Management of Primary Education In Bangladesh: Issues for Achieving The Impossible!

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Abstract

Planning education is Bangladesh is mainly administered by the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (MOPME). The Ministry has 5 different offices to supervise primary education; these are Directorate of Primary Education (DPE), Compulsory Planning Education Implementation Monitoring Unit (CPEMU), Bureau of Non-formal Education (BNFE), and National Account for primary Education (NAPE). The present hierarchical structure of primary education in Bangladesh indicates that policy decision and implementation process consumes enormous time, which delays the outcome. In order to manage these mammoth institutions every year government allocates nearly 15 percent of the national budget to the education sector of which the share of primary and mass education is nearly 60 percent. At present a donor-aided project named Second Primary Education Development program (PEDP-II) is running under MOPME to ensure quality of primary education in Bangladesh. But with the above initiatives and incentives Bangladesh primary education faces many problems and challenges to achieve "Education for All" commitment by 2015. To overcome these challenges special emphasis would be given to the recruitment, training and management of teachers, creating physical facilities, improvement of curriculum, monitoring and supervision and coordination. A

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> *comprehensive strategy may speed up the journey towards quality primary Education for All by 2015. Government can explore the potential instruments that fit into the integrated strategy and need to aptly navigate in achieving this goal.*

1.   Introduction

Primary education is one of the major sectors which can play a significant role in overcoming national development barriers. In developing countries in particular, long-term economic growth, political and social emancipation will be fostered by an appropriately tailored primary education management system (Andaleeb, 1998). But in many of these countries primary education is still a far cry. UNESCO report indicates that some 75 million children, 55% of them are girls, were not in school in 2006 (UNESCO EFA Report 2009). Access to universal primary education for these out of reach children is a major challenge of the 21st century. According to United Nations (UN) Millennium Development Goals (MDG), all children (girls and boys) around the globe should be able to complete primary education by 2015.

Nowadays quality education agenda has become an international issue and draws the attention of all levels of stakeholders in order to find out the tools and techniques for the effective implementation of quality education systems **(Ahmed, 2008).** In a study on the quality of children's education, Mirza and Hameed (1996) argue that *a realistic planning for the achievement of the cherished goal of providing equal opportunity to every child at primary level*

Figure 1: Inequality among countries in public expenditure per school student in 2006.
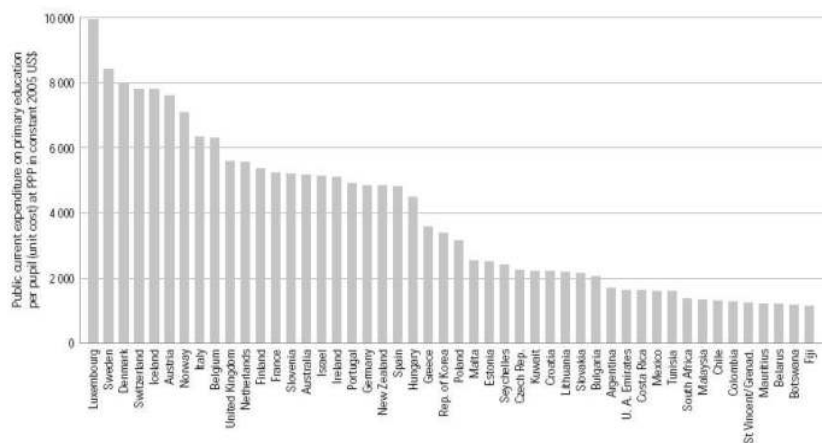
Source: UNESCO EFA Report 2009

needs to be based upon establishing cost-effective good quality primary schools for all children. In the 1990s, large-scale educational reforms were undertaken in many developed countries aimed at changing the teaching profession (Fullan, 2000) towards improved management system. Building a quality primary education system in a country also implies that government should focus on all stakeholders such as primary school management, its teachers, and the ultimate beneficiaries (Andaleeb, 1998).

Significant gaps exist between developed and developing countries in primary education management system. In developed countries, governments spend a huge amount of money to boost primary education compared to developing countries. A UNESCO survey reveals that in 2006 spending per student in primary education varied between US$39 in the Congo and US$9,953 in Luxembourg, (Figure 1). Therefore, it is necessary to consider the contextual management issues to bridge the gap and initiate public policy reform agenda There are many examples in the literature about the contextual management issues that need to be addressed in order to accelerate primary education in developing countries. In Pakistan, for example, low quality of education at primary level is closely related to school, head teacher, teacher, parent, and community (Saeed, 2003). In a study on shortcomings of management issues, Usman (2008) finds that ineffective communication and collaboration, poor instructional supervision and cultural insensitivity are major factors of poor performance of primary education in Nigeria. He also suggests that students may feel encouraged to attend school after adoption of the free lunch feeding policy. In many developing countries such as in Bangladesh, the education system is bifurcated, with a highly centralized and formalized government system coexisting with a range of less formal arrangements (Chaudhury, Hammer, Kremer, Muralidharan, and Rogers, 2006). The study also indicates that this centralization of education may contribute to weak accountability. It may lead to   large disparities between the personnel in their responsibilities and supervision load (Andaleeb, 1998).

In developing countries it has been observed that many teaching staff hold low qualifications and limited opportunities to participate in in-service trainings (Oplatka, 2007). Also salaries and promotion are largely determined by educational qualifications and seniority, with less scope for performance-based pay (Chaudhury et al., 2006). Therefore, absenteeism, late arrival in school, escapism, shifting responsibilities to female members etc. are regular features of primary education management staff in many developing countries. In a cross-country survey, Chaudhury et al., (2006) observed that absenteeism is a major problem in developing countries, for instance in Bangladesh (Table 1). Their

study reveals that pay does have some impact on absenteeism but the role of the quality of infrastructure at the school can change the habit in a positive direction.

Table 1: Absence rate in primary schools by Country
(modified from Chaudhury et al., 2006)

Country	Absence rate (%) in primary schools
Bangladesh	16
Ecuador	14
India	25
Indonesia	19
Uganda	27
Unweighted average	19

In developing countries discrimination towards female teachers in primary school is common. For example, in Turkey and Pakistan male teachers are preferred by authorities to hold educational leadership positions (Sales, 1999; Celikten, 2005). However, in many developing countries greater numbers of women are gaining administrative positions in schools (Oplatka, 2006).

Bangladesh as a developing country runs one of the biggest primary education management programmes in the world. Formal primary education in Bangladesh has a long past which started during the British colonial regime in 1854 and individual literacy activities were initiated in 1918 (Ministry of Primary and Mass

Table 2: Number of primary schools by type, teachers and
enrolment in Bangladesh in 2007

Type of School	Number of Schools	No. of Teachers		% of Female Teachers	Number of Pupils		% of Girls Students
		Total	Female		Total	Girls	
Govt. Primary Schools	37672	182374	91521	50.2%	9377814	4829793	51.5%
Regd. NGPS	20107	79085	25482	32.2%	3538708	1791500	50.6%
Non-regd. NGPS	973	3914	2532	64.7%	164535	81041	49.3%
Experimental Schools	54	210	82	39.0%	10097	4974	49.3%
Community Schools	3186	10060	7403	73.6%	436072	223258	51.2%
Kindergarten	2253	20874	11520	55.2%	254982	108520	42.6%
NGO Schools	229	1106	732	66.2%	32721	16515	50.5%
Ebtedaee Madrasahs*	6726	28227	2987	10.6%	947744	455761	48.1%
Primary Sections of High Madrasahs*	8920	35707	3734	10.5%	1099463	512867	46.6%
Primary Sections of High Schools*	1314	2937	1397	47.6%	450771	253325	56.2%
Total:	81434	364494	147390	40.4%	16312907	8277554	50.7%

Source: BANBEIS in School Survey Report 2007

Education, 2009). Bangladesh is one of the signatories among 155 countries who agreed at the World Conference on *Education for All* in Jomtien, Thailand (5-9 March 1990) to universalize primary education and massively reduce illiteracy before the end of the decade (UNESCO, 1990). Also the World Education Forum adopted the Dakar Framework (26-28 April 2000, Dakar) to promote *Education for All* by 2015 and to meet the collective commitments in following up the Thailand declaration. Owing to these initiatives Bangladesh has considerably achieved many successes in the area of primary education management. For example, Bangladesh is one of the few developing countries in the world to have met the UNESCO and MDG target of achieving gender parity in primary schools by 2005 which is ahead of schedule (UNESCO EFA Report, 2009). There are 81,434 primary schools of different types covering 16,312,907 students, among them around 50% are girls signifying gender parity in Bangladesh (School Survey Report 2007).

Table 3: Gross Primary Level Enrolment (%) from 1996 to 2002 in Bangladesh

Year	Gross Enrolment Rate (%)	
	Boys	Girls
1996	97%	93%
1997	97%	94%
1998	98%	94%
1999	98%	95%
2000	97%	97%
2001	97%	98%
2002	97%	98%

Source: Directorate of Primary Education, 2009

In Bangladesh the Gross Enrolment Rate (GER) in primary school is encouraging (Table 3). Over time, the enrolment rate of both boys and girls in primary education has considerably increased. Government also indentifies primary education as key to poverty reduction in their draft National Strategy for Accelerated Poverty Reduction (NSAPR) for 2009-2011 (ADB, 2008).

The Constitution also assures education for all citizens of Bangladesh. Thus, Article 17 of the constitution states, *the State shall adopt effective measures for the purpose of:*

a. establishing 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.

At present it is anticipated that almost 2 to 3 million children are not covered by primary education despite government initiatives, such as stipends, free books, school feeding etc. (ADB, 2008). However, while Bangladesh has considerable accomplishment in primary education, it has still many management issues to be addressed towards achieving comparable global standards.

The aim of this article is to examine the present management practices of primary education in Bangladesh and identify the limitations of these practices. The article also explores perceived areas where Bangladesh may improve management practices. In order to address these objectives, this article mainly examines publicly available sources in order to explore current management practices of primary education in Bangladesh. We shall first briefly review the present management practices of primary education in the country. Then based on this assessment, barriers and challenges of primary education have been identified and presented. This paper argues that in order to overcome the management problems of primary education in Bangladesh a policy reform initiative is necessary; otherwise the essence of *Education for All* by 2015 will be thwarted. Finally, conclusions have been drawn based on the findings.

2.   Management of Primary Education in Bangladesh

It is mandatory for every citizen in Bangladesh to send their children to the primary school. It may be noted that Compulsory Primary Education Act, 1990 affirms *Unless there is a valid ground, the guardian of each child living in an area where primary education has been made compulsory, shall for the purpose of giving primary education, have his/her child admitted to the nearest primary education institution located in that area*. But there are still many areas in Bangladesh where it is diffindt to reach children and prevent dropouts from primary schools. As mentioned earlier (Table 2), more than 81,000 primary schools of different types exist to accommodate children. Also in many areas of Bangladesh Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) provide primary education (Chowdhury, Nath, & Choudhury, 2001). They usually offer: free and compulsory primary education for all children, free education for girls up to grade eight and free books for all children at the primary level, and stipend programmes. But there is no single education guideline for the country. Table 2 indicates that many institutions such as government, semi-government, and non-government institutions are responsible for primary education in Bangladesh. These include Ebtedaee madrasahs, experimental schools, and community schools. Also kindergartens are teaching students in the English medium but following different types of home-made syllabuses. At present, at the primary level, student-teacher

ratio is about 49:1 which is very high and the literacy rate (7^+ years) is around 63 per cent (Ministry of Primary and Mass Education, 2009).

Primary education in Bangladesh is mainly administered by the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (MOPME). The Ministry has 4 different offices to supervise primary education and these are Directorate of Primary Education

Figure 2: Management Structure of Primary Education in Bangladesh in 2009
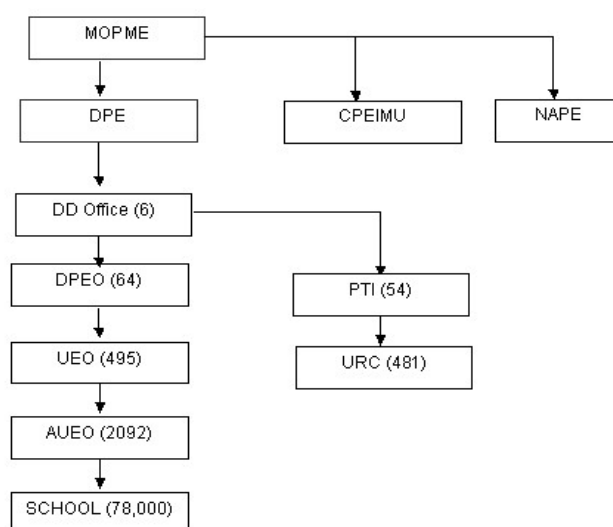
(Source: Directorate of Primary Education, 2009)

(DPE), Compulsory Primary Education Implementation Monitoring Unit (CPEIMU), Bureau of Non-formal Education (BNFE), and National Academy for Primary Education (NAPE). But among all DPE is largely responsible for policy planning and implementation of primary education in Bangladesh. Figure 2 illustrates present the primary education management structure in Bangladesh.

MOPME: Ministry of Primary and Mass Education
DPE: Directorate of Primary Education
CPEIMU: Compulsory Primary Education Implementation Monitoring Unit
NAPE: National Academy for Primary Education
DD Office: Office of the Deputy Director
DPEO: District Primary Education Office
UEO: Upazila Education Office
AUEO: Assistant Upazila Education Officer
URC: Upazila Resource Centre

The present hierarchical structure of primary education in Bangladesh indicates that policy decision and implementation process consumes enormous time, which delays the outcome. It may be noted that a grass-roots level management staff needs to take at least five steps to make a contact with the Ministry. In addition to these tiers inside the DPE there are Directors, Deputy Directors, and Assistant Directors working under a Director-General, most of whom are deputed from outside the organization. In practice a top-down approach prevails in the primary education management process in Bangladesh. The centralized system of primary education signifies that there is little or no scope for variation and innovation in the management practices to adapt to local conditions (Siddiqui, 2000).

In order to manage these mammoth institutions every year government allocates nearly 15 percent of the national budget to the education sector of which the share of primary and mass education is nearly 60 per cent (Ministry of Primary and Mass Education, 2009). In fact, the State takes all responsibilities with regard to primary education such as recruiting primary school teachers, distributing free books, and stipends to enrolled students etc. Also primary school teachers have in-service training facilities, award incentives, and teacher welfare trust to improve their professionalism. At present a donor-aided project named Second Primary Education Development Program (PEDP-II) is running under MOPME to ensure quality of primary education in Bangladesh. But even with the above initiatives and incentives Bangladesh primary education faces many problems and challenges to achieve *Education for All* commitment by 2015.

3.   Problems and Challenges of Primary Education in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh primary education is heterogeneous with regard to schools, curricula, teacher-students ratio, etc. (Table 2). Also teachers have different types of educational qualification and training in different sorts of schools. As a result, performance and quality of teaching significantly differs from school to school. Major management issues responsible for the existing quality of primary education in Bangladesh are discussed below:

3.1   Number of Teachers

The number of government primary schools is 37,672 (Table 2). Therefore, a law teacher-student ratio exists in Bangladesh, which is approximately 1:49. But in other developing countries, the teacher-student ratio is comparatively high. For example, in India the current average ratio is 1:42 (Premji, 2008), and in Malaysia it is 1:19 (Education Encyclopaedia, 2008). In developed countries the scenario is

different such as in the United Kingdom, the teacher-student ratio is around 1:21.6 (MacLeod, 2008), and in the US it is 1:16 (The Centre for Education Reform, 2007). In a study Premji (2008) suggests that a low teacher-student ratio has a negative impact on the quality of primary education. A low teacher-student ratio also impedes supervision and monitoring of primary education. Therefore, it is necessary to speed up the teachers' recruitment process to bridge the gap.

3.2   Physical Facilities

In Bangladesh most primary schools suffer from lack of adequate classroom facilities. In practice many schools have only 3-4 classrooms without adequate sitting arrangements. In some cases teachers do not have their own rooms. Also many schools run two shifts i.e. morning and afternoon shifts to accommodate students. As a result the contact hours for the student-teacher are limited. Moreover, primary school repair and maintenance is often controlled by government in power i.e. political interference by Members of Parliament (MPs) is a regular culture in Bangladesh. Due to lack of class room it is also observed that teachers take classes under the open sky.

In construction and maintenance of primary schools the MOPME has deployed another government ins titution named the Local Government Engineering Department (LGED), because the Ministry does not have itsown workforce. As a result, the MOPME has no administrative control over the LGED to ensure the quality and timely completion of the assigned works.

In many primary schools, other physical facilities for example playing ground, washrooms, electricity, text books, teaching aids, are limited. There is also a budget constraint to support regular expenditure at school.

3.3   Management of Teachers

Every year government recruits nearly 5,000 primary school teachers, which is inadequate in number to raise the present teacher-student ratio. The recruitment process is very extensive and administered partly by DPE and partly by the district administration. As oral test is taken locally, sometimes political interference and favouritism hinder the recruitment process. As a result, poorly qualified candidates are often selected as primary school teachers.

Poor salary structure is a major management problem in primary education. In general the salary of a primary school teacher is less than that of a lower grade clerk of government offices in Bangladesh. The primary school teacher has little social recognition. As a result well qualified people are not encouraged to become

primary school teachers. It is also observed that the people who initially join as primary school teacher are always on the look-out to change their jobs and obviously they are least committed to the students. In some cases, they are engaged in private tuition to earn extra money.

The present primary school teacher recruitment system is locality based. In Bangladesh vacant posts of primary school teachers are filled only from the permanent residents of that particular locality and, therefore, not fully on merit basis. Accordingly, in some areas less qualified candidates are selected whereas in other areas qualified candidates do not get a chance because of extreme competition. In private schools particularly in rural areas teachers are selected by the school management committee (SMC) and by and large they recruit less qualified teachers due to political and local influence.

The primary school teachers working in their own locality are habitually engaged in family affairs, local politics, and liaison with political leaders and MPs. Due to their strong political foothold, sometimes it becomes difficult for the supervisory authority to take any disciplinary action against them for dereliction of their duties.

Primary school teachers are also required to manage various local and national tasks, for instance, local bodies' elections, national elections, disaster management, voter list preparation, etc. Present compensation package and reward system are not sufficient to compensate the volume of work the teachers are required to perform. This has a negative impact on teaching students. So, absenteeism, late arrival, early departure, etc. are the common characteristics of primary school teachers in Bangladesh.

3.4   Teachers Training

To be a primary school teacher in Bangladesh there is no pre-requisite to have a degree or diploma in education. Government takes the responsibility and   gives in-service training in primary training institutes (PTI) for the duration of ten months. But the trainee has to spend his or her own money, which is to some extent demoralizing training not only in pedagogy but also in subject matter because of poor recruitment. The only incentive is that after completion of the PTI training the salary is increased. A good financial package may encourage teachers to take up training seriously. It may be mentioned that government decided to start a certificate-in-education training from July 2009 and Upazila resource centres would be strengthened in order to improve in-service training (ADB, 2008).

3.5   Curriculum Development

The National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) is responsible for the development of primary education curriculum. Interestingly, NCTB is administered by the Ministry of Education, and MOPME does not have any significant role in it. The DPE does not have a voice in preparing a universal primary education curriculum for Bangladesh. In regard to curriculum development, printing, and distribution, there is virtually no coordination among MOPME, NCTB and DPE. Hence sometimes students do not get their new books at the beginning of their academic session. Also poor quality of text books demonstrates the unenthusiastic attitude of the liable agency.

3.6   Monitoring and Supervision

Primary education performance is mostly monitored by the Upazila Education Officer (UEO). It consists of simply filling of a few pre-designed forms on a routine basis. Hardly any attention is given to quality management practices of primary education in Bangladesh. Also there are schools in remote and mountainous hilly areas in Bangladesh, which are difficult to access due to limited communication. Therefore, access and quality issues need to be reviewed to consider learning needs of underprivileged groups (ADB, 2008). An effective monitoring and supervision system can improve the performance of primary education in Bangladesh.

3.7   Co-ordination

A strong bureaucratic environment around the primary education system often hinders the implementation of best practices. There is no significant interactive communication at present between policy planners and implementers of primary education. In fact the bureaucracy does not want to decentralize the primary education because it gives them the power to indulge in nepotism and corruption with regard to resources and personnel devoted to primary education (Siddiqui, 2000). It is necessary to incorporate new ideas, technologies, and opportunities to enhance the quality of primary education. There is a need for effective primary education coordination between different types of institutions and programmes within an integrated framework (ADB, 2008). In every step from physical facilities to human resource development, effective coordination can assist the efforts to achieve *Education for All* by 2015.

4.   Recommendations for improving primary education management in Bangladesh

From the above discussions of primary education practices of Bangladesh it appears that as a developing country it has achievements in a few sectors for example student enrolment, gender parity, etc. However, it also has many challenges towards quality primary *Education for All* by 2015. Desired number of primary school teachers should be recruited through a quick, merit-based, and transparent system. Furthermore, the compensation package needs to be reconsidered in keeping with market needs. These initiatives will encourage better people to choose primary school as their preferred career.

An integrated curriculum is necessary to teach students at the primary level. An effective syllabus can assist a student to learn with creativity. In the primary school, the learning process should be updated with latest information, for instance real life activities, projects, computer literacy, second language, etc. In-service training of resource persons should be designed in a useful way so that they can utilize their efficiency and experience when they come back to teaching. A formal introduction of teaching method of 'special need students', such as the physically impaired, mentally impaired etc. can help a large number of children to enrol in schools. Also a national policy direction is necessary in regard to teaching method, syllabus, and student-teacher ratio in different types of public and private schools in Bangladesh.

Measures should be taken to reduce the bureaucratic environment in the DPE. In particular, consultation and participation of primary school teachers should be encouraged in policy planning and decision-making process in Bangladesh. Therefore, decentralization of primary education management should be a foremost strategy in the way of universal primary education in Bangladesh.

Physical facilities at primary school need careful attention of government. Work place facilities, student enrichment facilities, flexible teaching hours and health and safety issues need to be appropriately taken care of.

Geographically disadvantaged areas in Bangladesh should be treated as a prioritized sector of primary education or else the education divide between urban and rural areas cannot be minimized. Present monitoring and supervision procedure should be customised and an introduction of paper-less environment may assist in developing quality education strategy in Bangladesh.

Lack of coordination among different stakeholders of primary education management is one of the major bottlenecks in achieving *Education for All* in

Bangladesh. Since more than one provider is involved, some form of coordination is necessary to manage primary education smoothly. Therefore, a comprehensive policy framework for primary education can help overcome the existing gaps.

5.   Conclusions

Bangladesh runs one of the largest primary education programmes in the world. In recent times it has achieved a few significant improvements in gender parity and gross enrolment in the primary education. Government incorporates primary education in their main policy agenda (NSAPR) as an instrument of poverty reduction in the country. Primary education is free and government also provides stipends and free books, and operates school feeding programmes to encourage children to enrol in school.

Both public and private sectors offer a heterogeneous set of primary education in Bangladesh. At least 10 different types of schools are involved in teaching with different curricula. There is no particular programme for geographically disadvantaged locations and also no appropriate teaching method for students with special needs. There are also gaps in teacher recruitment, physical facilities, and in-service training. The quality of education needs to be enhanced for preventing drop-out from the schools.

Political interference sometimes hinders the effective management of primary education. A strong leadership role in primary education can help overcome the barriers. This is yet to be seen in Bangladesh. The lack of effective monitoring, compensation package and incentives often discourage teachers to attend schools regularly and to be effective in the school. Cooperation and coordination is inevitable among all stakeholders of primary education management in Bangladesh. A well-orchestrated mobilisation and campaign approach is necessary in favour of decentralization of primary education (Siddiqui, 2000).

Now more than ever before, Bangladesh is overcoming the gaps in primary education management. Government should consider the extent to which strengthening primary education can be a suitable approach to eradicate the illiteracy in Bangladesh. A comprehensive strategy may speed up the journey towards quality primary *Education for All* by 2015. Government can explore the potential instruments that fit into the integrated strategy and need to aptly navigate in achieving this goal.

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