

Education

Pre-Primary And Primary Level

Sylvia Mortoza

BANGLADESH's uneven development in which mass poverty co-exists alongside highly advanced technologies such as the sophisticated chemical process industries and computer/information technologies — is reflected in its education. Education resources have always been so unevenly spread that the emphasis has been on the creation of an educated elite rather than on the provision of mass education. This situation has appalled many and gave rise to the call for universal free and compulsory primary education which is still to be achieved. Unfortunately, this shifted the responsibility for education away from the community to the government with the result that attitudes have changed and those philanthropists who may have come forward to promote education quickly lost interest with the result that around 70 per cent of the population are still unable to read and write.

Sporadic efforts by different regimes to address the problem of education have also had varied results and, although most educationists are inclined to blame successive governments for their inability to put their grandiose schemes into operation, the faults to be found in the system cannot be laid at the door of government alone and must be equally shared by all. Much of the present malady can be said to be due to this tendency for people to believe that, because education as a right is written into the constitution, the government alone should provide it and, therefore, local people or communities have no further role to play.

Nothing could be further from the truth for, unless the parents and guardians are involved in teaching, schools can never reach the desired standard or live up to people's expectations. This is, in fact, the basic reason why education does not achieve all it should for without proper interaction or coordination between home and school, no community can expect to prosper, de-

spite the decision by the government to afford top priority to improving its human resource.

Although the curriculum followed in the primary schools is designed to achieve a set level of competency as in other things the minimum standard often becomes the maximum and rarely, it ever, goes beyond. Schools are also severely handicapped by the generally poor linguistic ability of the teachers most of whom "fall-back" on local dialect and other colloquialisms in teaching, restricting the students ability to improve his/her linguistic skills further. This adds to their learning burden, for Bengali in its written or classical form is by no means easy and the difference between the spoken variety and the written formal style is wide and difficult to bridge.

A recent suggestion that it could be worthwhile to undertake a reform of the Bengali alphabet to reduce and simplify the complex characters which now have to be learned by the small child, much in the manner that Greece did, could ease the pain of learning and encourage people to learn how to read and write quicker. In other words, the written form of the language will become easier for small children and the unlettered to grasp.

There are many other problems at the primary level which are not being dealt with and need urgent attention from the authorities for most have a direct effect on the standard and quality of education. For example there is no provision for a child's transition from the familiar and secure environment of the home to the less familiar and less secure environment of the school. This is particularly difficult for children coming from poor homes where the school-going tradition has not been established. As this period has long lasting effects on a child's psyche, unless this can be made smoother and more pleasant we could well end up with even more maladjusted children than we have now and with psychological problems

difficult, it not impossible, to undo. The government is yet to recognise this need and has not so far, introduced a policy for pre-primary education.

The arrangements in the satellite schools are said to be also conventional and there is no improvement over the long established government schools. In fact, despite their drawbacks, better physical facilities can be found in privately run Kindergartens and some of the non-formal schools run by the NGOs also seem to have a better attitudinal approach. However, as neither the government primary schools nor the private primary schools have teachers who have been specially trained to handle pre-school children, this is an area that needs attention. No consideration is apparently given to a teacher's ability to handle first level entrants when selecting teachers for these lower classes with the result many children find their first years in school unforgettable in the sense they are highly traumatic. Reports of "bad" teachers, those who are unresponsive to a child's needs are very common especially in privately-run Kindergartens.

Although primary level enrollments have increased to 91 per cent, the number of drop-outs at 39 per cent are still too high to be acceptable and as only a little more than half manage to complete the first five years of school, most passing at the minimum pass level, the results are not happy. Worse still, they cannot find jobs requiring some little qualification in their villages which either encourages them to look for work in the towns and cities or adds to their frustration quite apart from dashing the hopes of their parents. Unless a job creation scheme is taken up as a parallel scheme, this problem is likely to increase and, if not provided with employment opportunities they are likely to regress so quickly it will make the policy makers' heads swim and, it should be remembered, the

amount of money spent on them for their primary education will inevitably go to waste, a waste the country cannot afford.

As the people in charge of reforming the education sector are generally academics with little experience of the situation on the ground — and the civil servants who implement the plans tend to keep things going more or less as they were, things are unlikely to change soon — at least not without effort. There is basically not much wrong with the new curriculum but, as the quality of curriculum delivery is determined by the quality of the teaching staff which means his/her professional competency, teaching skill, attitudinal characteristics and commitment, a greater emphasis needs to be laid on teacher training. And with technology moving as fast as it is, it is not at all easy to predict with any certainty what skills may be required in five or ten years. Therefore, greater care must be made in planning a curriculum flexible enough to span the defects.

Many teachers for the primary sector are recruited from SSC and HSC level. These teachers should not be put into the classroom without proper training. Even degree holders, those graduates produced by our institutions with liberal arts and other non-pragmatic "specialisation," are handicapped because their degree has not provided them with any specialised skills beyond their own subject. "On-the-job" training is often necessary for both groups as neither has the ability to analyse problems, write or communicate efficiently, and few indeed are able to put the solutions into practice for which primary school students suffer. Teachers in private schools are generally less competent and less trained than the government school teachers although some schools offer "on-the-job" training to new recruits.