

Resource leakages in primary schools in Bangladesh: Do horizontal checks have an effect on the quality of governance?

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Acronyms and abbreviations

ASER	Annual Status of Education Report
AUEO	Assistant Upazila Education Officers
DPE	Directorate of Primary Education
DPEO	District Primary Education Office
GL	grade level
IDI	in-depth interview
KII	key informant interview
MoMPE	Ministry of Mass and Primary Education
PTA	Parent–Teacher Association
SAC	Social Audit Committee
SLIP	Scholl Level Improvement Plan
SMC	School Management Committee
UEO	Upazila Education Office

Abstract

Bangladesh has successfully increased spending on primary education and achieved impressive improvements in enrolment rates; however, the quality of learning outcomes remains a serious concern. The governance of schools is an important determinant of poor learning outcomes as it can result in a loss or diversion of teaching resources. To improve governance, the state has focused on formal arrangements that we describe as ‘vertical enforcement’. Bodies such as School Management Committees, Parent–Teacher Associations and Social Audit Committees operate at the school level, while other bodies operate at higher levels and affect the flow of resources from the treasury to schools.

We argue that the quality and effectiveness of vertical checks at any level depends on complementary ‘horizontal checks’. These horizontal checks occur where other actors have sufficient power and capabilities to check for violations that are in their own interest and then they support or demand effective formal governance. A feasible way of improving poorly performing formal governance is to establish if horizontal checks already operate and if these can be strengthened with policy support.

We investigate three important sources of corrupt leakages associated with poor governance in primary schools in Bangladesh: the inflation of student numbers, the misuse of school development funds, and the failure to check poor teacher allocation and effort. We have used ethnographic observations to see if and how horizontal checks operate at the school level for each of these leakages in a sample of 10 schools. We find that horizontal checks do indeed operate in some schools and that these are effective in reducing the relevant leakages. We have then assessed the learning outcomes of students in our schools in English, Bangla and numeracy and show that the first two, at least, have a significant correlation with our observed measures of horizontal checks.

As public schools are quite similar, the variations in horizontal checks across our schools are not very large. Furthermore, we have not found systematic associations between the strength of horizontal checks and the characteristics of actors or incentives that may be useful for designing interventions to strengthen horizontal checks. If we were to look at a wider range of schools, such as private schools and *madrasahs* (traditional Islamic schools), we are likely to see greater variations in the strength and types of horizontal checks. We may then discover factors that have a systematic effect on improving horizontal checks in ways that can be influenced by policy. Our findings show the limitations of focusing solely on formal governance arrangements – to improve governance, research effort must shift towards identifying and strengthening effective horizontal checks.

1. Introduction

Bangladesh has increased spending on primary education and has achieved impressive improvements in enrolment rates; however, the quality of learning outcomes remains a serious concern. The poor quality of education threatens to constrain the achievement of broader development goals that depend on the development of human capital.

A study on the state of learning in Bangladeshi schools (BIGD, 2022) finds that most students in primary schools perform significantly below their grade level expectations in numeracy, Bengali and English. Furthermore, correcting educational problems at secondary or tertiary levels becomes progressively more difficult if children have missed out on education at an early age. The conversion of resources allocated to education into the desired educational outcomes depends on governance – how such resources are managed, diverted, misused or used effectively to deliver educational outcomes. If resources allocated for education are misused or diverted, outcomes will obviously be poorer than they would otherwise have been.

Governance generally describes systems of formal monitoring and accountability. It refers to formal rules of decision-making and resource allocation, as well as the agencies enforcing these rules. The aim is to limit the misuse or misallocation of resources by detecting and stopping corruption, political patronage or wastages due to inefficiency. The effectiveness of formal, top-down monitoring and accountability systems usually depends on the power and interests of ‘horizontally located’ actors, beyond the ones directly involved in formal ‘vertical’ monitoring, accountability and enforcement processes (Khan and Roy, 2022).

Horizontal actors do not have formal governance or accountability responsibilities, but they do have an interest in rule violations that affect them. If their interest is great enough, they will spend time and resources to monitor actors who are violating rules. If, in addition, they have the power and connections to use this information, they will engage with formal actors responsible for monitoring and enforcement, as well as with the actual or potential violators to persuade them to comply. The activities of horizontal actors are always vital to ensure that corrective actions are taken and violations end. In more advanced countries, there is usually a dense network of many powerful and capable horizontal actors – including industry, parents, taxpayers, the media and competing political parties – who work to ensure that public resource flows are governed well. This is why such countries are generally described as having a strong rule of law. However, even within these contexts, horizontal checks may be much weaker in less developed localities or where parents have less power and knowledge, for example. Here, public educational outcomes can be much poorer than in other areas of the same country.

In less developed countries, the overall distribution of powerful actors (the political settlement) is not favourable for the enforcement of rules. There are far fewer powerful actors who support rule enforcement because the rules align with their own interests. As a result, there are insufficient horizontal checks that demand and support the enforcement of rules. Violations are widespread and manifest as extensive informality in these societies.

The efficiency of the conversion of public resources into educational outcomes is likewise also relatively poor in less developed contexts. But different sectors have specific actors and interests around them, and accordingly reform may be more or less difficult. The education sector in Bangladesh presents some tough problems. Increases in spending have not translated into improvements in outcomes. As Bangladesh attempts to graduate from manufacturing very low-technology and low-skill products such as garments to higher value-added products, the poor quality of general education is becoming a binding constraint.

Actors within the education system who violate formal rules appear to have sufficient power to ignore regulatory supervision. Meanwhile, formal supervisors and violators rarely come under strong enough horizontal pressure to improve compliance. Occasionally, however, local conditions enable a set of largely informal self-interested horizontal checks that result in better educational outcomes. These conditions may put sufficient pressure on the violators, as well as the regulators and enforcement agencies governing them, so that better educational outcomes are achieved in these localities. Investigating these checks, and understanding if and how they work, may help identify feasible entry points to strengthen the governance of the education sector.

The next section of this paper describes the focus of our study and our methodology. In Section 3 we describe the formal (vertical) monitoring and accountability systems relevant for different resource flows in the education sector, and then in Section 4 we look at how the horizontal activities of various actors affect these formal mechanisms. In Section 5 we summarise our qualitative analysis of several important resource leakages and the organisation of actors around these flows. In each case, we identify the actors involved in supporting or obstructing that leakage and the power and interests of these actors. The analysis explains why a particular problem persists, but, more importantly, it helps identify potential entry points to strengthen vertical and horizontal checks to constrain that leakage. Section 6 presents our quantitative analysis, which validates our findings.

2. Study focus and methodology

Feasible entry points to improve governance in the education sector in Bangladesh requires that we first identify the types of informal horizontal pressures that achieve material improvements in education outcomes. Then, innovative strategies can be developed to incentivise actors to play a bigger role in a wider set of localities. In the case of state primary schools in Bangladesh, powerful horizontal actors include local politicians, businesses and locally influential families, including those who have in the past granted land for a school. Some may have interests that align with ensuring public resources allocated for education are used as intended, while others may facilitate or create demands for the diversion of resources.

The effectiveness of formal structures of ‘vertical’ checks and enforcement depend on the power and interests of horizontal actors at different levels and the balance of supportive or obstructive activities. If powerful horizontal actors are motivated to support the allocation of resources to improve educational outcomes, formal accountability and enforcement at that level is likely to be (more) effective. On the other hand, if horizontal actors work to divert resources or to protect those who do, the formal (vertical) governance structures of monitoring and accountability are likely to work poorly or not at all, with effects on educational outcomes. Critically, the performance of formal governance may therefore depend on the configuration of horizontal actors at each level, their power and interests, and the types of activities they engage in to influence the allocation of policy resources.

This study focuses on the allocation of resources and the associated governance activities at the primary school level. Improving formal governance processes at any level requires an assessment of the power and interests of horizontal actors at play and a search for entry points where self-interested actions by some can support better outcomes – such as the appointment of better qualified teachers, for example. We believe it is most feasible to look for entry points at lower levels, even though achieving substantial improvements in educational outcomes must involve a sequential assessment of other levels governing the flow of educational resources. This is because there are organised interests at higher levels that are involved in diverting resources.

Horizontal activities are formal if actors lodge complaints or enquiries to contain violators using established mechanisms; they are informal if actors observe and publicise specific actions, for example, or impose costs on violators by aligning with their competitors to challenge their benefits and positions. An important point to keep in mind is that informal activities are not always negative in their effects – some informal horizontal checks improve formal governance outcomes. Consequently, it is essential to understand the social actors who apply horizontal checks through their power and interests, and for these stakeholders to participate in reforming formal governance systems to ensure better results.

When actors of different types spend time and effort to observe what is happening in their local school and then exert social or political pressure on officials to do their jobs or to do something differently, these actors are engaging in informal horizontal activities that are not part of any official function. These informal (horizontal) activities sometimes assist formal (vertical) accountability mechanisms and improve outcomes, but they can also support or create pressures for resource diversions, undermining the vertical checking and formal accountability processes.

The processes we examine here include the enrolment of students, the allocation of School Level Improvement Plan (SLIP) funds, the allocation of teaching responsibilities and monitoring of teaching effort, additional tuition of children after class, and unauthorised student assessments financed by informal fees from parents.

Our research method uses two parallel arms of investigation. In the first arm, we have applied a case study approach using ethnographic observations by our study teams and extensive key informant interviews (KIIs) with stakeholders from different perspectives. In the second arm we have used quantitative analysis to look for correlations between characteristics affecting vertical and horizontal checks and educational outcomes. Taken together, the two arms in this preliminary study validate the plausibility of our approach and the usefulness of further investigations.

We selected 10 schools in Bangladesh in three distinct localities – urban (n=3), rural (n=4) and peri-urban (n=3) (see Table 1). The localities were purposefully chosen from five districts and further selected to include variations in factors such as remoteness, socio-economic conditions and exposure to climate vulnerability. Two schools were selected from each district. In instances where multiple schools were present in a locality, priority was given to schools with larger student numbers, earlier establishment year and our location criteria. Three types of localities were selected because they are likely to have different configurations of local power and interests at the school level. The distance of a school from an urban administrative centre matters greatly in determining both the strength of the formal (vertical) checks it is subject to, as well as the configuration of power at the local level, which determines horizontal checks or obstacles. While a more diverse sample of schools could identify other variations of interest, we believe our sample helps identify an important set of issues.

Table 1. Distribution of selected schools

Division	District	Upazila	Rural ^a	Urban ^b	Peri-urban ^c
Chattogram	Cumilla	Borua	1	0	1
Rangpur	Lalmonirhat	Hatibandha	1	0	1
Khulna	Satkhira	Tala, Satkhira Sadar	1	1	0
Rajshahi	Naogaon	Naogaon sadar and Manda	1	1	0
Mymensingh	Jamalpur	Jamalpur sadar and Dewanganj	0	1	1

Notes: a) Rural schools come under a union *parishad* (council); b) Urban schools come under a district town *sadar* (administrative headquarters); c) Peri-urban schools come under a *thana/upazila sadar* (administrative sub-district) or a *pouroshobha sadar* (municipal headquarters).

We embedded our researchers in the selected localities to observe the activities of actors around processes of interest and mapped how the interactions of formal processes and informal pressures affected outcomes. A total of 45 in-depth interviews (IDIs) were conducted with different stakeholders including schoolteachers, parents, local businessmen, retired teachers, School Management Committee (SMC) members, and community leaders. Additionally, we conducted 20 KIIs with leadership-level figures such as the SMC president, head teachers, local councillors and senior teachers. Observations of school activities and transactions were carried out on the school premises within school hours over several days .

We applied plausible criteria to distinguish between informal activities that support positive educational outcomes from those that support resource leakages that harm educational outcomes. For instance, teachers wasting time in class and not putting effort into teaching is considered a leakage of teaching resources. We looked for informal networks of powerful actors that protect these bad practices and make vertical checks (for example, by head teachers or school committees) ineffective. Similarly, when teachers put in higher levels of effort, we looked for horizontal checks that impose informal pressures on head teachers or management committees to take action against ineffective teachers. Ethnographic observations of these activities enabled qualitative analysis of how horizontal checks or collusion work in different contexts, and the characteristics associated with effective or ineffective governance.

The fieldwork was carried out by experienced researchers, most with a background in anthropology. Prior to commencing data collection, all researchers underwent rigorous and intensive in-house training specific to the study's data collection protocols. The team split into two groups and both groups conducted fieldwork in person from January to February 2024. Detailed interview guidelines were provided to field researchers to ensure consistency and to maintain ethical protocols. To uphold quality standards, regular team meetings were held every two days. Furthermore, research leaders conducted field visits to observe data collection processes and to gain insights into school governance dynamics firsthand. In all cases, researchers obtained oral consent from the respondents before conducting interviews and took detailed notes. Finally, multiple group meetings were organised with community members to cross-check and validate our observations and findings.

We secured local permission for our ethnographic observations and interviews with stakeholders. We described the purpose of the study to stakeholders as an academic endeavour to understand how schools address problems in formal and informal ways. Our aim was described as a search for solutions that had the potential to improve educational outcomes in ways that could be implemented by the stakeholders themselves. These honest explanations allowed our researchers to talk about and observe how critical and sensitive processes were addressed, including the negotiation of teacher responsibilities, organising school investments, managing fake enrolments, and so on. As with many informal practices in Bangladesh, once trust was established regarding the constructive nature of our intentions, stakeholders usually talked freely about informal processes, even quite sensitive

ones. As different stakeholders were likely to describe different motivations and drivers, however, it was important to triangulate responses and repeat observations until a plausible and consistent analysis emerged, after adjusting for under- or over-statements.

The qualitative data collected by the research teams were organised around each type of resource leakage that we were observing. Collaborative team sessions were conducted to categorise the data, and then insights were triangulated across different stakeholder perspectives and our own observations until a consistent picture of the quality of vertical and horizontal checks could be arrived at. The results were then categorised as strong, weak or non-existent checks from specific governance and horizontal actors for each school and leakage. These data were organised to look for patterns for descriptive analysis and to contribute to the quantitative analysis.

The aim of the quantitative analysis – the second arm of the study – was to test if our indicators of the effectiveness of vertical and horizontal checks correlate with educational outcomes in the way we expect. We collected information on educational outcomes separately from the qualitative assessments conducted at the 10 schools. This ensured that numerical measurements of educational quality did not unconsciously affect our assessments of governance and leakages. During our on-site qualitative assessments, team members recorded parents' opinions regarding the quality of teaching in their schools, but these opinions were subjective. The education levels of the parents varied greatly, so these opinions were unlikely to influence team members in their ongoing assessments of governance quality.

Quantitative measures of learning outcomes were derived by surveying students using the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) tool for students in grades one to five. The sample included 500 students, comprising 400 students from the 10 schools where our qualitative observations were conducted and 100 students from other schools within each catchment area. To address the varying student populations across schools, we employed probability proportional to size (PPS) sampling to determine the number of participants from each school. Students were selected equally from each grade, covering classes one through to five. The same approach was used to select an additional 100 students from nearby schools. When recruiting students, we deliberately ensured variations in a range of socio-demographic factors including proximity to the school, gender, religion and parental occupations to achieve diverse representation and to maximise variation within the sample. As presented in Section 6, the correlations with vertical and horizontal governance indicators align with our expectations.

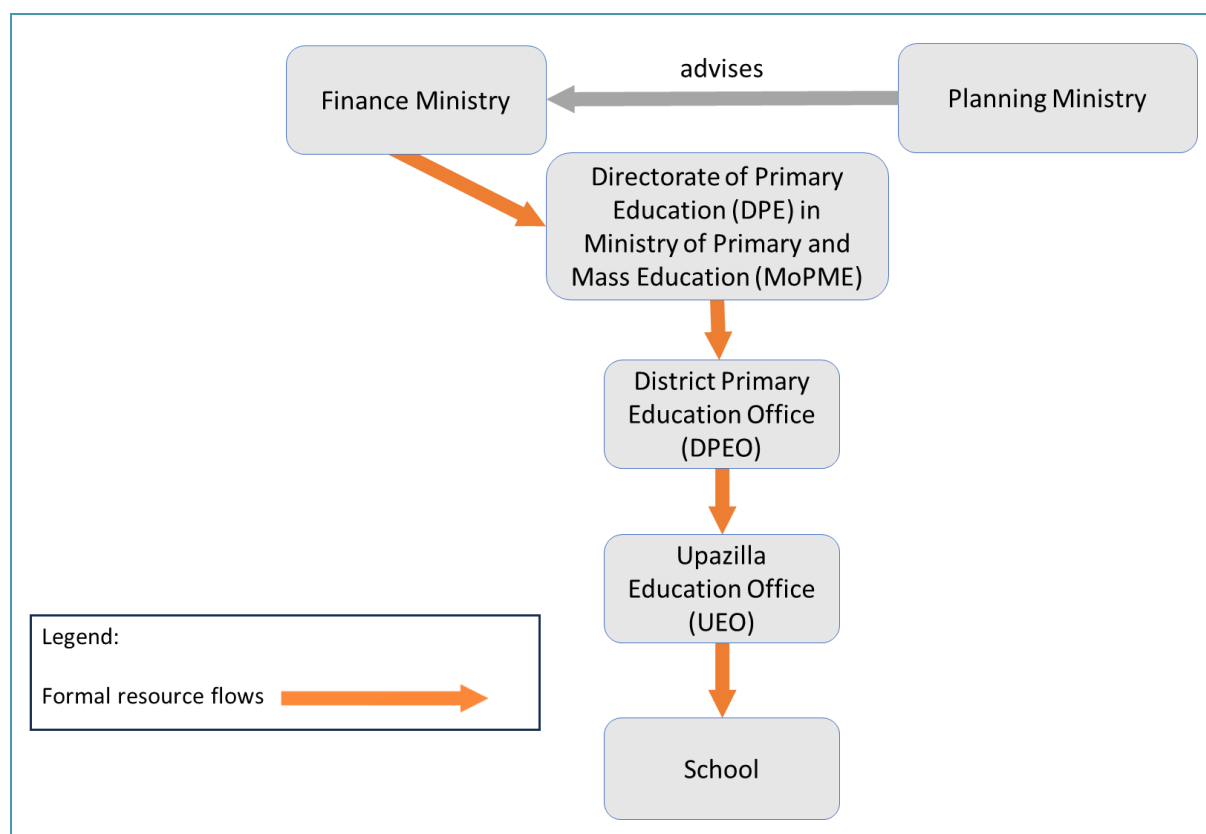
3. Formal resource flows and governance

The first two steps in our mapping exercise describe the formal flows of resources from the Ministry of Finance to each primary school and the formal governance arrangements to ensure these flows reach the right place and are properly used. This sets the scene for examining governance failures and the interdependence of vertical and horizontal checks in Section 4.

Figure 1 shows the formal flows of resources, indicated with red arrowsFigure 1. Education budgets are recommended by the Ministry of Planning and approved by the Ministry of Finance. The budget for primary education is then allocated by the Ministry of Finance to the Directorate of Primary Education (DPE) in the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (MoPME). The DPE passes the budget to individual school authorities through the District Primary Education Office (DPEO) and the Upazilla Education Office (UEO).

The allocation to primary schools shown in the figure can be far removed from what really happens, however. The allocated resources may not reach primary schools and they may not be used as intended when they reach the school. The actual outcome depends on the effectiveness of formal governance arrangements. Potential leakages and wastage include delays in implementation and possible diversions or misuse of resources by actors anywhere in the chain. These could be deliberate violations by corrupt actors, or inefficiencies because these actors lack interest or motivation to do their jobs properly. Once resources arrive at a primary school, there are a further set of potential leakages and inefficiencies. Resources may once again be diverted corruptly or employees may lack compulsions to do their jobs properly or use resources efficiently. Collectively, these failures can lead to resource diversions that significantly affect educational outcomes.

Figure 1. Formal flows of resources in the education system

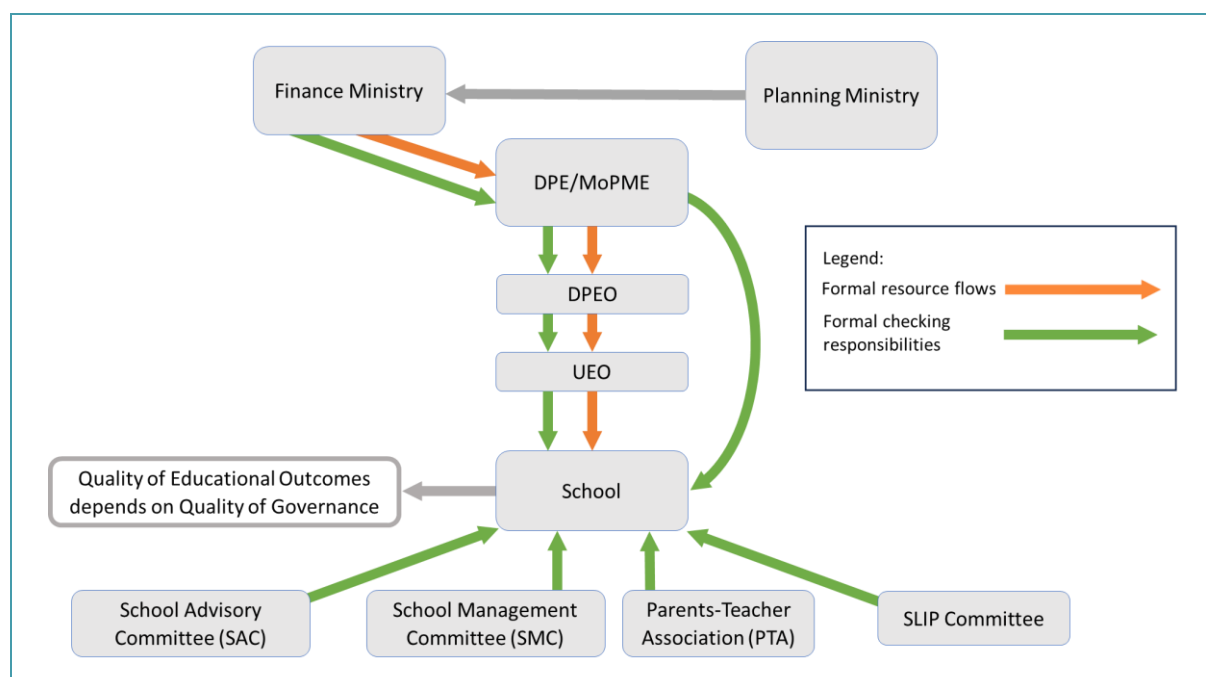


Source: The authors.

Figure 2 maps the formal governance responsibilities (green arrows) of different actors in the chain of formal resource flows (red arrows). At each stage, the flows of policy resources are monitored and recipients are held to account by designated agencies and actors undertaking distinct monitoring and auditing processes. Together, these processes and actors constitute the formal governance system, which we also describe as ‘vertical monitoring’. At each level of the system, an authority (the principal at that level) is given responsibility for monitoring, and for defining their monitoring, auditing and enforcement duties with respect to specified recipients of resources (the agents). In turn, the latter are accountable to the monitoring agencies for the proper use and allocation of resources allocated to them. The agent at a higher level may become the principal responsible for monitoring at a lower level, and so on.

For example, the Ministry of Finance is authorised to call for and audit reports from the DPE about how allocated funds have been disbursed. If anomalies are detected or suspected, the Ministry of Finance is authorised to use accountability mechanisms to take action against possible violators to compel them to change their behaviour. Note that the green arrows indicate the formal processes that are *supposed to* operate. Formal governance is generally weak in less developed countries and therefore our task is to identify which, if any, of these formal governance lines are working, why and to what extent.

Figure 2. Formal governance arrangements in the education system



Source: The authors.

In this paper we are particularly concerned with governance at the school level. However, a number of additional bodies are important for the formal governance of schools at the local level. We describe the lines of formal governance as ‘vertical’ governance because these involve a ‘principal’ conducting checks on and disciplining violations of an ‘agent’. The important organisations involved in formal governance arrangements at the school level are Parent–Teacher Associations (PTAs), SMCs, Social Audit Committees (SACs) and SLIP Committees.

Table 2. Organisations involved in formal governance of schools

School Management Committees (SMCs)

The SMC in a primary school is integral to fostering effective school governance and enhancing the quality of education. SMCs were set up in their present form in 2012. In theory, an SMC holds full authority over the administration of a primary school in Bangladesh and serves as a platform for local community members and parents to actively participate in school governance and decision-making. SMCs hold multiple responsibilities aimed at enhancing and ensuring quality education. This includes overseeing resource utilisation, promoting transparency and ensuring financial accountability, increasing enrolment, reducing dropout rates and engaging the community in school activities. Additionally, SMCs are tasked with ensuring adherence to government policies, supporting teacher development, and monitoring and maintaining school infrastructure.

An SMC consists of a head teacher as an ex-officio member, four elected parents, two parents nominated by the local member of parliament, one assistant teacher, one high school teacher from the local area, one land donor (whose family initially donated the land for the school), and the Ward Councillor (a political representative). As a minimum, the president of an SMC must have a degree-level qualification. Committee members serve for three years. Although the intention is for SMCs to be established through a formal election process, our observations in the 10 selected schools suggest that elections are not conducted in practice. Instead, the composition of an SMC is usually determined through negotiations involving local political leaders, the UEO and the head teacher.

The vast majority of teachers, parents and students declare an interest in and willingness to take responsibility for maintaining the physical environment of the school and for constraining corruption and the abuse of power (Education Watch, 2017: 61, 142). This is in line with the formal powers given to SMCs to monitor schools. However, the reality is often very different. There is considerable evidence of school-level corruption and poor governance that SMCs do little to check. This includes the collection of unauthorised payments from students for admissions and access to textbooks, private tuition of school students by public-sector teachers after class, absenteeism by teachers and the neglect of duties, and even sexual harassment and corruption in the procurement and delivery of school-level projects (ibid: 78–82). SMC members may be more interested in extracting their own kickbacks, for instance when they sign off overpriced invoices. Such approvals require collusion between the SMC president and the head teacher, with benefits shared across SMC members depending on their positions of power. Political influence and considerable amounts of money are deployed in elections of SMC members in order to secure these benefits, and to enjoy the local status and power that SMC membership confers (Sarkar, 2020).

Some parent representatives in SMCs are less interested in improving educational standards and more interested in petty rent extraction. A partial explanation for this may be the limited ability of parents to assess the quality of teaching. Some parents are more likely to focus on money-making opportunities in the SMC or the PTA. Another reason may be the multiplicity of monitoring bodies and confusion over the hierarchy of powers. A more important constraint may be the very limited power and interest of SMCs to improve teaching outcomes.

SMCs do not appoint teachers nor can they dismiss poorly performing teachers. They have very limited powers relative to the head teacher or local politicians. They cannot offer teachers incentives to perform better, and they cannot dock salaries or hold back prospects of promotion if performance is poor. We know from our observations in the selected schools that many parents are willing to pay teachers to provide additional private tuition outside school hours, however. These parents clearly care about the teaching their children receive, and they understand that what is provided in school is inadequate. Parents who are educated and understand educational outcomes may not use their time in an SMC to change teacher behaviour through monitoring and sanctions because they know such attempts will be in vain. In contrast, SMCs do have sufficient power to collude with head teachers and school staff to divert school resources – which is an activity that many SMC members engage in.

Parent–Teacher Associations (PTAs)

PTAs are 10-member committees comprising teachers and parents or guardians of children at the school. They have a president and a vice-president, both elected by general members, along with the school's head teacher who serves as the member secretary ex-officio. One assistant teacher is elected by the school's teachers. Three male parents/guardians and three female parents/guardians are elected by general members from among the parents or guardians of the school.

The primary objective of a PTA is to foster a good relationship between teachers and parents/guardians and to support activities for the welfare of the school. The SMC and the PTA act as complementary bodies, working together on school development activities. Key activities of a PTA include fostering parent–teacher cooperation for a safe learning environment, enhancing parental involvement, boosting enrolment and attendance, preventing dropouts, and engaging local professionals in school development, among other initiatives.

However, the educational level of local parents, particularly in rural areas, is often low and this affects their capability to assess teaching quality. Less educated parents are also likely to be less powerful relative to the school administration and the head teacher. Importantly, we find that membership of the PTA is attractive for many parents for reasons unrelated to the assessment of educational quality. This is because participation in the PTA increases the social status of some and is used to further other ambitions of these parents. Also, as the approval or acquiescence of the PTA is required for school spending on small infrastructure projects, members expect rewards for validating projects. This means that many parents use influence and money to secure their membership, but then they do not exercise effective checks that can improve educational outcomes, particularly in less developed areas where poor and low educated parents dominate.

School Level Improvement Plan (SLIP)

The primary object of a SLIP is to ensure the quality of primary education by creating a supportive learning environment. The SLIP is regarded as the primary planning document for primary education and serves as a key tool for school-level development. As a medium-term plan, SLIPs are designed as three-year rolling strategies to improve the overall quality of education by enhancing teaching and learning processes and improving the educational environment. An annual plan must be prepared to support the implementation of the three-year SLIP.

SLIP Committee

To be eligible for SLIP funds, a school must have an active SMC and an operational PTA. To secure and implement SLIP funds, a five-member SLIP Committee is formed. This Committee comprises: the head teacher, who serves as the president; a designated representative from the SMC; a designated representative from the PTA; a benevolent donor committed to supporting education; and a female teacher from the school selected by the UEO. The SLIP Committee analyses the school's current situation, identifies problems and takes immediate corrective measures while determining the school's needs to achieve the desired standards. Additionally, it assesses costs, identifies funding sources, involves the local community, encourages contributions from benevolent individuals and institutions, prepares a draft SLIP and submits this to the SMC.

Social Audit Committee (SAC)

An additional five-member team is responsible for monitoring and evaluating SLIP activities conducted by the SMC. Typically, a SAC verifies whether the budget has been utilised as planned, ensures the accuracy of expenditure vouchers and checks whether the vouchers align with market prices. The team consists of the head teacher, the PTA president, one PTA member, a local donor or an education enthusiast, one SMC member and a female assistant teacher.

SACs are a sub-committee of SMCs. Although SACs operate separately, SMCs retain full control over them. The head teacher acts as the president of the SAC and simultaneously holds a crucial position in the SMC. In practice, the head teacher carries out all essential functions of the SAC in collaboration with an assistant teacher or an active SMC member. In general, SACs do not operate very differently from SMCs or PTAs. These bodies have formal powers, but widespread evidence of poor school governance suggests they do not have either the effective power or interest to block different types of resource extraction or to sanction poor effort by teachers and school administrators.

The *2017/18 Global education monitoring report* by UNESCO (2017) identifies problems of governance in primary education in Bangladesh. With student numbers increasing in primary education, the accountability relationships between teachers, students and parents have become more challenging. The report highlights how local monitoring agencies at the *upazila* level function poorly. They appear to have no real power to take actions and UEOs and Assistant Upazila Education Officers (AUEOs) rarely perform their duties of regularly monitoring the performance of schools. Some teachers bribe their monitoring officers to have satisfactory remarks recorded regardless of their performance, and some AUEOs allow teachers to complete evaluation forms by themselves.

Based on these observations, the *Global report* argues that further decentralisation of governance might not be an immediate and effective solution (ibid.). Rather, greater autonomy to handle resources and administrative tasks might cause more corruption and inefficiencies. The collection of unauthorised and informal fees by schools for admissions, to release stipends, for class promotions and sports reflects the culture

of corruption that is embedded in school administration systems. The SMC is ineffective as most members are themselves uneducated and politically connected, and the Right to Information Act 2009 is ineffective because schools do not have to disclose information about the allocation of responsibilities of teachers, the decision-making process, their budgets and expenditures.

The *Global report* refers to Transparency International Bangladesh's (TIB) claim that teachers' recruitment is one of the main sources of corruption in the education sector of Bangladesh (ibid.). Corruption, nepotism and political affiliation are common factors that influence the recruitment and training of teachers. Furthermore, the UEO makes schools buy necessary materials from favoured vendors, which leads to poor quality construction. Local political lobbying, a poor bidding process, short bidding periods and the secrecy of the selection process create opportunities for the UEO to engage in corruption to allocate construction contracts. Teachers who extract informal payments from students are themselves forced to pay bribes for very simple administrative processes such as their certificate attestation, leave adjustments, pensions, transfers and training. In short, all dimensions of formal governance are subject to corruption.

UNESCO proposes high-level reforms to enhance formal accountability. These include improving the participation of all political parties in parliament so that public policies are subject to open debates and discussions. It suggests working to improve the participation of relevant stakeholders in the budget preparation process and other policy decisions. Effective decentralisation and delegation of power to local agencies, including schools, are also recommended to improve the enabling environment. An effective performance management system should also be introduced.

These are all excellent proposals, and we have no disagreement with any of them. But even if laws were passed to facilitate these changes, how can we ensure that *these* formal rules are properly implemented to strengthen weak formal governance elsewhere? For instance, ensuring the participation of all political parties in parliament so that education policy is checked at a high level is not a simple matter. To be effective, opposition parties must possess the organisational power to ensure that the ruling party does not fix elections or ignore them in parliament. Governance at this level, as elsewhere, is not just a technical or legal issue, but a fundamental problem around the distribution of organisational power. Formal governance at this level will remain weak if the distribution of power is not appropriate for the horizontal checks required for competitive politics to be effective. If opposition parties are weak or have been deliberately suppressed by the ruling party, society has to work to change the relevant distribution of power (for instance by working to enhance the power of opposition parties) if parliament is to exercise effective vertical checks. If this is not feasible, we need to begin work at other more promising entry points. Similarly, the other proposals are also likely to be effective only if specific horizontal checks are in place, which are generally absent or weak in Bangladesh currently.

Rahaman (2016) argues that substantial inequalities in educational attainment relate to weaknesses in formal governance. For instance, the centrepiece of the government's policy to address education inequality at the primary school level has been conditional cash transfers to poor children. But the programme has failed to effectively target the poor and transfers have been captured by others. Rahman argues that the poor governance of education policy is due to two main factors: capture and bias. Capture is closely related to corruption but includes pressure faced by public officials to act illegally even if they do not directly benefit. Bias describes the anti-poor preferences of critical state actors that disadvantage the poor and other marginalised groups during policy implementation. This analysis identifies important problems too but, like the *Global report*, it does not help us identify strategies to address these problems.

Islam and Helal (2018) look at the governance of primary education in Bangladesh in the light of the National Education Policy of 2010. The authors identify corruption and failures of governance as significant factors affecting the quality of education at the school level. They describe failures at three levels. At the community level, they describe serious failings in the composition and operation of the SMCs and the PTA; at the school level they describe violations of rules by teachers; and at the level of the AUEO and UEO there are failures in their formal monitoring and checking roles. These corruption and governance failures result in direct or indirect leakages of resources that affect the delivery of educational outcomes. These include the irregular attendance of teachers, the late arrival and early departure of teachers, irregularities in claiming and distributing stipends for students, poor monitoring and supervision of teaching staff, poor recording and reporting of school activities, the misappropriation of some or all of the SLIP fund, and the involvement of teachers in private tuition, often of the same students that they fail to teach in class. The authors call for more effective external supervision, enhanced formal checks and balances, improvements in the operation of the SMC, and so on. The solutions they propose all involve strengthening formal governance and vertical checking. We concur that formal governance is weak and needs to be strengthened – but pointing this out does not tell us *how* to achieve stronger governance.

Our approach broadly aligns with the existing literature on school governance in Bangladesh. We identify the same or very similar problems at the school level such as inadequate teaching effort and so on. We agree that these problems are ultimately caused by weak formal governance and the prevalence of corruption and patronage that allows resource leakages and wastages to persist. We also agree that the problems are entrenched and intertwined. However, we go beyond the identification of weak formal governance to look for entry points and strategies that can effectively address some of these failures. It would be desirable to address all problems simultaneously. However, this is not necessarily feasible given the power and interests of those who are collectively violating at different levels, and the absence of any identifiable counter coalition with both the power and interest to engage in the day-to-day delivery of public educational services.

Our hypothesis is that formal governance is only likely to be effective if there are concurrent and effective horizontal checks of the same resource leakages by actors with sufficient power and interest to block violators at that level. If the evidence corroborates our hypothesis, this demonstrates the importance of identifying feasible entry points for reform by jointly supporting the strengthening of vertical *and* horizontal checks at the most promising levels. This offers a way of incrementally strengthening formal governance in adverse contexts where the rule of law is weak.

4. How horizontal checks affect formal governance

Formal governance generally does not work too well in less developed countries like Bangladesh, and that is also true of public-sector education. As a result, educational outcomes are not commensurate with the investments of policy resources and elaborate structures of formal governance.

We now assess the extent to which formal governance is working in primary schools, and if not, why. Our proposition, based on Khan and Roy (2022), is that formal (vertical) governance works well only if supported by horizontal actors who check relevant resource leakages that are in their own interest and who put pressure on both principals and agents within the formal governance chain. Horizontal checks describe additional activities beyond that of the formal governance system. They involve actors who are not formally designated as monitors or enforcers who observe and respond to violations in their own interest. They may then share information with formal enforcers, put pressure on the latter to take action by reporting them to their superiors or engaging with politicians and the media, or directly engage with violators and stop financial or commercial transactions with them, and so on. All of these actions are costly if sustained until results are achieved, and therefore only powerful actors with a strong interest in having the rules enforced have a chance of being effective.

The analysis of governance among more advanced countries usually ignores the importance of these horizontal checks because they are *always* working in the background. Something that is ubiquitous is often not noticed. As a result of intense horizontal checks and activity by powerful actors when rules are discovered to have been broken, the general enforcement of rules – described as the rule of law – is usually strong in such countries. But in less developed countries, horizontal activities cannot be taken for granted in every sphere, though they are present or almost present in many. This explains why countries such as Bangladesh face many problems of governance and why some processes and resource allocations are better governed than others within the same country.

The weakness of horizontal checks in some countries or sectors stems from the relative paucity of powerful organisations with high productive capabilities. Productive organisations are ones that add value, whether in sports, culture, business or knowledge. They are generally involved in coordinating complex activities that require the enforcement of rules. Productive organisations are therefore more likely to *want* to support the enforcement of rules, and if they are powerful enough, they *will* engage in effective horizontal checks. These organisations do not have to be as powerful as the most powerful organisations in the country, but they must be as powerful as the violators they want to check. Effective checks therefore do not necessarily require actors who are powerful in an absolute sense. In countries where organisations with relevant power, capabilities and interests are not present

everywhere, there are nevertheless *entry points* for incremental reforms. And wherever some horizontal actors have the power and interest to check specific violations, formal governance is likely to be better than elsewhere.

The problem is that many powerful actors in countries such as Bangladesh do not support the enforcement of rules, and *their* horizontal activities obstruct formal governance. Many powerful organisations have low productive capabilities and rely on rule violations to extract resources. They have little interest in following rules or enforcing rules on others. Rather, they may put informal pressure on officials to violate rules and share the benefits with them. Horizontal pressures for collusion should obviously not be confused with horizontal checks, and the effects on formal governance are very different. Understanding the interaction of vertical and horizontal processes is therefore important to identify the most promising entry points for effective governance and anti-corruption. These entry points are ones where horizontal actors are already active, or very likely to become active with appropriate support, to put pressure on rule enforcers (principals) and/or those subject to the rules (agents) to follow the rules.

In the context of primary schools in Bangladesh, a number of actors play important roles in potential horizontal checks.

Table 3. Important actors in horizontal checks

Local families who have granted land to a school

Most public primary schools sit on land granted by a local family. Primary schools used to be set up in this way until some schools were absorbed in the state system and teachers and other staff began to be paid from the public budget. Teachers and head teachers prefer to be employed by the state as this provides job security and a pension, and generally higher salaries. Most schools applied for state recognition, therefore. The state has not had to build primary schools, instead refurbishing and improving existing schools that have been incorporated in the public system.

In making the original land grants, local families had different motives. These ranged from pure altruism in some cases, enhancing their social and political status in others or, more recently, influencing the creation of state-funded jobs for family members in the schools that were set up. Although the granting family does not retain any formal rights in the school, family members are often in the management committee, and occasionally employed as teachers, head teachers or in other capacities. Even if not benefiting from public resource flows to the school in these ways, the land-granting family often retains an informal authority in its operations. If their interests align with good educational outcomes, their involvement as monitors with some authority can help to constrain resource leakages. If, on the other hand, they too want to extract resources, they are likely to be able to use their authority to set up collusive arrangements with the school management, worsening existing levels of leakages. Given the informal power of the land-granting family, their interests are often quite critical in determining the quality of horizontal pressures on primary school authorities.

Political or business actors with an interest in improving education quality

Occasionally, local politicians or entrepreneurs take on a social responsibility in monitoring education quality and put pressure on head teachers and the school administration system. These actors usually have the power but often not the interest in spending time and resources in these types of activities. However, sometimes such actors emerge because of a personal commitment to improve educational quality or because they want the social or political recognition that comes from making a difference to local schools.

Committed head teachers

Head teachers can play a critical role in improving and maintaining educational quality, but not all head teachers are interested in doing that. The formal authority of the head teacher is therefore insufficient for ensuring good educational outcomes. We make a distinction between the formal powers of head teachers, which all head teachers have, and the idiosyncratic characteristics and networks of the few head teachers who make a big difference to their schools. Apart from purely subjective characteristics of head teachers, these differences are linked to the social networks the head teachers are embedded in. For instance, teachers from families of teachers and professionals often take a greater interest in the performance of their duties. Other types of family, political or professional networks that some head teachers are embedded in may also create incentives and compulsions for these head teachers to take a more active role in managing resource use in schools. These family, political or professional networks provide an informal horizontal check on the performance of some head teachers. It is important to make a distinction between the formal authority and powers of teachers and individual or informal network characteristics of the head teachers. If the formal powers of head teachers mattered more, then focusing on formal governance structures would deliver results. But if only specific types of head teachers or those who are embedded in particular types of networks deliver results, then we have to focus on identifying these characteristics as well.

Parents and guardians in the local community

Parents are obviously important local stakeholders. We may expect them to have an interest in good educational outcomes even if they do not always have the power to monitor schools and check leakages. However, the effectiveness of the horizontal checks that local parents can exercise depends quite significantly on their own power and capabilities. Capabilities refer to the productive capabilities of parents, and whether they themselves have the educational and professional backgrounds to assess the quality of teaching and exert pressure on school management and head teachers if teaching is inadequate. Parents with high capabilities also tend to be more powerful because they have higher incomes and status. But powerful parents who do not have high productive capabilities – for instance, parents who have made money through political connections or local contracting – may not be able to exercise effective horizontal checks if they themselves are unable to determine the quality of education. The quality of horizontal checks that parents can exercise therefore depends very significantly on the catchment area of the school, which may be proxied by the average socio-economic background of students.

Parents who have the power and interest to exercise horizontal checks can directly approach the school management to make complaints or share information. They may also take their complaints to higher education and political authorities if the school response is unsatisfactory.

Political parties

Education quality is, in theory, a political issue that can inform voting behaviour. Opposition parties and their organisations should therefore be a potential source of horizontal checks. In principle, constituents can complain about poor school performance, and opposition parties can include school governance or performance in their election manifestos to put pressure on school management. This can lead to informal discussions with school management, with the possibility of taking complaints to a higher level and of using poor educational quality as an election issue. For the same reason, the ruling party too can take an interest in school management to protect their popular support and vote shares. They can be expected to put informal pressure on school management at the local level to protect their own interests. However, this study was conducted towards the end of the Awami League regime that ruled Bangladesh from 2009 to 2024. Elections were controlled and rigged during that period, and opposition parties had almost no power to exercise any horizontal checks on school management or indeed on any other matters. Consequently, this source of horizontal checks is likely to become more important in the future.

In the figures that follow (Figure 3, Figure 4 and Figure 5) we have added additional arrows to capture these informal horizontal checks on a case-by-case basis. Where formal governance is failing, we show a cross (X) on the relevant green arrow, indicating a failure of the checking function. If the governance arrangements occasionally work, but not always, we show a question mark (?) over the arrow. When formal governance fails or is weak, the result is resource leakage or wastage. A resource leakage describes the diversion of resources through corruption or theft. Resource wastage happens when teachers or administrators fail to put in effort or are absent from work. Both behaviours adversely affect educational outcomes. The black arrows show these points of potential resource leakages or wastages.

Our analytical proposition is that formal governance is more likely to work in the presence of a necessary condition: effective horizontal checks supporting formal governance at that point. In the figures we show the horizontal checks as additional blue arrows. These checks are carried out by actors who are not formally charged with monitoring that activity, but who engage in checking activities because they are affected by the policy or activity in question, and they have the power to be effective. In some cases, the actor may be formally charged with a responsibility, like a head teacher, but the quality of their effort cannot be explained simply in terms of their formal governance position. Here too, there may be implicit horizontal checks at work, though in some cases it may simply be because of the personality of an individual. As with the formal checks (shown with green arrows), we use a cross (X) to indicate if the horizontal checks (blue arrows) are entirely ineffective and a question mark (?) if they are only occasionally effective.

Our proposition is that controlling resource leakages (blocking the black arrows) is only likely if vertical and horizontal governance is present simultaneously. The horizontal checks are necessary to make the vertical checks based on formal governance effective. In the absence of horizontal checks, the formal checks are likely to be defective in the contexts of less developed countries where the rule of law is weak. In the primary education sector, we have not found horizontal checks that are fully effective in the observed schools. Nevertheless, some potential leakages are blocked to some extent by partially effective horizontal checks (effective in some schools and not others), and as a result the associated formal/vertical checks are also partially effective in the same way. The arrows with question marks (?) are therefore particularly important because they direct our attention to the occasional presence of horizontal checks but also to the fact that, in the context of primary schools in heterogeneous localities, horizontal checks are effective in some schools but not others. These are the potential entry points where our analysis can help to design better formal governance. Depending on the leakage and the strength of evidence on horizontal checks, the best strategy may either be to strengthen the relevant horizontal checks in contexts where they are already present or, more ambitiously, to trigger similar horizontal checks with additional policy support in other types of schools where they are absent currently.

The weakness of formal governance in primary education in Bangladesh is widely recognised in the literature. For example, a study of primary and pre-primary education conducted by the Brookings Institution focuses on the extent to which poor and marginalised children face unequal opportunities in the country (Steer et al., 2014). Given the government's commitments to equity and high-quality primary education, the authors argue it is necessary to identify regions or population groups that are underperforming on key indicators and allocate resources appropriately. They analyse regional performance across key indicators, including access, infrastructure, gender equity and so on. While they highlight the relation between educational inputs and outputs – which we have described as the governance problem – they do not analyse entry points for improving the relationship. Their sub-national analysis focuses primarily on the sub-district or *upazila* level. Despite the education system being highly centralised in Bangladesh, with delivery overseen by deconcentrated administrative units, there is considerable regional diversity in outcomes. Our focus on the primary school reveals the diversity of horizontal checks across localities, and the variations in formal governance and leakages at the school level, and therefore we show the need for targeted solutions.

5. Resource leakages

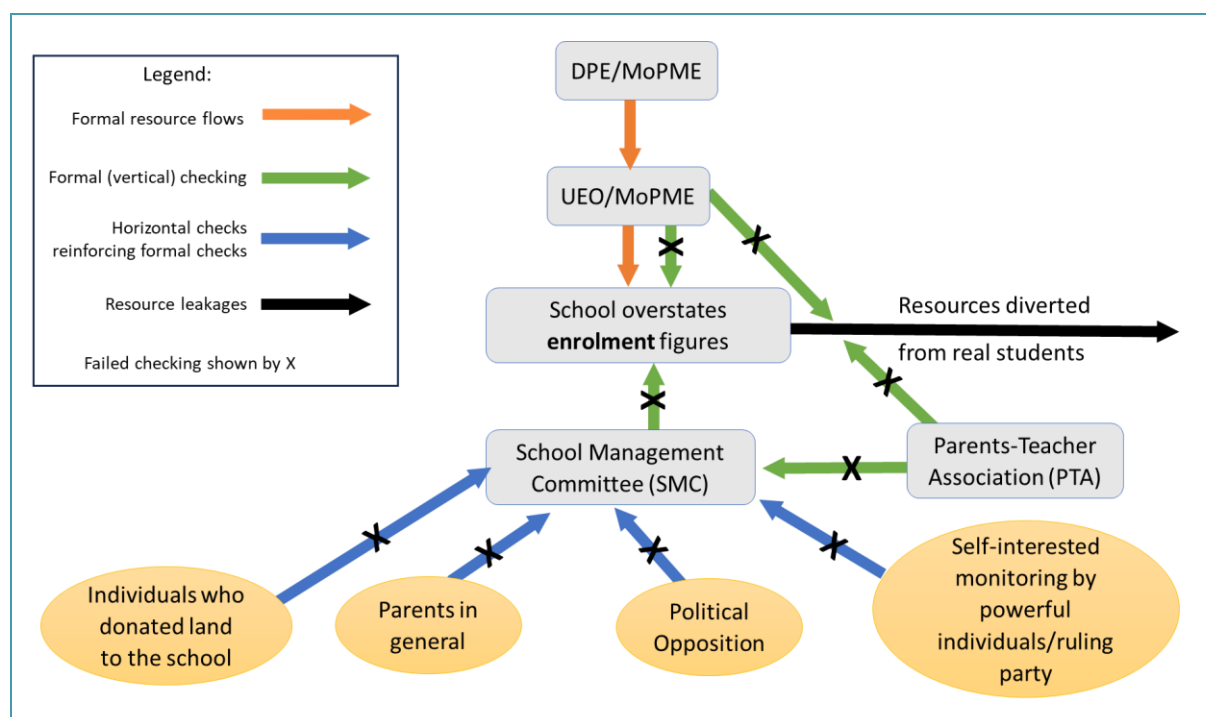
5.1. The problem of fake enrolments

Fake enrolments in primary schools is an example of a leakage where there are no interests at the local level that are powerful enough to check a significant fraudulent outflow. We find this to be a widespread practice. Many schools enrol substantial numbers of ghost students, constituting 10% or more of the student body, though the number varies across schools. Ghost students are not entirely fake. Rather, they are students studying at other schools, usually fee-paying ones. Both the colluding state school and the parents of these children benefit from the fraud, and there are no powerful local interests that lose out. This makes it difficult to mobilise horizontal checks.

For the school, the fraud brings in additional money as more central funds are claimed based on student numbers, which may then be diverted by the school authorities. Colluding parents benefit because the state gives stipends to children who enrol in state schools. They go on to study at private schools, but no one has the incentive to report or follow up on this. Moreover, as these privately educated students usually sit their public examinations in the public school where they are registered, this can improve the average performance of the colluding school on paper, without any expenditure of time or resources. This governance failure results in an overallocation of funds to some schools; stipends leak out to students who may not need it; and the additional funds that colluding schools receive are also likely to be extracted by the head teacher and other colluding officials for their own use.

Figure 3 shows the resource flows, the formal vertical checks that are supposed to check this type of fraud, and the weakness of horizontal checks which explain why the formal governance of these leakages is so poor. Not all levels and actors are shown in every figure, to focus on the key actors relevant for that problem. The two main formal monitoring bodies here are the UEO and the SMC and PTA. We have found no evidence in the sample schools that any of these principals are interested in monitoring or taking any action against this violation. In fact, not much monitoring is required as the fake enrolments are well known and often openly discussed. Rather, the real issue is the absence of any interest of these key 'vertical' monitors to take action against the relevant violators.

Figure 3. Overstating student enrolment figures



Source: The authors.

The green arrows in Figure 3 show the formal lines of responsibility (vertical governance) for checking violations and leakages associated with fake enrolments. We find that these governance arrangements systematically fail across all schools as student numbers are overstated in each case. The implicit resource diversion is shown by the black arrow leaving the system. Resources are potentially misallocated as schools with the most inflated student numbers get additional resources without delivering an education to these students. The degree of overstatement depends on random local factors such as the numbers of parents who are willing to falsely enrol their children in the public school while simultaneously educating them in a private school.

The failure of vertical checks is shown as the series of crosses (X) on all the green arrows of responsibility. The formal monitoring and governance functions of the UEO, the SMC and the PTA appear not to have any effect on this process. Our hypothesis is that vertical checks are likely to fail if horizontal checks are weak. There are several actors potentially engaged in horizontally checking school activities at the local level. These include the family that granted the land, the community of parents and guardians, political parties and locally powerful individuals. We have not found any likely horizontal actors who may have an interest in revealing and blocking inflated student numbers and in putting pressure on formal governance bodies to do their jobs. All potential checks by horizontal actors (blue arrows) also have black crosses (X) on them because we have also found no evidence that these checks take place.

Although this is an example of a governance failure, the correlated absence of vertical and horizontal checks is consistent with our hypothesis that effective horizontal checks are necessary to support vertical monitoring and governance. The absence of effective horizontal checks here reflects the power and interests of key horizontal actors. Overstating student numbers benefits the school administrations and parents of children falsely enrolled.

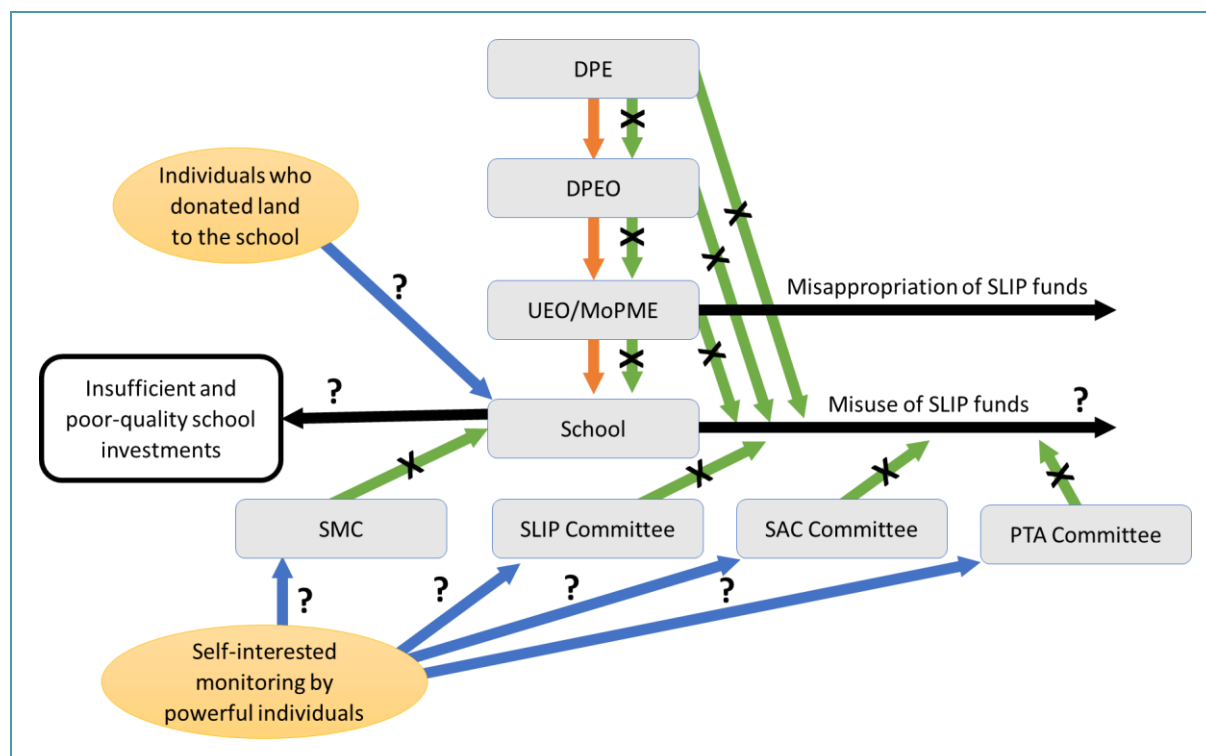
In contrast, no local actors lose anything from this corruption, except very indirectly as the overall quality of public education drops due to the loss or misallocation of teaching resources at the collective level. This is a classic multi-person prisoner's dilemma problem. For an individual at the local level, horizontal checks are more costly than the potential benefit they might enjoy. Only relatively small improvements will be made in the quality of education by stopping some of the leakages due to inflated student numbers. Indeed, we have not found any horizontal actors spending time, energy and resources checking and putting pressure on violators.

The cost–benefit logic that results in the failure of local-level collective action in this case demonstrates why all corruption problems cannot be addressed at the local level. For many violations and leakages, the distribution of costs and benefits at the lowest level is such that powerful local actors do not have a sufficient interest in checking violations. Addressing these problems requires the organisation of horizontal checks at higher levels, where the distribution of costs and benefits may be different. For instance, at the national level, the overclaiming of funds by schools without students may affect the efficient allocation of resources to improve quality of education overall. At some level of aggregation, the costs of these leakages may be large enough to trigger action by a coalition of interests who are harmed by this corruption and who are powerful enough to check this leakage.

5.2. Misuse of SLIP funds

The misappropriation of SLIP funds is a major source of corruption in school management in Bangladesh. This fund is disbursed from the DPE to individual schools through the respective DPEO and UEOs. UEO representatives often demand unofficial fees from schools to disburse funds. Hence, there is some resource loss at the stage of the funds moving from a UEO to a school. Although DPEs, DPEOs and UEOs all have a responsibility to formally monitor the use of SLIP funds, they do not do this effectively. SMCs, PTAs and SACs are also supposed to check misappropriation of funds, but they do not stop this practice because members of these bodies may benefit from the misallocation or over-allocation of SLIP funds.

Figure 4. Misuse and misappropriation of SLIP funds occasionally reduced by horizontal checks



Source: The authors.

However, we find that horizontal checks occasionally emerge because of the interests of some actors, and in these cases the misappropriation of SLIP funds is reduced. Sometimes these actors are unexpected. In one case, a relatively low-level school office assistant played a role in checking the misappropriation of funds. This individual is related to the head teacher and felt that the head teacher's reputation was at risk. He put pressure on the SAC to better monitor the use of SLIP funds. The assistant did not have power as an individual, but he had networked power as he was speaking for the head teacher but acting on his own initiative.

Influential local citizens may also play a significant role in implementing horizontal checks if they have the power and interest to do so. For example, a land-granting family may have an interest in the proper allocation of SLIP funds for the upkeep and development of the school that their family is associated with. Open-ended discussions with these stakeholders revealed that, in some cases, horizontal actors have the interest and the power to take action to reduce the diversion and wasteful use of SLIP resources. They have engaged with and put pressure on appropriate formal bodies. Cross checks with other actors qualitatively validated that SLIP fund usage is better in these schools.

Thus, while horizontal checks were not observed uniformly for the allocation of SLIP funds across all schools, occasionally the relevant horizontal actors deploy effective horizontal checks. This correlates with variations we observed in the effective use of SLIP funds.

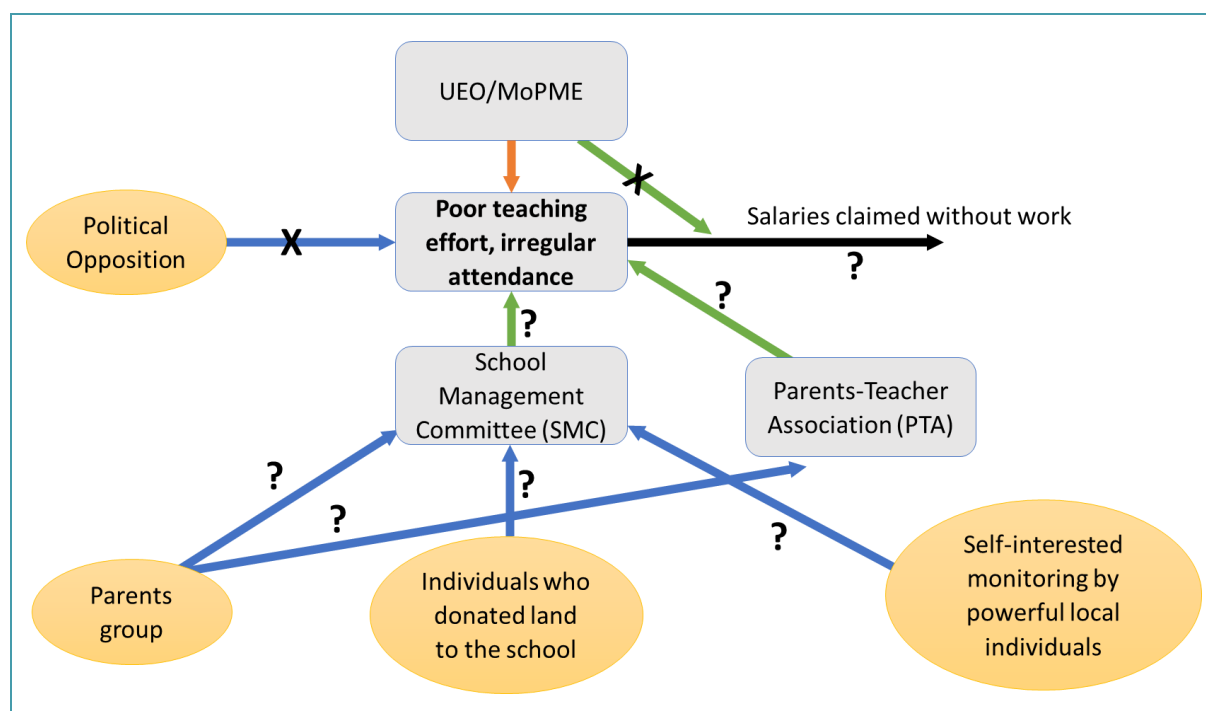
5.3. Poor teaching allocation and effort

Teacher effort and teaching quality in class are widely recognised as a serious problem in Bangladesh. Poor teaching effort can take the form of teacher absenteeism, and also behaviours such as using mobile phones and social media apps during class, chatting with colleagues, or asking non-teaching staff or even a student to manage the class while the teacher takes care of other business outside class. Some teachers take care of their own children during class times. These are examples of violations that amount to corruption as they divert public resources allocated to teaching time to private use. Teachers are formally accountable to the UEO, but this vertical monitoring is uniformly weak. SMCs and PTAs are also supposed to check teacher performance and attendance, but these vertical governance arrangements are mostly dysfunctional. Very occasionally, a UEO steps in to hold egregious violators to account, but even here, the outcomes are often not satisfactory. We found cases of very poorly performing teachers successfully ignoring vertical accountability processes because they were connected politically.

The failure of formal governance also reflects the weakness of horizontal pressures on formal agencies to discipline violators. Parents are the most obvious horizontal actors who are directly affected by poor teacher effort and absenteeism. Paradoxically, the most common response of parents to this problem is not to put pressure on the SMC, PTA or the head teacher, but to pay the same teachers to provide after-school tuition to their children when they can afford it. This behaviour reveals an implicit cost–benefit calculation by most parents. Parents could opt to allocate time in individual or collective activities to exert horizontal pressure on school bodies to improve teaching quality; or they can allocate resources to pay for extra tuition from the same or other teachers. In most cases parents opt for the first choice. This tells us that parents strongly believe any horizontal checks targeting this problem would not yield benefits commensurate with their effort, which could reflect their assessment of their power relative to teachers who are public servants. The latter are not only powerful in terms of social status, but they also play important roles in providing and managing support for the ruling party in rural areas. The exceptions are parents who are themselves better educated and powerful, whose voices occasionally have an effect in the PTA and SMC.

Sometimes, other horizontal checks are more effective in disciplining teachers. While parents are generally not effective on their own, land-granting families or other influential local individuals may have sufficient power and status to ensure action is taken against the worst offenders, even in relatively under-developed areas. These horizontal actors can check teachers through the SMC, or they may put direct pressure on the head teacher. Their motivations are complex but include acting as good citizens for the public good or protecting the reputation of a school their family is associated with. In one case we found a land-granting family exercising effective horizontal influence to discipline teachers, despite being associated with the opposition party at a time when the ruling Awami League made support for or belonging to an opposition party a costly activity.

Figure 5. The governance of poor teaching effort and absenteeism



Source: The authors.

Our ethnographic evidence from school observations offers some insights into why the governance of teacher performance is very poor. The main horizontal actors with the greatest interest in constraining teacher delinquency are generally parents. But they are also generally insufficiently powerful in most school contexts in Bangladesh to have much chance of making a significant impact. The occasional examples of successful horizontal checks simply serve to highlight the importance of horizontal checks and also why they are not systematically observed across schools.

6. Quantitative validation

We constructed proxy variables to test the validity of our ethnographic observations. The variables capture the presence of horizontal checks on these schools, and then we correlated these variables with our quantitative measures of educational outcomes derived from surveying students using the ASER tool.

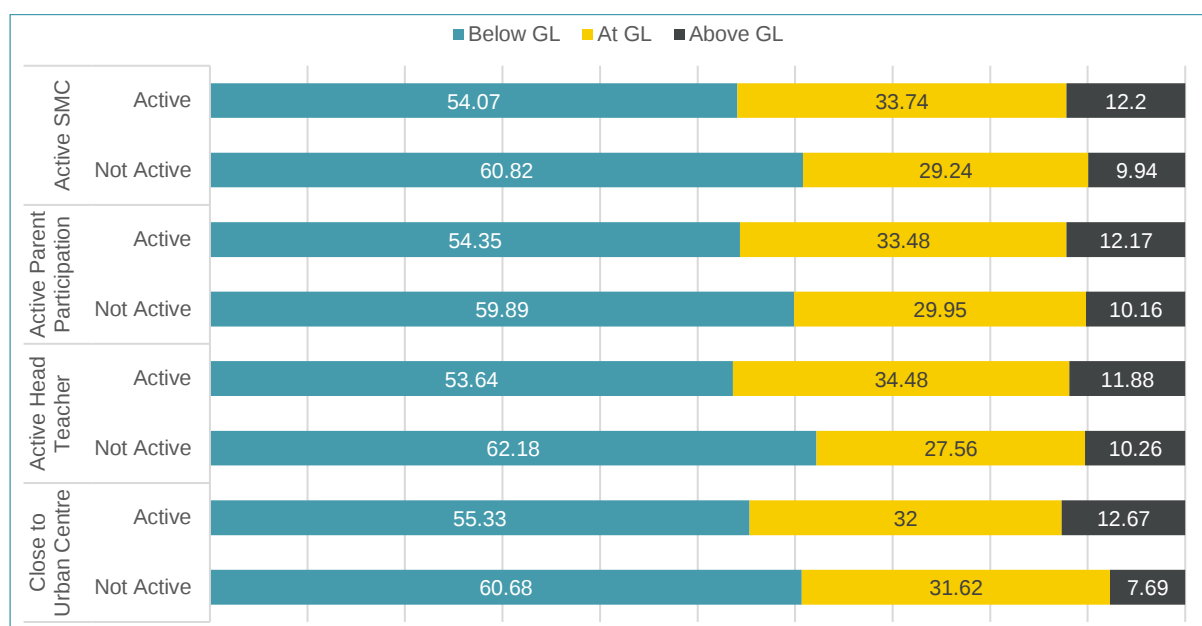
We assessed each school for the presence or absence of four characteristics. First, we examined whether the school has an active SMC, which four of the 10 schools do. As discussed earlier, SMCs are likely to be active in the presence of horizontal pressures from actors in the local community. Secondly, we looked at whether a school has active parent participation in the running of the school. Again, four of 10 do. As discussed, parents are only likely to be active in school affairs if they have the power and capabilities to make a difference. Third, we looked at whether the head teacher is active in school management, which is true for seven of our schools. Head teachers are also likely to be active if they have the power and interest to make a difference and if they are supported in their attempts to discipline other actors in the school. All three characteristics relate to our observations of when horizontal checks are effective in supporting formal (vertical) governance. And fourth, we scored schools in terms of their distance from an urban centre, the *upazila* or district headquarters. This proxies for the level of development of the local area and therefore the average socio-economic status of parents. Six of our schools are in urban or peri-urban settings and therefore meet the criteria for closeness to the administrative centre, while four rural schools do not meet this criteria.

Table 4. Governance characteristics of sample schools

Area	School	Active SMC	Active parents	Active head teacher	Close to <i>upazila</i> or district headquarter
Peri-urban	Jinsar Government Primary	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Urban	Golden Jubilee Government Primary	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Rural	Par Sheikh Sundar Government Primary	Yes	No	Yes	No
Peri-urban	Dewanganj Model Government Primary	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Rural	Bhabanipur Government Primary	No	No	Yes	No
Rural	Enayetpur Government Primary	No	No	Yes	No
Urban	No. 5 Pathalia Taz Government Primary	No	No	Yes	Yes
Rural	Kumira Government Primary	No	No	No	No
Peri-urban	Hatibandha Govt Primary	No	No	Yes	Yes
Urban	Chak Ramchandra Govt Primary	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

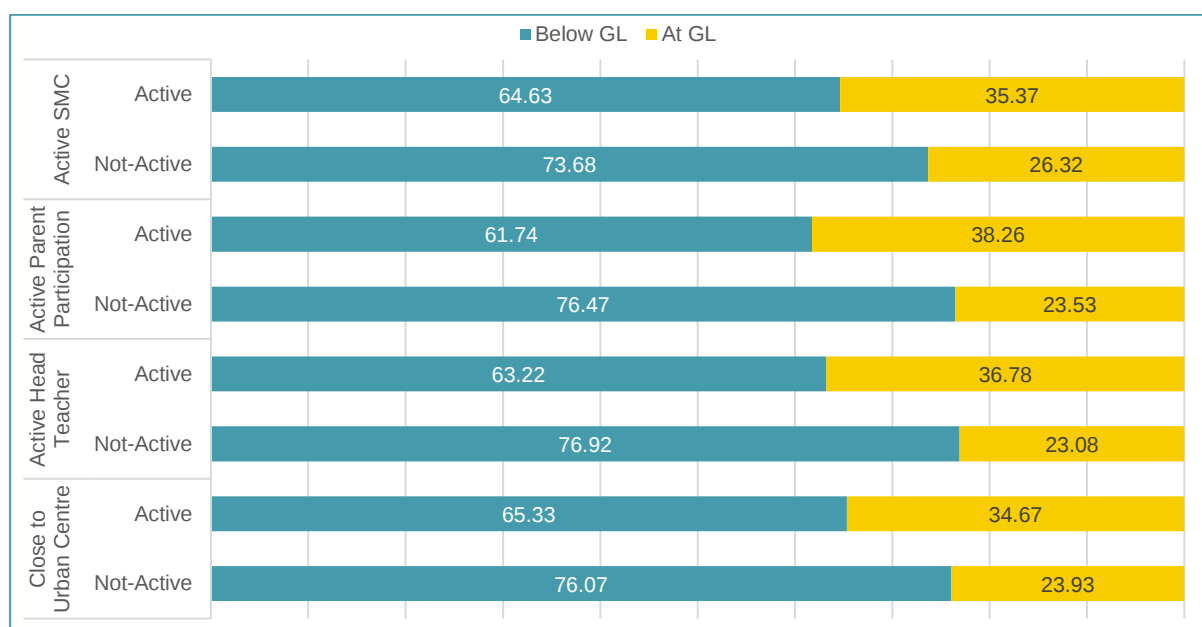
We used data from our ASER student survey to identify any correlation between these characteristics and school governance and learning outcomes. Figure 6, Figure 7 and Figure 8 show there is indeed the expected correlation. Each figure shows the distribution of students below, at and above the expected grade level (GL) in schools with specific characteristics.

Figure 6. Distribution of children's foundational numeracy levels, by governance indicators



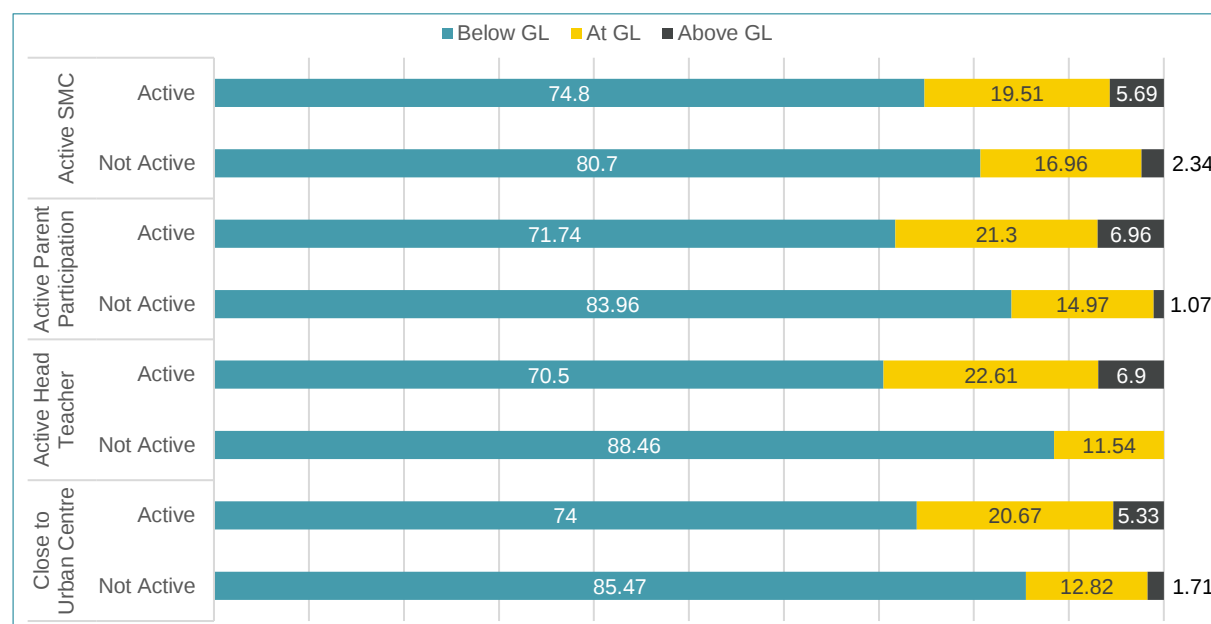
Note: GL = grade level; overall sample of children is 417.
Source: The authors.

Figure 7. Distribution of children's foundational Bangla literacy, by governance indicators



Note: GL = grade level; overall sample of children is 417.
Source: The authors.

Figure 8. Distribution of children’s foundational English literacy levels, by governance indicators



Note: GL = grade level; overall sample of children is 417.
Source: The authors.

The proportion of students who perform below grade level (in all three areas – numeracy, Bangla and English) is higher in schools where the head teachers are not active, where parents’ participation is low and where SMCs are not active. However, the differences in performance with better horizontal checks appear to be the greatest for Bangla, then English, and relatively small in numeracy teaching outcomes. This is plausible in that horizontal pressure is most likely to improve teaching outcomes in areas where teachers have greater competence, and numeracy is likely to be an area of weakness for primary school teachers in government schools. The variable for the distance from the urban centre also has the expected effect. We hypothesise this works through the greater strength of horizontal checks from parents who are higher earners and more powerful, who are more likely to reside in areas closer to urban centres. This variable may also capture the possibility that vertical monitoring by the UEO or DPEO is likely to be more effective when the school is closer to an administrative centre.

A regression analysis was also conducted at the student level, controlling for district fixed effects, parents’ education, and the age and gender of the student. This shows that the coefficients for dummy variables created for active SMCs, parents’ participation, an active head teacher and closeness to the urban centre are all significant in improving teaching outcomes in Bangla. Parent participation, head teacher activism and closeness to urban centres are significant for improving teaching outcomes in English. All these dummy variables have effects of the right sign on teaching outcomes in numeracy, but the coefficients are not significant. Although we cannot draw causal inferences or the direction of causality from this

exercise, our analysis provides validation that our variables of interest correlate with learning outcomes.

Table 5. Regression estimates of competency and governance indicators

	SMC is active (=1)	Parent participation in education- related activities observed (=1)	Head teacher active (=1)	School is near urban centre (=1)
Share of students with at/above GL competency in Bangla	0.098** (0.045)	0.138*** (0.050)	0.136** (0.054)	0.156*** (0.048)
Share of students with at/above GL competency in English	0.063 (0.042)	0.084* (0.047)	0.166*** (0.050)	0.133*** (0.044)
Share of students with at/above GL competency in numeracy	0.044 (0.053)	0.020 (0.058)	0.064 (0.063)	0.037 (0.056)
N	398	398	398	398

Note: All regressions were estimated with district fixed effects and robust standard errors (in parentheses). All specifications control for characteristics of both parents (mother's education, father's education, mother's employment status) and the child (age and gender). Single, double and triple asterisks indicate statistical significance at 10, 5 and 1% levels.

The regression results are consistent with our ethnographic observations of how horizontal checks operate at the school level with occasional positive impacts on teacher performance and school-level investments of SLIP funds (but not on the inflation of student numbers). We used ethnographic observational techniques to see if and how horizontal checks are operating at the school level for each of these leakages in the sample of 10 schools. We find that horizontal checks are indeed operating in some schools and are effective in reducing the relevant leakages. We then assessed the learning outcomes of students in our schools in English, Bangla and numeracy and show that the first two, at least, are significantly correlated with our observed measures of horizontal checks.

However, as public schools are quite similar to each other, the variations in horizontal checks across our schools are not very large and we have not discovered systematic associations between the strength of horizontal checks and other characteristics of actors or incentives that may be useful for designing interventions to strengthen these horizontal checks. For instance, it is not the case that the presence of local influential actors, or the presence or absence of land-granting families, has systematic effects on teaching outcomes. Rather, the power and interest of horizontal actors appear to depend on unobservable factors or relate to variables that cannot be easily influenced by policy. The socio-economic characteristics of the local area matter in the expected way in creating stronger horizontal checks from parents, but this does not have obvious policy implications for strengthening school-level governance in rural or less developed areas as geography or the socio-economic status of parents are not policy variables.

By extending our research to look at a wider range of schools, such as private schools and *madrasahs*, we are likely to see that the strength and types of horizontal checks show greater variations. We may then discover factors that have a systematic effect on improving horizontal checks in ways that can be influenced by policy. Nevertheless, our current findings are important. They show the limitations of focusing on formal governance arrangements, which emphasise the SMCs, PTAs and SACs. The focus should rather shift to how to strengthen horizontal checks.

7. Discussion

Reforms in formal governance systems are much more likely to work if they are designed to ensure the participation of actors who have the power and interest to apply horizontal checks on potential violators. The evidence we present shows that the horizontal checks of some actors make a difference to educational outcomes in the primary sector in Bangladesh.

We have mapped the vertical formal flows of education resources from higher authorities down to individual primary schools. Flows of resources are authorised by central government and transmitted through various departmental channels down to individual primary schools. We have also identified the formal (vertical) governance arrangements providing oversight at each level of these flows. These processes describe how formal flows are audited and monitored, and how violators are held to account.

Through ethnographic observations we have examined three areas where resource leakages occur. Firstly, we have looked at the enrolment of students, where we find widespread evidence of exaggerated declarations of student numbers to falsely claim additional funds. Parents participate in this fraudulent activity because enrolling their children in public schools entitles them to stipends, which they can collect with the collusion of the school, while their children attend private primary schools. This diverts scarce resources from genuine students and schools that have the declared numbers of students. Secondly, we have considered widespread irregularities in the allocation of SLIP funds. These can be used to improve and maintain school equipment and infrastructure. Third, we have examined irregularities in the allocation of teaching responsibilities and in the monitoring of teaching effort, which effectively wastes resources allocated to teaching. Pressure from parents often does not improve teaching quality, and meanwhile parents informally pay the same underperforming teachers to provide additional tuition after school.

Through in-depth qualitative analysis across schools we have identified differences in patterns of formal–informal interactions that correlate with educational outcomes. While a more diverse sample of schools may identify other variations of interest, we believe our sample helps identify an important set of issues. We also show how some informal activities support improved outcomes, while other informal activities support corruption and resource diversions. These informal processes reveal important features of how societies are organised in less developed countries, and how the power and interests of different actors are reflected in governance.

Our findings suggest that the formal governance of primary schools depends on factors that directly affect vertical monitoring systems as well as on factors that determine the effectiveness or otherwise of supportive horizontal checks. Observations across a relatively small sample of schools validate our hypotheses

about the interdependence of vertical and horizontal processes in determining the quality of governance and in controlling resource leakages that lead to adverse educational outcomes. Our quantitative study tests if our overlap measures of stronger horizontal checks correlate with better educational outcomes, and we find this is indeed the case.

However, the evidence base is not yet sufficient to identify the most feasible strategies to strengthen horizontal checks to improve school governance in ways that will enhance educational outcomes. The variations in characteristics that affect horizontal checks are not sufficiently large within public primary schools to identify the policy variables that could make a difference. But the variations *are* large enough to establish the importance of horizontal checks. Our analysis therefore establishes the relevance of further investigating entry points to strengthen governance and reduce resource leakages that affect educational outcomes. This paper is the first step on this path. We have demonstrated that such horizontal relationships exist, and that ongoing processes of horizontal checks are associated with schools that perform better.

Appendix: Summary of schools

Par Sheikh Sundar Government Primary School

The school is located in a rural community in northern Bangladesh, approximately 60 km from the district headquarters. The majority of residents in the school's catchment area engage in agricultural activities, with a few involved in business ventures. Currently, the school enrolls 250 students, comprising 121 boys and 129 girls. The teaching staff include four officially appointed teachers and an unofficially appointed teacher who instructs at the discretion of the head teacher.

The head teacher is currently unwell and unable to perform her duties. She has four months left in her tenure. To address this gap, the head teacher has arranged for an unemployed individual from her village, who holds a master's degree, to teach at the school for a monthly fee of Tk 4,000. The head teacher assumes primary responsibility for the school's overall management. With a 20-year tenure at the school and strong social and economic standing within the community, the head teacher's family holds considerable influence. This influence is further amplified by the fact that the SMC president is her daughter's son-in-law, granting her significant authority in school-related matters.

Teachers have been observed to be negligent in carrying out their assigned duties, often using mobile phones during class time and engaging in conversations with colleagues. Although school attendance rates are generally satisfactory, they tend to decline during the corn harvesting season. To discourage absences, a fine of Tk 10 is imposed for any student's single-day absence, with an additional fine of Tk 5 per day for absences lasting more than one day.

Due to the absence of support staff, informal tasks such as raising flags, locking classrooms, maintaining cleanliness on the school grounds, serving tea and hosting guests are performed by the teachers. Parents find it frustrating because they believe these tasks divert teachers' attention from teaching and learning experiences. Nevertheless, parents express satisfaction with the quality of education provided by the school and, at times, the school gains official recognition from higher authorities. Some teachers demonstrate proactive teaching methods, which are appreciated by the school community.

Hatibandha No. 1 Government Primary School

This school is situated in a peri-urban area (Upazila Sadar) in northern Bangladesh. The school has 13 teachers and 259 students (127 males and 132 females). In close proximity to the school are two private kindergartens, two *madrasahs* and a secondary school. The surrounding community is diverse, with most residents

engaged in agriculture. However, there are also individuals from various professions such as doctors, professors, school teachers and legal advocates residing within the catchment area.

Many students in this school are also enrolled in the kindergarten as that private school provides a better education. The joint enrolments in this primary school are primarily to receive stipends. While primary teachers are aware of this situation, they take no action because they need to increase student numbers to influence the SLIP fund allocation. One of the contributing factors to the school's good results is that these private students also take exams at this school. Furthermore, teachers corruptly ensure these students have met the required attendance criteria on paper to qualify for stipends.

Some teachers in the school are not enthusiastic about teaching and instead engage in gossiping, chatting and using their mobile phones in class. The school has three assistant teachers who are relatives (a married couple and mother-in-law) and have significant social, political and economic influence. A concerned parent remarked, "My son has been studying in this school up to class five, but he still struggles with basic Bengali reading. I enrolled him in a kindergarten class for grade three, and only now can he read a little. It makes me question the quality of education provided here up to grade five".

The management of the SLIP fund in this school involves joint control by the SMC president, the head teacher and the UEAO. There are allegations that they divide the funds among themselves. Additionally, they purchase construction materials using substantial SLIP funds from a specific company to maximise their commission.

The SMC and its president show minimal interest in school affairs beyond the expenditure of the SLIP fund. The current SMC president, a politician, is the son of the current MP and General Secretary of the Upazila Awami League. His presidency at the school is primarily aimed at expanding his political network and influence. To secure his position as SMC president, he adopted a son and enrolled him in the school, a condition for assuming the presidency. It is worth noting that this individual has previously served as the SMC president in four other schools.

Bhabanipur Government Primary School

Situated in a rural area of Cumilla, a district in southeastern Bangladesh, the local community heavily depends on remittances from residents working abroad, notably in the Middle East and Europe. The locality has a bazaar and mosque, alongside alternative educational options such as a private kindergarten and a *Qawmi Madrasa* (religious school). The school operates in two shifts and is staffed by six teachers, primarily female. Despite a slight decrease in enrolment from the previous year, the school currently educates 185 students.

After school hours, an informal coaching system is operated by these teachers to assist students with homework assignments. This practice is encouraged by the UEO. However, a fee is charged for this supplementary coaching session. The school faces challenges due to the absence of office assistants and security personnel. Consequently, students are assigned tasks beyond their educational responsibilities, such as cleaning and sweeping. One teacher conducts classes without formal recruitment, relying on personal connections. Other teachers pay her informally for her services, which allows them to take unauthorised leave while she covers their responsibilities.

Both the head teacher and an assistant teacher hold significant power within the school. There are concerns about transparency around the expenditure of the SLIP fund, especially regarding the assistant teacher's management of finances and procurement documents. Despite being physically present, the assistant teacher neglects class duties, leveraging his seniority and political affiliations. His influence is further reinforced by familial ties and powerful connections. At present, the school does not have an SMC in place. The dissolution of the previous SMC, consisting of landowners and opposition party activists, was ordered by the Upazila Chairman, highlighting the strong influence of the Awami League in school management affairs. Political influence, particularly from the Awami League, significantly shape the composition of SMCs, often sidelining other political forces and influential community members.

Jinsar Poura Government Primary School

The school is situated in a peri-urban area (Upazila Sadar) in southeastern Bangladesh. It has eight teachers (three female, five male), with a student body of 358. Located approximately 3 km east of the upazila headquarters, the school receives routine visits from the UEO and benefits from high community involvement. Local politicians, public representatives and residents actively participate in school affairs. The area enjoys an affluent socio-economic status, primarily attributed to residents' engagement in lucrative employment opportunities abroad. Parents in this community are highly conscientious about their children's education, regularly visiting the school to discuss their academic progress and well-being.

The SMC places a strong emphasis on academic excellence, striving to uphold rigorous standards. Home visits and consistent communication with parents are key strategies employed to monitor student progress and swiftly address any concerns. Supplementary tuition is offered after regular school hours, with affordable fees to ensure inclusivity for all students.

The school utilises informal assessment methods focused on performance-based evaluation and continuous monitoring of student advancement. Monthly assessments are conducted upon finishing each curriculum chapter, with examination fees waived for students in grades four and five. These assessments are funded through the SLIP.

The vice president of the SMC, also holding the position of Ward Councillor, wields greater authority than the SMC president and plays a crucial role in overseeing and supporting the school's activities. The SMC comprises notable individuals recommended by local government representatives and the UEO, and members frequently visit the school premises. The proactive engagement of the SMC leads to enhanced academic achievements and increased enthusiasm for education among local residents. Transparency in SLIP expenditures is emphasised, with thorough reviews conducted during monthly SMC meetings, supervised by the SMC vice president. He has made several efforts to kickstart construction projects informally for the school building. Despite facing challenges and encountering delays, he has successfully overseen the renovation of the teachers' room and facilitated donations for the overall improvement and development of the school.

Silver Jubilee Model Government Primary school

This school is situated in a bustling district town of southern Bangladesh. It is surrounded by key establishments such as the District Resource Centre, the Sadar Police Station (local police headquarters), the Central Shaheed Minar, a park and the Central Library. The local community has a relatively high average socio-economic status, with many residents engaged in various businesses, government positions and private-sector jobs. Consequently, parents in this area prioritise the quality of education for their children and are actively involved in school affairs. They regularly visit the school and participate in academic and extracurricular activities. Their vigilant oversight has made teachers wary of any irregularities in teaching practices. Currently, the school has 541 students and is staffed by 15 teachers (12 female, three male). Additionally, the school committee has privately appointed a cleaning staff member.

The proactive leadership of the head teacher is widely recognised to be driving high-quality education standards at the school. Both the head teacher and the SMC president hold considerable influence in governing the school, drawing from their socio-economic status and strong social connections. Despite not being directly involved in political matters, their local influence plays a pivotal role in ensuring effective school management. In their efforts to enhance the educational environment, the governing body (especially the head teacher) encounters various political and financial challenges or pressures. However, the head teacher deftly navigates these obstacles using her extensive personal networks.

To improve the quality of education in the school, the governing body and head teacher have organised various informal activities, sometimes funded personally. This includes hiring teachers for art, singing, recitation and dancing, and charging Rs 1,500 at the time of admission for these activities. Despite not being part of the government-prescribed evaluation system, the school conducts weekly and monthly examinations for students from pre-primary to third grade. This decision is partly influenced by pressure from parents seeking such assessments for their children.

The head teacher has disregarded a ban from the UEO regarding these evaluations. In addition to the standard curriculum, subjects like English word mining, grammar, general knowledge and science are taught from first grade to fifth grade. Furthermore, an Alumni Association has been established comprising former students who periodically provide funding to support the school's initiatives.

Kumira Government Primary School

This school is situated in a rural area of southern Bangladesh, with a Multi-Purpose Secondary School located in front of it. The village predominantly consists of Hindu residents who are mostly engaged in agricultural activities, with some involved in small grocery businesses or other enterprises. The level of higher education attainment in the village is low, and many parents, in particular, lack awareness about education matters. Currently, the school has 182 students who are taught by six female teachers. The head teacher commutes to and from the school from the district town. Due to her age and physical illness, she is less active in school affairs. Other teachers also display a tendency to arrive late and leave before the end of school hours. There are instances where teachers neglect classes, engaging in activities such as using mobile phones, chatting or leaving the school premises during teaching hours.

According to local residents, the quality of education in this school is not good. This can be attributed to several factors, including the low socio-economic status of the region, societal lack of awareness about education, irregular performance of duties by the head teacher, negligence in teaching responsibilities by other assistant teachers, and a general lack of accountability among the teaching staff. Some parents attribute poor performance to all teachers at the school being female and them seeming to devote more time to other activities, even though the gender of teachers does not correlate with teaching outcomes in general. The SMC president is a teacher at a neighbouring secondary school, and the PTA president is a betel leaf trader in the area. Both individuals show limited interest in maintaining educational quality.

To retain students, the PTA president reported that the school admits children who are not of the right age. Attendance is enforced through fines and corporal punishment for absenteeism. An unofficial cleaner has been hired by the school administration, funded by student contributions. Although student surveys are meant to be conducted by teachers, at times, they are carried out by the office assistant and cleaner. Monthly tests are conducted to generate interest in learning among students and reward their efforts, however, despite no formal mandate for tests beyond government-prescribed ones. Parents perceive these efforts as beneficial for improving the quality of education.

Enayetpur Government Primary School

This school is situated in a rural area in a northern district of Bangladesh. The majority of residents in this area earn their livelihood through agricultural work. Nearby, there are kindergartens and schools operated by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) where many local students are enrolled. Given the limited educational attainment of residents, parents are less aware of education and seldom visit the school to enquire about their children's education. The school has 89 students (46 boys and 43 girls). There are seven teachers, including the head teacher. Among them, three female teachers receive additional benefits such as leave and class allocation. Female teachers in this school generally have higher technical and digital literacy compared to the head teacher and other male teachers, which leads the head teacher to rely on them in various situations. Conversely, there is a male teacher who demonstrates irregularity in fulfilling his duties. He struggles with drug addiction, leading to inconsistent attendance and unreliability in conducting classes. At times, other teachers are forced to conduct multiple classes simultaneously. Due to a relative of the delinquent teacher holding a position in the secretariat, disciplinary actions against him cannot be enforced.

The school authorities organise various competitive exams and events outside the government guidelines in terms of assessment. Additionally, underage children are admitted to the school or promoted to higher classes without meeting the required merit level. Due to the absence of an office assistant at the school, the teachers have taken it upon themselves to hire a staff member unofficially to perform office duties. She is being paid a monthly salary of Tk 700. The official recruitment of an office assistant has been halted due to reports of financial irregularities involving the Deputy Commissioner. The current SMC president is educated, honest and influential locally. However, due to residing in another area, they do not actively participate in school affairs. There have been previous allegations of irregular spending of the school's SLIP fund. On one occasion, after withdrawing the fund money from the bank, the president retained half of the funds and gave the remaining portion to the head teacher for school development. Fees of Tk 10 or Tk 20 are collected from students to repair school furniture. In the absence of a strong SMC leader, the head teacher assumes the primary role in making major decisions regarding school management.

Chakramchandra Government Primary School

This school is located adjacent to the district headquarters in northern Bangladesh and has 159 students. Being an urban school, the attendance rate is relatively high. The catchment area is mainly populated by migrants, resulting in a reduced emphasis from residents and guardians on the quality of education and teaching standards at the school. However, some parents are conscious of the importance of education and visit the school regularly. Most residents engage in occupations such as business, while some engage in agricultural jobs within the community.

At present, the school employs seven teachers, including the head teacher. However, with two female teachers on leave, the remaining staff members work overtime to maintain school activities. This situation sometimes compromises the quality of teaching. Due to its proximity to the district headquarters, administrative visits are common. When students are absent for an extended period, teachers phone them instead of conducting home visits. Occasionally, they arrange meetings with parents, with representatives from a specific class attending. Influence and money are used in selecting staff. For example, a relative of a prominent landowner was appointed as an office assistant at the school. The recruitment process was supported and facilitated by the former head teacher, the SMC president, teachers and local community members. A sum of Tk 50,000 was taken from the assistant as a contribution towards school development expenses.

The SMC president is a businessperson and therefore is unable to dedicate the required time to school matters. Consequently, the head teacher makes decisions independently, including about budgets such as SLIP funds and income generated from leasing school land. There have been complaints about the head teacher's unilateral decision-making and perceived arbitrariness as a result. Local residents have voiced concerns that the head teacher does not appreciate local involvement and prefers to run the school independently. Many parents are withdrawing their children from this school, which is leading to a decline in the quality of education.

No. 5 Taz Pathalia Government Primary School (Jamalpur sadar)

Situated in the heart of the district town, this school is surrounded by key governmental establishments such as the Deputy Commissioner Office, Government Hospital, District Judge Court and DEO. Despite the diverse economic backgrounds of the surrounding community, most students attending the school come from financially disadvantaged and low-income families. The parents of these children are not well-educated and seldom visit the school. Wealthier families opt for private schools to access a higher quality education.

The head teacher holds significant authority within the school due to her familial ties with the land-granting family. She has taught at the school for 20 years. Her husband serves as the SMC president, which further strengthens their influence. They are politically connected and have strong ties with the ruling Awami League party. The SMC is formed according to the head teacher's preferences, with members chosen to align with her interests. The head teacher is so dominant that parents fear expressing their concerns.

There has been a noticeable decline in education standards in recent times. Parents/guardians and their children have expressed dissatisfaction with the perceived decline in the quality of education, prompting some to enrol in alternative schools. The teaching staff are all female. There is a perceived lack of seriousness

among the teachers, with instances of them engaging in conversations and using mobile phones during class time.

Dewanganj Government Primary School

This school is located at the heart of the local Upazila Sadar and the municipality. Various government and private offices and educational institutions are located next to the school. Administrative supervision occurs frequently because it is a model school and the upazila primary resource centre is attached to the school premises. Although there are several kindergartens and *madrasahs* around the school, people are attracted to this school because of its reputation for providing quality education. People from both Hindu and Muslim communities live in the vicinity of the school, resulting in a significant number of students in the school being Hindus. The children of various government officers and officials also study here. People from various professions live locally, including agricultural and non-agricultural workers, various small and medium businesses, and government and private-sector employees. Many parents are aware of their children's studies and pay regular visits to the school. Moreover, they actively engage in discussions about educational concerns and school matters, both in formal meetings and informal conversations.

The school offers after-school tuition for a fee. The educational standard at this school surpasses that of other primary institutions due to the diligence of the SMC president, the proactive head teacher and the active involvement of parents in school affairs.

The SMC president and other members are appointed rather than elected, indicating a lack of democratic process in their selection. The current president holds significant political influence and is closely affiliated with powerful political figures. Additionally, he possesses considerable economic resources and enjoys social respect and prestige, being from a prominent landowning family. To improve the quality of education in the school, the SMC president keeps track of all aspects of the school, including attendance, learning and infrastructure construction. Sometimes he passes on donations from various sources to the school. The head teacher, who is the wife of a prominent politician in the ruling Awami League party, has served the school for over a decade. Her close connection with the SMC president lends strength to her leadership role in the school.

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