

Textbook overload becomes children's nightmares

Ershad Kamol

MANY English medium schools and kindergartens require students to use seven times the number of textbooks required by the government syllabus, a New Age investigation has found.

An excess of books create 'unnecessary' pressure on the children with potentially harmful effects on both their creativity and psychological health, educationists, curriculum consultants and child health experts observed.

The number of textbooks on the curriculums of these schools is higher than the number required in any country of the world,' professor Siddiqur Rahman, consultant of the National

Curriculum and Textbook Board, told New Age.

And of course it's against the spirit of the national curriculum. When choosing books for the curriculum, the schools never consider the mental capacity of children, the level of teacher-student contact hours and as a result unnecessary stress is imposed on the children,' he added.

NCTB consultants assigned to develop Bangladesh's primary and secondary curriculum confirmed that the national curricula in countries such as India, Sri Lanka, Thailand and the Philippines included a maximum of eight subjects up till class VI.

Bangladesh's national

curriculum also includes eight subjects up to class V and nine subjects up to class VIII.

However, New Age inquiries into the curriculums and booklists of 19 schools, including eight English medium schools, five kindergartens and six Bangla medium schools, reveal that these schools use far more texts than the government schools.

Although the national education policy suggests that students at the pre-primary stage of education should not use any textbooks, 11 out of 13 English medium and kindergartens schools which were part of the New Age inquiry required the playgroup students to have

five textbooks on Bangla, English, Arabic, and drawing.

While a class I student at a government primary school is required to have three textbooks, the inquiry found that children in non-government English and Bangla medium schools study at least 12 texts.

Scholastica, one of the country's leading English medium schools, requires class I students to buy a staggering 21 textbooks. Another four English medium schools surveyed by New Age required students to have between 18 and 20 textbooks.

And while students from class III to V at government schools study six textbooks

involving six subjects, the English medium schools use up to 19 textbooks for a similar number of subjects.

Similar differences in the numbers of books were also found to exist for students studying between class VI and VIII.

Nazneen Rahman, senior vice-principal of Curriculum Development at Scholastica, told New Age, 'After years of research, analysis and study we felt the need to increase the number of literature books to build a firm literary base of the students at the very formative stage of their schooling.'

'The books are selected at each level or class to fulfill the requirement of each' *Continued on page 4 Col. 5*

Textbook overload

Continued from page 1. study area of the curriculum developed by the Curriculum Development Unit,' she added.

Although the existing list of English and Bangla books may seem high, some of these are simple story books and are selected only to enhance their reading skills, some are activity-based worksheets which are student centric and have been designed to develop their critical thinking skills as well as communication skills,' she said.

Fakhruddin Md Kesayetullah, vice-principal of Islamic International School Dhaka, which requires class I students to have 20 textbooks and class II students to have 19 books blamed the scarcity of quality texts for why English medium schools included too many textbooks.

'We have tried a lot to limit the number of texts. But, we have not found suitable quality books.'

He, however, could not provide any educational reason for including Arabic at the early stages of schooling, though he claimed that students enjoyed reading Arabic. Parents, on the other

hand, create pressure on the low profile schools to include more texts covering a wider range of subjects than the high profile schools use. And there is no central monitoring system of the government to handle the situation,' Kesayetullah added.

Anwarul Haque, former chairman of National Academy for Educational Management, said, 'The schools include more texts than the national curriculum some of which are beyond the capacity of children, primarily to legitimise their higher tuition fees, and secondly to create an opportunity for private coaching and thirdly because they are influenced by the importers and publishers of such textbooks.'

'For their own financial benefit the schools are killing creativity of the students and creating unnecessary pressure on the children,' he observed.

Bangla medium students studying in the leading schools also face similar problems. A class I student at Viqarunnisa Noon School, for example, include rapid readers and general knowledge textbooks when students of the same class at

government schools are just introduced to Bangla and English alphabets and number counting.

Viqarunnisa Noon School principal Manju Ara Begum claimed that the school included such textbooks as suggested by the 'conscious' parents and teachers to increase 'creativity' of the children.

Some low profile non-government Bangla medium schools have developed an advanced curriculum by including geometry for class III student, which at government schools is introduced in class VI.

'It reflects people's desire for material gains in a highly competitive society. All parents dream of their children becoming highly successful in career without considering any holistic development of the children,' observed professor Shaheen Islam, chairman of the education and counselling psychology department of Dhaka University.

'Such mentality is creating tremendous pressure on the children, since children are forced to study throughout the day at schools and coaching centres. They don't have any leisure time. And

the faulty education system of the country has just resulted in the situation getting worse,' she added.

Child healthcare specialists observed that 'unnecessary' pressure on children sometimes resulted in their suffering psychosomatic syndrome.

'These days we get many children who complain of aches on different parts of the body, but we don't get any organic cause of such symptoms. It happens to the children who are overstressed,' Abid Hossain Mollah, professor of child health of Dhaka Medical College, said.

Fatema Zannat, a counsellor at Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University, told New Age that she provides counselling to a number of children who are subject to unnecessary educational pressure by parents and schools.

Education ministry secretary Kamal Abdul Naser Chowdhury told New Age that the ministry did not supervise the curriculum of the English medium schools. 'In case of any complaints against Bangla medium school, we will investigate,' he said.