

Reforming Education

A good deal of talk is going on about education these days but we must remember education is a social service and its aim is to instruct and shape minds. For children to be productive citizens, they need an education, but where class differences continue to prevail, and where funding for public education remains low, the need for private schools increases. This causes class distinctions, which may not be healthy so, to ensure uniformity of purpose, a team of teachers, psychologists and educationists should be employed to make regular inspections of all schools.

Although under law, education is free and compulsory for children up to class VIII, in reality factors such as location of schools and the availability of teachers severely limit access to education. In many cases, particularly in rural areas, families simply cannot afford the cost of sending a child to school if it means losing his income. Such barriers to education mean only 40 to 50 per cent of school-aged children actually attend school, which in turn leads to persistently high levels of adult illiteracy. With the gap left by formal education, other means of teaching must of necessity step in, and the BRAC informal schools are one such alternative for students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

At the time these informal schools were seen as a radical departure from the norm but as their success reverberated around the country they paved the way for newer innovations for learning. But the role of the state as exclusive provider of education also underwent radical change and though in theory this provided a student with a wider choice of schools, it did not necessarily raise standards. Due to this factor, only those schools with a planned programme of learning and facilities for teacher training should be permitted to function because if schools employ untrained teachers or do not have an in-house training scheme, they are unable to function as the conscience of society. Under such circumstances, a teacher will become a retrogressive force instead of a force for positive action.

One other reason for the current state of affairs is that two or more parallel systems have been allowed to run concurrently. If reform of the system is needed, it must begin here and the fact that the government is taking steps to reform Madrasa education and bring it in line with general education in the light of the Dr MA Bari Commission report, is a welcome step. As per the Commission recommendations, vocational courses will be introduced for the Madrasa students in keeping with specific job needs. The Education Ministry is also going to start a vocational training project for children in jails so that they can get engaged in jobs after coming out. The government also plans to introduce the semester system in all educational institutions from the year 2004 to improve quality of education and quality of life.

As quality education for small children calls for far greater commitment than any other activity, it is most essential to employ only highly skilled and dedicated teachers. With only 2.60 per cent of institutions with a standard A-plus, this is sorely needed. But a recent order of the government regarding the presence of teachers in secondary schools and colleges has provoked unrest among the teachers, in both government and non-government schools and the Bangladesh Federation of Teachers' Associations (BFTA) has urged the authorities to withdraw the order since it does not conform to the provisions of the UNESCO-ILO Recommendations concerning the status of teachers, particularly one that says: "Authorities should recognise that improvement in the social and economic status of teachers, their living and working conditions, their terms of employment and their career prospects are the best means of overcoming any existing shortage of competent and experienced teachers and of attracting and retaining in the teaching profession substantial number of fully qualified persons."