

Ways to improve primary education

by Md Siddiqur Rahman

GIVE me an educated mother, I shall promise you the birth of a civilised, educated nation.' The role of a mother in educating a child can be easily perceived through the statement of Napoleon. Mother is the first teacher of a child. She has to take care of her baby not only after giving birth but also from the pregnancy period. The children are being sent to pre-primary school at the age of 5-6 years for childhood development which is congruent to SDGs target 4.2 ie, 'By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education.'

Working for quality primary education was my long-time desire since joining the civil service in 2003. I had the opportunity to work on primary education while I was working in the Bangladesh Public Administration Training Centre. Two sessions and visits to see government primary education were incorporated in foundation training course contents. The then rector AZM Shafiqul Alam encouraged me to work on that. Under 'Bangladesh: Exploring Potentialities' module, each participant was sent to visit government primary school during field attachment. In feedback session, the then director general of the directorate of primary education Shamol Kanti Ghosh was invited to listen to the experience of the participants. In course of the 50th FTC, the secretary to the ministry of primary and mass education AKM Abdul Awal Majumdar along with the director general came to have feedback of 250 participants. The director general requested 260 participants of the 55th Foundation Training Course to visit their own primary school where they studied. The participants were motivated to be involved in improving the quality of education and

other development activities of their school. He also assured support from the directorate of primary education and issued letters.

After joining as upazila nirbahi officer in Kishoreganj upazila in Nilphamari, I got the direct opportunity to work for developing primary education. Visiting some schools, it was seen that the shortage of teachers, poor quality of teaching, poor attendance of the students, indiscipline, teacher's frequent visits to upazila education office during class time and so on. Why do teachers come to education office so frequently during class time? There are many problems, said some teachers. Unfortunately, there was no plan of their own to overcome the existing problems. To find out problems and prospects, one workshop was arranged with all head teachers and analyse SWOT — strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of an organisation. Usually strengths and weaknesses come from within organisation and opportunities and threats come from outside the organisation. Of course, there is no hard and fast rule; it may sometimes vary, depending upon the situation. However, teachers first identified the existing strengths or capabilities, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to Kishoreganj upazila primary education.

For example, 169 government primary schools, new buildings, qualified and punctual teachers, a huge number of students are the strengths. A number of weak points came out from the discussions such as 60 per cent of the teachers do not reach and leave the school timely; 80 per cent of the teachers conduct class sessions without lesson plans and preparations; students are not taught as per the contents designed; various types of learning and teaching methodologies are not used. For example, teamwork, dialogue, exercise, story, role play, simulation, etc. are not practised in most cases. Teacher-student relationship is not friendly. There

are no special cares for weak students, no sufficient classrooms for classes in one shift; there is scarcity of benches, furniture; there is an abnormally high teachers-student ratio; many posts of teachers in remote schools are vacant; and so on. There are also opportunities like school meal projects, scholarship, free books, SLIP and other allocations, etc. Threats like child marriage, dropouts, land grab, gambling, heckling of girls, etc exists.

On the basis of the SWOT analysis, three more workshops were arranged with upazila education officer, assistant upazila education officer, leaders of teachers' association and expert teachers to work out a smart action plan to address the problems. The overall goal of the action plan is to ensure the quality of education along with full enrolment and the prevention of dropout. There are eight specific targets such as ensuring full enrolment of children, reducing dropout to 5 per cent, ensuring at least 90 per cent attendance, ensuring 100 per cent success at primary education completion examinations, achieving at least 10 per cent A+ in PEC examinations from every school, achieving at least 15 per cent A+ in Class III and IV in examinations from every school, ensuring achievable qualities in Class I, II and III and enhancing reading skills of Bangla and English. There are 27 actions including role assignment and timeframe in the action plan, child survey, full enrolment, home visit, meeting with mothers and guardians, reduction in dropout rate, timely arrival and departure of students and teachers, clean environment, the use of learning materials and methodology, co-curricular activities.

Following the action plan, child surveys were conducted and new students were enrolled. Meetings with mothers and parents meeting were held where they were motivated to send their children to school. Students who dropped

out were re-admitted. Attention was also given to children with disabilities and a list of such children was made and they were sent to school by the use of devices such as hearing aids, wheel chairs and glasses. Timely arrival and departure were ensured. Attendance increased to 90 per cent. Weekly tests and three model test were held, answer scripts were evaluated and given to them. The use of learning and teaching materials and methodology and teacher's note made the classroom teaching interesting and enjoyable. Primary students have participated in debates and quiz competitions in Upazila Digital Fair 2014 and 2015. Co-curricular activities such as quiz contests, debates and sports events have reduced the dropout rate. In a nutshell, qualitative and qualitative changes have been taken place in the implementation of the action plan.

Since primary education is the foundation of education system; so it is essential to strengthen the foundation; without a strong base, education might remain incomplete and risky. It is essential to analyse SWOT in every school and to work out an action plan to overcome weaknesses with strengths and sort out threats with opportunities.

A proper education system must be in place to develop the minds that create knowledge and make further improvements in schools. Special emphasis would be given to teaching methods that sharpen the qualities of our students at all levels for the development of skilled and creative human resources, which are one of the eight goals of the Bangladesh Vision 2021. The implementation of Vision 2021 will expedite achieving SDG 4 — ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. Sincere initiatives are important in this regard.

Md Siddiqur Rahman, UNO, Kishoreganj, Nilphamari.