

PRIMARY EDUCATION IN A SHAMBLES-1

70pc can't read, write even after 5-yr study

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The quality of the country's primary education is so substandard that around 70 percent of students who complete the five-year primary level education are unable to read, write or calculate properly.

According to a new government study, 69 per cent of students who have completed primary school are not able to read news headlines in Bangla newspapers properly.

Also, 87 percent of these pupils failed to do simple mathematical calculations like addition, subtraction, multiplication and division.

The survey has also found students tremendously weak in English language.

The recently published study on 'National Assessment of Pupils of Grades three and five - 2006' under the Second Primary Education Development Programme (PEDP-II) has also revealed that 72 per cent of them are not able to write a short composition.

Badrul Alam Tarafdar, secretary in charge of Primary and Mass Education, admits that there

is an issue of low quality of education at primary level. He said that in order to encourage parents to send their children to schools, expanding primary education used to be the main target of the education ministry, not quality education.

"But, the time has come to focus on quality education now. At present, ensuring quality education is the main goal of the ministry because most parents are now willing, even eager, to send their children to schools," Tarafdar told The Daily Star.

Researchers and academicians have identified several causes behind the students' poor performance. The main reason they point out, is that most of the primary students -- both in urban and rural areas -- pass their exams without learning 50 per cent of the curriculum.

Renowned academician Prof Serajul Islam Choudhury said the scenario of low quality education in primary schools is mainly due to lack of attention by teachers, students and also parents.

"Primary education should be extended up to

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class eight because five years is not enough for a children to remember the skills of reading, writing and calculations," Serajul Islam told The Daily Star.

Other experts also agree that increasing the number of years students spend at school would strengthen their literacy skills.

Former vice chancellor of Dhaka University, Moniruzzaman Miah, thinks that a severe shortage of qualified teachers and a faulty examination system are the main reasons why children complete school years without learning the entire curriculum.

"Most teachers at the primary schools do not have adequate teaching skills. Teachers for primary schools should be recruited through the Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) examination under the Public Service Commission to ensure a certain standard of skills," said Miah who is also the chairman of the Education

Commission.

To assess the status of learning by the primary students, the directorate of primary education has conducted three national level assessment studies in the past -- in the years 2000, 2002 and 2006. These assessment studies carried out surveys on students from urban and rural areas across the country.

The alarming results have come out of the 2006 assessment where researchers tested primary school students with a set of questionnaires covered by the school curriculum.

The study also found that quality of education in remote rural areas is far worse compared to urban areas.

This assessment study has found that students in class V have completed about 56 percent of the Bangla, 46 percent of Mathematics and 47 percent of the English syllabus in the national curriculum.

The study also revealed an alarming weakness in mathematics, as only 13 percent of

class V students were found to be able to do simple addition, subtraction, multiplication and division.

Thirty-one per cent of class V students were found to be able to read news headlines in Bangla newspapers properly.

The researchers have identified many factors behind the lack of quality in education imparted at primary level.

Weak organisational and institutional framework for delivery of primary education, lack of proper physical environment at schools, comparatively short school hours, lack of support materials and teachers particularly trained teachers have been pointed out amongst others through the assessment.

The assessment study has recommended that to improve the quality of education contact hours between teachers and students should be increased and more attention should be paid to mathematics and literacy skills in both Bangla and English.