

Shoring up primary education

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THE primary education system is equipped with an impressive competency-based curriculum. Subject- and grade-wise competencies have been identified and corresponding learning outcomes have been developed. Based on the outcomes, textbooks were designed to ensure that learners acquire the intended skills. To support teachers in facilitating effective teaching-learning processes aimed at achieving these competencies, detailed teacher guides and supplementary materials were also prepared.

However, despite such well-intentioned and learning-oriented initiatives, the actual outcomes remain far below expectations. A considerable proportion of learners still lack basic literacy and numeracy skills. This persistent gap demands a serious review of why many primary school students continue to

struggle with reading in Bangla and English and with fundamental mathematical operations. The important question is not whether the curriculum exists, but why it fails to deliver the desired results.

A major cause appears to be the gap between the intended curriculum and the implemented one. While the curriculum framework is comprehensive, its execution in classrooms often falls short, preventing learners from achieving the prescribed competencies. This disconnect leads to weak foundations in literacy and numeracy. To address this pressing challenge in primary education, policymakers must take decisive and pragmatic steps.

Curriculum developers, to begin with, should adopt a more grounded approach in designing the intended curriculum. The diverse realities of learners must be at the forefront of planning. Many children come from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds and face barriers such as unsafe or difficult access to schools, malnutrition, lack of learning support at home, and inadequate school facilities, including shortages of teaching materials, teachers, and classroom contact hours. These factors inevitably hinder the learning process and must inform curriculum design.

When these traditional phonetic practices disappeared from both the curriculum and teaching methods, students' ability to read fluently in Bangla and English began to decline. This observation should not be dismissed as nostalgic but rather considered as a valuable pedagogical insight. Such methods, grounded in repetition and auditory learning, could be reintroduced and adapted into modern curriculum design to strengthen foundational literacy.

Furthermore, the implemented curriculum should not only cater to urban or high-performing schools but also reflect the realities of under-performing and hard-to-reach schools. Inclusivity and practicality must be prioritised over uniformity. Curriculum development must therefore involve not only subject experts but also competent primary school teachers, field-level education officers, and teacher

trainers. Representation must be equitable across geography, ethnicity, religion, and gender, to ensure that the curriculum reflects diverse experiences and challenges.

In ensuring that all learners attain fluency in Bangla and English reading and proficiency in the four basic mathematical operations, clear benchmarks are essential. The Directorate of Primary Education in collaboration with the National Curriculum and Textbook Board and the National Academy for Primary Education should establish grade-specific 'required proficiency levels' in literacy and numeracy. For instance, grade one recognise letters and vowel signs; pronounce and write them correctly and fluently; read and write two- or three-letter words; read very simple sentences of three or four words. And, grade five read any text fluently, answer comprehension questions and write a few sentences on a given topic.

Achieving these grade-specific required proficiency levels should be made mandatory for all learners within a clearly defined time frame, for example, from January to June each academic year. This initiative could run concurrently with regular classroom activities. The head teacher, acting as the academic leader, should prepare and oversee a plan to implement the programme, ensuring the active engagement of teachers and parents.

Schools must have the autonomy to design and implement their own approaches to achieving required proficiency levels, while education offices should refrain from micromanagement and instead focus on providing technical and logistical support. From July to December, district and upazila education officers, along with primary teachers training institutes and UPTC instructors, could assess progress through uniform evaluation tools developed by the Directorate of Primary Education in consultation with the National Curriculum and Textbook Board and the National Academy for Primary Education. The findings should then be used to hold teachers and officials accountable for both progress and shortcomings.

However, before introducing such an initiative, it is crucial to ensure that each school has an adequate number of teachers, at least five per institution, or a proportionate ratio according to student enrolment. Without addressing staffing shortages, no reform initiative, however well-designed, can achieve its intended results.

As the twenty-first century brings rapid technological changes and new economic challenges, the demands on future generations are evolving. To thrive in an increasingly digital and knowledge-based world, learners must acquire the ability to read, comprehend, and calculate efficiently from an early age. Lifelong learning, a key requirement for adaptability and innovation, begins with strong foundational skills in literacy and numeracy.

Bangladesh's competency-based curriculum was a major step forward in re-imagining primary education. Yet the real test lies not in the design of the curriculum, but in its translation into meaningful classroom experiences. Ensuring that every child learns to read fluently and calculate confidently is not merely a pedagogical goal, it is an economic, social and moral imperative for the nation's future.

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