

Towards 'Education for All': Lessons from Bangladesh

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It has been now ten years since the World Conference on Education for All (WCEFA) was held in Jomtien, Thailand. The Conference, among other recommendations, had called for ensuring basic education to at least 80% of the children. This paper argues that the dream of 'education for all' (EFA) still remains a distant dream for a country like Bangladesh. A recent survey carried out in over 42,000 households all over Bangladesh paints a mixed picture on the country's success in achieving of EFA.

There is hope. The enrollment has increased (particularly for girls), the completion rate has risen, and the poor and less educated parents are sending their daughters in larger numbers to school than before. However, the progress in terms of net enrollment has been rather slow and the children are not learning much in school. With a net enrollment of 73%, 70% completing the primary cycle, and 57% of those completing grade 5 achieving 'basic education', not even 30% are receiving any meaningful education. The analysis shows that the rate of progress in terms of achieving a minimum level of basic education has been slow --less than one percentage point per year.

The challenge for the world is how to achieve EFA at the shortest possible time. For Bangladesh, investment in education in general and its distribution, pluralism in delivery system, appropriate curriculum, positive discrimination in favour of disadvantaged groups, and a supportive supervision and monitoring system will be important ingredients.

Introduction

The World Conference on Education for All (WCEFA), held in Jomtien, Thailand, in March 1990 was a landmark in reaffirming the participating nations' commitment to the cause of basic education. 'Education for all (EFA) by the year 2000' was the popular slogan that came out of the conference. Now with the advent of a new century and the Dakar WCEFA conference, how far are we from this goal? With recent data available from the ground, this paper looks at the progress that has been made in universalising primary education in the context of Bangladesh.

Background

Bangladesh ranks among the bottom 20 countries in the literacy-league table. Between 1980 and 1995, the literacy rate in the adults rose marginally from 32 percent to 38 percent; the rate for females has remained at only about half of males (Table 1). Recent statistics provided by the government indicate that the literacy rate has now reached 56 percent in 1999, a figure which needs to be confirmed by independent sources.

Table 1. Adult (15 + year) Literacy in Bangladesh -- 1980-1995

Year	Adult literacy rate (%)		
	Male	Female	Total
1980	43	20	32
1985	43	22	33
1990	47	22	35
1995	49	26	38

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

World Development Report, The World Bank (various reports)

The Constitution of Bangladesh, framed in 1972, enshrines the right of the child to free and compulsory primary education, but not until 1990 that the Compulsory Primary Education Act was passed. Over the past several years the country has seen increased commitment and actions of the government, nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), and donors to the cause of primary education.

According to official statistics, over 37,000 primary schools owned and managed by the government constitute the core of the national system of primary education. Approximately 23,000 similar primary schools, setup with local private initiative, are managed with limited government subvention. The *Ebtedayee madrassas*, which are also estimated to be over 7,000, provide education with a religious focus (Alam and Hussain, 1999). Several NGOs have given special attention to primary education; the number of students served by them is increasing sharply with 1.2 million of BRAC alone. The last in the category of primary level institutions are the English medium schools whose number remains unknown.

In terms of public spending on education, Bangladesh (in 1993-94) spent 2.3% of its gross national product (GNP) on education which is far too short of what other countries in South Asia invest on education Haq and Haq, 1998 (Table 2). Ninety six percent of the revenue expenditure on primary education is incurred to meet teachers salary leaving very little for others such as supervision, training, or curriculum development Ahmad, 1996.

Table 2. Percent of GNP Spent on Education in Bangladesh and other South Asian countries (1993-94)

Country	% GNP spent on education
Bangladesh	2.3
India	3.8
Pakistan	2.7
Nepal	2.9
Sri Lanka	3.2
Maldives	8.1
All South Asia	3.5

Methodology

Due to the unavailability of reliable data on education, an *Education Watch* has been set up in Bangladesh by a group of like-minded institutions and individuals concerned with education. Coordinated by Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE), a supra body of nongovernmental organisations engaged in education, and implemented by BRAC through its Research and Evaluation Division, the *Watch* is an yearly event, and that of 1999 dealt with various indicators pertinent to 'internal efficiency' Tan and Mingat, 1992 and Chowdhury and Nath of primary education in Bangladesh. Data for this paper came from the first year's *Watch*, which were collected through a nationwide survey carried out in October-November 1998.

Instruments

A set of three instruments was used in the survey. Except for some open-ended questions, these instruments were structured and pre-coded.

Household Survey Questionnaire

This instrument was developed to provide information on gross and net enrollment, availability of textbooks, use of private tutor and parental participation in school matters. Question relating to each of the household member, particularly the schooling for those aged 4-20 years, were included. Although the primary schooling age is 6-10 years in Bangladesh, different studies had reported that children older and younger than this age group also get enrolled in primary schools. That is why it was decided to collect schooling information on all individuals aged 4-20 years.

Assessment of Basic Competencies (ABC)

This instrument collected information on the quality of learning. Based on the concept of *basic education* as enunciated in WCEFA, this instrument utilized the following operational definition (Choudhury, et al., 1994): *Basic education refers to education intended to develop basic learning skills (i.e.,*

the 3R's) as well as some basic life skills necessary for the children to survive, to improve the quality of their lives and to continue learning.

The definition encompassed the following competencies which were assessed through the ABC instrument:

- a) ability to read and write a short, simple statement on everyday life;
- b) ability to work out everyday arithmetic; and
- c) knowledge/attitude regarding selected life skills necessary to improve quality of life.

The ABC is an elementary and curriculum independent test instrument. The minimum level on the ABC is expected to be achieved through any primary level formal or non-formal schooling in Bangladesh. Further details on the instrument, its modification, validity and assessment procedure are reported elsewhere. (Chowdhury, *et al.*, 1994; Chowdhury, *et al.*, 1992; and Nath, *et al.* 1992).

School Observation Checklist

The instrument collected classroom information, teacher's profile, community participation, retention and dropout, and school visit by the supervisors.

Sampling

A total of 42,584 households from 312 villages/mahollas were visited through the household survey, where 31,092 children aged 6-10 years were identified. The number of children assessed through the ABC survey was 3,360, and a total of 885 schools were traced.

Results

Enrollment

Table 3 shows the gross enrollment ratios at the primary level of all types of institutions. It shows that the gross enrollment ratio exceeded 100 in almost all strata for both girls and boys. The gross enrollment ratio nationally is 107 with girls having a higher ratio of 109 compared to boys' 104. Division-wise, rural Khulna has the highest and the Metropolitan cities have the lowest in both cases girls exceeded those of boys'. In fact, girls were ahead of boys everywhere except rural Chittagong where boys were marginally ahead of girls.

Figure 1 shows the gross enrollment by grade enrolled at the national level. It shows several things. Firstly, enrollment decreases progressively in the higher grades. Secondly, the drop out rate is highest between grades I and II, and between grades III and IV. Thirdly, there is little difference between boys and girls in the way the attrition takes place. Fourthly, the load of students is the highest in earlier grades which may be a reflection of increased enrollment at the lowest grade in the most recent past or higher subsequent dropout or both. Whereas one-fifth of all students should have

been in each grade a third of all students were in grade I alone.

Table 3. Gross Enrollment Ratio at Primary Level (Grades I to V) by Stratum and Sex

Stratum	Gross enrollment ratio (%)		
	Girls	Boys	Both
Rural Dhaka Division	112 (1829)	101 (1951)	106 (3780)
Rural Chittagong Division	104 (2397)	105 (2555)	104 (4952)
Rural Rajshahi Division	113 (1663)	105 (1732)	109 (3395)
Rural Khulna Division	121 (1923)	113 (2006)	117 (3929)
Rural Barisal Division	108 (1993)	106 (2041)	107 (4034)
Rural Sylhet Division	107 (2185)	104 (2300)	105 (4485)
Metropolitan cities	103 (1601)	99 (1657)	101 (3258)
Other urban areas	111 (1626)	106 (1633)	108 (3259)
Rural Bangladesh	111 (11990)	105 (12585)	108 (24575)
Urban Bangladesh	107 (3227)	103 (3290)	105 (6517)
All Bangladesh	109 (15217)	104 (15875)	107 (31092)

Figures in the parentheses indicate number of children aged 6-10 years,
Source: Household survey.

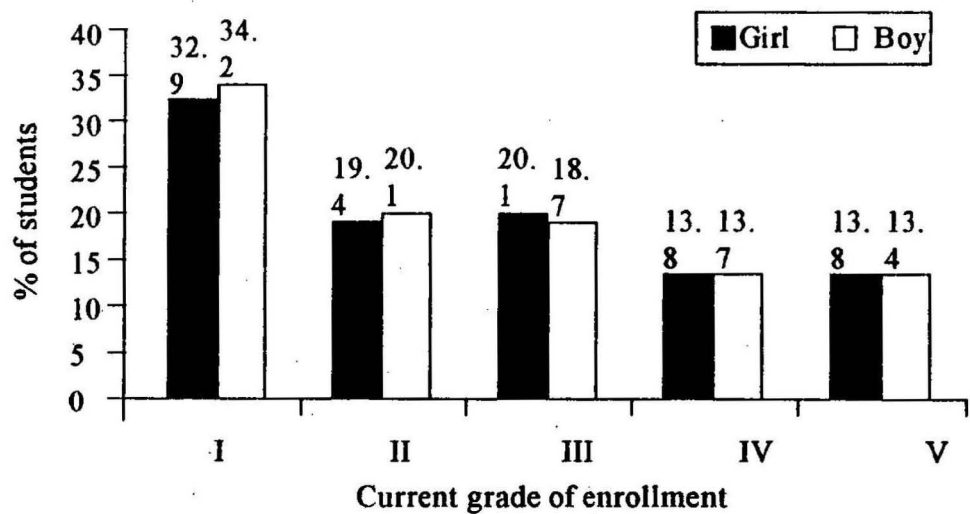


Figure 1. Percent Distribution of All Students in Different Grades, Girls and Boys

Source: Household Survey

It has been found that 33% or a third of the enrolled students were from

outside the primary age group and 27% were over-aged.

Of the students enrolled at the primary level, the government-run schools have the highest number of them, with two-thirds of all students enrolled in such schools (Table 4). It should be remembered that the government schools have also the highest capacity. A far-second in enrollment is the nongovernment (registered) schools with 12% of all students. The non-formal schools, which are run by NGOs in most cases, are the third with 8.5% of enrollment. The *Madrassas* have 6% of students; of these *Ebtedayee*, which is equivalent to the primary level, has 1.3% share. Others, such as nongovernment (unregistered), English-medium and the primary school attached to secondary schools are much less significant. Of the non-formal schools, 76 percent pupil attended BRAC schools.

Table 4. Percentage Distribution of Children Currently Enrolled at Primary Level (Grades I to V) by Type of School, Residence and Sex

Type of school	Rural Bangladesh			Urban Bangladesh			All Bangladesh		
	Girl (13177)	Boys (13246)	Both (26423)	Girl (3439)	Boys (3367)	Both (6806)	Girl (16616)	Boys (16613)	Both (33229)
Primary School									
Government	68.9	69.2	69.1	57.7	55.5	56.6	67.6	67.6	67.6
Nongovernment (reg.)	12.9	12.7	12.8	7.2	6.5	6.9	12.3	12.0	12.1
Nongovernment (un-reg.)	2.9	2.9	2.9	2.0	2.8	2.4	2.8	2.9	2.8
Nonformal primary	10.0	6.6	8.3	9.0	10.4	11.7	10.2	6.8	8.5
Madrassa									
Ebtedayee	1.0	1.5	1.3	2.5	1.9	1.3	1.0	1.6	1.3
Kamil/Fazel/Alim/Dakhil	2.4	4.2	3.3	3.5	2.8	2.2	2.4	4.1	3.2
Hafezia/Kaomi/Kharezee	1.0	2.0	1.5	1.7	1.1	0.5	0.9	1.9	1.4
English Medium	0.5	0.7	0.6	8.8	7.7	6.7	1.2	1.6	1.4
Secondary attached	0.4	0.3	0.3	9.6	10.2	10.7	1.6	1.3	1.5
All types	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Figures in the parentheses indicate number of children currently enrolled at primary level

Source: Household Survey

The net enrollment is 77% which means that this proportion of primary school age children (i.e., 6-10 years) are enrolled and the rest 23% are not enrolled at all. The difference between girls and boys as found in gross ratios is maintained here as well with the girls being significantly more enrolled than boys ($p < 0.001$). An important difference between the gross and net rates

emerges when one compares the urban-rural difference. While rural areas did better in gross rates, this is reversed in net rates; this probably implies that urban schools were more stringent in terms of age of the pupil while admitting them or urban parents are more conscious about sending their children to school at the appropriate age or both.

Trend in Enrollment

The household survey collected information on schooling history of the children. The same information was also collected in 1993 for children 11-12 years old in a separate national survey (Nath, *et al.*, 1993). This gives a snapshot of two groups of children but provides valuable information on trend. When the proportion of children aged 11-12 years who are currently enrolled are compared between 1993 and 1998, some increase is seen (Figure 2). This increase is, however, restricted to girls whose proportion increased by 10 percentage points; the boys actually registered a small decline.

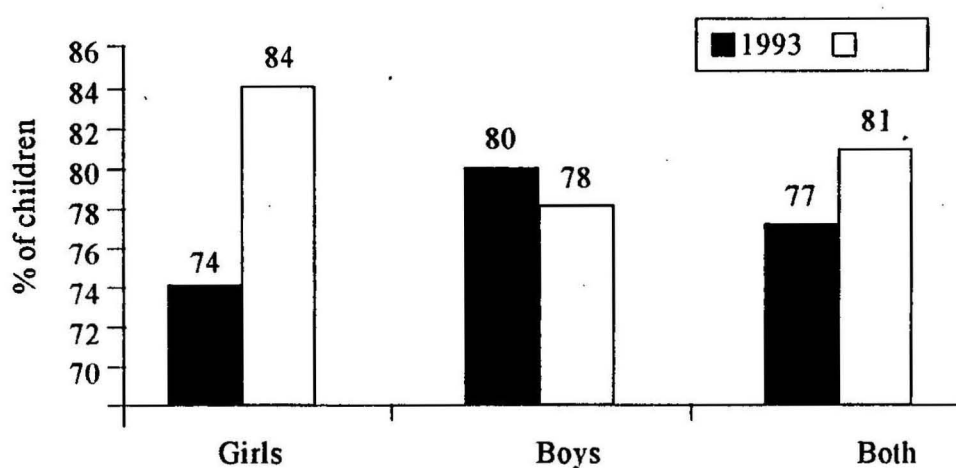


Figure 2. Proportion of Children 11-12 Years Old Currently Enrolled in School, 1993 and 1998

Source: Household Survey

Dropout

In the absence of information on a real cohort, we created a hypothetical cohort with children in grade I as the entrants to the cohort and those passed successfully in grade V as the group successfully passing through the system, with the data available from the schools survey. Table 5 gives completion and dropout rates using the methodology suggested by UNESCO (PMED, 1995). Seventy three percent completed the cycle over a period of 6.6 years (instead of 5), and 27% dropped out through the cycle. The girls did slightly better than boys. Figure 3 shows several things in respect of completion rates for girls. Firstly, the completion rate is the highest for the English medium and secondary school-attached schools and the lowest for Madrassas.

Secondly, the number of years taken to complete the cycle for those who actually complete was also the lowest for English medium and secondary-attached. Thirdly, it shows the proportion of girls who actually completed the full cycle in five years without repetition were 48.6% for government primary, 34.2% for Madrassas and 87.91% for English medium schools respectively.

Table 5. Hypothetical Cohort Analysis of Students Registered in Various Grades using the UNESCO Methodology, for all Schools (1997-98)

	% of children		
	Girls	Boys	Both
Completion rate	73.4	72.0	72.7
Dropout	26.6	28.0	27.3
Survival rate	77.2	76.0	76.6
Coefficient of efficiency	76.5	74.6	75.5
Years input per graduate	6.5	6.7	6.6

Sources: Schools Survey

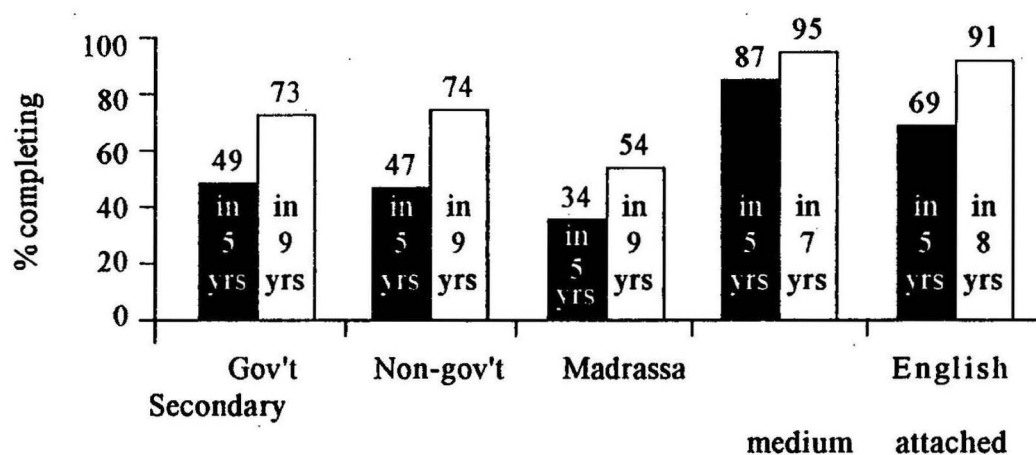


Figure 3. Proportion of Girls Completing Primary Schooling by Type of School and Number of Years Taken to Complete

Note: Nonformal schools are not included

Source: Schools Survey

Attendance

The attendance rate in schools was 59% on the day they were visited by the interviewers. The rate was higher for girls than boys. When the estimated dropout between the time of registration in January and the survey in October-November was considered, the attendance rate increased to 62.4 percent (64% for girls and 61% for boys).

The highest rate of attendance was reported for non-formal schools

(81%) closely followed by the English medium schools (79%). The lowest was 47.4% for Madrassas. If one assumes that 20% of absenteeism is random, then the proportion of children who are regular in schools is approximately 82% ($=62+20$). When this is considered in association with the net enrollment rate of 73%, the effective enrollment turns out to be about 60%.

Teacher-student Ratio

Table 6 shows the teacher-student ratio in various types of schools. The government primary schools have the highest ratio with 73 students per teacher. This is followed with 55 by nongovernment (registered and unregistered) schools. The non-formal schools and *Ebtedayee madrassas* seem to have more favourable ratios. In English medium schools there were only 18 students per teacher.

Table 6. Teacher-student Ratio by Type of Schools

Type of schools	No. of schools observed	Teacher Student ratio
Government primary	349	1:73
Nongovernment primary	142	1:55
Nonformal primary	232	1:31
Ebtedayee madrassa	12	1:32
English medium *	39	1:18

* Includes KG schools which provide schooling upto standard V.

Source : Schools Survey

It was found that only 12.9% of the government primary schools have 40 or less number of students and 60.2% have 61 or more students per teacher. It may be mentioned that the primary schools run by government and private initiatives are held in two shifts: one for grades I and II and another for grades III to V, and the same set of teachers teach in both shifts. When this is considered in calculating teacher-student ratio, the ratios become more favourable.

Learning Achievement

Based on the working definition mentioned earlier, 29.6% of the interviewed children successfully passed the minimum level of *basic education* (Figure 4). This means that among the children aged 11-12 years in 1998, only 29.6% satisfied the minimum levels in all four areas of competency including reading, writing, numeracy, and life skills/knowledge. Boys did better than girls ($p<0.05$) and the children of urban areas did much better than their rural peers ($p<0.001$). Similar level of area-wise variation maintained when the data were broken down by sex of the child for urban and rural areas. The urban boys showed the best performance (52.7%) and the rural girls the worst (25.2%).

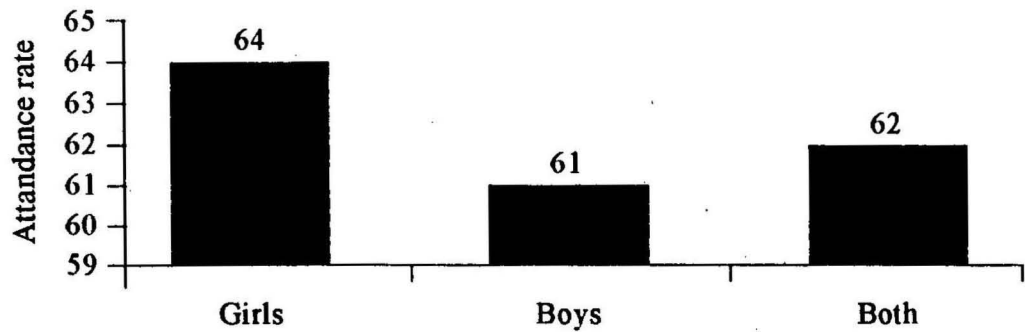


Figure 4. Attendance Rate of Students in Primary Schools at Time of Survey

Stratum-wise variation was also observed when analysis was done separately for each of the four competency areas. Forty three percent had life skills/knowledge, 54.2% reading skills, 51.4 % writing skills and 83.4% had numeracy skills. In all the areas of competency, the urban children did significantly better than the children of rural areas ($p<0.001$)

Table 7 presents the 'literacy' levels of the same children in different strata. 'Literacy' was defined as the children satisfying all criteria of *basic education* excluding the criterion of life skill/knowledge which is essentially the 3R's. Some may argue that even though it is desirable to achieve life skills/knowledge, it is not equally emphasized in all types of primary education provisions. For the purpose of comparison among different types of schools, 'literacy' may be preferred.

Table 7. Percentage of Children Satisfying Literacy Criteria (the 3R's) by Stratum and Sex

Stratum	Girls	Boys	Both	Significance
Dhaka Division	35.7 (210)	36.7 (210)	36.2 (420)	ns
Rural Chittagong Division	25.7 (210)	33.6 (211)	29.7 (421)	ns
Rural Rajshahi Division	40.8 (211)	43.5 (209)	42.1 (420)	ns
Rural Khulna Division	58.6 (210)	57.1 (210)	57.9 (420)	ns
Rural Barisal Division	42.8 (208)	48.3 (211)	45.6 (419)	ns
Rural Sylhet Division	38.1 (210)	35.7 (210)	36.9 (420)	ns
Metropolitan cities	50.2 (211)	64.8 (210)	57.5 (421)	$p<0.01$
Other urban areas	57.6 (210)	60.8 (209)	59.2 (419)	ns
Significance	$p<0.001$	$p<0.001$	$p<0.001$	
Rural Bangladesh	38.5 (1259)	41.1 (1261)	39.8 (2520)	ns
Urban Bangladesh	54.0 (421)	62.7 (419)	58.3 (840)	$p<0.01$
Significance	$p<0.001$	$P<0.001$	$p<0.001$	
All Bangladesh	40.8 (1680)	44.2 (1680)	42.5 (3360)	$p<0.05$

Figures in the parentheses indicate number of children under ABC test; ns=not significant at $p=0.05$

Source : ABC Survey

On an average, 42.5% of the children had basic literacy. Similar to *basic education*, higher levels of stratum-wise variation ($p < 0.001$) was observed in the literacy rates. Urban children showed significantly better performance than the children of rural areas ($p < 0.001$). But there was no difference between the literacy rates of the two urban areas (metropolitan and other urban). In general, the basic literacy rate was found to be one and a half times higher than the rate of *basic education*.

Figure 5 presents the level of basic education according to the years of schooling completed by the children. The level of basic education significantly increased with the increase in years of schooling ($p < 0.001$). It is only 7.5% among the children with one year of schooling which goes up to 20.8% for those completing three years and to 56.9% for those completing the full five year primary education.

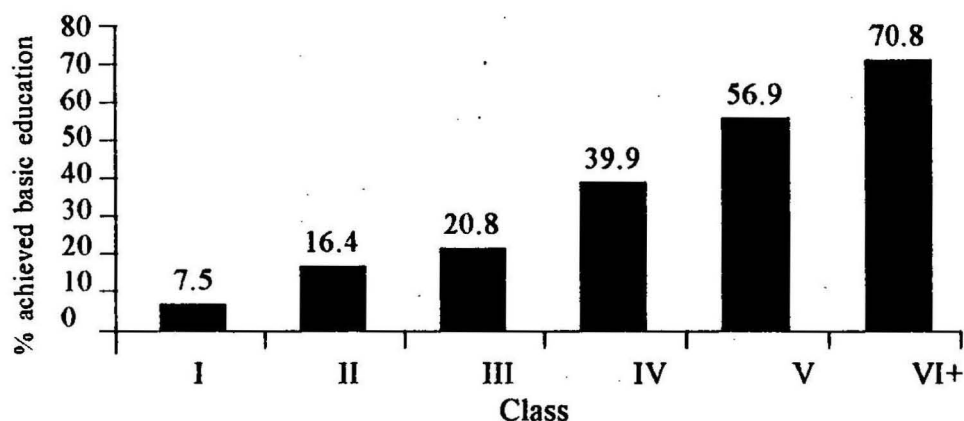


Figure 5. Percentage of Children Satisfying All 'Basic Education' Years

Source: ABC Survey

The level of basic education also varied according to the type of school the children were attending at the time of survey (Table 8). For obvious reasons, the children currently enrolled in secondary schools showed the best performance. Students attending government and nongovernment primary schools performed very poorly. A moderate level of performance was seen among the students of non-formal primary, Madrassa and English medium schools. It was discovered during the course of analysis that most of the students included in the ABC sample under the English medium schools and the secondary schools, and some under the Madrassas were enrolled at grades six or seven at the time of survey. On the other hand, all the students of the primary schools (formal and non-formal) were in grades between one and five. Thus, additional years of schooling (in excess of 5 years) of the students of the secondary schools, Madrassa and the English medium Schools might have contributed to their better performance in basic education.

Table 8. Percentage of Currently Enrolled Children Satisfying All 'Basic Education' Criteria by Type of School, Residence and Sex

Type of school	Rural Bangladesh			Urban Bangladesh			All Bangladesh		
	Girls (1259)	Boys (1261)	Both (2520)	Girls (421)	Boys (419)	Both (840)	Girls (1680)	Boys (1680)	Both (3360)
Govt. Primary	17.0	23.3	20.1	33.6	32.1	33.1	18.9	24.2	21.5
Nongovt. Primary	18.4	24.6	21.6	36.6	54.9	46.0	19.9	27.1	23.5
Nonformal	35.0	44.5	38.7	32.4	41.7	36.2	34.5	44.0	38.3
Madrassa (Ebtedayee)*	32.4	33.2	32.9	30.7	36.9	34.4	32.1 (12.1)	33.6 (18.1)	33.0 (15.2)
English Medium	0.0	30.6	26.8	33.4	58.6	47.8	26.7	42.7	38.1
Secondary	53.1	66.7	58.7	75.9	85.8	80.9	58.1	72.4	64.3

Notes: Figures in the parentheses indicate number of children under ABC test;

* Due to small sample size the data were not arranged by residence; Variations according to school type are statistically significant at $p < 0.001$ in all nine cases.

Source: ABC Survey

For a better understanding of the relationship between achievement level and school type, with years of schooling as a confounder, analysis of data was done separately for students in each grade. Students from only four types of schools and those who were currently enrolled in grades between one and five were analysed (Table 9). The schools were government and nongovernment primary, non-formal and Madrassa. This analysis showed that none of the students who were currently in grade one could pass the test. However, the level of basic education of the students of each type of schools significantly increased with the increase in current grade of enrollment ($p < 0.01$). In each grade, the students of non-formal primary schools performed significantly better than the students of other three types of schools.

Table 9 . Percentage of Currently Enrolled Satisfying All 'Basic Education' Criteria by Current Grade of Enrollment and School Type

Type of school	Current grade of enrollment						Significance'
	One	Two	Three	Four	Five	All	
Government primary	0.0	4.8	7.2	20.9	37.7	21.5	$p < 0.001$
Nongovt. primary	0.0*	6.2*	12.7	23.2	34.7	23.6	$p < 0.001$
Nonformal primary	0.0*	21.1	46.5	36.7*	66.3	38.3	$p < 0.001$
Madrassa (Ebtedayee*)	0.0*	19.4*	29.3*	12.4	51.8	25.8 (15.2)	$p < 0.001$
Significance	na	$p < 0.001$	$p < 0.001$	ns	$p < 0.001$	$p < 0.001$	

¹ Statistical test for each of the school type was done excluding the children currently enrolled in grade one

Sample sizes in these cells are <30; na=not applicable, ns=not significant at $p=0.05$

* Due to small size the data were not arranged by grade;

Source: ABC Survey

Trend in Basic Education

Figure 6 presents the changes in the levels of 'basic education' and 'literacy' rate over a period of five years. It should be mentioned that following a similar methodology and using the same test instrument a national study and ABC was conducted in 1993 (Nath, et al., 1993). The figure shows that both basic education and basic literacy rates have significantly increased over the period ($p<0.05$). Although a statistically significant increase was shown for the rural areas, a declining trend was observed in the urban areas (not shown in figure).

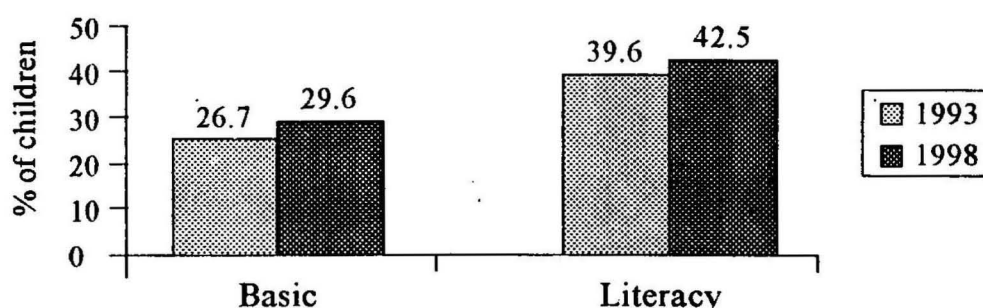


Figure 6. Percentage of Children Attaining 'Basic Education' and 'Literacy' in 1998 compared to 1993

Sources: ABC Survey; Nath, Mohsin and Chowdhury (1993)

Discussion

This paper presented the latest data from field level studies on the *internal efficiency* of primary education in Bangladesh. The *Education Watch* collected data from households, schools and children, representing all 644 districts of the country. Quality assessment measures adopted for the study indicated that the data were reasonably reliable. In the following we discuss some of the results.

Access

The study has documented encouraging results in primary level enrollment. The Gross enrollment ratio has reached 107%. This is more than what the latest government figures suggest. Independent estimates by UNICEF have found the rate to be 111% but the 'Bangladesh Education Sector Strategy Note' prepared for the April 1999 Paris Development Forum quoted a gross rate of 90 to 95% LCG, 1999.

A look at the type of institution/schools in which these children are enrolled reveals that the government primary schools with its network all

over the country remains the dominant type with two thirds of all children enrolled in such schools. The government had nationalised all primary schools in 1973 but started allowing new schools in the private sector in the early 1980's. The registered and unregistered privately managed schools, which now enroll about 15% of primary school-going children, are increasingly playing important roles. The third highest in relative enrollment are the schools run by NGOs. Most of these are non-formal in nature but cater to the learning goals as enunciated by the government (Ghosh, 1999). The NGO schools enroll 8.5% of primary school-going children. Children going to other types are small in proportion.

The official primary school-age group is 6-10 years but one third of all children enrolled in primary level institutions are from outside this age group. The net enrollment rate is a preferred indicator for enrollment. Seventy seven percent of children in primary schools age are enrolled in different institutions. This means that 23% children are still outside the reach of any educational institutions. This situation is better than what it was a few years ago. Both the gross and the net rates have increased over the past few years which is indicative of the system's capability to improve. In fact, the gross rates have surpassed what was targeted by the government for the year 2000 (PMED, 1995). The target of 95% is, however, much modest when compared with the goals of WCEFA.

The increase in the enrollment scenario is also confirmed by other analysis carried out in the text. A study carried out in 1993 had found among the children aged 11-12 years that 77% were enrolled. For the same age group in 1998 the percent enrolled was 81. This is encouraging, but what is frustrating is the speed at which this is being achieved. It took five years for enrollment in this latter age group reach 81% less than one percentage point per year. If we move in this pace how long will it take for all our children to gain access to primary school? Probably 29 years! We need a faster track.

Dropout

Dropout also has been reduced. From an average dropout for all grades of 6.2% for boys and 7.3% for girls in 1993, it has now been reduced to 5.7% and 5.5% respectively. The cumulative dropout rate has also decreased to 26.4% for girls and 27.8% for boys. As a result, 73.4% of girls and 71.9% of boys now complete the 5-years primary education (the NGO schools, most of which follow a 3-year cycle, are excluded). A recent report for the World Bank has quoted a cycle completion rate of 60% (LCG group, 1999).

The repetition rate has, however, remained high. As a result, the average number of years taken by a child to complete the 5-year cycle is 6.5 for girls and 6.7 for boys: only less than half of the children complete the cycle in the stipulated five years. This has great resource implication. The nation has to spend 32% more resources due to the repetition (to keep a child an extra 1.6 years in school).

Quality of Learning

Quality in education represents the impact of several factors. The purpose of the present study was restricted to looking quantitatively at selected indicators of internal efficiency; quality of education in its broad spectrum (Choudhury, et al., 1997 and Murshid, et al., 1995) was not studied. We, however, looked at achievement which may be considered as a narrow proxy for quality. In doing this, we used a test called the *Assessment of Basic Competency (ABC)* and administrated it on a representative sample of girls and boys aged 11 and 12 years (i.e., those recently passed the official primary school age of 6-10 years). The results corroborated the findings of other studies done previously using the same test (Greaney, et al., 1998) or other similar tests (Nath, et al. 1993; Choudhury, et al., 1997b; and Murshid, et al., 1995). Nationally, 29.6% passed the test indicating that they achieved the basic minimum level of education as defined by the test. A previous test carried out in 1993 had found this to be 26.7% (Nath, et al. 1998), which means an increase of three percentage points over a period of five years.

When the composite outcomes from reading, writing and arithmetic (which is the 3R's) are considered, one gets an estimate of the 'basic literacy'. The proportion achieving basic literacy was higher than that of basic education for obvious reasons, but the quantum of increase over the 1993-1998 period was very similar (in 1998 the literacy rate is 42.5% compared to 39.6% in 1993).

The above shows the basic education or basic literacy of children irrespective of whether they had been going to school or not. When the ABC was constructed for children who passed grade V (i.e. primary school), 57% qualified. The ABC is a very elementary test and one would expect that any child passing through the primary cycle of schooling would easily get through it with little problem. The results on the quality of learning are thus very frustrating-- both in terms of overall achievement and progress since 1993.

In 1998, the government declared that the country achieved a literacy rate of 51%. This was much higher than what the various international organizations were reporting (Table 1). Recently, barely within 12 months since the last report, the rate increased to 56 percent. Such a fast improvement is interesting and should be a matter of further research itself. There are two aspects to this. First, the question of the credibility of the claim. If it is done to prove that we are on our way to achieve the targeted literacy rate of 62% by 2000, then one has to be worried about. Secondly, the quality of this literacy, even if the claim is true, should be under close scrutiny. In the five districts which the government has declared 'illiteracy free', less than half of the children qualified in the ABC, and the gross and net enrollment were marginally higher than the national averages. The government must review the mechanism through which its various statistics are generated. The present Prime Minister and the Education Minister are on record to have publicly

dropout more, and perform worse in achievement tests. However, the positive discrimination enforced through the food for education programme of the government and the NGO focus on the poor have had some positive impact. The poorer sections have shown improvements at a faster rate than the better-off in terms of achievement and enrollment.

The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) where most of the country's ethnic minorities live have been an unknown territory till recently. Very little was known about the educational situation in the three districts that constitute CHT. In mid 1998, following the peace agreement between the *Parbattya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samity* (the armed group in CHT) and the Government of Bangladesh, BRAC's Research and Evaluation Division carried out a large socioeconomic survey of five of the CHT's 14 major ethnic groups. Education was one of the foci of study. Substantial differences among the groups in terms of literacy, enrollment, and achievement were reported. It was observed that all the groups were lagging much behind the plainland Bengalees, that girls were behind boys in each group and that some of the ethnic groups such as *Mros* and *Tripura* were far behind the more dominant *Bengalees* and *Chakmas* (BRAC, 2000). A new kind of opportunity has ushered in CHT through the peace agreement and this must be taken advantage of by taking development initiatives that will be suitable for and acceptable to the people of different ethnic groups living in the area.

Government Primary Schools Need Improvement

The schools run by the government are the most dominant type in Bangladesh with 67% of all enrollments. All the steps taken by the government to bolster primary education in recent past have benefited these schools most. The government's expenditure on education is one of the lowest for the South Asia region, and that too is mostly spent in meeting salaries and allowances. Very little is left for improvement of the efficiency of the system. New resources are needed to improve supervision, training and appropriate curriculum development.

The performance of these schools, however, is moderate in terms of attendance, dropout and achievement. While the national estimate for the ABC test for children who are currently enrolled in any schools is 34%, the same in the case of students going to government schools is 21%. Even the five districts which the government has declared to be free of illiteracy, the situation is marginally better leaving doubt about the authenticity of the claim. This shows that the State-run schools are not performing to the best of their potentials.

Nonformal Schools Need More Support

The involvement of NGOs in primary education is recent. Barring a few who run 5-years 'formal' schools, most NGOs operate non-formal schools of varying duration. BRAC, one of the largest NGOs, with almost 76% of all

expressed their anguish on the quality of educational statistics in the country (Jala India, et al. 1997). The *Education Watch* may fill some gaps in this respect.

Equity

The issue of equity mainly affects several disadvantaged groups including girls, the poor, ethnic minorities, and street and working children. As has been reported in this paper, the country has made spectacular progress in reducing the gender gap in enrollment which has virtually disappeared. This is a feat which few other countries in South Asia have been able to achieve! This spectacular accomplishment can be traced to a number of 'positive discriminatory actions' that the State and NGOs have initiated. The most important contribution to this is the scholarships that the State provides to girls attending schools; as of June 1999, the government provided Tk. 4.8 billion (US \$ = Tk. 50) to 7.8 million girls. The schools themselves also simultaneously received a small contribution from the State for every girl enrolled, which provides incentive to schools for recruiting more girls. Primary education in Bangladesh is free but the secondary education is free for girls only. In addition, a favourable school environment has also been created by increasing the number of female teachers, both in public and NGO sectors.

The nongovernment organizations (NGOs) may also claim share in this accomplishment. Traditionally, the NGOs promote women's development, and in Bangladesh they have been particularly successful (Lovell, 1992). Scores of NGOs work in thousands of villages of the country and carry on development work which benefits particularly the women. In addition some of the NGOs have also large non-formal primary education programmes which target girls from poorer families (Ahmad, et al., 1993). An example of positive discrimination in favour of girls is the BRAC programme which ensures that 70% of its 1.2 million pupil are girls and 90% of the teachers are female. The Madrasahs which provide education with Islamic focus, on the other hand, have only 10% of their pupil as girls.

The disappearing gender gap has also been observed in completion rates. In fact, girls' completion rate is higher and dropout rate lower than that of boys. Girls also attend schools more frequently than boys. The other facet of this analysis is the learning achievement as shown through the ABC test. Unfortunately the girls did not do equally well in this respect. Good progress in girls' access to education has been achieved but not so in terms of the quality of what they learn in school. More emphasis, which may be positively discriminatory, needs to be given which will enable the girls to learn more and perform better in school.

Children coming from socioeconomically worse-off families have been found to enroll in schools less in numbers, attend school less frequently,

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