

Challenges of Quality Education at Secondary Level- A Commentary

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[For over two decades, in his work as a public administration specialist for the International Development Research Center (IDRC), Canada and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Abu Tayeb Rafiqur Rahman, has been involved in organizing training seminars and undertaking consultancy missions to numerous countries around the world. He undertook missions to Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Guyana and Trinidad.]

Dr. Rahman was born in Bangladesh and currently lives in New York state, USA. After a successful and outstanding career in international arena, he still pursues intellectual activities in his professional field. He has been an Adjunct Professor of Public Administration at Baruch College, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, and a Guest Lecturer at other institutions including the Harvard Institute of International Development, Harvard University.

Dr. Rahman is the founder and the chairman of Volunteers Association for Bangladesh (VAB), a non-profit organization, established in 1998 by Non-resident Bangladeshis (NRB) to expand opportunities for rural children of Bangladesh in quality education and skill training. Over the last fifteen years, working with over a hundred rural secondary schools, VAB has helped more than 50,000 young men and women and their families in the villages and underprivileged areas of Bangladesh to overcome poverty and elevate their lives.

Press report about a meeting hosted by the Ministry of Education on education quality on 26 May, 2016 prompted Dr. Rahman to offer the following insightful comments. – Editor, BEJ]

A recent meeting of experts, organized by the Government of Bangladesh, on the quality of secondary education in the country has reviewed a detailed presentation made by the Additional Secretary of the Ministry of Education on all its relevant aspects and made several key recommendations. Some key aspects include details on schools, student enrolment, number of teachers and their ratio vis-a-vis students, results of SSC exams over the years, issues of quantity vs. quality and the relevance and impact on them played by heavy curriculum, complex text books, low-quality questions including MCQs, abuses in exam halls, and a few critical management and governance issues.

Experts agreed on the sharp fall in quality and recommended the following steps, as reported in the Daily Star: “Simplify curriculum and textbooks; Abolish MCQ system in all exams; Set up a question bank; Reform creative question system; Increase budgetary allocation; Provide more training to teachers; Rethink primary terminal and JSC exams” (“Overhaul is the Answer,” Daily Star, 27 May, 2016).

There was general acknowledgement among participants that the Education Ministry officials are fully aware of the quality issue and an appreciation that they have been forthcoming in sharing the issue without reservation. Quality deterioration has become a systemic issue, both in the school education as a whole and within the secondary level. The Education Minister reportedly noted, "Education in the country has gone far in terms of number over the last five years. Now, we have to ensure quality education."

If one takes a longer-term view, one observes that the emphasis on quantity was building up over decades without making necessary arrangements for preserving quality, as reflected mainly in the enrolment rate, policy of "social promotion", pressure from parents and SMC members to allow students to move to upper classes without any attention to their performance in the lower classes and to allow SSC candidates to take the SSC exam irrespective of their lack of success in pre-test or test exams, and recently in the ever-rising SSC pass rate.

However, the emphasis on quantity, at the expense of quality, did accomplish certain purposes: satisfaction to the community and the parents in seeing their supported schools get a respectable pass rate and their children pass high school; increased supply of successful graduates instead of failed SSC students for a low income economy, and above all some political support for the government. The sum of these positive aspects has been corroborated in a recent UNDP survey of 15000 households in Bangladesh where 52.7 % noted their happiness about their children's education.

Once we identify the "beneficial" aspects of quantity, as above, the issue of quality takes on a thoroughly different dimension. A number of crucial questions arise: What is meant by "quality"; what purpose is served by quality; what are the true costs and benefits of improving quality; and so on. Granted, one of the central objectives of high quality high school education is to ensure admission into college education and higher level education. In an ironic way, then, quality secondary education becomes an "ingredient" of increasing quantity of higher-educated graduates.

A critical question arises at this point: What purpose will be served by an increased number of higher-educated graduates? **The issue transcends the level of rhetoric and enters the very pragmatic area of manpower development for the emerging economy and its absorptive capacity at each stage of development.** For example, is the national economy at a stage now that it can employ the increased number of higher-educated better-skilled manpower, or is this manpower going to be under- or un-employed, just as we see in the neighboring economy?

These questions address the crux of the matter: **what is the relationship between quality secondary education with national manpower development including the significance of curricula, syllabus and their related aspects and what and how much is the need for manpower in the dynamic process of national economic development endeavor?** These questions need to be answered pragmatically, accurately and scrupulously in the current debate on quality secondary education.

Nonetheless, there is a general agreement on the gradual fall in quality education and a complex quantity- centered and shared participation in low quality education system has taken root with its supportive culture among the key power groups in the school education. Attempts made earlier to break the system and culture has had very limited results, sometimes due to emphasis on the symptoms rather the real causes. There is no guarantee that recommendations highlighted now will be implemented and have desired results. It may be noted that the first ever Learning Assessment Survey-2013 carried out in schools over 10 years under a World Bank supported Secondary Education Quality and Access Enhancement Project (SEQAEP) found around 92 percent of sixth graders don't have the required competence in English, 89 percent of them lack proficiency in Bangla, and more than 82 percent of them cannot gain expected competence in mathematics.

Considering this uncertainty and anticipating continued public resource constraints, certain marginal interventions focusing on **curricula, teacher and management** may have significant positive impact on quality. **Curricula, text books and their related aspects** provide the main framework and substance of academic learning. Recommendations to reduce number of subjects at primary and secondary levels, to simplify text books so that an average student can understand the basic content, and establish question banks for each subject will have positive impact on quality. The idea of having more than one text book for each subject reflecting variation in presentation, clarity, readability, as prevalent in advanced countries deserves serious consideration. This will provide competition among authors, encourage team writing and offer choice to teachers and students.

Teachers are universally recognized as the heart of a good education system. While more training in the conventional sense is recommended, it needs to be organized in a comprehensive manner covering pedagogic concerns to meet the current needs. However, there is an urgent need to focus beyond remedying the current situation and prepare for the future to attract more qualified and self-motivated entrants by offering both monetary and non-monetary incentives. To facilitate such action, government may devise guidelines and set standards leaving actual implementation to the local schools and the communities. In addition, the government may also consider a program like **Teach Bangladesh** to attract young and motivated college graduates to spend two years teaching in rural schools that need additional teaching support most. This kind of program, either fully educational or a part of the National Service, has been in practice in many countries.

Finally, the issues of **governance, management and funding** remain critical to quality improvement. Maximum autonomy may be sought for local school officials to mobilize resources and manage school affairs to attain the best results for the students and their schools. It seems only fair that the same leaders and the communities that established almost all schools since 1972 and may have mobilized resources for running them before government subsidy was made available should continue to be responsible for their welfare without government interference. The recent High Court decision barring a Member of Parliament to automatically head the local elected bodies may have positive impact on local

autonomy. While assuring its hands off position, government may consider to further strength the link between performance and all its grants and manage this process not directly by the Ministry but by an autonomous body to assure professional and objective management for best results.

As the Government continues to slowly raise its yearly allocation for education, two key pro-quality recommendations may be taken in the interim to enhance benefit to deserving schools and encourage fund mobilization from non-public sources. They include active consolidation and elimination policy of existing schools and public-private collaboration for promoting and sustaining quality education. There is a need for consolidation by combining schools where there are too many schools chasing too few students.

There is also an urgent need to eliminate schools, at least drop them from public support that have been performing poorly. Using a benchmark of one secondary school for every 10,000 people there are at least 3,000 extra schools currently in Bangladesh and a policy of consolidation will help better distribution of public and private support to the remaining schools which can serve better the students and the communities. With an encouraging societal concern for quality education, there exists ample scope for attracting initiative and support of concerned Bangladeshis, enlightened private corporations and relevant NGOs locally, nationally and internationally. An active public policy, guidelines and interaction may possibly help in mobilizing and sustaining such concern and support to help improve quality.

It may be concluded with caution that the public secular education system and culture in Bangladesh has remained ensconced in the system perpetrated by the colonists. It is now high time to align national development efforts with national manpower needs and to utilize education, especially secondary education, as the tool for such alignment. The quantity and the quality issues will then necessarily be in sync.