

Changes In Primary Education

by Philip Rodrigues

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SINCE 1978 primary school children in Bangladesh spent more time reading, writing and counting than soaking up formal studies. The stress on the basics was the result of changes made to the curriculum in that year.

The aim of the new curriculum was to ensure that the pupils were well-versed in the Three Rs after they have completed their primary education.

But nobody knows for sure whether the new curriculum will achieve that aim because the curricular changes were not tried in selected schools for preliminary results.

Instead, they were implemented in all the 36,366 government primary schools in the country after the details had been worked out by the National Commission on Education.

An experiment with some selected schools might have revealed weaknesses in the context of the curriculum. A year-long trial could have been planned to spot such flaws if any as was done in some developing countries, like Malaysia.

Malaysia has recently overhauled the primary school curriculum and has selected some schools to test the new Three R-centered curriculum next year. This pilot scheme will enable corrections or adaptation to be made before full implementation in 1983.

But Bangladesh has reasons

for not adopting a similar pilot scheme. An officer of the Bangladesh Bureau of Education, Information and Statistics (BANBEIS) said that the public might not accept an experiment confined to only a few schools.

"People might also think these selected schools have been favoured at the expense of other schools. Then others might object to the changes as they do not want children to learn something different from other schools", said the officer.

But since no test was made in the first place, it would not be known whether such objections or misunderstandings would arise.

However, BANBEIS is thinking of evaluating the curriculum by devising some tests to gauge the children's performance.

Questionnaires might also be sent to teachers to find out their reactions and suggestions. Some officers might also visit parents to get their views.

With all the answers in, it might be possible to make further changes to the curriculum.

In many ways, however, the emphasis in the curricular content is the same in Malaysia

and Bangladesh. Both countries have allotted more time to the teaching of language and mathematics than on other subjects.

In Bangladesh, about 60 per cent of the teaching time is concentrated on Bengali and mathematics and 40 per cent on subjects like environmental and religious studies. This constituted the first phase (from class one to two).

In the second phase (from class three to five), there is only a slight decrease in the teaching periods of Bengali and mathematics.

Malaysia too follows a two-phased approach under the proposed new curriculum. In the first stage (from standard one to three) 70 per cent will be focused on Bahasa Malaysia (the national language) and mathematics and 30 per cent on environmental studies, religious studies, arts and crafts.

In the second phase (from standard four to six) 60 per cent will be on the language and 40 per cent on other subjects.

Academic contents are mostly found in environmental studies which get increased attention in the second phase in both countries.

Environmental studies encompass subjects like physics, biology, history and geography.

Under the old curriculum, children in Bangladesh were being taught more academic stuff or formal studies than the basics. The changes made to the curriculum cannot be considered drastic as there was only a change in emphasis from academics to the basics.

But in Malaysia it was a drastic overhaul with subjects like health science and science integrated into environmental studies. The new look curriculum was introduced after teachers, educationists and parents had complained about the irrelevance of the academic-orientated approach of the old curriculum.

Bangladesh is also shifting its focus from academic irrelevancies in primary education to the basics for another reason.

Said education official: "Our primary education also highlights the importance of blue-collar work".

This means that in subjects like physical education the children have been doing some light work, like gardening and painting.

It is hoped that when the students leave school, they will not be afraid to do manual work. And in developing countries, economic progress is dependent on blue-collar work in many ways.