

PRIMARY EDUCATION Learners or Just Test-takers?

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THE primary education authorities - especially the Directorate of Primary Education (DPE) and the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (MOPME) - must be busily preparing for the Primary Education Completion Examination (PECE) or *Shomaponi* to be held in November.

Over 3 million children completing grade 5 of primary school will sit for the nationwide public examination. Education experts, academics, researchers and informed citizens have questioned the value of this examination. They have in fact pointed out the harm it causes citing educational theory, research and international experience. Teaching-learning has been taken over by test-preparation, they argue.

The authorities have not been persuaded to reconsider their position ignoring all evidence and arguments. They have doggedly defended it, which reflects a problematic decision-making process in our education system.

Education Watch (EW) Report 2014, based on an empirical nationwide survey, to be released on August 19, looked at the pros and cons of PECE. It has brought out damning evidence about the problems arising from PECE.

The EW team led by Samir Ranjan Nath, and guided by a technical committee consisting of education experts, has followed the usual methodology of EW reports of collecting representative sampling of relevant data and surveying views of major stakeholders including students, teachers, parents and education personnel.

SOME KEY FINDINGS

The following are some key findings of EW 2014 study.

- *Exam-centric teaching-learning and rote memorisation has been given a boost by PECE.* Memorisation and drilling have become synonymous with studying, understanding of contents have very little or no space.

- *Dependency has increased on paid private tutoring.* Private tutoring has spread to all types of institutions and socio-economic groups both in urban and rural areas. EW estimated a total household expenditure of a thousand crore Taka for this purpose, close to total public expenditure for primary education.

- *Guidebooks have pushed out textbooks.* Guidebooks have become the principal instrument for studying to most students, school teachers and private tutors. The appeal of the guidebook is in its ready-made answers to likely exam questions, which are memorised and drilled without the trouble of reading textbooks and supplementary materials, learning the content and figuring out own answers.

- *Students are enticed to learn malpractice and unethical behaviour.* A large number of examinees, supported directly or indirectly by teachers and examination organisers, anxious to score high at any cost, engaged in malpractices and inappropriate behaviour in and outside examination halls.

- *Inequality has increased throughout the system.* Inequality in terms of school type, urban-rural dichotomy, gender, pupils' background and private expenditure has increased with the household spending and preparation for PECE.

FIVE CRITICAL CONCERNS

Five questions about PECE have been raised by the EW Study.

a) *Does it measure defined competencies of primary education completers?* Only a moderate relationship between competency-based test and PECE results (a correlation of 0.60, for those statistically inclined) indicates

problems in this respect. The high pass rate in PECE and the low levels of competency acquired by fifth grade students in Bangla and math as assessed by National Student Assessment survey under DPE auspices is one kind of evidence among others. The latter shows that only about a quarter of students completing class five are achieving basic skills in Bangla reading and writing and simple mathematical calculations.

b) *Does it contribute to improving the teaching learning process and thus quality of education?* The effects of PECE have been to encourage drills and rote memorisation, neglect understanding and creativity, disregard basic content of the curriculum, and discourage thinking and reasoning.

c) *Does it support, complement and encourage formative evaluation in classroom and school as an essential element of good pedagogy?* Formative assessment is continuing day-to-day attention by teachers to ascertain if their students are learning what they are supposed to learn. In educational terms, this is more important than the summative assessment like PECE. PECE has taken away time and effort from formative evaluation and regular teaching learning.

d) *Does it contribute to quality with equity in the system?* Results so far show that the private kindergartens serving the more privileged have an advantage in terms of PECE performance.

Household expenditure for private tutoring is worsening prevailing inequities.

e) *Is it consistent with creating a developmental and supportive environment for young children?* PECE, which replaced school-based annual class five examinations, with its grading system and high profile publicity of results, declares quite unfairly more than half of the young children falling between grades 1 to 3 incompetent non-achievers. This is the reason most countries have abandoned competitive and high profile public examination at an early age.

It is difficult to agree with the official position that PECE has been a major step in valid and reliable assessment of student learning and improvement of quality in primary education.

WAY FORWARD

EW report recommends general steps for improving quality of instruction and some specific measures for reforming student assessment. It argues for redesigning the nature of the completion of examination, focusing on measurement of foundational skills in Bangla and math and changing the high stake character of the completion of examination.

Intentional or incidental, the examination has become a source of anxiety and grief for students, parents, teachers and school authorities. The direction based on experience and research point towards making the national assessment primarily focused on foundational skills of language and math and a diagnosis of the system performance - schools, teaching-learning, subject wise issues and disparities in outcomes - rather than grading individual students.

A solution would be to have a category of "pass with distinction" for those scoring 80

percent and higher and all others awarded a "pass." Students' scores can still be recorded and used for research and analysis of the system. The completion examination should be re-designed based on experience of other countries as well as the National Student Assessment experience in Bangladesh.

Teachers must be supported, respected and empowered to do their job. Teachers should be at the centre of any education system along with students. The education system has to help teachers understand their duties, enable them to develop and apply their professional skills to guide and assist their students and take responsibility for what they do.

Assessment has to create the space and the conditions for teachers to play their role in the classroom with their students.

Even a national assessment can be given a local face. At present, DPE with its limited human resource, conducts the largest public examination in Bangladesh as a wholly centralised operation. A basic competency-based test focusing on foundational skills be less cumbersome to administer. Multiple versions of the question sets can be distributed randomly to the Upazila level prior to the exam to protect test security.

Such a move would be consistent with National Education Policy recommendation Upazila-based examination at the grade five level and a national assessment after grade 10. It is too late to do anything about the examination. But if better sense prevails, necessary actions can be taken early to redesign the examination for 2016. Child and the primary education system may spared the perils of PECE.

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