



NATIONAL
THEMATIC FORUM
QUALITY EDUCATION



Position Paper

Improving Quality Education at
Primary and Secondary Levels

Photo: Health safety kits are being distributed among the students at a school in Kishoreganj.

Introduction

The National Thematic Forum is an apex body and a theme-based platform for civil society and grass-roots/local organisations. It provides an opportunity for civil society representatives, government actors, and other stakeholders to engage in discussion and formulate recommendations exclusively dedicated to citizens' priorities in Bangladesh. This position paper is based on the experience of the 'National Thematic Forum' (NTF) members who are working at the national level to strengthen civil society and government accountability mechanisms in Bangladesh.

High-quality education, especially at the early stages of education, is vital not only for the development of our youth and children but also for the development of Bangladesh as a whole. While the country has made remarkable progress in achieving school enrolment at both primary and secondary levels, the quality of education is still fairly low. In 2018, a study conducted by Save the Children and funded by USAID found that 44% of first-grade students could not read their first word and that 27% of third-grade students could not understand what they were reading (USAID, 2018).

In most cases, students without basic learning skills, such as reading, repeat one or more grades or even drop out of school before completing their fifth-grade education. This, in turn, weakens the development of their foundational skills, and when they join the labour force, their lack of basic education constrains their productive capacity and career development in the knowledge-based economy. Keeping this backdrop in mind, we have prepared this position paper by drawing on observations from various research studies on the topic of the quality of education and simultaneously citing first-hand experiences of the NTF members to outline the nature of the problem that persists, some practical solutions to the problem, and recommendations for different stakeholders on how they can contribute to improving the quality of education in Bangladesh.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused the largest disturbance in the education system in the world's recent history. It has affected 1.6 billion pupils around the world (Pokhrel and Chhetri, 2021).

A World Bank study finds that 38 million students in Bangladesh have been affected by learning loss since educational institutes closed from March 2020 to September 2021 (World Bank, 2021). According to the post-COVID ICT road map of Bangladesh, 16 million of these students might never return to their classrooms. Those that are continuing their studies will face a huge number of impediments due to session jams or public universities lacking institutional mechanisms to graduate pupils on schedule. Many schools, colleges, and universities have taken face-to-face classes to the digital arena. This is very challenging for developing countries that have outdated equipment, unstable or unavailable internet network, and poorly trained and ill-informed teachers.

Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), one of the 17 goals that all the United Nations member states agreed on, calls for actions to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning for all'. If Bangladesh can successfully achieve SDG 4 at the national level, with all people being well-educated and skilled, Bangladesh will have better human capital and an active and productive workforce.

Problems Related to the Quality of Education at the Primary and Secondary Levels:

Bangladesh has made good progress in achieving enrolment at both primary and secondary levels, and gender disparities have also been eliminated. However, the quality of education – both primary and secondary – in general, is poor. Around 83% of children complete primary education. However, completion rates decline at higher levels of education, with only 65% of children completing lower secondary education and just 29% completing higher secondary education.

A mere 33% of children in Grade 3 have the appropriate reading skills for their grade, and only 18% have the expected level of numeracy skills. The proportion of children with foundational skills is higher among those in more advanced grades. The share with foundational reading skills rises to 74% by Grade 6 and to 91% by grade 10. Acquisition of numeracy skills lags behind somewhat, with 42% of children in Grade 6 and 65% of those in Grade 10 possessing the numeracy skills expected for Grade 3.

The majority of out-of-school children lack foundational skills in both areas, with 23% found to have foundational reading skills and 14% found to have foundational numeracy skills (Bangladesh Education Fact sheet 2020, UNICEF).

Probable Causes of the Problems

There were several reasons identified through secondary literature and discussion with the NTF members that cause the low-quality of education in Bangladesh. The major causal factors included as:

Poverty: Among these causes, poverty is probably a binding factor as it affects many aspects of children's day-to-day life that could impede their learning in schools. For example, family poverty may cause food insecurity, lower children's nutritional intake, and cause learning difficulties. As such, poverty is more of a national-level concern than the causes, which can be handled at the local level. Marginalised and excluded children are particularly vulnerable to dropping out of school. These children usually live in poor conditions, such as in slums, in poverty-ridden unions, close to the borders, and in isolated areas; some of them are homeless and live along the roadside, under bridges, and in bus and rail stations. They are forced to participate in wage earning activities for their family.

Poor Teacher Performance: The existing accountability and monitoring and evaluation mechanisms of teacher performance are weak. Our survey found that teachers' poor performance was one of the major causes of poor education quality. It was reported that some teachers arrive late and are even absent on school days. Some teachers appeared to be biased in grading assessments showing favour for students whom they also taught as private tutors.

Safety and Security: Children are not protected at school in terms of corporal punishment and negligence. Another concern is that girls are often sexually harassed at school or on their way to school. The sanitation and hygiene facilities are very poor at both primary and secondary schools. Poor hygiene facilities for girls in most of the schools has directly increased absenteeism and thus resulted poor academic performance.

Curriculum and Learning Materials: A creative curriculum was introduced in primary and secondary education sectors in 2009.

According to the National Education Policy 2010, the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) made changes in the content of the syllabi as well as the question pattern to assess the learner's creativity. However, teachers are not skilled enough to teach this curriculum. Around 41% of high school teachers in our country cannot prepare creative questions. 55% of primary school teachers do not even understand creative system. Learning materials and syllabi are not updated frequently, and the burden of excess curriculum causes poor student performance.

Weak Assessment Systems and the Burden of Public Examinations: Introduction of PECE (Primary Education Completion Examination) or PSC and JSC examinations in primary and secondary levels in the last few years have encouraged students to drill and focus on rote learning or memorisation. Students do not understand the content of their course work nor have the scope to create something on their own. Education experts, researchers, intelligent citizens, teachers, and guardians have questioned the value of these examinations. It doesn't contribute to improving the teaching-learning process. In addition, teachers' biased assessment in schools is a major concern for parents.

Expanding Coaching Centres and Guidebooks: More alarming is that about half of all teachers (47%) surveyed rely on guidebooks to prepare lessons while 92% of students use guidebooks to understand their lessons. Students have heavily depended on guidebooks, private tutors, and coaching centers, specifically for the PSC and JSC exams. These two public exams are the root cause of the rapid growth of coaching centres as well as guidebook publications. The schools also prepare the question papers for half-yearly, yearly, and test exams following guidebooks. The reality is that the guidebooks and the coaching centres are playing a helpful role in students achieving better marks. Every year, students secure better grades. Parents, students, and school authorities are happy with the overall performance of the students. Now, coaching and guide-notebook culture has become an unavoidable part of our education which is a major challenge in improving the quality of education for all.

Dysfunctional School Management Committees (SMCs): Experiences suggest that school management committees in most schools are virtually non-functional as far as the quality of teaching and learning is concerned. They take little if any interest in how to improve the quality of education in schools. Parents, in most cases, especially in rural areas, are also less concerned about the quality of their children's education.

Weak monitoring and Enforcement of Rules and Regulations: Although the primary education monitoring system has many rules and instructions, they are poorly applied and rarely enforced. Low monitoring levels are common, and few school visits are conducted by District Director (DD), Assistant Thana Education Officer (ATEO), Thana Education Officer (TEO), and other monitoring staffs. The vast majority of monitoring staff do classroom visits once or twice a year, despite being instructed to do so more regularly. Even the head teacher is supposed to visit classrooms, but this rarely or never happens. As there are few classroom visits, teachers do not receive any feedback. The monitoring staff come to the school and collect data regarding education and other school issues via secondary sources (i.e., from the head teachers' office) rather than by observing first hand themselves.

Inadequate Support for Students with Disabilities: The study also found that limited support is given to students living with disabilities and physical and mental health issues. No institution can omit the admission of any student with disabilities for any reason, but in reality, the infrastructure of the schools, the learning methodology, and the curricula are not appropriate for children with special needs. Teacher-Student Ratio: Additionally, having such a high teacher-to-student ratio (1:45 in 2018 according to BANBEIS) as well as the low number of poorly trained teachers in schools hinders quality education in Bangladesh. Furthermore, the large class sizes reportedly discourage students from going to school.

Additional causes that negatively impact the quality of education include:

- lack of skilled teachers,
- low number of public schools,
- parents' inadequate monitoring of their children,
- low attendance of student and teachers,
- high dropout rate,
- lack of transportation options to and from schools, high travel costs,
- no or poor provision for food during school time (lack of mid-day meal provision for less privileged students),
- little to no facilities for students' extra-curricular activities,
- seasonal inaccessibility of schools in certain areas,
- weak communication systems,
- and language and cultural barriers.

The severity of the existing problems cannot be comprehended if one does not consider the consequences that low-quality education could have on the people and communities of Bangladesh. General consequences include:

Unemployment: People who lack education, or who only finished primary school often work poorly paid jobs or struggle to find any job whatsoever. Simply put, good jobs are reserved for qualified employees, and qualifications are primarily acquired through education. In today's digitalised world, where knowledge quickly becomes outdated and traditional jobs are slowly disappearing, quality education becomes even more important as it represents the deciding factor whether a person will be able to adapt and find a suitable job or will become unemployed. It could even become more difficult for some educated youth to find a proper job. The shortcomings of their elemental learning process can work as a major obstacle for them to build their skills and acquire the necessary knowledge to hold jobs in the modern workforce. Moreover, their basic knowledge foundation may impede their learning abilities for more advanced and technical positions making their career development minimal or non-existent thus adding to the country's "educated unemployed" problem.

Gender Inequality: Women who receive poorer education than their male counterparts are often in an adverse position. Quality education gives women independence, higher salaries, and the opportunity to express their views on various social issues. Education means independence and the ability to make informed decisions in one's life, for both men and women. Low-quality education results in inequalities and outdated social norms.

Social Isolation: Inadequately educated people struggle to fit in social situations and often remain marginalised. The lack of resources generated from a poor education prevents them from participating in numerous social activities in a productive and comprehensive way, in contrast to educated people who engage in the same activities without difficulty.

Illegal Activities: People who received a low-quality of education, the unemployed, or those who work poorly paid jobs are often forced to work even harder to maintain a basic existence. Hence, it is no wonder that a lack of education can lead to a life of crime, which some people see as a shortcut or the only way out of their disadvantaged position.

Having no or low-quality education, school-age children might be more likely to commit crimes and be involved in drug and substance abuse.

Poor Economy: Countries with educated people have stronger, better-developed, and more sustainable economies. This trend will continue and become even stronger throughout the 21st century when digitalisation and the changes it brings will directly correlate to a countries' ability to successfully adapt which will directly depend on its educated population.

Inadequate Participation in Political and Social Life: Without a comprehensive education in both sciences and humanities, a person will lack the knowledge and tools that enable them to make intelligent and meaningful political decisions. Quality education enables open dialogue, constructive exchange of opinions, and a joint search for the best solution for society as a whole. Therefore, it helps the individual not to fall prey to political marketing, but to base their decisions on their own thoughts and views.

Increased Cost of Education: Families are increasingly relying on private tutoring because of the low-quality education provided in schools. This could widen the inequalities in society between those who can afford additional tutoring for their children and those who cannot. Our survey findings suggest that many parents prefer private schools as an alternative to the low-quality public education system. Poor families, however, cannot afford to send their children to private schools, and arguably, this further widens the gap between the rich and the poor.

National Level Initiatives to Improve the Quality of Education

Education is one of the main priority areas for the government, and thus, the government takes many initiatives to improve public education including legislative action, program changes, and increased resource allocation. The Government of Bangladesh also initiated the Primary Education Compulsory Act 1990, National Education Policy 2010, National education Act 2016 (draft), Fourth Primary Education Development Program (2018), and Integrated Special Education Policy (2019) among others, which are all working to improve access to education and quality public education.

To improve the quality of education further in Bangladesh, some noteworthy national level initiatives include:

- Providing scholarships to academically sound students and offering full-free student-ships to students from impoverished families;
- Providing relatively poor students with meals in schools under government initiative;
- Introducing a digital education system in schools (for which the government has already set plans for the next three fiscal years) and giving the utmost importance to building skilled pupils with modern knowledge of science and technology;
- More broadly, the government is dedicating more of its social protection schemes' budget towards improving the education system in Bangladesh;
- Providing free education for girls;
- Investing in building proper infrastructures for schools, distributing free textbooks, conducting basic literacy training in schools, and expanding digital knowledge-based primary education using ICT;
- Collaboration between government, NGOs, private organisations, and non-profit organisations to ensure universal coverage of quality pre-primary education and quality inclusive basic education throughout the year, even during disasters;
- Under the government's a2i initiative, a teachers' portal has been initiated that was primarily a social media hub and is now the largest online educational content storage and professional development platform in Bangladesh, with more than 575,000 teachers as its active members. Teachers can collaborate among each other to create better quality educational content that meets the specific needs of their pupils through this site.

Local-Level NTF Initiatives to Improve the Quality of Education

NTF members are working closely with authorities to improve the quality of education in Platforms for Dialogue's working districts. NTF members have created space for citizens to raise their voices in front of proper authorities, and as a result, some positive initiatives have been taken at the local level. These include:

- After raising concerns at a stakeholders' meeting in Kishoreganj, local authorities reformed Parents Teachers Association (PTA) in 7 primary schools and organised a stakeholder meeting titled Planning for School Development with 70 schools in Karimganj Upazila. From next year, the District Primary Education Officer's (DPEO) Office has planned to regularly organise an orientation programme with new School Management Committees (SMCs).

- In Nilphamari, 778 SMCs out of 1,084 have been reformed, and a complaint box has been installed at each school premise after the instruction of DPEO. In Patuakhali, 6 Primary Schools and 12 Secondary Schools ensured separate toilets for their male and female students. To encourage students to pursue computer science, 11 Secondary Schools have updated and opened their computer labs.

- In Munshiganj, PTA monthly meetings are regularly arranged.

Possible and Practical Solutions to Overcome the Problem

Improving the quality of education requires multifaceted and mutually reinforcing strategies and actions on the part of school communities and public institutions. Some policy alternatives suggested by NTF members include:

Strengthening the School Management Committees and Involving Parents in School Affairs: It is vitally important to strengthen school management committees and make them functional and effective. At the same time, parents should also be more involved in school affairs for improved monitoring. Arranging bi-annual, compulsory "Parent-Teacher Meetings" can be a useful tool to ascertain communication between them on individual students' progress and limitations.

Developing an Effective Monitoring and Evaluation System: Though there are certain rules and regulations in each school, most of the time there are no functional or effective monitoring systems. For example, many teachers are not held accountable for their performance in the classroom. It is therefore necessary to put an effective system in place to conduct monitoring and evaluation of teachers and schools at the local level.

This can also help curb the use of smart devices, especially for social media on school premises and more importantly during classroom times. This should be done by both the line ministries and also by the local community (SMCs, parents, etc.).

Regulate Private Tutoring: Private tutoring must be regulated as it is one of the major impediments to poor quality teaching and learning in schools. This could substantially help improve the quality of education in schools. Private tutoring also contributes to increased inequality between those who can afford additional tutoring for their children and those who cannot. If banning it entirely is not possible, private tutoring can at least be institutionalised within the school system so that every student can reap the benefit of additional learning without compromising the quality of education in schools.

Ensuring Child-Friendly Schools and Student-based Teaching and Learning: Schools need to assess students' capabilities using regular assessments and provide students with support to realise their potential. They also need to implement small group teaching and collaborative learning in schools. Additional teaching should be provided for slow learners, and additional and qualified teachers should also be provided for students with special needs. Schools should be child-friendly and gender-sensitive; they should also use ability-based teaching and learning techniques.

Regular Updating of Academic Curricula: It is important to make necessary changes to academic curricula and regularly update the syllabi of primary and secondary education. This helps ensure that the knowledge and skills taught in schools are up-to-date and suitable for career development.

Reviewing Teachers' Recruitment and Training Practices: Teacher recruitment policies should be regularly reviewed and revised, when necessary, in order to recruit competent and skilled educators. In NTF-led discussions, concerns over the current system of teachers' recruitment were raised. Members suggested that, once recruited, the teachers should be provided with foundational as well as periodic and regular training to reinforce key competencies. Also, it is imperative that an adequate number of teachers be recruited with incentives for them to maintain the standard teacher-to-student ratio of 1-to-30.

Ensuring Access to Quality Education for All and Promoting Inclusive Education: It is key that schools and teachers ensure that quality education is accessible for all, in particular for children who live with disabilities and have special educational needs. Teachers and other educational workers should be given training so that they are well-equipped to work with these children. This should be done in all government primary and secondary schools. Additionally, for students living in the Chattogram Hill Tracts and other remote areas of Bangladesh, a particular fund could be allotted to provide them with some transportation and meal funds (if mid-day meals can not be arranged for them). This would encourage and enable students to join the education system and in many cases, not "drop-out" in the middle of their education.

Reviewing the Student Assessment System and Reducing the Burden of Too Many Public Examinations: Student assessment systems should be reviewed regularly and revised when necessary. The current assessment system doesn't necessarily ensure that students are acquiring the desired competency level, but rather the exam system promotes obtaining high scores through whatever means. The burden of frequent public examinations also hinders the quality of education and promotes unfair competition among students, parents, and teachers to obtain good scores.

Strengthen Teachers' ICT Capacity to Activate Digital Labs in Schools: With the goal of creating a Digital Bangladesh, it is necessary to enhance the ICT capacity of teachers to transfer digital skills to students. The government already provided the logistics and a few trainings to teachers, especially to facilitate online classrooms during Covid pandemic, and to also set up the Rasel Digital Lab. Based on the current state of most teachers' capacity, it should be mandatory to train all teachers and conduct regular monitoring to ensure the continuation of effective digital classrooms.

Rebuilding School WASH Facilities Focusing on Inclusion: With the support of SMC and local authorities, every school should keep a suitable WASH facility at each school for both boys and girls. If the sanitation and hygiene practices improved in schools, then girls would feel safer and could attend school more regularly. Also, students could be safer from the viral and bacterial diseases that are related to water and hygiene.

Improving the quality of education in schools is not an easy task, and no single strategy or agency can do the job in its entirety. It needs a combined, concerted, and coordinated effort by all stakeholders. The matrix below outlines the organisations and agencies that should be made responsible to implement these strategies in order to improve the quality of education at primary and secondary levels in Bangladesh within the shortest possible time.

Strategies	Responsible Agencies /Organisations
Strengthening the school management committees and involving parents in school affairs	LG, DPE, SMCs
Developing an effective monitoring and evaluation system	SMCs, LG, DPE
Regulate private tutoring	MoE, DPE, SMC
Child-friendly schools and student-based teaching and learning	SMCs, NAPE, CSOs
Regular updating of academic curriculum	MoE, NCTB
Reviewing teachers recruitment and training practices	MoE, NAPE, SMC, CSOs
Ensuring access to quality education for all and promoting inclusive education	SMCs, LG, MoE, DPE
Reviewing the student assessment system and reducing the burden of too many public examinations	MoE, NCTB
Strengthening teachers' ICT capacity to activate digital labs in schools	MoE, DPE, ICT division
Rebuild school WASH facilities considering inclusion	DPHE, MoE

Note: MoE- Ministry of Education; LG: Local Government; DPE: Directorate of Primary Education; SMCs: School Management Committees; NCTB: National Curriculum and Textbook Board; NAPE: National Academy for Primary Education; DPHE- Department of Public Health Engineering; ICT- Information and Communication Technology; CSOs: Civil Society Organisations.

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