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The Provision Of Continuing Education in Rural Bangladesh

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THROUGH formal and non-formal systems both the Government of Bangladesh and NGOs are actively working to provide for the acquisition of literacy and other basic education skills. The Government has recently revamped its Mass Education Programme, renaming it the integrated Non-Formal Education Programme. The new programme includes five sectors: pre-primary education, non-formal primary education, non-formal education for adolescents, adult literacy programmes and continuing education. It is anticipated that NGOs will meet more than half the ambitious targets set for the next two years. It is crucial to note that the eradication of illiteracy is no longer seen as a task for formal schools and adult literacy programmes alone. A broader view has been taken, and all sectors coverage in the continuing education activities which are the natural extension of initial literacy programmes. Continuing education is the vehicle for maintaining literacy, numeracy and other life skills. My work and research has been primarily in the field of adult literacy and post-literacy programmes. Post-literacy work is one vital part of continuing education. In this paper I will explore lessons learned in the field and how the ideas can be applied to continuing education with a wider focus.

The Challenge of Continuing Education

Because of the problems of adult new literates not using their skills, post-literacy activities have long been advocated for them. More commonly called follow-up programmes, the absolute necessity of providing a means of retaining and developing the newly learned literacy skills is seen as crucial to the success of any literacy project. Continuing education in this context is an essential part of a real effort to combat illiteracy. Post-literacy works should not be seen as an isolated effort or simply as another programme tagged on the initial project. It is part of the literacy continuum (Hamadache with Martin, 1986:36), which comprises all stages of the literacy process, from pre-literacy to full participation in the literate activities of a society.

The need for continuing education for those who acquire literacy through the formal school system is not as readily recognized. There has been an assumption that children would progress through the school system and eventually be exposed to the myriad forms of reading matter available. However, it must now be acknowledged that the majority of children in rural Bangladesh do not complete the primary cycle and even less progress through secondary. They leave school with limited literacy skills, and they too need opportunities to practice their skills if their literacy is to be maintained and

extended.

Unfortunately, even in the case of adult new literates, the actual practice of post-literacy work has not kept pace with the rhetoric. All over the world literacy programmes are initiated, conducted and concluded with the little thought of a follow-up stage, and the efforts that have been made have been sporadic. On the field not enough attention and effort have been given to continuing education activities.

For both children and adults, the retention and development of reading, writing and numeracy skills involves several complex and inter-related factors. This whole area of study raises more questions than answers, but it is worthwhile to examine the basis on which post-literacy programmes are built.

One of the most common reasons advocated for the need for post-literacy activities is that without them the new readers quickly relapse into illiteracy (Rahnema, 1976:177). It is claimed by some writers that as a result of the lack of follow-up materials that as many as 60% of the adults who once knew how to read and write relapse into illiteracy (Malya, 1976:99) and in other settings it is estimated that 90% fall back into illiteracy (Marten, 1976:43). Speaking of various literacy campaigns and programmes in what is now Bangladesh, Quddus (1963:47) noted that hundreds of literacy certificates were issued, but "on a sample inquiry and test, it was found that within 6 to 12 months, most of the certificate holders forgot almost everything they learnt". He too blamed the situation on a lack of follow-up materials.

The theory of relapse—both for graduates of adult literacy programmes and for drop-outs from the formal school system—is certainly a popular one and sounds quite plausible. However, there have been few actual studies on the retention of literacy and numeracy skills, and for these "methodological problems render clear answers impossible" (Wagner, 1987:10). An equally plausible theory, which bears investigation, is that the majority of learners did not attain in the initial programme the standard of literacy which is later expected of them. In an interesting study of school drop-outs in Egypt, the researchers found that the early school leavers did not lose skills expected of them but that they had never gained them in the first place.

We conclude that dropouts from primary school forget little of the skills acquired in school. Rather, they leave school with very low levels of skill. But the skill level of a typical

fourth grade dropout who has been out of school for five years is neither much better or much worse than that of a new dropout from the same grade. (Hartley and Swanson, 1984:4).

The evidence from Bangladesh points to a similar problem. The most recent comprehensive study on primary education, after referring to several sources, suggests the following rates:

- Enrollment of 50% to 60% of the age group
- Attendance rate of 50% of those enrolled
- Dropout rate of 80% to 90%
- Repetition of classes varying from 20% to 50%
- Repetition of class 1 affecting nearly half the students (Gustavsson, 1990:47).

Based on these findings, it is estimated that no more than one out of five students acquires sustainable literacy skills at primary school (IBID: 154).

Taking a sample from the programmes organized by Literacy House in Lucknow, northern India, Roy and Kapoor in a 1975 study "came to the conclusion that there is a correlation between the duration of the literacy course and the standard reached on the one hand, and the probability of relapse on the other" (Bordia, 1985:182). Reflecting on the experiences of the Experimental World Literacy Programme, Gillette (1987:212) felt that "literacy, to the levels it was taught in most national projects, was not self-sustaining."

What is emerging is a picture not so much of the new readers' relapse into illiteracy but of a failure of adult literacy programmes and the formal school system to provide many of the learners with skills that are adequate at even a very basic level. Perhaps one of the reasons that so little research has been done on the question of retention is because of the problem of systematically tracking down former participants of programmes (particularly ones who have not continued if a post-literacy programme is offered) and testing them on materials comparable to those on which they were tested at the end of the literacy course. To help fill the gap I have analyzed some of the Functional Education (FE) records of two organizations with which I worked for a number of years in Bangladesh, the 'Joyramkura Primary Health Care Programme' in Mymensingh and 'Friends in Village Development Bangladesh' in Sylhet (Jennings, 1990:241-4). The studies at Joyramkura and Friends suggest

that in the area of reading most learners who achieve fairly strong skills will retain them even in the absence of a structured follow-up programme. With some input from the programme, the Friends experience indicates that the literacy skills will for most of these adults improve overtime. Joyramkura data points to the possibility that the skills of even fairly fluent new readers will atrophy without the help of some type of post-literacy programme. Writing and numeracy skills showed a definite decline in the absence of continuing education opportunities, and readers whose skills were poor at the end of the initial course had not improved. The purpose of the initial literacy course is to help the participant gain the skills on which he can continue to build. Once those skills are gained, he should be able to progress to more difficult reading materials with practice over time. However, for the learner who does not gain these basic skills, either in school or in an adult literacy class, continuing education activities which assume literacy will be of little use.

But even for the new literate who can read the course materials fluently there can be disappointments ahead if he is forced to immediately enter the world of the mature readers. In the Joyramkura programme it was found that only 35% of the learners who could read the FE books fairly fluently could read a national newspaper without considerable difficulty. The needs is "to follow-up the initial literacy skills acquired with a continuing flow of easily accessible reading matter of interest to the new literate" (Coombs, 1985:278). New literates cannot read most of the existing materials, and what they need are "books that will be of interest to them, but which will be written at a level of readability which they can manage" (Bhola, 1981:24-5). Post-literacy readers are usually intended to serve as a bridge leading the new literate from the primer to the world of regular written materials (Haman, 1977:399). As will be seen later, involvement in continuing education activities makes general available materials more accessible to the new literate. For instance in Joyramkura it was found that after a 6-month follow-up course, the percentage of participants able to read a national newspaper increased from 35% to 51%.

In many countries creating the bridge to 'regular written materials' may be sufficient, but in others that word is very limited (Dumont, 1990:6). The programme may find that even when the participants are fluent readers of difficult materials, its role as a provider of reading matter is not over. This is certainly the case in rural Bangladesh.

(To be continued)