

Is Class Size Important?

With the expansion of primary education, in keeping with the plan to introduce education for all, one factor which has not yet figured in our calculations is which class size will give us maximum benefit. Most people appear to be of the view that the smaller the class, the better for both student and teacher. Recent international studies go to support this view, at least at primary level, which places us in a quandary for, with present teacher-student ratios at 1:66, even to be able to imagine a small class of 15 or so is to stretch the imagination beyond limits.

Researchers in the state of Tennessee in the United States, following the progress of a group of 7,000 five year olds for a period of four years found that those taught in classes of around 15 did better at reading and arithmetic than those in larger classes. An analysis of results from the first national standard tests on British seven year-olds taken in 1991 also shows that pupils in smaller classes were more likely to do well.

With this as evidence, it is our feeling that classes in Bangladesh, schools are far too unwieldy for achieving all we would hope for from universal education.

British primary schools have more pupils per teacher than most European schools and 28% of primary school classes reportedly consist of more than 30 pupils. This may, however, be due to the cost of education which becomes more costly, per student, at each higher level.

In Bangladesh the number of children now enrolled at primary level is, inevitably, large, and overcrowding in classes may be the only way to keep down costs but, we question the wisdom of this because the conclusion educators draw from these studies is that, if at all class size matters, it matters most in the earliest years of schooling, which is surely food for thought. Although listening to pupils reading out loud, or having to peer over shoulders as children struggle with arithmetic for the first time, may be boring, or thought to be a waste of time, but in the light of our goals for our children, this may be what is necessary.

As spending for education appears to be the main factor in determining class size, it stands to reason that resource allocation for the different sectors needs to be overhauled. Yet transferring funds from secondary level to primary is likely to meet with considerable resistance despite the fact that switching resources may pay dividends in improved standards of learning. At present, Bangladesh's spending on education, as a proportion of national wealth is still less than the average spent by other developing countries. The government is trying to raise the percentage but, unless the additional amount is spent wisely, it could turn out to be money wasted.

There are, however, people who will dispute such findings on class size. A much publicised study compiled for the American government tested the abilities in mathematics of 13 year olds in a total of 19 countries. South Korean children came out best with Taiwanese children a close second yet both countries have large classes of more than 45, double that of either Canada or America whose children were way down at the bottom of the list. It is possible that class size matters only at primary level and is insignificant later on. Although more research on this score may be needed, we must go on record as saying 66 children to a class is too much and no teacher can do justice to so many children at a time. Not that many city schools in the private sector are better off for reportedly, in most, forty students are crowded into rooms too small to serve as classrooms which surely means that this aspect of education should be attended to.

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