

Rural High Schools in Bangladesh: An Experiment on Quality Education

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Abstract

The paper describes the evolution of a model for quality education embracing knowledge, competence and good citizenship for the rural high schools in Bangladesh. The essence of the model is to take measures in active partnership with the schools to empower all the stakeholders – students, teachers, management committee members, parents and community leaders. A comprehensive approach is taken for students to complement their learning with co-curricular activities in language, math and science. Activities through clubs and volunteer squads develop competence and good citizenship. The teachers are trained that enables them to teach better. The schools are provided with modest resources to support teaching and learning.

A pilot scheme to test the model was carried out with fifteen schools in three Upazilas in the country. Instead of considering an overhaul of the system, the model works for gradual change over a five-year period. VAB works in close coordination with the Government education officials in the locality. The model itself reflects the aspirations expressed in the Bangladesh National Education Policy. This paper describes the premises and the approach followed in the initiative. Progress made and results achieved so far in the pilot project are reported. VAB considers the model affordable and replicable and looks for partners in extending the work in a larger number of schools in the country.

Key Words: *Secondary Education in Bangladesh, Rural High Schools, Experiment in quality.*

1. Introduction

Volunteers Association for Bangladesh (VAB) is a not-for-profit organization, established in 1999 by non-resident Bangladeshis (NRBs) in the USA, led by Dr. A. T. Rafiqur Rahman. Its aim is to help the poorest children in Bangladesh get quality education and skill training. It focused on rural high schools in Bangladesh and started by providing scholarship and tutoring to students from poor families and training to the teachers since 2000. It also gave support to vocational labs and provided computers to a few schools. In 2009, it undertook a study to assess the impact of its work and found a significant reduction of dropout rate because of the interventions (Gyasuddin, 2010). Drawing on its experience, VAB developed its model of rural secondary school quality improvement.

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VAB's approach in educational support is based on its premise that poverty is the root problem of rural life in Bangladesh. Because of extremely limited physical resources, the ever-growing population in rural Bangladesh along with the increasing pool of youth is caught in a vicious cycle of poverty, desperate and futile migration to urban areas, and potentially disruptive social unrest. VAB founders and collaborators, after intensive discussions among themselves, and drawing on their understanding of theory and practice of national development as well as their own life experience, concluded that quality high school education enriching human resources was a reliable way out of the cycle of poverty (Rahman, 2010). At the "field level", in collaboration with a regional NGO "Prakritajan", "Udoiankur Unnayan Sangstha" and "Ashar Alo", VAB undertook extensive consultation with the rural schools on how to realize the objectives of VAB to enhance the life opportunities of rural youth through education. It was realized that helping individual students fail to accomplish the intended objectives because of the poor quality of education in the schools. VAB leaders worked on developing strategies for fruitful utilization of the limited resources available to VAB.

VAB is arguably the only NGO in Bangladesh which has been solely devoted to rural high school education for nearly two decades. It is, therefore, in an advantageous position to address the issues of high school education in rural Bangladesh. Following an iterative process, a five-year strategic plan was developed. A decision was made to direct VAB's effort for quality improvement based on a recognition of the multi-dimensional nature of quality education and the need for integration of the diverse aspects. VAB's own resources, essentially mobilized from individual NRB philanthropists and their non-Bangladeshi friends, are quite limited. VAB also believes that any development effort has to be sustainable by the resources of the beneficiaries themselves, ridding themselves from dependency. These factors prompted VAB to aim for sustainability as an objective, which is to be achieved over a defined period.

2. Development of the Quality Education Model

Simply put, quality education calls for better learning by students, better teaching by teachers, better education environment provided by schools and engagement of the community in education of its children. VAB, based on its work experience with the schools and intensive discussion on resolution or mitigation of the problems, developed an integrated set of intervention measures. Empowerment of the beneficiaries was at the core of the intervention. Many a development project fails because the beneficiaries are not allowed the possibility of building their own capabilities to carry on the development efforts. Instead, they remain in a "dependency trap". In development economics, there are examples galore of limping foreign aided projects because the beneficiaries are kept, sometimes deliberately, devoid of capacity to carry on their own. This premise led to what we term the Empowerment Model for Quality Education with Sustainability. The interventions in the model are directed to empower the key stakeholders to carry on the exercise of quality education. In Bangladesh's rural education there are four groups of beneficiaries, who are the main

stakeholders: the students, the teachers, the schools and the communities. The quality education interventions are designed to achieve the empowerment of the stakeholders. Elements in the interventions are designed to strengthen self-confidence, stoke the inner energy, and create a dynamism and vigor to enhance capacity-building among the stakeholders.

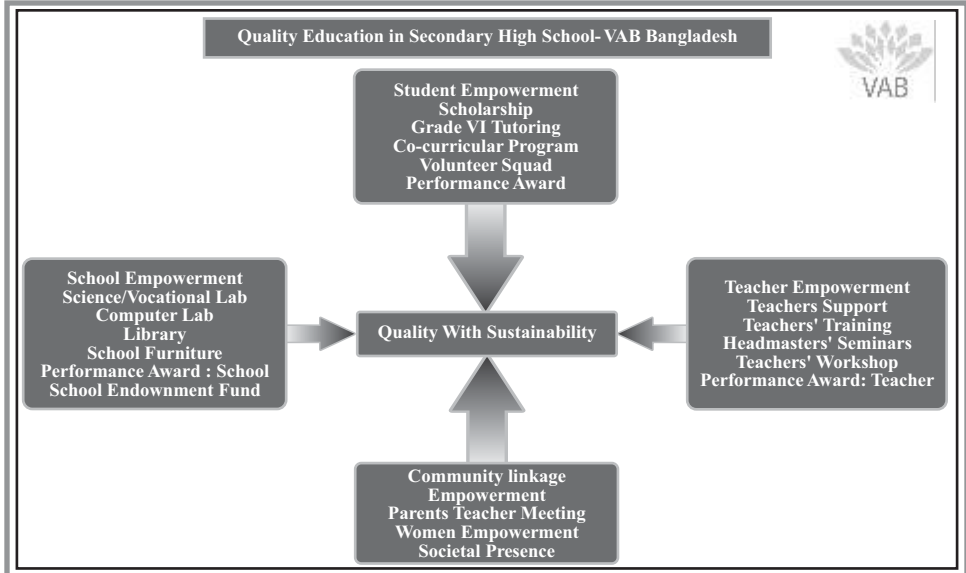
The model has been developed by drawing on three sources: (a) the ideas and thoughts of VAB leadership both in Bangladesh and in USA, enriched by cross-fertilization of ideas from exposure to education systems in Bangladesh and abroad, particularly USA, East Asia and Scandinavian countries;¹ (b) field experience of VAB officials, mainly in Bangladesh; and (c) empirical observations by the author and his colleagues while working with high schools in rural Bangladesh since 1995.

The Empowerment Model has drawn the attention of potential contributors who saw it as an approach with a promise of attaining its goals. Chevron Bangladesh awarded a one-crore taka (about \$150,000) two year project to be implemented in 14 schools in its area of operation in 2014. In 2015, Bangladesh Bank granted 10 lac taka (about \$15,000) to implement the model in five schools. The award has been renewed in 2016 with the addition of five more schools. American and Efird (A & E) approved a project with a program for a five year period with a grant of 24.5 lac taka (about \$35,000).

In the Global Conference at Atlanta, USA in May 10-13, 2015 organized by the Nobel Peace Laureates on Innovative Social Business Projects in Health, Technology and Education, the VAB Model won the first prize (Global Summit, 2015). VAB submitted its Empowerment Model as a solution to poor quality education in rural Bangladesh, which can be applied to any Third World country. The model's focus on the empowerment of the stakeholders of rural education – students, teachers, schools and communities – combined with low cost, effectiveness and sustainability attracted the judges.

The model elements are briefly depicted in the diagram below (Figure 1).

¹ PISA – (Program for International Student Assessment) -- is a worldwide periodic survey by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in member and non-member nations of 15-year-old school pupils' scholastic performance on mathematics, science, and reading. It was first performed in 2000 and then repeated every three years. It is done with a view to improving education policies and outcomes. It measures problem solving and cognition in daily life. The 2012 version of the test involved 34 OECD countries and 31 partner countries, with a total of 510,000 participating students. The results of the 2015 survey were to be published by the end of 2016.

Figure 1. Elements of the Empowerment Model for Quality Education

Source: Constructed by the writer based on VAB development concept and premises

A careful look at the elements of the model shows that they are a combination of some traditional education improvement measures and a number of innovative, relatively novel (at least in Bangladesh) measures. The innovative elements do not squarely fall under curricular measures but can be described as “co-curricular activities.” Students need to participate in better learning; the traditional way for better learning by students is through classroom education (notwithstanding nascent trends towards home learning and luminary examples like Rabindranath Thakur, Bill Gates and Steve Jobs who flourished outside of the classroom environment). Scholarship to students in poverty is a long-standing measure of ensuring that the students will attend classes. Tutoring is a complement to classroom teaching. VAB looked for new low-cost ways of students getting better learning. It is generally agreed that if somehow the child could be inspired to learn, stimulated and guided to devote his or her inner strength to educational purposes, the resulting self-motivated learning can be more powerful than classroom learning. Co-curricular activities complement teaching through self-learning. Organizing, managing and participating in students’ clubs on reading, debating, Science and Math have, for example, obvious impact on self-confidence, awakening interest and retaining knowledge (VAB, 2015)). The concept of “Volunteer Squad” in which students voluntarily, possibly led by teachers, interact with the community to mitigate some community issues, such as sanitation, garbage disposal, clean surroundings has multiple impacts (Roy, 2015). These impacts are better learning of social issues and their mitigation; team work, discipline and efficient execution; identification with the community; and on the part of the community, recognition and respect for the contribution of the school.

Teachers' training is the traditional measure of positioning teachers for better classroom teaching through better understanding of the curriculum and improved teaching methods. Headmasters' Seminars and Teachers' Workshops are somewhat non-traditional measures. Headmasters' Workshops offer an opportunity to the Headmasters, who are virtually the leaders of rural education, to discuss their experience, challenges and opportunities, to learn from one another, and most importantly, to mull over the ways and means of addressing the daunting problems. Teachers' Workshops provide forums for exchanging ideas among fellow teachers, learn from one another, and hopefully, identify best practices of better teaching. Teachers' support is a recognition that rural schools are woefully under-staffed and need to be provided support with teaching resources.

Provision of library books, science lab equipment and computers are traditional measures a school can adopt to improve the learning/teaching environment. A novel measure devised by VAB for the schools is the establishment of an Endowment Fund with which a school can add to the learning aids as necessary and ensure that these are maintained and used effectively. This is a direct outcome of VAB's preoccupation with sustainability, or self-sufficiency, by the schools themselves when external assistance ceases.

The community empowerment measures are also non-traditional in the context of rural Bangladesh. The school-community interaction is not only a way of staying on top of the quality improvement measures, it also strengthens ownership by the community and the school of the improvement measures themselves. It is also hoped that such interaction would inspire the community to contribute, in cash or kind, to the improvement measures, and perhaps even draw back members of the community who migrated to urban areas or abroad.

3. Modus operandi of implementation

a. Work with rural schools within the existing education system

Political leaders, social thinkers and educationists are often disappointed with the existing education system and they talk of overhauling the whole system. Of course, for a resource-poor country like Bangladesh, that is daunting. Undeterred, however, well-intentioned NGOs and others build and operate their own schools to create a model of quality education, but the benefits stay within these institutions only, with no multiplier effect in the community. The quality of education received by the vast majority of students in the public system remains unaffected. Replication is an impossibility. Limited results are seen from a large investment. The VAB model works with the existing rural schools under the existing education system. Thus, instead of wasting time, energy and resources to bring about a "revolution", VAB can concentrate on changes that can go a long way in the low-cost economy of Bangladesh. In addition, local initiative is regarded as the key from day 1. The community becomes the messenger and co-implementer of quality. The approach mobilizes all the stakeholders into program implementation and builds a cooperative environment among participating schools. Multi-dimensional ideas are thus generated which benefit individual schools.

b. The cluster approach

VAB prefers to implement its model in clusters of schools, each cluster consisting of five schools in geographical proximity. The cluster approach brings an ease and economy in administering the empowerment model of VAB and brings in all the stakeholders under an umbrella - students, teachers, school management committee members, parents, particularly mothers, former students, community leaders, government officials and public representatives – engaging all in the improvement of the quality of education. The primary benefits of the cluster approach were deemed to be the following:

- To influence collective efforts among the stakeholders in a community
- To create easy access to a community as well as service providers
- To stimulate competition among the institutions
- To facilitate different events collectively and thus have wider recognition and publicity
- To reduce management and monitoring costs
- To create an enabling environment to disseminate good practices to a larger audience (thus, the rural education environment in the whole locality can be energized)

True to its original emphasis, VAB wishes to focus on the poorest and the neediest in society. The vulnerable upazilas are identified by considering the socio-economic condition and the literacy and school enrollment rates of the upazila. The information was collected from BANBEIS sources (BANBEIS, 2014). Three upazilas were selected, Shyamnagar in Satkhira in southern Bangladesh and two in northern Bangladesh, Nageswari in Kurigram and Nilphamari Sadar in Nilphamari. The cluster schools were selected by reliable local partner NGOs, Udainkur Unnayan Sangstha (USS) in Nilphamari and Ashar Alo in Satkhira. Information was collected in a format designed by VAB. After preliminary analysis of the data collected, VAB undertook discussions with the schools on terms and conditions for collaboration. Through the discussion, both the parties, VAB and the schools, reached a consensus to work together for quality education. The parties then signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the details of work to be done.

c. Jointly formulated plan tailored to needs of each school

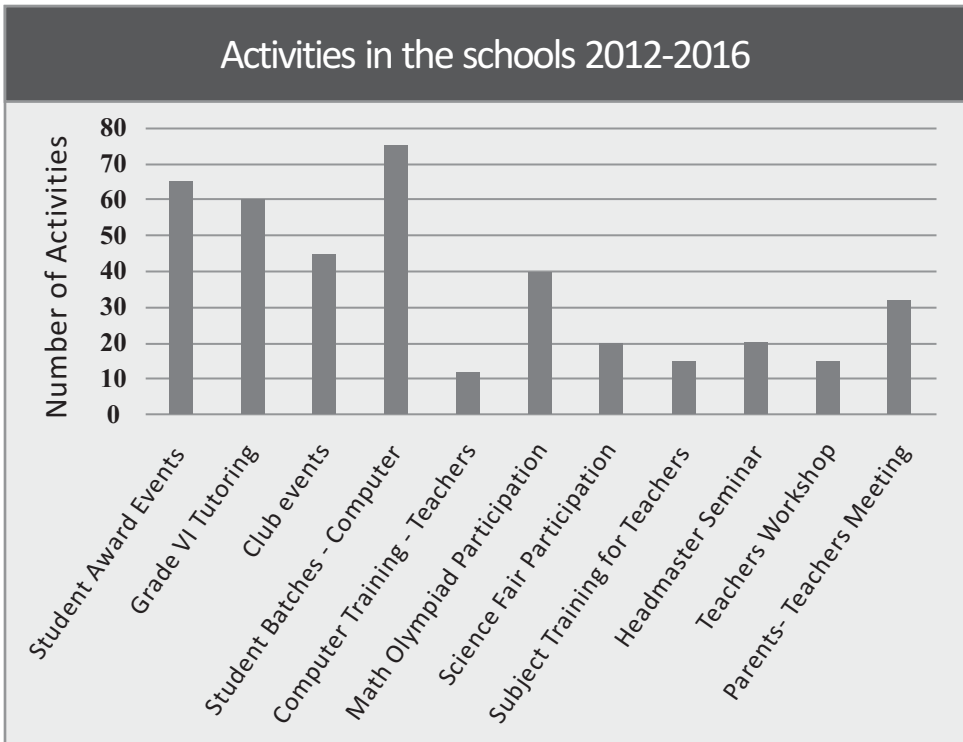
The programs for individual schools were developed with initiatives driven by the schools. Two activities were carried out to ensure the approach. First, a Headmasters' Seminar with the participation of the Headmasters themselves was held at the VAB office in Dhaka to get the commitment of the schools to quality improvement. Secondly, a Teachers' Workshop was held in each school within the cluster. The theme of the workshop was: Quality Education in Secondary High Schools with Local Initiative. The workshop included all the teachers and a few of the School Management Committee members and parents. Sometimes student representatives were also invited to participate. It may be mentioned that VAB found the inclusion of the students stimulating and beneficial to the whole discourse and the

schools generally were supportive of the move. The thrust was on developing a Quality Education Plan for the school, with engagement of the stakeholders as partners in developing the Plan. This automatically imparts a sense of responsibility on the teachers, the schools and the powers-to-be and imbues them with a sense of ownership of the Plan. A preliminary budget with shares of the cost to be borne by the individual schools and VAB and a work plan were drawn up in the workshop. Along with the plan formulation, cost-sharing itself is a powerful motivation for ownership. These, in turn, foster motivation, readiness and willingness for sustaining the improvement measures and their achievements. This was further refined on discussion with the schools leading to a formal agreement between the individual school and VAB.

4. Description of Activities in the schools

Figure 2 below gives a summary of the activities undertaken by the schools over the five year period. VAB encouraged and whenever possible participated in the award events to draw the interest of the parents as well as the community members. Sixty-five such events took place

Figure 2. Quality improvement activities in schools (2012-16)



showing that the events took place in most of the schools every year and 1,920 needy students were awarded scholarships. Sixty three-month-long tutoring courses benefited 2,260 Grade VI students, 65 teachers got training in Math, Science and English, 105 teachers received on-site computer training and fifteen teachers' workshop and twenty Headmasters' seminars took place. Sixty club events in sports, debates cultural programs and volunteering, 75 batches of students totaling 3,750 students got computer training and forty batches totaling 250 students took part in Math Olympiad. Fifty five computers were given to the schools and equipment for science labs and vocational shops were provided. The enrichment of science lab allowed participation in 20 science fairs by a number of the schools. About 4,000 books were distributed to the school libraries and steps were taken to promote reading habits of the students. Thirty two parents-teachers meetings were held in the schools with interchange of views on student attendance, regularity of studies, adolescent problems and the role of women in educating children. The significance of the large number of student empowerment activities that required the direct assistance of the teachers becomes obvious if one understands that most of these activities were absent (or were done in a nominal way) earlier and the work enumerated here were mostly done in the last three years of the project. The first two years were dedicated primarily to creating the resources, training and motivation for the program personnel. In all activities undertaken by VAB, attempts were made to include community leaders and government education officials in order to promote community ownership in quality efforts in schools.

a. Objectives of the individual school programs

The work in the three clusters was undertaken as a pilot scheme to test the efficacy of the VAB model with plans delivered in a five-year period. The primary objectives set for this pilot scheme were the following:

- Reduction of dropout
- Increase of percentage of pass in public examinations
- Better performance in public examinations (measured in grade point)
- Better performance in co-curricular activities, and
- Greater interest of community in quality education

b. How the plans were carried out

The VAB plans are process oriented requiring close cooperation with the schools in all phases of the work. A typical implementation plan is sketched below for a school over a calendar year. The plan was implemented with a spirit of partnership between the school and VAB (Table 1).

c. Human and financial resources

VAB's efforts were to facilitate in establishing self-help educational institution improvement and developing their capacities at the grass root level to meet their needs and solve problems collectively. The primary purpose was to help them become self-reliant and deal with urgent problems in the institutions. The emphasis was on strengthening the institutions in management, operation and self-help.

VAB employs a limited number of staff for implementation. VAB management personnel both at Dhaka and in New York are wholly voluntary. VAB has a team of student volunteers from the universities in Dhaka. They volunteer their services in program implementation.

The schools lacked experience in designing plans for quality improvement; most of their developmental effort being directed to improve the inadequate physical infrastructure. In this pilot scheme to demonstrate that the pursuit for quality must proceed within the existing constraints, VAB opted to bear most of the cash costs for the project. The schools, however, worked cooperatively with VAB, the teachers shouldering major responsibilities in field implementation.

d. Monitoring

VAB used reflective practices in its monitoring and evaluation. All project staff, headmasters, teachers and other participants were given a clear picture of plan objectives, implementation scheme of the activities and its monitoring and evaluation plan. All VAB staff was trained on the plan's cause, effect, logic and result chain. VAB ensured that its staff had complete understanding of the specific objectives of the reflective practice; with monitoring and evaluation taking place appropriately to ensure realizing the goals and objectives. The staff for the plan had the primary responsibility for assuring that all activities were completed and the intended results obtained, with full cooperation of the schools as partners.

e. Evaluation

VAB provides annual report of its activities to its contributors. Some of these reports are presented on the website (www.vabonline.org). On the occasion of its fifteenth anniversary, VAB published a report that provided views of all the stakeholders of the schools (VAB, 2015). The internal evaluation of the program went on continually, as the program elements were introduced. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected to assess the output as well as the outcome of the program.

An evaluation study was done by an independent consultant in 2015 at the end of four years of model implementation (Roy, 2015)). The consultant collected his data independently. Primary data were collected from the field using questionnaires and checklists following specific methods, such as interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), case studies, reviewing enrolment and attendance records and examination results, etc. as deemed appropriate to fulfill the objectives of the study. Data were collected from the teachers and the students of selected secondary schools of the target upazilas of Kurigram, Nilphamari

and Satkhira districts. Besides, meeting and sharing with the members of SMC, parents, respective project officials, and concerned government education officials were also carried out to collect required information in relation to the intervention.

The results generally are consistent with the internal evaluation by VAB in 2016. The results presented below are from the independent evaluation of 2015, updated with 2016 data where appropriate. .

5. Accomplishments

a. Reduction of Dropout

The dropout in high schools shows a significant improvement since 2011, in part because of government intervention in the form of scholarships for the students (ADB, 2015). The evaluation included six of the fifteen cluster schools. The field level assessment reveals that overall dropout of students in Class VI from the cluster schools was 12% during 2011 and 4% during 2015 i.e. the rate decreased by 8 percentage points (i.e., by 67%) by the year 2015. The overall dropout of students in Class VIII from the cluster schools was found 4% during 2011 and 6% during 2015. This negative result appears to be an effect in part of the recent introduction of public examination at the end of class VIII in 2010, leading some students to leave school. The overall dropout in Class X was found to be 7% during 2011 and 2% during 2015; thus the rate decreased by 5 percentage points (i.e., by 71%) by the year 2015. The reason for dropout was primarily the dropout of girls, particularly in Class VIII and Class X. These are the two Classes at the end of which public examinations take place. This however continues to improve for the better with greater awareness in society. In some of the schools, girls' team has been formed to dissuade parents to opt for early marriage. VAB is examining critically the dropout situation in Class VIII.

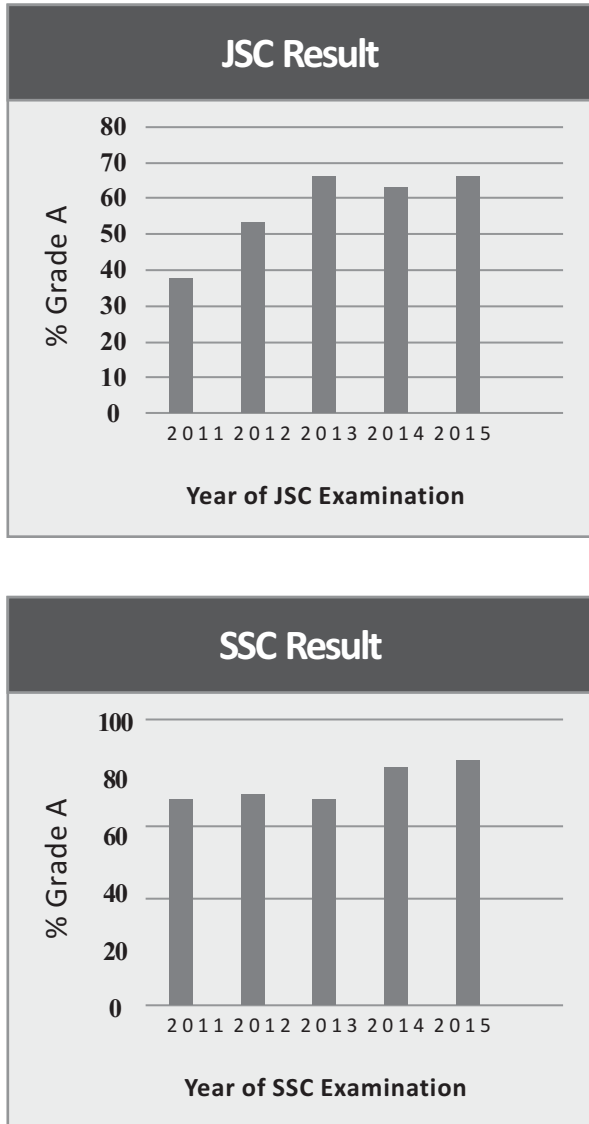
b. Increase of percentage of pass in public examinations and of grade point

The evaluation study also reveals that 91% of the girls and 96% of the boys passed the Junior Certificate Examination (JSC) in 2014. There has been progressive improvement in the results since 2012 and the pass rate always remained a two to four percentage points higher than the national average. The pass rate in SSC for the girls and boys were 84% and 87%, respectively in 2011; the rate rose to 96% and 97% in 2015. The increase was by 14% and 11%, respectively.

In addition to percentage of pass, the level of attainment of the students in terms of grades obtained also improved markedly. Data obtained from the schools show that in JSC in 2011, 25% of the girls and 54% of the boys received A grades. The numbers in 2014 were 51% and 73% respectively. Data for SSC show that in 2011, 44% of the girls and 70% of the boys received A grades, increasing to 51% of the girls and 73% of the boys received A grades in 2014. The rates for 2015 were 74% and 87%, respectively. The data demonstrates the reduction of gender gap in the quality of results, the gap decreasing from 26% difference in 2011 to only 13% in 2015 for SSC results.

Figures 3 and 4 give a progression of results for all students, boys and girls, in percentage of A grades for these schools for JSC and SSC. The overall percentage increases were from 39% to 67% in the case of JSC and from 55% to 78% in SSC. The slight dip in 2014 could be a reflection of the overall performance in grade nationwide.

Figure 3. JSC and SSC Results in VAB-Assisted Schools



c. Better performance in co-curricular activities

Research (Kemp et al, 1990) shows that co-curricular activities enhance the ability of the students and should be an integral part of education in the high school. Co-curricular activities and volunteering for societal needs were found not only to enhance individual capability but they also contribute to self-esteem and academic performance of students (McNeal, 2010). VAB undertook in earnest these elements of education. Prior to 2012, the co-curricular programs in the schools were carried out off and on without any definite plan. With the exception of one or two, the schools in the clusters hardly won any award at the upazila level and rarely moved to the regional level competition in co-curricular activities. The participation locally also was minimal. Table 2 below shows a dramatic increase in the participation and performance, leading to various teams bringing laurel to the schools even at the regional level. These activities create a dynamic and lively environment in the schools. In the past, the participation of girls in cricket and football were inconceivable in most of the schools. Every school now has teams for both boys and girls in sports and other activities. Apart from award level performance, there is a wider participation of students in sports and other co-curricular activities that have been deemed essential for the fruition of benefits for all students (Ibid). It may be noted that performance gradually increased taking it to a competitive level by the fourth and fifth year of program.

Table 2: Participation and Performance in Co-curricular Activities

Item	Total number of Events (2012-2016)			Awards won (2012-2016)		
	Local	Upazila	Regional	Local	Upazila	Regional
Cultural Program	114	75	28	75	28	14
Debate	57	38	14	38	27	6
Cricket - Girls	48	28	18	28	17	3
Cricket - Boys	22	12	10	12	6	5
Football - Girls	48	30	24	30	18	7
Football - Boys	40	22	18	22	9	6

During the period of the VAB program, Sports Clubs, Debating Clubs and Volunteer Squads were formed in all the 15 schools. The clubs and squads are designed to be led by students with a teacher as adviser. These activities require planning, team work and ability to organize and work with large groups of people. The resulting outcome would be the development of individual capability and attainment of citizenship virtues like diligence, prudence, accountability, tolerance, compassion and other moral and ethical values. The club program is also a measure to make the quality efforts sustainable.

d. Greater interest of community in quality education

Community empowerment is one of the prominent components of the program. VAB's approach to get the schools do their job includes a two-fold push—empowering the students and empowering the community linkage. Such empowerment creates interest among the students and the community members to know what the school is planning to do and why. This increases accountability of the schools and forces transparency in operation and gives an opportunity to the schools to seek support from the community. The tools used are parents-teachers meetings, mothers' assembly, alumni contacts and inclusion of community members in various events in the schools. The culmination of the community linkage program is an Education Fair comprising multiple interschool competitions in the final events followed by an Award Ceremony where all local dignitaries including government officials and public representatives are present. VAB programs created a positive impact on the cluster schools; other schools in the vicinity are approaching VAB with a plea to be included under the VAB umbrella. It is remarkable, particularly in the context of Bangladesh, that VAB efforts already led to the establishment of Endowment Funds in some of the schools for future activities; more contributions from the community to support school programs are also forthcoming.

6. Lessons Learned

The Government has an ambitious plan for quality education to realize the objectives of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Ahmed and Rahman, 2015). The plan is capital intensive and will take long years for fruition. For the near future, any improvement exercise has to operate within the constraints present in the existing school system of Bangladesh. VAB aimed at quality within the existing constraints, removing them as progress was made.

To the pleasant surprise of VAB and also many critics, the experience of the last five years demonstrated that the rural schools can attain remarkable improvement of their performance within the existing constraints through appropriate planning and well-defined interventions as well as a drive for local initiative. The most encouraging lesson learned was the willingness and cooperation of the teachers to engage in the quality process. Unreserved support was obtained from the Headmasters and the Management Committee members. Profound interest was generated among the students and the community members. Within the limited facilities provided by VAB, the Headmasters and the teachers attended seminars and training arranged at the VAB Center in Dhaka. These are all positive lessons VAB learned that emboldens it to launch the model in new clusters and appeal for replication throughout the country with broader and more ambitious goals.

Another important lesson is the welcoming attitude by the schools about performance based awards for both the teachers and the students. This reduces a dilemma in operation where the VAB donors often expressed concern that teachers and students would perform only if financial incentives are provided. On the other hand, performance based incentives are looked upon favorably by most donors. In order to empower a greater number of students

through performance based award, VAB now has devised a scheme for evaluating the performance of groups of students covering both academic and co-curricular performance. The evaluation will reward the groups instead of individual students, creating competition among groups and allowing higher performance for a much larger group of students.

At one stage of development of the Bangladesh economy, a high school certificate could be a “passport” to a decent employment. The economy has progressed remarkably. A factor that was present in the past to a limited extent – bribery and corruption – has become rampant lately. This has a direct bearing on what the students and the parents can expect from the current system, and their expectations can be quite negative. In this context, while VAB has been promoting excellence in performance; work with the schools showed that it was helpful to provide counseling in career choice. Along with promotion of the vocational stream that existed in some high schools, VAB brought into focus the choices related to diverse careers as artisans, nurses, police and law enforcement officials, army personnel, medical assistants, shop assistants and middle-level managers, small business entrepreneurs, etc. Based on lessons learned, VAB is taking steps to strengthen its role to generate employable skills and assistance in making career choices so that students ponder about alternatives before moving on with the general stream at the next level of schooling or seeking government employment.

7. Challenges and Opportunities

In broadest terms, poverty is the greatest challenge for quality secondary education in rural Bangladesh. The cost of educating a young boy or girl is not only the direct educational cost, but also the cost of food, healthcare, etc. for her/him. In addition, there is the opportunity cost of taking the child out of work, outside or in the house. Limiting ourselves to the issue of education quality itself, a central challenge is that, despite the formulation of a National Education Policy, the system cries out for reform and renovation. A relatively young sovereign nation, with aspirations of extraordinary social development and high economic growth with equity, needs to have a human resource policy, especially since it is rich in this respect, with scarcity of physical resources. Education is the key to achieving proper utilization of the human resources; unfortunately, that alignment of education policy and human resource utilization policy remains weak. The low per student cost of secondary education can be seen as an advantage, and affordable quality measures can be devised if the mindset and sense of obligation to the deprived boys and girls exist. Despite daunting challenges, VAB is trying its best to utilize this cost advantage. As mentioned earlier, VAB is not “revolutionary” in its approach, it believes, changes at the margin with marginal costs can accomplish a lot.

The bigger picture aside, the political violence in 2013, 2014 and 2015 posed a significant challenge to carry out the program in a timely fashion. The schools were on the whole very cooperative to implement some of the programs on their own and by allowing flexibility for VAB for safe travel. The teachers are the integral partner for success in any program. There was unhindered cooperation from most teachers. For every program undertaken by VAB, the teachers have to perform additional duties in implementation free of charge. This puts a

demand on their time and work. The dedication of the VAB staff and the selfless service of all the donors, patrons and management of VAB both in Bangladesh and USA provided the motivation and inspiration to the teachers to offer their service free of charge. Further, the ownership created through the Teachers' Workshop has been of great help. VAB also points out the benefits, both material and psychological, that the teachers may derive with an increase of reputation earned by the school. However, all the schools suffer from the shortage of teachers that limit the capability of the schools to take up all quality activities with full vigor.

Sustainability of an education institution is in fact the end result generated through combined efforts of several initiatives. For the present project these initiatives include: empowering students, empowering teachers, empowering school and empowering community linkage. It is undeniable that the degree of difficulties in empowering teachers, and empowering community linkages are far higher than those in attaining students' empowerment and school empowerment. These various challenges need to be met simultaneously with a balanced effort to achieve overall sustainability of the institutions.

A major constraint in implementation is the relatively short daily school hours and the shortage of effective number of class days in schools. The multiple public examinations with a lengthy schedule exacerbate the problem of the available days. The other difficulty is the engagement of both the teachers and the students at pre-school and post-school time in private coaching activities, leaving little time for engaging in co-curricular activities. This is a problem that has drawn the attention of the Government and policy makers. The awareness on quality, transparency and accountability generated through the quality drive of VAB is an effective way to overcome this problem.

One persistent problem in the rural schools is the level of regularity in attendance in the schools. This becomes more acute during the cropping seasons. Possibly the Government should give authority to the schools to adjust holidays and vacations keeping the seasonal agricultural needs in view. This could in fact have a very desirable impact on promoting dignity of labor in the country as a whole. Active participation of the rural students in certain farming activities such as harvesting, storing and transporting grains seasonally could become a part of the academic program in the school.

VAB has an open door policy regarding partnering and collaborating with donors, trusts, corporations and individual philanthropists. Currently it has relationship with USS and Ashar Alo on community linkage, Bishwa Shahitto Kendro on reading programs, Bangladesh Open Source Network (DOSN) on Math Olympiad, Freedom Foundation on Science Fair, D-net on computers and Agami Foundation on ICT. As mentioned earlier, it carries out programs for corporations like Chevron Bangladesh and A & E and Bangladesh Bank. Further, it operates education programs on behalf of three private Trusts. It is open for partnership for implementing the full quality improvement model or parts of it.

8. The Way Forward

The pilot project provided VAB with a greater insight on achieving the goals of the 2010 Education Policy (Ahmed and Rahman, 2015) of the government of Bangladesh. VAB identifies three primary objectives of education in the Education Policy. These are:

- Knowledge
- Competence
- Good Citizenship

VAB quite successfully addressed the knowledge gap in terms of examination results and to some extent, in the attainment of learning with emphasis on cognitive skills. Self-learning is also promoted through a variety of co-curricular activities – students' clubs (both for boys and girls) in reading, debating, science studies, math studies, etc., as well as competitive activities like Math Olympiads, Science Fairs and Education Fairs. Further, VAB now has a definite program to promote computer and ICT application through its 100% computer literacy drive for the school and enhancement of English proficiency through 100% conversational English in the English classes. The club programs, participation in the community linkage activities and the volunteer squad program are effective tools in meeting the competence gap and good citizenship gap. There is still a lack of proper understanding among the teachers of the good citizenship ideas interspersed in the curriculum. The drive for getting marks in the examination overshadows the need to promote the citizenship virtues in practice. There is currently a surge of interest in character education within the school system (Ryan and Bohlin, 1999). The essence of character education is to inculcate the virtues of character which are to a large degree synonymous with the virtues of good citizenship spelled out very clearly in Bangladesh Education Policy and also emphasized in SDG 2030 education goal (particularly Target 4.7). VAB has redesigned the program that includes curriculum content as well as materials and videos from various sources in training programs for the teachers and the club and squad members (Rizzo, 2006).

VAB now plans to launch its five year program for new clusters of schools in two phases: an Initiation Phase of two years followed by an Augmentation Phase for the last three years. The initiation phase will provide resources and training needed to launch attainment of targets in the Augmentation Phase. Based on extensive discussions with the schools of the three pilot clusters, VAB has set up the following targets for the Augmentation Phase.

- 100% computer literacy for the schools that will include all teachers and all students
- 100% of students able to communicate in English
- 100% of the students each reading at least ten books from school library
- 100% of the schools will have at least one student qualify for the National level Math Olympiad

- 100% of the schools will qualify for at least two regional competitions in student co-curricular activities
- 100% of the schools will benefit from at least one lac taka (about \$1,500) annually in each school from local sources for quality education
- 100% of the schools will undertake promotion of good citizenship through curricular and co-curricular activities

These programs have been defined and work plans prepared in consultation with the pilot schools and additional new cluster schools. The schools are very positive and the experience of working with the three clusters over the five year period gives VAB the confidence that the targets can be reached in five years.

9. Concluding Comments

VAB's education model is in line with the requirement of policies and priorities of the Government of Bangladesh Education Policy, consistent with SDG 2030 education targets, and in harmony with the political and social context of Bangladesh. The model proved to be appropriate for contributing to quality of secondary education of the country. The model is responsive to the requirement of the students, the teachers and others who have direct and indirect stake to improve quality of secondary education in the country. All the elements of the model have demonstrated proven applicability and are replicable. The benefits of the model are obtained in the stipulated period of five years. The achievement of these targets will create a self-propelled momentum to continue the quality process. The success of the schools in attaining quality targets will drive the community support and sustainability will be ensured.

VAB seeks support of the Government, philanthropists, funding agencies and corporate and business enterprises to replicate its model in different parts of Bangladesh to the maximum extent possible.

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