

Towards Adult Literacy Through Primary Schooling

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THE constitution of Bangladesh, the Act of Parliament for Compulsory Primary Education, the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child and the United Nations World Summit for Children Declaration all call for primary schooling for all children. Bangladesh has endorsed all these and set high goals for the 1990s. The question is how to achieve Education For All by the 21st century?

The population pyramid of Bangladesh shows that 55% of people are under the age of 20. They become the adults of tomorrow and unless these, the children of today, attend primary school, they will become illiterate adults of tomorrow.

The formal education system may not be adequate to deal with the demands of universal primary education. Already between 60 and 75% of children enrol in government schools. With this good enrollment the focus must be given to attendance and completion. Why? Because only 50% of these children, on average attend class and only 35% complete the five year cycle of primary education. Therefore very special attention, very special programmes and a very special emphasis, must be given to the regular attendance and then school completion of children currently enrolled.

Looking at Attendance and Completion the main thrust should be on learning achievement within all educational systems. However, there is one problem: the number of hours which teachers spend teaching. Comparisons between the major countries of Asia reveal that the children of

China receive three times more hours of instruction in the classroom than the children of Bangladesh. Chinese families have fewer children and yet society places a very high value on their education.

But educational experts tell us that the 440 hours of classroom time which Bangladesh children receive each year is sufficient to teach the basics of primary education *if the teachers teach for the full time*. But studies have shown that teachers do not spend the entire 440 hours teaching. A time breakdown of a typical first period 35-minute class for primary schools shows us that five minutes are taken up with roll call, five minutes by teachers moving from class to class, a further fifteen minutes are spent checking the homework assigned the day before — which leaves only ten minutes for teaching.

Each parent has helped their own children with their homework. However, we are able to help our children because we are educated and yet two thirds of adults in Bangladesh are illiterate.

Therefore we must ask ourselves how children of illiterate parents can learn when so little time is spent teaching and when so much emphasis is placed on homework? Wouldn't children do better if they learned and did their homework in school? Perhaps this is related to the high drop-out rate?

by Cole P Dodge

The high drop-out rate poses an interesting set of questions. On the one hand we might conclude that the children of Bangladesh are less intelligent, less capable and therefore do not do well in schooling and drop-out. But this is clearly not the case when we look at those very drop-outs who have been enrolled in non-formal schools. Consider their performance: 98% attend, 96% complete. The daily course work is done entirely in the classroom. There is no homework. This is evidence enough for me to conclude that Bangladeshi children are indeed intelligent and bright and capable.

Congratulations are due to the government on its commitment to Education For All, signing the United Nations World Summit for Children Declaration, for ratifying and putting into law the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and for passing the Compulsory Primary Education Act and introducing CPE in 1992.

These indicate a very strong commitment at the political and administrative levels to Compulsory Primary Education. However, there is a big challenge to bring all children into school and give at least 80% three years worth of primary schooling.

How we can reach Education for All by the year 2000? Is there a precedent for optimism? Yes — Universal Child Immunisation has reached well over 80% of all newborns in 1990 and again in 1991, from less than 5% in 1985. The experience in the UCI drive suggests that the Ministry of Education requires many partners to achieve their

gigantic goal. The Ministry of Health was only able to vaccinate 40% of newborns by themselves up to 1988. Then, they look on many partners, not only within government ranging for the Cabinet Division, the Ministry of Education, Local Government, Women's Affairs, Social Welfare, Youth and Information but also many non-government organisations, professional bodies and service groups. Every one combined to work hard to achieve UCI.

So the experience of UCI in Bangladesh suggests that the Ministry of Education should look for the natural partners who are already engaged in education, out of their commitment to education. The biggest group are the Islamic Schools: the Maktabas and Madrasas who reach almost one out of every five children. Many children who drop out of school are enrolled in an Islamic school.

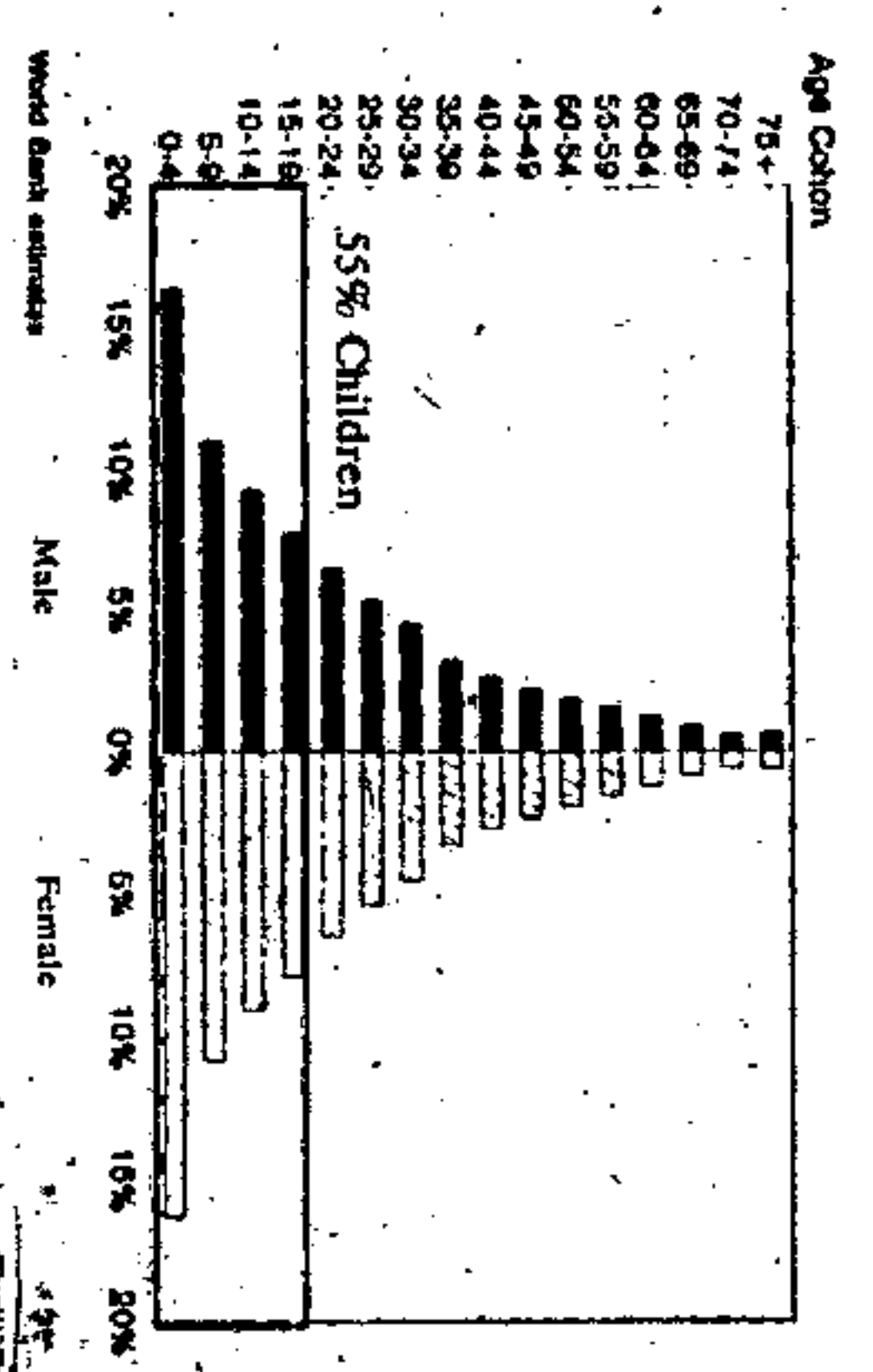
Some people point to poverty as the main reason children drop out of the school and yet I have never

found a mother and father of a six-year-old girl in Bangladesh who said that they did not want their daughter to receive an education. Indeed, one of the reasons why between 60 and 75% of children enrol in school in the first place is because education of children is seen as an escape from poverty by poor parents.

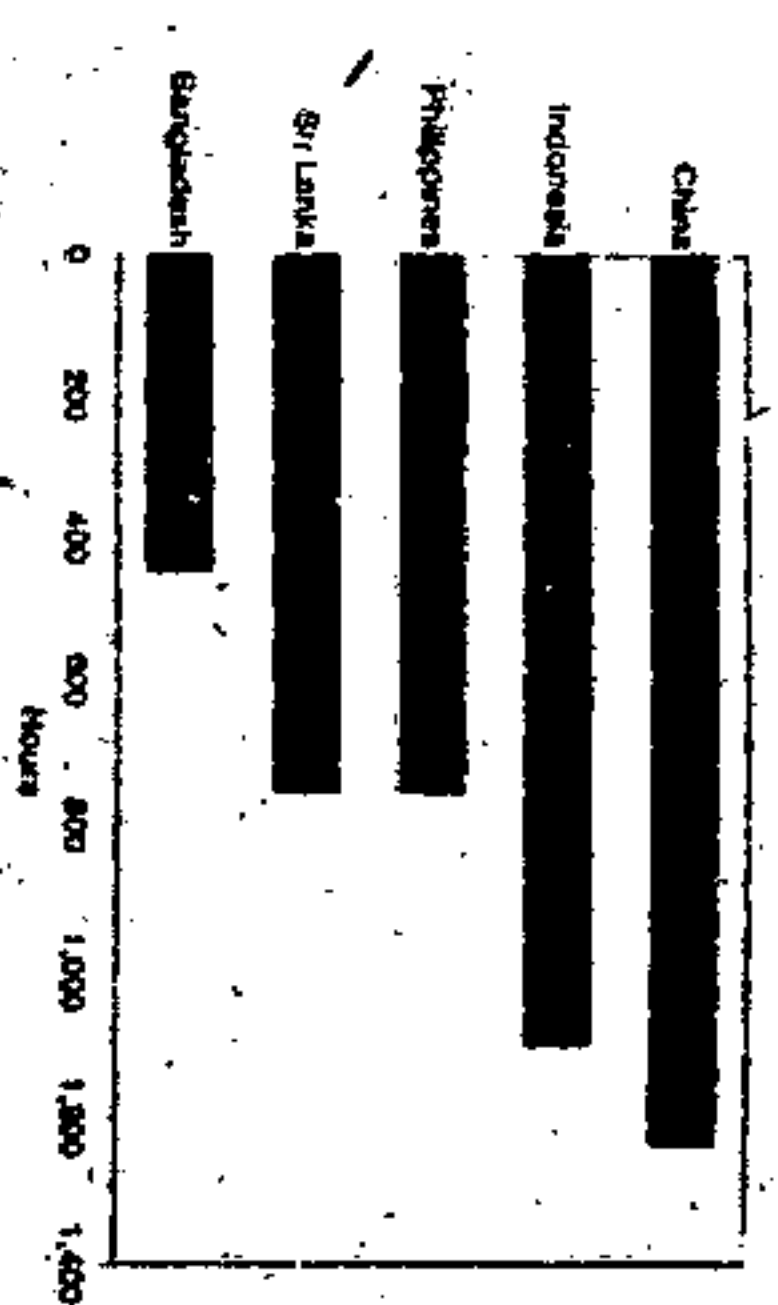
We can pull together many partners to achieve and alliance for basic education. Social mobilisation can be done best by the non-governmental and by social service organisations as well as people engaged in communication. If Bangladesh is to achieve Universal Basic Education and have mass literacy by the 21st century then it is imperative that the children of today become literate adults of tomorrow.

On priority as identified by government, clearly must be on primary schooling. Demographers calculate that if there is no change in qualitative performance of primary schools, in other words if the trends of today continue until the next century, then there will be an absolute decline in the number of adults who are able to read and write. We will see a decline from one third to about a quarter of adults who are literate. On the other hand, if 80% of children today, in this decade and into the next century, complete primary schooling, then 75% of adults will be literate in the next century. The priority on the primary schooling for the largest demographic group in society today — the children — will ensure adult literacy tomorrow.

Population Pyramid 1990



Length of School Year in Hours



Time on Task in Schools in Bangladesh

