What we can learn from Sweden’s rethink of digital classrooms

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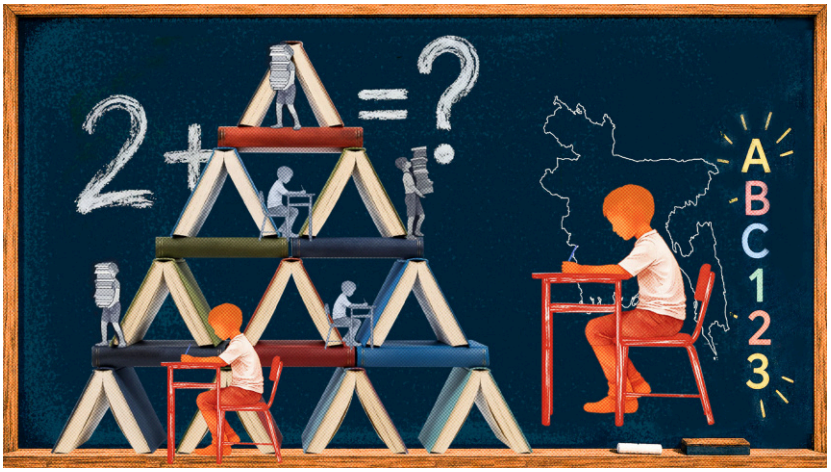

VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

Sweden is currently doing something that, a decade ago, would have seemed unthinkable for one of Europe’s most digitally advanced societies: it is pulling back from using screens in classrooms. After years of equipping students with laptops and tablets, the Swedish government is now encouraging a return to printed textbooks, handwritten work, and reduced screen exposure—especially for younger children.

The shift reflects a growing concern that heavy reliance on digital tools may be weakening students’ ability to concentrate and is affecting their reading proficiency. Backed in part by findings linked to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), policymakers argue that core skills such as reading, writing, and basic comprehension are more effectively developed through traditional, paper-based learning. This is reinforced by other evidence as well: despite Sweden’s strong digital reputation, a 2023 study under the International Computer and Information Literacy Study (ICILS) found that four out of 10 Swedish students did not reach a basic level of digital competence.

That said, the recent policy shift is not being framed as a rejection of technology. Instead, it is presented as a correction to what officials see as an overextension of digital learning in schools.

Still, the move has sparked debate. Critics caution that reducing screen-based education too sharply could leave students less prepared for a labour market that is increasingly shaped by automation, data-driven systems, and artificial intelligence. In a country closely associated with global tech innovation, the central tension remains how to strengthen foundational learning without weakening digital competitiveness.

But while Sweden is trying to recalibrate after years of deep digital integration, Bangladesh is still at a much earlier and more uneven stage of a similar journey.

A recent survey by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics offers a snapshot of this reality. It shows that 53.4 percent of people in the country use the internet, while 88.4 percent use mobile phones. But access to devices that support deeper learning remains limited, as only 11.3 percent use computers. The digital divide is also geographic, with 75.7 percent internet usage in urban areas compared to 43.6 percent in rural regions. Cost remains a major barrier, with 43.6 percent of respondents saying they avoid using the internet due to high prices.

Beyond access, the survey highlights how limited digital capability still is. The most common ICT skill is copy-paste, performed by 84.4 percent of users, a figure that effectively captures the level of everyday digital literacy. Usage patterns also reflect shallow engagement: 64.4 percent of users search for government job-related information, 49.8 percent consume sports content, and only 11.6 percent engage in online shopping.

What these figures point to is not just a connectivity gap, but also a gap in depth of internet usage. Digital tools are widely present, but their utility remains functional. The tools required for creation, analysis, or advanced problem-solving are still limited for most users. This gap is reflected in the education system, where technology has expanded in presence but not fully in purpose.

Over the past decade, Bangladesh has invested heavily in ICT-based learning under its “Digital Bangladesh” agenda. Multimedia classrooms have been introduced in thousands of schools, teachers have received ICT training, and a national teachers’ portal now connects more than 600,000 educators for sharing lessons and materials. During the Covid pandemic, this system was stress-tested at scale, with televised classes, online platforms, and mobile-based learning used to keep education running during school closures.

The current political leadership in education has also outlined a more skills-oriented and hybrid approach to technology use in learning. Education Minister ANM Ehasnul Hoque Milon’s plans emphasise expanding ICT-based training for students, including short courses for programming, cybersecurity, and digital marketing, alongside stronger technical and vocational education. There is also a renewed focus on improving digital infrastructure in schools and technical institutions, including expanding multimedia classrooms, introducing smart learning environments, and increasing access to basic devices for teachers through initiatives often described as “one teacher, one tab” approaches. At the same time, the focus remains on using technology to support employability rather than fully replacing traditional classroom structures.

More recently, the government moved forward with "smart classroom" initiatives to modernise secondary education, including smart boards, recording facilities, and digital infrastructure in selected schools.

However, this raises questions about priorities in a system where many classrooms still lack basic tools such as functional blackboards, adequate lighting, ventilation, and teaching materials.

Additionally, while smart technologies can make classrooms more engaging, they cannot replace skilled teachers or structured instruction. Traditional teaching allows for a slower, more gradual learning experience that helps students engage with ideas while also fostering direct, face-to-face interaction with teachers. In contrast, screen-based instruction can sometimes encourage passive consumption and contribute to cognitive overload, particularly among younger learners.

Bangladesh's structural limitations further complicate the picture. Most students still depend primarily on mobile phones rather than computers, limiting opportunities to develop advanced digital skills. Rural schools continue to lag behind urban institutions in terms of both infrastructure and reliability of internet access, while teachers' capacity to deliver effective ICT-based instruction varies significantly. In many cases, technology is still used mainly to replicate traditional teaching methods by presenting lectures and notes in a digital form, without fundamentally changing the underlying emphasis on memorisation and examination performance.

Against this backdrop, international assessments point to persistent weaknesses and disparity in the broader system. A 2023 World Bank report highlighted Bangladesh's continuing challenges in education, including lower learning outcomes, uneven access to quality schooling in rural areas, and limited investment in education infrastructure.

In the meantime, digital technology has already moved well beyond the classroom and into everyday life, particularly for children. Even where it is not yet contributing meaningfully to learning, it is already shaping their attention spans, behaviour, and daily routines. Many children spend long hours on mobile games and social media outside school hours. In some households, even very young children have developed a strong dependence on screens, where everyday activities such as eating or emotional regulation are tied to their access to a video playing in front of them. In fact, a 2024 study on children in Bangladesh found that around 86 percent of preschool-aged children show signs of smartphone dependence.

Technology is not only something being introduced into classrooms; it is something that has already become embedded in childhood itself, mostly outside the control of schools or learning systems.

Seen together, Sweden and Bangladesh represent different points along the same global transition. Sweden is now questioning the effects of having gone too far with digitalisation in education, while Bangladesh is still trying to ensure that digital tools produce consistent and meaningful learning outcomes at all.

Ultimately both are confronting the same issue: that technology does not automatically improve education. Its impact depends on how it is structured, how deeply it is integrated into teaching, and whether it strengthens learning or simply changes its format. In Bangladesh's case, the challenge now

extends beyond classrooms—towards a generation already shaped by technology long before education systems have fully adapted to it.

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