

# Dilemma of the High-Stake Public Examination for Primary Education in Bangladesh: Can Decentralization Help?

Mohammad Shahidul Islam<sup>\*</sup>

## Abstract

*The Directorate of Primary Education replaced in 2009 the primary school scholarship examination by a general nationwide Primary Education Completion Examination (PECE). PECE was introduced with the intention to measure students' achievement of prescribed competencies, award them credentials, and thus encourage better student and school performance. This high-stake public examination seems to have failed to realize these purposes. Studies show that students' performance in reading with comprehension and basic numeracy hovers around 30% while PECE pass rate is over 98%. Not acquiring the foundational skills seriously impacts students learning of other subjects. Ignoring this consequence, the national government has highlighted the very high pass rate in PECE as evidence of success in primary education. Decentralization of PECE, suggested in this paper, may not solve this complex learning performance issue, but it can shift the focus from pass rate at the national level to assessment of learning at the school level. Thus the government would be relieved from the pressure to deliver ever higher pass rates and could reposition itself to introduce a credible assessment for measuring student learning achievements and supporting improvement of learning in school.*

**Key words:** *Learning Assessment in Bangladesh, High Stake Public Examinations, Primary School Completion Examination.*

## 1. A high-stake and centralized public examination

Bangladesh celebrated a 98% pass rate in the recently announced results (March 2015) of the Primary Education Completion Examination (PECE), the public examination at the end of the primary cycle, which comprises five years of schooling. A nationwide public examination after completion of the primary education cycle was introduced in 2009. Until then, examinations were held in each school and students who passed these examinations could enroll in grade six, the first year of secondary education. A proportion of grade five students, normally 40 percent, sat for a competitive scholarship examination conducted externally by the local primary education authorities to select recipients of a government scholarship for students enrolled in secondary school (DPE, 2014 a).

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<sup>\*</sup> Senior Education Advisor, USAID, Dhaka, Bangladesh E-mail: msislam@usaid.gov

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The rationale for the PECE was three-fold: first, to ascertain primary students' achievement in competencies prescribed in the national primary education curriculum; second, to judge the performance of primary schools and their teachers; and third, to award a credential of completion of primary education to students, many of whom do not continue in formal education and may opt for non-formal education, for skill training or for the world of work. Furthermore, scoring well in the scholarship examination had become, allegedly, too important. It had become a matter of prestige and reputation for the school. The 40 percent who took the scholarship examination attracted the attention of the school and teachers at the cost allegedly of neglecting other students (CAMPE, 2008).

How well have the intended purposes been served by the high-stake public examination? A huge state machinery is involved in administering the PECE – for 2.7 million fifth graders annually. The exam comprises a single set of questions used throughout the country. The 98% pass rate brought a big smile on the faces of the state officials responsible for conducting this highly centralized national examination (Kingdon et al 2014).

## **2. The dilemma of a much-hyped and centralized public examination**

Prior to 2009, examinations in primary school were a decentralized, school-level and low-key affair in Bangladesh. Passing in the annual examination in each grade and finally after the completion of grade 5 was considered a reasonably good measure of student learning for school and education authorities as well as for students and parents. Unlike some countries, where entry to secondary education was restricted, in Bangladesh all students carrying a certificate of completion of grade five from his or her primary school were eligible for admission to grade six in secondary school. The introduction of PECE turned the system into an extremely centralized, politically sensitive, high-profile issue. It appears that officials at the central level do not dare any longer to accept a result that is not close to 100% pass rate.

What does the “98%” pass rate signify about primary education in Bangladesh in 2015, beyond the obvious: 2.6 million children are certified to enroll in secondary school (DPE, 2015)? Have these 2.6 million children learnt what they are supposed to learn by the end of the primary cycle?

In 2013, at the urging of the external donors providing funding support to primary education, the Directorate of Primary Education conducted a national assessment of student learning in Bangla (the first language for most students) and math on a nationwide sample of grades three and five students. It showed that only 26% of children at grade five could read their textbook with comprehension (DPE, 2014b). Children demonstrated a similar low level of learning in mathematics. Even this score may be an over-estimate of comprehension. Some have argued that the tests for the sample assessment were pitched at too low a level of performance (DPE, 2012).

There appears to be a reluctance on the part of senior officials to face up to the question of school quality. Informed observers suggest that PECE has encouraged teachers to concentrate on students memorizing and recalling textbook content, as opposed to learning

to read and perform basic mathematics. Teachers, especially in grades four and five, drill textbook content into students through an intensive routine. In contrast, the national assessments undertaken by DPE test skills and competencies indicated in the curriculum, rather than recall of the textbook content (CAMPE, 2014).

The emphasis on a public examination that would show a high pass rate arose in part from the Education for All (EFA) movement in the 1990s, which convinced the political establishment that showing a good record of progress in primary education was important. EFA failed to place adequate emphasis on quality.

In the 1970s and the 1980s, primary and secondary schools often partnered with neighboring schools to minimize the cost of setting and printing question papers for annual school examinations in all grades. Some schools procured question papers from reasonably reliable publishing companies, which developed and printed question papers on a large scale, maintained confidentiality, and supplied these to schools at a reasonable price. Later on, the upazila<sup>1</sup> level Primary Education Teachers' Association began to produce terminal and annual examination papers, which were sold to schools and became a source of funds for the Association.

In the 1990s, this independent decentralized system of examinations in primary schools attracted the attention of primary education officials. Over time they moved away from it in favor of a centralized system that, since 2009, has become PECE. The politicians and senior administrators did not think through the possible consequences of this decision for student learning and performance. Nor did they consider the fact that most countries either don't have or are moving away from a centralized public examination at the primary education stage.

In explaining the 98% pass rate there are other factors that need mention. The Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE) is a civil society forum engaged in education. In its Education Watch (2014) report, CAMPE reviewed news, opinion and editorials on PECE from several leading national dailies. A major problem in administering PECE was found to be "question paper leakage". Leaked questions were disseminated just days before the exams and to ensure maximum reach they were disseminated by Facebook, emails, and text messaging! The papers also reported incidents of teachers writing on students' answer scripts and "false examinees" (PECE graduates of previous years) taking the exam on behalf of others. The quality and credibility of PECE have become seriously compromised as a result, and educationists have expressed their concern that PECE has prompted children to "learning to cheat" instead of learning to read and write with comprehension (CAMPE, 2014). The education authorities claim that these lapses have been brought under control.

Education Policy 2010 had recommended extension of the primary stage to grade eight, which presumably would become part of the universal and compulsory primary education

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<sup>1</sup> *Upazila* are sub-national administrative units. There exist approximately 500 *upazila* in Bangladesh, with an average population each of 300,000

cycle (Ministry of Education, 2010). The Government has decided in 2016 to shift the responsibility of supervising education up to grade eight to the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education, though a complete plan for implementation of this decision and what it means in respect of academic, administrative and financial arrangements have still to be worked out. The question now has arisen whether the public examination for primary education completion should be held after grade eight instead of grade five. This has been discussed at the policy-making level of the government and it has been decided that for the time being the present PECE at the end of grade five will continue along with a public examination after grade eight (Junior Secondary Certificate Examination), which was introduced in 2010. If and when the primary education completion exam is shifted to grade eight, the arguments and suggestions presented in this article remain valid.

### **3. How can decentralization help?**

Can decentralization of the PECE system contribute to students' learning gain instead of just preparing them as good test takers? What form would decentralization take? Our answer is essentially going back to the system that existed before PECE was introduced, with some necessary modification. Decentralization alone will not solve the whole array of problems around student learning. But, it can shift the focus from pass rate on a national league table to performance of students in each school. Government administrators (in the national ministry, line directorates, field offices, district and sub-district administration) would be relieved from the pressure they currently face for delivering successively higher pass rates to be presented ceremonially to the Prime Minister by the Minister for Primary and Mass Education.

In over four decades since the birth of Bangladesh, the democratically elected governments never took any significant steps toward decentralization of governance, including governance and management of education. A first formal step for decentralization of power, promotion of upazila elected assemblies, was taken by an authoritarian (military) government in the 1980s. The democratically elected government that returned in the 1990s remained indifferent to strengthening local government bodies. The basic reason is that members of parliament saw elected local government representatives as their rivals in exercising power and distributing patronage. It took another cycle of authoritarian government, under the military backed caretaker government in 2007 and 2008, for the Upazila system to be reinstated with the provision for an elected upazila Chairman. Again, in 2009, the newly elected democratic government brought various changes in local government laws, rules and regulations, but these did little to promote an effective decentralized system of public service provision, including primary education.

An argument against decentralization is the lack of planning and management competencies at the local level. But perhaps the way to overcome this constraint is to build those capacities by actually practicing decentralized planning and management. As in other service sectors, education officials working at the district and upazila levels may not possess the knowledge and skills required for plan formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

Decentralization of PECE could be a trust and capacity building opportunity. Lessons learned can be replicated and adapted both horizontally and vertically to broaden the scope of decentralization by initiating to decentralize some systems and service provisions.

Why decentralization of PECE and decentralization to which level? PECE is a public system task, but unlike many other public activities PECE is self-financing. Since parents pay fees for their children writing the exam, PECE decentralization will not require any financial support from the central government. Upazila are the fourth administrative tier in the government of Bangladesh (GOB) structure (below the central, division, and district administration) and is close to communities where schools function. Upazilas are a miniature version of the GoB structure and people are familiar with their role. The Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (MoPME) has field offices at the upazila level. Upazila Education Offices (UEO) and upazila Resource Centers (URC) are two important parts of MoPME's upazila level structure. The UEO has the overall management responsibility at the upazila level, while URC provides various training to primary school teachers to build their capacities. Upazila being an effective tier for decentralization with representation of various central agencies and given the history of its role in school management, it is the appropriate level for taking on the expanded tasks implicit in decentralization.

#### **4. Implementing PECE decentralization**

Bangladesh has been making concerted efforts towards achieving the goal of Education For All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goal 2, which called for universal primary education by 2015. This is the international context for the improvement of learning outcomes for children in Bangladesh. A credible assessment of student learning is important from this perspective (USAID, 2004). PECE decentralization would help, if the GOB can build confidence among various interest groups and government functionaries that it expects upazilas to expand their capacity. Decentralization of planning and management of primary education was one of the major strategies proposed for the achievement of EFA. It is also a key action area in the Third Primary Education Development Program (PEDP 3 for the period 2011-17.) But, as noted, a great constraint in promoting decentralization is seen to be the lack of necessary competencies at the local level, which has stymied a determined and systematic effort.

As mentioned earlier, public officials at the central level do not need to create a separate funding provision for decentralized PECE administration. Existing rules and regulations can sufficiently cover PECE administered jointly by UEO and URC, working closely at the upazila level. The URC can focus more on technical aspects of PECE and the UEO can be more instrumental in administering the test and other logistics. For instance, URCs can provide training on 'examination system and learning assessment' for the primary school teachers; the UEO will help the primary education stakeholders at the upazila level address the strategic planning required for administering PECE at the local level. The selection of scholarship recipients can still be done on the basis of a quota for each upazila based on its student population, taking into account the result of the Upazila level examination.

Decentralization of PECE can be undertaken initially on a trial basis in a limited number of upazilas. The pilot upazilas could include a mix of high and low performing upazilas, urban and rural combinations, and upazilas that differ based on socio-economic and learning status. Provided it is undertaken carefully, this trial can lay the foundation for future decentralization of the entire primary education system in Bangladesh. The reform needs to be slowly and carefully planned, engaging all primary education stakeholders at both the local and central levels.

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