

Low-Cost School with Quality: Can BRAC's Nabodhara Pilot Set a Trend?

Syeda Fareha S. Islam¹

Abstract

Low-cost private school is gaining popularity because public system is not delivering the goods in respect of quality school education with equity. Without denying or disputing the imperative of right to education, the premise of education as a public good, and the state's role in fulfilling the right to education, in the complex calculus of how public interest and citizens' rights are best realized in the real world, there has to be room for non-government provisions and public-private partnership, when certain "rules of the game" are established and observed. BRAC's piloting of Nabodhara School is an initiative to find a pragmatic approach to expanding the opportunity for school education with quality and equity. This article describes the early phase of the Nabodhara school.

Key words: Low-cost private school, BRAC pilot school, Nabodhara.

A low-cost quality school – is this an oxymoron? A range of education stakeholders does not think so. This includes the promoters of public- private partnership in education, those who believe a dose of market principles is good for even a public service activity, and those who are believers in the market mechanism as the answer to all kinds of problems in society. Professor James Tooley of New Castle University, an ardent champion of private schools, says, "I want to see the private schools emerge and then the state just move aside from education" (Guardian, 12 November, 2013). The detractors of private schools also represent a wide spectrum – from somewhat skeptical to strong and ideological opponents of "commodification" of a public good.

The reality is more complex than either group of protagonists is generally willing to accept. Ensuring quality in education, however it is defined, requires a threshold of minimum investment that would provide for the essential inputs, allow the processes to fully put the inputs into use, and produce the outcomes in student learning achievement. School education is a labour-intensive enterprise, teaching personnel accounting for a large proportion of the total cost. Cutting corners too much in this respect inevitably affects quality

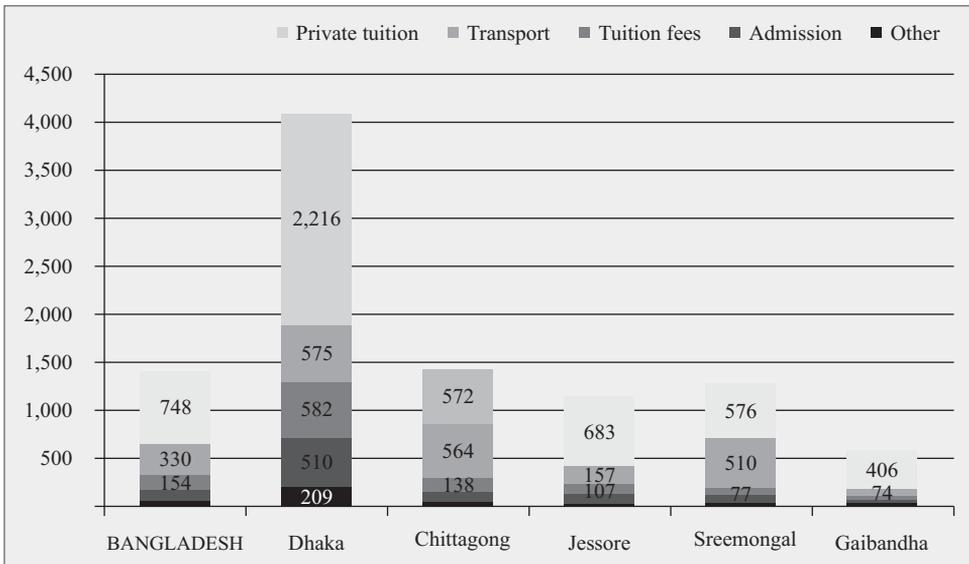
¹ Lecturer III, Institute of Educational Development BRAC University, sfsislam@yahoo.com

adversely. Along with qualified, professionally supported and motivated teachers, basic physical facilities and environment for young learners have to be provided; and the learning materials, books, teaching aids, laboratories and libraries have to be made available. An emphasis on “low-cost” does not quite fit the notion of quality in education.

If education at least at the basic level (defined as at least grade 8 level by Education Policy 2010) is a right of children and education is a public good benefiting society as a whole, what justification and rationale can be offered for education services at the basic level to be organized with a cost-recovery approach, even if it is not run as a profit-turning business? The rationale lies in the fact that the real world is more complex than the premises underlying theories and ideologies about public goods and public services. If the state-provided public services for whatever reasons do not serve the public and children are deprived of their right to education of acceptable quality, and a less “purist” approach expands educational opportunities for children with a degree of equity, which may fall short of absolute equality of opportunities, such an approach can be regarded as acceptable and defensible.

At the same time the effort must continue to overcome the problems of public education services and to create the conditions for the state to meet its obligation in respect of the right to education of children.

Figure 1. Household Educational Spending at the secondary level



Source: BRAC-Pearson Survey, 2012

Pearson International, a multinational conglomerate in publishing and education business, and involved in promoting for-profit education enterprises, conducted an exploratory study in Bangladesh about the prospects for fee-paying quality schooling at the suggestion of BRAC. The survey confirmed the general perception that households at all economic strata spend a substantial part of their income on children's education, even when the children attend public or publicly assisted schools. The major household cost is for private tutoring outside school. In parents' view, whatever happens in school does not ensure that their children would acquire the required knowledge and competency to do well in the public examination, move on to the next stage of education, or be adequately prepared for the employment market.

The survey also confirmed the findings of other studies and the public perception that teachers are dis-satisfied with their job, have poor incentive and motivation, functions in adverse working conditions, and have no career and professional development path in front of them. Demoralised and demotivated teachers can hardly make their contribution to a functioning school system that can serve the interest of learners and society.

Table 1. Teacher Satisfaction and Motivation in Secondary Schools

Teachers are unsatisfied and are not motivated:

- **Low salaries:** Non-government teacher salaries are comparable to the average GDP per capita in Bangladesh, but in other countries teacher salaries are 3-4 times GDP per capita; teachers struggle to pay for basic needs – food, housing, clothing, transport
- **Poor working conditions:** Schools are underfunded and therefore have inadequate, unpleasant facilities (e.g., a lack of furniture)
- **Very limited career paths:** No clear path to become a master teacher or be involved with school management
- **Performance is not rewarded:** No financial incentive scheme in place to reward good teaching

Source: BRAC-Pearson Survey 2012 citing existing studies

BRAC and Pearson did not go for a joint venture at this time in establishing private schools. But the discussion that was generated led to the idea of trying out low-fee private schools managed by BRAC itself; and prompted BRAC and the Institute of Educational Development to formulate a plan and embark on a trial of the Nabodhara school.

BRAC Nabodhara School – An Introduction

BRAC Nabodhara School is the latest educational endeavor of BRAC. The task has been delegated for design and implementation to the Institute of Educational Development, BRAC University. The school started its journey in January, 2014, teaching Early Learning Class to Secondary grades for 3 to 16 years old students. The mission is to design a replicable, scalable, sustainable and inclusive model of schools with an interactive, stimulating, safe and quality learning environment. Nabodhara is a unique approach to education in Bangladesh because it aims to create a self-supporting institution that provides meticulous academic programmes and addresses holistic development of students. It is a private fee paying school with two campuses located at present in Dhaka city.

The Nabodhara School is designed to offer equal opportunity for all learners irrespective of socio-economic class, religion, and individual differences. This is in line with the aim and objectives of education as mentioned in the National Education Policy 2010 of Bangladesh. The Policy stated that education in Bangladesh aims–

to create unhindered and equal opportunities of education for all as per learners' talents and aptitudes, irrespective of geographical, social and economic situations to establish a society that is free from discrimination; [and] to prevent use of education as a commodity to reap profits. (National Education Policy of Bangladesh, 2010, p. 1)

Key Features of Nabodhara

“Nabodhara” which means “a new trend” follows the National Curriculum and textbooks. Bangla is the medium of instruction, but English is taught as a compulsory language and a strong written and spoken proficiency in English is given priority. Instruction in the English medium following the national curriculum is also planned to be offered as an option. The new trend refers to its conscious effort to offer a high quality of facilities, a wide range of resource materials and above all learner-centred teaching-learning approaches.

For language instruction, the school follows the “thematic approach” in pre-primary and a “two-track approach” in primary grades focusing on accuracy in communication and creativity. Features emphasized in language instruction include:

- A learner-centered active teaching-learning approach
- Emphasis on skills -- reading, writing, listening, speaking, critical thinking and problem solving
- Activity based rhymes book developed
- Library corner in each classroom

In teaching Math and Science, teaching-learning strategies follow from concrete to semi-concrete to abstract:

- Relating prior knowledge and linking with real life application
- Different methods and processes are applied to solve a problem
- Math teaching for young children also uses rhymes, role play and story telling
- Students create their own math and science problems.
- Science and ICT Lab facilities have been established.

Quality in pedagogy and learner-centred practices are encouraged by:

- More contact hours for students than usually required in schools
- Wide variety of learning materials: e.g. posters, board games, flash cards, story books, workbooks, etc.
- Use of the Design for Change approach initiated in Ahmedabad, India. (This refers to students' active involvement in working for change they would like to see in society and school, introduced by Kiran Bir Sethi, an educationist in Gujarat, India.)
- The Teaching Principal, who is not just an administrator
- Trained and qualified teachers with ongoing in-service training
- Researchers and material developers at the Institute of Educational Development working on the project for over a year.
- Teachers' guide for each subject.

Assessment of student learning pays attention to assessing both for learning and of learning:

- Portfolio and individual folders for students
- Formative and summative assessment through reports, presentations, portfolios, project work, investigation, quizzes and tests.

Co-curricular activities are an essential part of school experience. Cultural and creative activities emphasize ethics and values promoting respect for people, appreciation of diversity in society and protection of the environment including:

- Health promotion and "Green School"
- After school programs for the community.

Inclusiveness and diversity

Nobodhara School believes that each child has a right to education. Inclusiveness here connotes coping with a wide range of differentiation which includes gender, religion, divers esocio-economic class, varied ability, and children with special needs.



The National Children Policy of Bangladesh, 2011 affirms that “initiatives shall be taken to extend facilities to the female child, disabled child and child with special needs” (National Children policy of Bangladesh, 2011). This policy is taken as the guide in designing the school programme.

Students from diverse socio economic class

In view of the mission of the school and the government policy, BRAC Nobodhara School has adopted a diversity policy, accommodating students of diverse socio-economic background.

The one-time admission fee is Taka 10,000 (approximately USD130), an annual session fee is Taka 8,000 (USD85) and the monthly tuition fee is Taka 1,500 (USD19). Financial support is provided to the students on the basis of parents’ profession, source of income, family expenditure and parents’ financial capability. Concession is also provided to the siblings studying in Nobodhara School. In this case, the second child gets 50% discount on admission fee. In total 73 students out of 252 received concession on admission and session fees and the monthly tuition charge.

Table 2. Nabodhara School – Students receiving admission fee and tuition concession

Total number of students	Range of financial support on admission fee	Range of financial support on monthly fee	Total% of students receiving financial benefit
252	10%-95%	20%-90%	29%

Class	Total Number of students	Mothers’ Profession								
		Office Employee	Business	Home maker	Doctor	Architect	Lawyer	Teacher	Domestic Helper	Deceased
ELC	77	18	1	46	2	2	1	7	-	-
Pre Primary	57	8	2	39	2	-	1	5	-	-
Grade I	45	5	3	29	-	-	-	8	-	-
Grade II	19	1	1	14	-	-	-	2	-	1
Grade III	21	4	-	16	-	-	-	1	-	-
Grade VI	33	4	1	22	-	-	-	3	3	-
Total	252	40	8	116	4	2	2	26	3	1

Table 3: Nabodhara School Parents’ Background

Office employee	Father’s Profession												
	Business	Engineer	Teacher	Architect	Doctor	Journalist	Researcher	Rickshaw Puller	Lawyer	Labour	Driver	Tailor	Deceased
48	20	2	2	-	1	1	-	-	-	2	-	1	-
26	24	1	1	1	1	1	2	-	-	-	-	-	-
24	15	-	1	1	-	1	-	-	1	-	-	-	1
7	6	1	2	-	-	-	-	1	2	1	-	-	-
12	6	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1	-	-	1
9	16	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	3	3	-	1
126	87	4	6	2	2	3	2	1	2	8	5	1	3

Source: Nabodhara School

The data about students and parents indicate that the pledge to offer equitable opportunities is reflected in fee and tuition concessions offered to 29% of the students. The parents' occupations suggest that they belong pre-dominantly to middle and upper-middle strata with most engaged in professional jobs and business. The lower socio-economic strata with occupations such as laborers, rickshaw-pullers, drivers, tailors and domestic help comprised less than five percent of the parents.

If Nabodhara expects to live up to its commitment to offer equitable educational opportunities through a fee-charging school, it has to find ways to expand its fee concession strategy so that a greater number of the children from disadvantaged families can enroll. Then, it may be argued that, schools receiving public subsidy, especially those which have earned a reputation of academic performance, hence highly competitive, may not have a strong record of offering equitable opportunities. Nonetheless, BRAC as a development NGO, with its organizational mission of equitable development, has to be especially mindful of the equity consequences of the Nabodhara model.

Student with Special Needs

Nobodhara School caters to students with mixedability and individual differences. This principle is reflected in every aspect of the school's operation. The term special need sen compasses a wide range which includes physical disabilities, such as, hearing and visual impairment, developmental delay, and ADHD (Attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder).

Strategies for serving special needs. Various strategies, e.g., observation, home visit, individual parent counseling, parenting sessions, counseling on home management, counseling on classroom management, remedial support to the individual child etc. have been adopted to support children, teachers and parents to meet the challenges.

Inclusion of students with special needs and diverse socio-economic background has initially sparked repercussion from almost all concerned stakeholders of the school, i.e., the teachers, parents and the students as well.

Teachers in the beginning expressed anxiety in admitting so many students with special needs in the Early Learning Class and the primary classes. They faced problem in identifying the needs of the students and misinterpreted the stage of settling down of the students in a new environment as delayed development or hyperactivity. They had to struggle to manage the class and follow the lesson plan in class. Teachers found it difficult to plan need-based activities and keep the special needs learners engaged in class along with other students. They did not have enough experience about assessing the status and needs of these students.

The reaction of peers was also a challenge. Other students were sometimes scared of the aggressive behavior of some of the special needs students. The parents complained about some students and suggested that they should be admitted to a school for special needs.

Moreover, some parents of students with special needs were initially in denial about the status of their children's abilities. Some parents were eager to know the background of other students. Some of them had a tendency to look down upon the parents and children from low income brackets. Parents of the students without special needs feared negligence in class of their children as the teachers may be more attentive and caring towards the students with special needs.

Mitigating the challenges. Various strategies were followed to cope with the new challenges.

- The parents of low income group were invited to attend an orientation program in the beginning of the session where they were briefed by the school management team about the school's mission and the procedure they need to follow as parents.
- The school management team members paid home visit to build a rapport and make them aware of their rights and duties as parents.
- Gradually, all the parents are being invited to attend the programs like, Orientation, Education Fair, Open Day, and Report Card Day where they get a chance to get introduced to each other. In programs like these, parents are briefed about the mission and vision of the school, they observe their children's presentation and academic achievement which help them to appreciate the children irrespective of their socio-economic class difference and physical impairments.
- Counseling sessions are conducted by the psycho- social counselors and ECD specialists from the Institute of Educational Development of BRAC University. These sessions are held in school premises.

Monthly Parenting Sessions

School-parents and teacher-parents contacts are considered an essential element of the Nabodhara approach.

- Monthly sessions for parents are held for all the parents to create awareness about inclusive education and sensitize them to moderate neurological and behavioral problems of the children with special needs. These sessions are conducted by the ECD specialists of IED- BRAC U and a teacher of special education from USA. These sessions created a positive impact on the parents and helped them to change their traditional mind set. Now they acknowledge the fact that even a small child has a lot to contribute in another child's life and also benefit from it..
- Ongoing teachers training provided by the Nabodhara Teachers Training Team is of great help in order to build teachers' confidence and plan the lessons with differentiation for individual needs.
- Flexible routine for the children with special needs and support from the assistant teachers in class help the children to settle down in class and get used to the formal classroom setting.

- Group work, peer coaching, pretend play and associative play help a lot to make all children feel at ease and engage in meaningful and joyful learning.

Way Forward

Nobodhara School believes that One-Size-Fits-All approach doesn't work when the goal is to engage children in active learning and all have to be enabled to perform and realize their potential. This is reflected in the teaching-learning process of the school which provides scope for all children in a classroom to perform and be engaged. This also ensures that children learn in school and dependency on private tuition is minimized. Clearly, Nobodhara School is at its very early stage and has along way to go. The process of inclusion has to be further strengthened with constructive approaches including capacity building of the teachers and management. Specialized teachers' training session on various aspects of special needs need to be organized.

Above all, developing a model for fee-paying school that expands quality schooling opportunities with attention to equity is a challenge that requires reconciling contrary forces of the market and the societal and state obligation of promoting a public good. The fact that parents of students in state-provided and state-assisted schools are compelled to spend substantial amounts for their children provides a justification and opening for fee-charging schools which also serve the equity objective. BRAC as a development NGO committed to the equity goal is better equipped than any other entity to pilot the model.

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