

Thoughts On Primary Education

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PRIMARY school children in Bangladesh generally start schooling at the age of 5+ according to the government rule of admission. Students of primary level are supposed to remain in school for 5 years without retention. They leave school at the age of 10+ to 13. This age is very low for finding regular employment in any sector or organisation, government or private. A small portion of this number of school leavers are employed in some private shops and stalls, but the rest remain as burdens on their families. This is the situation of primary school leavers and dropouts in Bangladesh.

Recently, Government has undertaken the responsibility of bringing all the primary age children into formal schools through a project of Universal Primary Education (UPE). In view of this it would become a growing interest of the planners and policy makers to relate primary curriculum of Bangladesh to work experience so that this cohort of children who are not in a position to go to the higher level can build a base at least to step into an employment position. It is essential to prepare children with skills and attitudes for the world of work to earn a livelihood. Accordingly the new primary curricula envisage to expose all primary pupils to work experience. The justification for this is accustoming students to manual work. But it is not easy to implement through the present formal

system. Question arises how should a formal school in a village replicate on a large scale a process of work experience that seems to go on effortlessly in the informal sector of a rural area. Indeed, if the school fails to go beyond the lowest common denominator of existing rural skills it stands to lose credence with the parents. Be it as it may, there we shall see one good way in which it is possible to find employments for the primary school leavers. This should be an alignment of primary education with the working life of the community.

In Bangladesh it is possible to insert some form of pre-vocational skills into a basic or primary education cycle and thus expose children to a minimum skill orientation. For such a subsistence self-employment strategy it is necessary to stress the re-integration of the primary school youth into an ordinary village life so that the need for such skills can be adapted to village needs and thus children can work alongside the people of the village. For this reason emphasis should be given on correct manual attitude, manual work and reconciliation with village life. For the purpose of attainment of this subsistence self-employment it is required to examine the importance of social control for primary school leavers. It has been noticeable therefore that the more ambitious a skill programme is for the youth the more likely it is that it will somehow require the in-

volvement of the community. Learning skills for self-employment remain a matter of community concern for children of rural primary schools and for that reason it is necessary for the school to maintain a link with the community. Moreover, for the surviving and expanding of school activities and procuring new resources community dimension is unavoidable. Schools are required to orient themselves to self-employment training and also they are to rely on community resources. For an over-populated country like Bangladesh now it is very difficult to give in-school training to the children even at the top two classes of primary cycle without direct link with the community. Hence, a priority on a linkage aspect of primary education is obviously justifiable. The schools therefore either have to gain their self-employment experience through a linkage programme in the community the community members themselves may bring the relevant skills into the class rooms at a low cost.

The main justification for aligning primary education with the working life of the community is that, at this age primary school leavers find it difficult to get a paid job. The community itself can shoulder the employment burden. The unemployment problem of primary school leavers can thus be removed by being localised or in other words, that community involvement in the school will destroy the barriers between

school work and village work. If the school is developed thoroughly in the local community, the responsibility of working lives of the young people will be developed in the village and it is hoped that eventually there will be no such thing as the unskilled primary school leavers.

This strategy of devolution of employment responsibility to the community has already been introduced in a wide variety of settings, combination of study and work etc. in many countries of the world successfully i.e. Cuba, Tanzania, China. Bangladesh has also undergone some experiment and research in similar fields. Two recent studies of this type namely (i) Comining education and productive work experience in Bangladesh and (ii) A study on open air education by Institute of Education, University of Dhaka, are good instances of such a strategy.

Planners of our country have to re-think on educational structure and outcomes of primary education. The main thrust of reforms should be with work preparation, employment and aspiration of the school leavers by providing training in village occupations through a scheme of alignment of primary school with the working life of the community.

As regards planning, designing, administration and implementation of such a scheme no approach is suggested at the moment. However, for a pilot test a planning strategy may be developed in due course.