

Taking the fear out of English, mathematics at school

COMBINED pass percentage in the Secondary School Certificate and equivalent examinations came down to 77.77 per cent in 2018, a slide by 13.57 percentage points, from 91.34 per cent in 2014. The slide is put down to poor performance of students, more in rural areas, by academics and education officials, that results from a sorry state of the teaching of English and mathematics in schools, caused by an acute shortage of teachers having specialisation in the two important subjects. The shortage has hampered the classroom teaching of English and mathematics, having its reflection in the results of the school-final public examinations. The latest Bangladesh Education Statistics report, which came out in May 2017, shows that 89 per cent of the teachers in secondary schools take English classes without themselves having had English as a core subject in their bachelor and master's degree courses. The report further shows that 84 per cent of the teachers take mathematics classes without themselves having had mathematics as a core subject in their bachelor and master's degree courses.

What remains further worrying is that only 4.4 per cent of the total 78,415 English teachers have had, as Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics figures say, bachelor's honours degree and 6.88 per cent have had master's degree in English. The statistics also show that 6.56 per cent of the total 54,042 mathematics teachers have had bachelor's honours degree and 9.32 per cent have had master's degree in mathematics. A situation like this cannot ensure adequate classroom teaching in English and mathematics, which has dogged the education of students. Added to this was the fear that students ingrain in learning English and mathematics in their primary education years. As the situation is bad at the secondary level, it is only natural that the situation is worse at the primary level. Many brilliant students take up teaching job in schools, primary and secondary, as a means of transition to better, and well-paid, jobs. After they land good jobs, they quit teaching. The education minister seeks to say that additional classes, introduced in 250 upazilas under a project, has helped to improve student performance in the subjects. But the solution lies in having adequate number of teachers with specialisation in the subjects. It is difficult, and almost impossible, to have such a large number of teachers with specialisation overnight. Yet, while trying at this, the government can arrange for specialised, intensive training for the existing teachers in the subjects on how to teach students better. Still, if the managers of education want to take the fears of students out of English and mathematics, they need to focus more on primary education as faults in basics at this level lead to the fears among the students, which only persist throughout the next levels.

The government, under the circumstances, must work out a plan to have teachers with specialisation in the subjects so that the situation improves. It must attend to the issue at the primary level with utmost sincerity. It must also arrange for training of the teachers simultaneously and sustainably.

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