
Q#D	0.3	3.2	8.7	18.7	36.0	46.2	67.5
C. WRITING SKILLS							
Own name	5.9	29.3	64.5	84.7	93.2	98.0	100.0
Town/Village name	0.6	7.7	27.3	41.8	62.6	82.3	93.5
Words: Water	0.8	8.1	36.6	51.1	73.4	90.7	97.4
Education	--	2.2	7.6	16.8	40.3	64.9	83.9
Bangladesh	0.3	8.1	23.3	42.9	67.6	88.2	96.8
Sentence	0.3	2.7	13.4	13.8	36.3	60.7	78.3
Letter Salutation	0.8	3.8	12.2	23.9	45.3	69.5	80.9
Message communication	0.3	3.2	11.0	23.9	43.2	70.5	82.7
Sincerely	0.3	1.6	6.4	11.2	28.0	46.9	63.6
D. NUMERACY SKILLS							
Count 40 to 50	39.9	62.7	76.2	90.7	98.2	98.3	99.8
Can read 3	22.5	91.1	83.7	95.9	97.8	99.33	100.0
49	2.2	12.4	30.8	48.9	70.9	82.1	87.3
500	3.4	14.7	37.8	61.2	74.8	89.7	94.7
Can write 5	9.0	38.4	76.2	90.7	96.0	99.3	100.0
67	0.8	7.6	26.2	37.7	58.3	71.3	88.7
208	1.7	6.0	16.7	31.0	53.2	68.8	87.8
Addition	1.1	6.0	25.0	52.5	75.2	86.0	94.2
Subtraction	--	2.7	9.3	17.5	38.1	55.5	70.5
Mental Arithmetic Q#A	64.0	70.8	84.9	89.6	93.9	95.3	100.0
Q#B	69.4	75.7	82.6	85.8	92.4	96.8	98.6
Q#C	51.7	59.5	70.0	81.3	87.4	92.4	97.5
Q#D	5.3	15.7	23.8	26.9	38.5	52.1	71.2