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Quality EFA in Bangladesh

Progress and Challenges

Abstract:

Bangladesh has been struggling for achieving quality primary education. A number of initiatives have been made by both the government and the non-government agencies during the past two decades. Taking evidences from a number of recent studies, especially series of studies under Education Watch, this paper examines the progress made in various aspects of quality education during the past decades and the challenges remained in reaching the goals.

Zusammenfassung:

Bangladesh versucht, das Ziel einer qualitativ guten Grundschulbildung für alle zu erreichen. Während der letzten 20 Jahre gab es eine Reihe von Initiativen sowohl von den staatlichen als auch von nicht staatlichen Schulen, die Qualität zu verbessern. Anhand der Untersuchungen von Education Watch versucht der folgende Beitrag aufzuzeigen, welche Erfolge in Bereichen der schulischen Infrastruktur, Lernförderung, Schülerpartizipation, und Lernergebnissen erzielt worden sind.

Introduction

The Constitution of Bangladesh oblige the government to 'establish a uniform, mass-oriented and universal system of education and extending free and compulsory education to all children to such stage as may be determined by law' [Article 17(a), GoB 1998]. A number of laws have been enacted since Independence to enhance primary education in the country. Under these laws the government took over the responsibility of all the existing primary schools, established school managing committees in all schools and made primary education compulsory to all children (GoB 1973; 1974; 1981; 1990). It took about 20 years after the Independence to have a legal frame of compulsory primary education for five-year duration.

At the same time (in 1990) a grand conference of world leaders was held in Jomtien, Thailand calling the nations to provide 'basic education' to their people by the end of the past millennium (WCEFA 1990). In response to the call, the national governments and the international communities took a number of initiatives. However, the task was unfinished by the deadline. The Dakar conference was held in 2000 to review and renew the goals and targets which came out with a declaration aiming to complete the task (UNESCO 2000). At the same time, the millennium development goals were fixed – two of the eight goals are specifically on education. As commitment to the international goals and targets including a range of ini-

tiatives and due to the national Constitutional obligation, the government of Bangladesh has taken various initiatives to achieve EFA goals throughout the decades of 1990s and 2000s. Non-governmental agencies including the NGOs also supplemented to the State initiatives.

At the State level, a general education project was implemented during 1990–1995. 27 independent projects were implemented during 1997–2004 which were later collectively called as the first primary education development programme. Two important projects under this were UNICEF supported intensive district approach to education for all (IDEAL) and effective schools through enhanced education management (ESTEEM) financed by the British government. The latest and the largest one was the second Primary Education Development Programme (PEDP II). This is a US\$ 1,815 million programme financed by eleven development partners (a third) and the government of Bangladesh (67%). This would end in June 2011. All the projects and programmes were targeted to the students of state owned or state supported primary schools, leaving about a quarter primary school students outside. Besides Islamic religious schools (madrasas), English medium kindergartens and non-formal schools of the NGOs were in operation. The NGOs alone run 40 thousand single teacher non-formal schools throughout the country which started to scale up after the Jomtien conference.

At the initial stage of the above initiatives, increase of enrolment was the only aim of primary education but over time it shifted to achieving quality primary education for all children. Owing to the above interventions, the primary education sector in Bangladesh, in general, made progress in some of the areas. Referring to the Education Watch study findings (see www.campebd.org) including other studies done during the past decade; this paper explores the progress as well as the challenges of primary education in Bangladesh.

Progress and challenges

Access, enrolment and participation: Nearly two decades have passed since the introduction of Compulsory Primary Education Act but Bangladesh is still struggling to reach the goal of UPE. The net enrolment rate at primary level was 60% in 1990 (BBS/UNICEF 2000) which increased to nearly 80% in 2000 and about 87% in 2005; however, no change was noticed between 2005 and 2008 (table 1). The latest figure corroborates with other estimates as well (DPE 2008, BBS and UNICEF 2007). Although the overall improvement looks impressive but a closer look would show about two percentage points improvement per

year during the first decade and 1.4 percentage points during the next half a decade. This indicates slowing down of the rate of progress. This was probably not too unexpected as the task became harder to reach the final 10% ('the hard-core'). However, the girls were ahead of the boys throughout the decade and the rural children surpassed their urban counterparts.

Strata	Year				Significance
	1998	2000	2005	2008	
	1998	2000	2005	2008	p<0.001
All Bangladesh	77.0	79.8	86.8	86.4	p<0.001
All Girls	78.5	79.9	88.0	87.1	p<0.001
All Boys	75.5	79.8	85.6	85.6	p<0.001
Significance	p<0.001	ns	p<0.001	p<0.01	
Rural areas	76.7	79.6	86.6	86.2	p<0.001
Urban areas	79.0	81.5	88.1	87.6	p<0.001
Significance	p<0.05	p<0.01	p<0.05	p<0.05	

Table 1: Progress in net enrolment rate by area, gender and year
(Sources: Education Watch Household Surveys 1998, 2000, 2005, 2008; www.campebd.org)
ns = not significant at p = 0.05

So far no study was done to identify specific reasons for such stagnancy. However, one can conjecture the socio-political circumstances that dominated that period, especially the last two years. 2006 was the last year for a political government and 2007–2008 was a regime for a prolonged non-political caretaker government. As free and fair national election was the main agenda for this government, it was not unlikely that maintaining and manoeuvring for political stability got more attention than social agendas. Primary education may have been affected to an unknown extent owing to involvement of teachers and education officials in preparing fresh voter list and making national identity cards and use of school houses for those purposes. Educational programmes had to be compressed including shortening of contact hours for such activities. The other indicator of participation, viz., attendance, increased seven percentage points during the past eight years. Such an increase might have occurred due to high dropout of those who were irregular in school. The cycle dropout rate was estimated to be about 50% (DPE 2008; Nath/Chowdhury 2009). However, it should be mentioned that the caretaker government undertook some initiatives like fare process in teacher recruitment, provision of flexible school calendar, introduction of citizens' charter, decentralization of administration to some extent, etc. which might take time to act specifically on quality education. The other important issue related to participation is the access to education by the children aged six years. According to the Act 1990, children of that age are supposed to be admitted to class I. We need to ensure enrolment of all such children in class I by 2011 if the second MDG is to be attained but the net intake rate for class I never went beyond 45% at any time during the past decade and it was found below 40% in 2008 (Nath/Chowdhury 2009). The major challenge in this regard was keeping a large portion of these children out-of-school (35% in 2008). This happened mainly due to lack

of parental awareness about the Act or they were not convinced at the start age of schooling. The next level of problem was that of those who were convinced to send their six-year old children to school at age six, 30% actually sent their children for pre-primary classes and 4–5% in the non-graded madrasas. The tendency of the parents to send their children of age six in these institutions have increased over time. It should be made clear that any pre-schooling should be completed before age six. An issue that comes to the fore is the correct estimation of the age. A plausible reason why parents do not send their children to school at the recommended age is their ignorance of the actual age itself. The absence of birth registration (and vital registration) is a serious impediment and should be attended to.

Learning achievement

To explore the immediate output of primary education provision Education Watch assessed competencies achievement of the students who completed the full course in 2000 and 2008. The same measurement tool was used in both. The average performance of the students increased during the past eight years; with a rate of 0.33 competencies per year. Such improvement was observed irrespective of school type. This indicates that competencies learning of the students through primary education has gradually improved but at a considerably slow pace. The performance of the students varied widely by their school type. The primary-attached high schools and the non-formal schools did best, the government and non-government schools mediocre and the madrasas poor.¹ This has a positive correlation with the teaching learning and other provisions in the schools. It can be easily said that the primary-attached high school students did best because of better physical facilities and teachers' educational qualification, and relatively well-off economic condition of the students' families. The non-formal schools did better due to relatively better teacher preparation and teaching-learning provision, additional care to the students, and better supervision and monitoring of the schools. On the other hand, all these lack in the madrasas and thus the students of these institutions could not do equally well. This indicates inequity in primary education in terms of performance of the students. The other type of inequity was related to gender and area of residence of the pupils. The girls and the rural students could not do well like as their respective counterparts. To remove inequity the probably the best way is to provide equal facilities and create equal learning opportunities in all the primary schools in the country through additional inputs as needed.

Strata	2000	2008	Increase
All Bangladesh	16.1	18.7	2.6
Girls	15.5	18.2	2.7
Boys	16.7	19.3	2.6
Rural area	15.3	18.4	3.1
Urban area	19.1	20.1	1.0

Table 2: Mean number of competencies (out of 27) achieved by students of grade V, 2000–2008 (Source: Education Watch Learning Achievement Test 2000, 2008; www.campebd.org)

Studies based on classroom observations identified this as a serious problem in primary classroom teaching (PSPMP 2001; Nath/Chowdhury 2001; Nath et al. 2004; Nath/Mahbub 2008). Such a situation is obviously related to teachers' training, everyday preparation for teaching and largely commitment to quality teaching. If creative classroom teaching cannot be arranged, learning cannot be creative and hence students cannot grow up as creative citizens. Thus, in order to improve students higher order skills and competencies, more emphasis on creative teaching-learning in the classrooms is an imperative.

Physical facilities and learning provisions

These are the two critical things that need to be established first in order to create an atmosphere of educational opportunities for the children. Overall physical facilities of the primary educational institutions improved during the past decade. The improvement could be noticed in terms of number of classrooms, quality of construction materials, seating capacity in the classrooms and water and sanitation facilities in the schools. In terms of all physical facilities, the primary-attached high schools were most advantaged. Owing to their attachment with a high school the students of primary sections of these schools got better physical facilities than those of others. Improvement of such facilities in the government and non-government schools indicate investments through the PEDP II. However, the improvement of facilities in the madrasas and the non-formal schools was much slower. The non-formal schools were temporary stop-gap provisions and were thus different from others in terms of physical facilities. But why the madrasas did not improve much? These institutions were mostly established under the auspices of the communities and the government did not have much intervention in them. Because of the religious sentiment attached, no objection was made if these were established violating the rules of the ministry or without ensuring the basic minimums. As part of mainstream primary education provisions, the madrasas should ensure adequate physical and educational facilities necessary for quality education.

The teachers

If education is known as the backbone of a nation then the teachers are the backbone of any educational system. The teachers directly interact with the pupils in the classrooms; so their education, training, experience and overall preparation are exceedingly important for quality education. It was found that the average number of teachers per student in the government primary schools increased during the past decade. This happened because of major recruitment drive under PEDP II. Improvements also occurred in proportion of female teachers and educational qualification and training of the teachers. The PEDP II also recruited more female teachers than ever and the non-formal schools traditionally recruit females as teachers. Increasing proportion of female teachers was also found in the primary attached high schools. However, the madrasas lagged much behind in this regard. Owing to arrangement of training in two shifts in the Primary Teacher Training Institutions (PTIs) it was found that a large number of the government and non-government school teachers were trained during the past decade. The non-formal school teachers follow a separate mode of training and most of them were found trained. Major deficiency of training was ob-

served in the madrasas where only 10% of the teachers were trained. Nearly half of the teachers in high school-attached teachers were also found untrained. It was found that 42.5% of all primary teachers came late in schools; they, on an average, were late by half an hour. This finding corroborates with others (Nath/Mahbub 2008) which portrayed the process of teachers' disuse of school contact hour through late attendance, gossiping and spending time in the guise of doing official work. It was estimated that 40% of the official contact hour is misused in such manner. The late attendance and consequent disuse of time by the teachers could be demoralizing for the students and hence a threat to school discipline and consequently on quality of instruction.

Factors affecting learning

The schools should play the most important role in learning but the multivariate analysis of the students' performance revealed that this was not happening in Bangladesh. Separate analysis for three bunches of inputs and process indicators showed that in terms of predictive power, the socio-economic characteristics of the students was the most influential factor in explaining students' learning. The place of additional educational inputs provided by the families was the second and the school related factors came out in the third. When all three types of variables were considered for building a single model the highest predictive value was found for fathers' education followed by incidence of private tutoring. Of the five most powerful inputs only one was related to a school factor. All these clearly indicate that the schools' relative role in students' learning was behind the families' inputs. This has multifarious implications for education development. First, the schools, in general, were not playing their roles as they were supposed to. Second, as a third of the primary students were first generation learners, if the fathers' education plays the most important role in learning instead of the schools, how these learners would perform well? Third, the educated parents were more likely to be economically better-off and they were more likely to look after their children's education and/or provide private tutors (Nath 2008). Having private tutoring as the second most important predictor and the increasing tendency to engage private tutor among the primary students clearly demonstrate that primary education in Bangladesh is increasingly becoming dependent on private tutoring. Experiences from other countries, both low and high-income, show that it is difficult to remove private tutoring for many practical reasons but improvement of the quality of classroom teaching can be an effective tool to keep it at a minimum level (Bray 2006; Bray/Kwok 2003).

Gender issues

This including the other studies on primary education consistently showed that the girls were ahead of the boys in enrolment in all primary grades. This means that they were more successful than their counterparts in surviving at various grades as well as completing the full-cycle of primary education. This brought a proud feeling with complacency to many. However, this was not the case when the learning outcomes were considered. Education Watch studies and as well as the national assessment of pupils in 2006 reveal that the girls did not perform well as the boys in the tests. The primary education cannot reach its goals without ensuring equal learning achievement of both genders. Social atti-

tudes and practices as well as learning opportunities at school were responsible for this. The girls were expected to do more household work than the boys which leads to having less time for study at home. A study on Mathematics education in primary schools showed that the girls were given less motivation in learning mathematics at home, by the education officials and the teachers (Shahjamal 2000). This may happen in other subjects too affecting the overall learning of the girls. It is thus important to give them an equal opportunity by creating an enabling learning environment both at home and in schools, so that they can learn equally well as the boys. The system as a whole has to be responsive to girls' learning needs. The role of the teachers is very much important in this regard.

The other issues related to gender in education include sex ratio among the teachers, the education officials and in the School Management Centres (SMCs), and role of the females in school development. The non-formal schools, in general, got good result by recruiting more females as teachers and in the SMCs. On the other hand, the madrasa education had less involvement of the females and the students of these institutions showed poorest performance as well. The policy to recruit more female teachers in the government primary schools and the primary-attached high schools should be kept up. Except for the non-formal schools, participation of women in the SMCs, as head of the institutions or as education officials is much less than what it should ideally be. Involving more women in these areas of education and providing them adequate support including training might help bring a balanced environment in the primary schools. This may ultimately create the expected condition for the girls to perform equally well and hence improve overall quality of education.

Conclusion

With all efforts from the government and the non-governmental agencies, Bangladesh made progress in various indicators of quality of primary education for all. The first noticeable increase was the enrolment of children in schools and gender parity in it. However, dropout rate was found still very high and primary intake rate was also very low. On the other hand, school infrastructure, learning facilities, teachers' educational qualification and proportion of female and trained teachers increased during the past decades. Students learning achievement also improved with a slow rate. However, family background and incident of private tutoring affected more than school factors in learning achievement of the students. Gender equity was achieved in access only but not in learning achievement and other quality indicators. Inequity in terms of school type, area, and socioeconomic status of students still prevailed. An integrated approach with a common curriculum, minimum standard of learning and decentralized policies, plans and implementation strategies can be a safeguard for quality with equity.

Annotation

1 Government schools are managed and supervised by the primary education authority of the government. The teachers are fully paid by the government. Non-government schools are affiliated to the governments primary education authority. Only the basic salary of the teachers is provided by the government. Non-formal schools are one room single teacher community schools run by the non-government organizations. Primary attached high schools are the secondary schools which have primary sections (grades I-V). These may be government or non-government schools. Madrasas are the schools which emphasis more on Islamic education.

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