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## Many students end primary education without basic skills

Staff Correspondent  08 May, 2026, 00:14



*Representational image.*

Many students in Bangladesh enter the secondary school without foundational literacy and numeracy skills, revealed a report of the United Nations Children's Fund on Thursday.

According to the report, baseline assessments of Class VI students in 24 pilot schools demonstrated that 91 per cent of them were unable to correctly answer half of Class V mathematics and 65 per cent Bangla questions. They remain at the 'novice' level.



Lack of skilled teachers, teaching materials, standard training for teachers, monitoring, competency-based curriculum, proper assessment methods and accountability of the authorities concerned are the reasons behind this situation, observed educationists and researchers.

At the report launching event, minister of education and primary and mass education ANM Ehsanul Hoque Milon expressed dissatisfaction over ineffectiveness of the investments in the primary education sector.

UNICEF organised the event to launch the findings of the research titled 'Bringing Learning to Life: Innovations in Teaching, Learning, and Student Engagement' in the capital.

The research by UNICEF in Bangladesh and the UNICEF Office of Research, Innocenti, suggests that improving education outcomes in Bangladesh depends not only on strong policies, but on how effectively they are implemented in classrooms and learning centres.

Some of the key research findings are given below:

Teaching improves significantly when based on actual learning levels rather than assumed grade readiness; curriculum change must be better prepared, more stable, and supported by classroom-ready tools and communication; out-of-school children can rapidly recover learning gaps through flexible and level-based instruction.

Other key findings say:

Combining basic education with vocational skills increases employability and confidence; progress is limited by social norms, mobility restrictions, and lack of financial access; while sustainable impact requires stronger links to markets, finance, and long-term livelihoods.

BRAC University professor emeritus Manzoor Ahmed said that these findings were not new.

He pointed out that the World Bank's Learning Poverty Index reported in 2022 that over 47 per cent of children aged 10 to 14 could not read or write and in 2024 this figure rose to 58 per cent.

'The government's latest periodic National Student Assessment also showed that many Class III students could not read or do maths at a minimum level and it was the same for Class V students about half of whom could not do the same,' he pointed out.

According to professor Manzoor, out of the total 65,620 government primary schools there are no head masters in 32,000 schools.

'Without permanent leadership, there is none to take responsibility for planning, teacher training, or for ensuring accountability,' he said, adding that there were concerns regarding qualifications, skills, and motivation of teachers.

He laid emphasis on addressing school management, adequate availability of teachers, their support and training, supervision, and the physical condition of the schools for proper education.

According to Gonoshahajjo Sangstha founder FR Mahmood Hasan, the teaching-learning method in primary schools is extremely weak.

The current curriculum in Bangladesh, he said, is memorisation-based while children cannot learn without activity-based teaching-learning method.

Mahmood also criticised the existing terminal assessment system which, he observed, should be replaced by formative assessment.

Dependency on notebooks and private tutoring should be stopped also for a real change, he added.

Former director general Md Rafiquzzaman of the Bureau of Non-Formal Education under the primary of mass education ministry said that though he did not fully agree with the findings on student competencies in the Unicef report, the standard of students was quite low.

'Regarding primary schools, it is true that we are far behind the level the nation expects,' he said, adding that the country's primary cycle consisted of about 500 to 700 class hours which got further reduced to 250 to 300 hours because of teachers' negligence, absenteeism, school closures, and various holidays or floods.

In comparison, Sri Lanka provides 1,100 to 1,200 hours, while India provides 900 to 1,100 hours, he mentioned.

Fewer class hours affect the quality of primary education in Bangladesh, he added.

Associate professor Mohammad Mahboob Morshed of the Institute of Education and Research at Dhaka University said that the students experienced learning gap from Class I through to Class V.

Lack of teachers and skilled teachers, learning materials, identification of learning gaps and remedial systems, equity in education facilities and proper training for teachers are the reasons behind the situation, he observed.

Morshed stressed increasing the number of teachers, improving their skills, monitoring, and accountability and taking special initiatives for the children from underprivileged communities.

Attending as the event chief guest, the education minister said that they had undertaken the Fifth Primary Education Development Programme (PEDP-5) project at an estimated cost of around Tk 51,000 crore while earlier the fourth phase of the project had been implemented at a cost of around Tk 32,000 crore.

Even after such huge investments the expected results had not been achieved, he commented.

He added that all stakeholders concerned, including policymakers, field-level officials, education administration and teachers, should take the responsibility and work seriously in that direction.

Conducted from 2023 to 2025 in partnership with government institutions, over 15,000 students and 800 teachers took part in the research throughout the country.

The report underlines a clear conclusion that education reform succeeds when systems are ready.

The event was attended among others by state minister for primary and mass education Bobby Hajjaj, the prime minister's adviser Mahdi Amin, Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education director general professor Khan Moinuddin Al Mahmud Sohel and UNICEF representative in Bangladesh Stanley Gwavuya.

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📍 Hamid Plaza (4th floor), 300/5/A/1, Bir Uttam CR Datta Road, Hatirpool, Dhaka-1205  
PABX: +8802 41062247-50, Fax: +8802-41062245

✉ [newage.editorial@gmail.com](mailto:newage.editorial@gmail.com)

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