

## State of Primary Education in Bangladesh and Scope for Improvement

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**Abstract:** *Education is key to the overall development of a nation and primary education, upon which all higher education depends, deserves priority. This realization exists among the post independence government education policy makers of Bangladesh. Nonetheless, serious problems in the primary education system mar success achieved thus far. Education in Bangladesh is not internationally competitive and this has serious implications upon the overall progress of the nation. Lack of a unified curriculum has been the bane of the primary education sector for the past 40 years in Bangladesh. Other problems such as the quality of teachers and facilities, problems inbuilt within the syllabi and lack of political will to implement judicious recommendations of the different education commissions also have had ruinous effects. After decades of lagging behind the more developed countries in almost every sector, it is time to rise above political agenda and make objective analytical studies of the prevailing situation in the education sector and identify weaknesses for remedy. Such an initiative has been undertaken within the limited scope of this paper and several suggestions have been put forward. Through a strong primary education a highly qualified generation may emerge to lead Bangladesh in realizing the dreams and goals of the great Liberation War of 1971.*

### 1. BACKGROUND

The prerequisite for building a strong progressive country is a properly educated populace and every level of education from the primary to the tertiary is vital, however, special care and attention is deserved by the primary level due to its lasting effect on all subsequent levels. This priority should not be seen as in competition with the higher levels due to its inherent massive contribution to all subsequent levels. In other words, undervaluation of this level would negatively impact education at the high school and university resulting ultimately in hindering the progress of a nation.

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For example, Western European countries which prioritized primary education in the 19<sup>th</sup> century have all advanced greatly and are the leaders of the whole world today<sup>1</sup>. This significance was realized by the post independent government of Bangladesh and the first education commission recommended investment in the primary level of education. There have been many serious studies carried out by different education commissions since 1972 and recommended steps based on such studies have been implemented under the different governments of independent Bangladesh with various degrees of success. Unfortunately, however, despite huge investment and effort by both the government and the private sector, desired level of success has been elusive.

There has been success in increasing enrollment from 58% to 94.8% by 2010 which bodes well for attaining the target of 100% enrollment by 2015 set by the current government keeping in line with UN<sup>2</sup>. On the other hand, however, dismal figures in retention mar this success and in conjunction with other major problems such as quality and standard threaten to deflect achievement of desired goals<sup>3</sup>. While trying to bring under primary education the remaining 3.3 million out-of-school children the government should ensure that quality is not compromised.

Furthermore, it may be noted that there has been a total lack of uniformity in the curriculum followed by primary educational institutions in Bangladesh despite being mandated by the constitution of the country. Article 17 of the constitution states<sup>4</sup>:

*The state shall adopt effective measures for the purpose of –*

- a) Establishing a uniform, mass-oriented and universal system of education and extending free and compulsory education to all the children to such stage as may be determined by law;
- b) Relating education to the needs of society and producing properly trained and motivated citizens to serve those needs.
- c) Removing illiteracy within such time as may be determined by law.

In fact, in Bangladesh, there are 13 different types of curricula being followed at the primary level. This poses a big problem. Strengths and weaknesses vary tremendously among the students under different

curricula. As a result it is quite impossible to accommodate these students of diverse backgrounds in the same class maintaining a single standard at the higher levels.

In the available literature, the focus is on the successes of the primary education system and simple survey reports. Analytical approaches addressing problems with the aim of improving primary education in Bangladesh has been limited to the various Education Commissions. Even they have failed to fully address the problems as is evidenced by how far Bangladesh is falling behind internationally. The primary education system in Bangladesh needs to be assessed objectively, weaknesses identified and steps need to be taken to strengthen this vital educational level.

## **2. PURPOSE**

Even though a thoroughly adequate research is out of the scope of this paper the purpose and aim is to identify existing major problems and subsequent to a study of the best systems of the world, put forward some very important practical suggestions.

## **3. METHOD OF STUDY**

A thorough study of available material and research documents by learned educationists, government commissions and international educationists' reports has been carried out for reaching worthwhile conclusions about the state education and educational curricula in Bangladesh and the developed world. Interviews of students in different types of primary institutions and teachers have also been undertaken to complement literature review. Finally direct observation of performance of students from diverse backgrounds at the higher levels added significantly to the study.

## **4. GOALS AND PURPOSE OF PRIMARY EDUCATION**

Before proceeding further the goals of primary school education in Bangladesh need to be reviewed. Each commission set out building up their policy based on some preset ideals or goals. The first commission was the Kudrat-i-Khuda Commission of 1972. This is of the highest significance as the education policy of this commission has been the

basis for all future endeavors. The Kudrat-i-Khuda commission spelled out its purpose concisely thus<sup>5</sup>:

“To develop and nurture the child’s moral, mental and social personality; to bring up the child as a patriotic, responsible, inquiring and law-abiding citizen, and develop in him/her love for justice, dignity, labour, proper conduct and uprightness; to learn to read and write in the mother tongue and to be able to count and calculate; to be able to acquire the fundamental knowledge and skills needed for a future citizen; to prepare for the next stage of higher education.”

Recently in 2010, under the Hasina administration a major initiative has been undertaken. A commission was formed under the illustrious educationist Professor Kabir Choudhury. The commission set up lofty yet much needed goals and has mapped out a roadway for achieving the goals.

*The fundamental goals of primary education in Bangladesh can be briefly stated as below:*

1. Expansion of school system to ensure inclusion of all primary aged kids.
2. In addition to teaching students reading and writing, instill among students values that will be the mark of their education.
3. Instill in students a progressive and scientific outlook free of superstition and communalism and prepare them for further studies.
4. Training students with skills to enter professional life or enter vocational schools bearing in mind that for many students, primary education may be the highest level of education.
5. Increase enrollment and retention.
6. Create a unified educational curriculum
7. Provide Free Education

## **5. PERCEIVED PROBLEMS**

Identification of weaknesses and problems in the existing system is a prerequisite for improvement. Some of the glaring problems are discussed below.

### *Curricula*

This first major step forward was taken in 1972 when the constitution was introduced in independent Bangladesh. The constitution rightly recognizes and declares education under article 17 as a basic right of the people. The then government also understood the significance of education at the primary level and an ordinance was passed in October 1973 nationalizing a large number of primary schools thus opening the doors to education for the masses. In addition, a law was passed to further strengthen the efforts in 1974 which basically thrust upon the government the responsibility to bring all primary education under a centralized administration. Other pragmatic steps were taken in Mujib's five year plan (73-78) to renovate and improve the primary education system with the goal of increasing enrollment and retention. The Mujib administration's realization of the value of primary education is also reflected in their plan to establish 5000 new schools.

Even though the Constitution calls for a unified primary curriculum there is great disparity in the curricula and standards of the schools in Bangladesh (Fig. 1) and as stated earlier this is a major drawback. There are currently 13 types of schools: Government Primary Schools (GPS), Registered Non-Government Primary Schools (RNGPS), HSAPS- High School Attached Primary Schools Experimental Schools Primary Teachers' Training Institute Primary School, Community Schools, Non-Registered Non Governmental Primary Schools, Kindergarten, NGO Schools, Primary sections of Secondary Schools, Ebtedayee Madrasahs, and Primary sections of other Madrasahs, English Medium and English Versions<sup>7,8</sup>.

A unified curriculum is very important. Students studying in different systems will not only have widely divergent world views but also standards. This becomes a major problem at the higher levels of education. As already stated maintaining a standard in classrooms becomes near impossible. To accommodate weaker students, teachers are often forced to lower standards which directly hurt students with stronger backgrounds. Dr. A. H. Moinuddin Ahmed of Dhaka University once despaired that he was forced to teach fourth year students material meant for the freshman year. Furthermore, having varying systems is a recipe for social polarization and disintegration. This is again of prime importance at the primary level as this is where a base of future generations is created.

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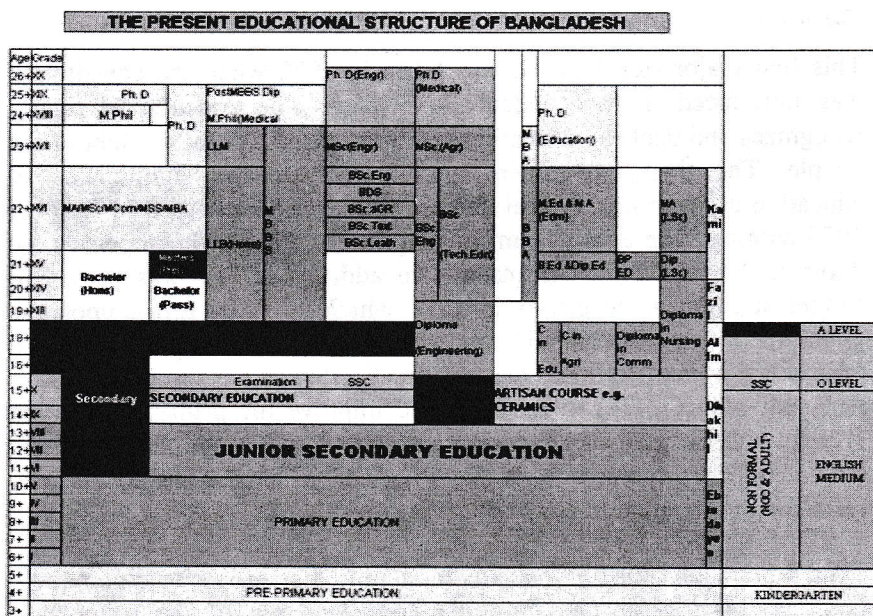


Figure 1: Education in Bangladesh<sup>25</sup> (modified)

Broadly speaking, however, there are three major systems: Public Schools (Government and Registered) Private (Non-government) and the Madrassa. Most schools of Bangladesh are under the government (Government and Registered) and most students study in the government schools. However, Madrassa primary schools account for a huge number of students while schools such as English Medium schools are few and mostly situated in major cities (Fig. 2, 3)<sup>7</sup>.

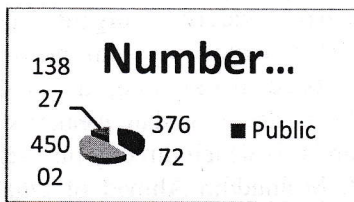


Figure 2: Major Types of Schools, Data: BANBEIS<sup>7</sup>

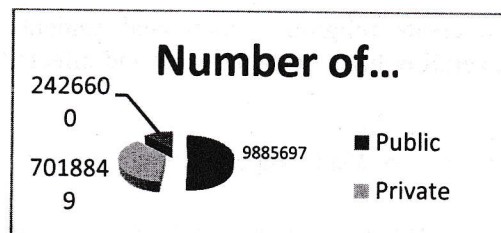


Figure 3: Enrollment in Different Types Primary Schools, Data: BANBEIS<sup>7</sup>

At the primary level, in all systems, Bangla, English and Mathematics are taught. However, the quality of instruction varies greatly and further differences arise henceforth. As religious schools, Madrassas focus mainly on Arabic (I and II) and learning the Quran. Social Science and Science gets more emphasis in the general public and private schools and religious education is given less importance.

The English Version schools generally follow the same structure as their Bangla Version counterparts but, as the name implies, students in the English Version gain a stronger foundation in English. Difference is seen again in private schools where the syllabi may be the same but higher standards are maintained as is evidenced by the results of students in standardized exams such as the P.S.C.

The English Medium Schools vary the most. Even though their numbers are not great and their standards are the highest. The syllabi and curricula come directly from some of the world's leading countries. However, there are two very important drawbacks of this kind of schooling. First and foremost, it is a highly exclusive system due to very high tuition fees. Besides, the syllabi of these schools produce students who are generally apathetic towards their own country and culture due to lack of proper courses in Bangladesh history and culture and the minimal importance Bangladesh gets. Non formal schools follow separate unique syllabi and fall under no singular type, hence its name and the standards vary greatly among non formal schools.

Even the objectives of some of these types of schools are quite different which promises polarization in society. The general schools strive to create scientific minded, non-communal students while the Madrassa

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system strives to create religiously motivated students. This is then reflected in the overall politics of the country and affects the progress of the nation.

The aims and objectives of Madrassa education are<sup>6</sup>:

- to establish firm belief in Almighty Allah in the minds of the learners and his Prophet (Pbuh) and to enable them to understand the true meaning of Islam;
- to build them up as students motivated to preach and propagate the tradition of Islamic virtues; to build up their character in a way so that they can make the communities aware of different aspects of Islam, its religious customs and rituals and to inspire the learners to the codes of life as prescribed in Islam;
- to build them up in a way that they can know and understand the true ideal and spirit of Islam and accordingly become persons of sound moral characters and are able to reflect those ideals and principles in all aspects of life;
- to instruct and follow the general and compulsory subjects as recommended for different levels of others streams.

*Tuition Fee*

The constitution of Bangladesh recognizes education as a basic right and decrees that primary education shall be free and the government shall bear all financial responsibility. However, since the government has failed to provide free education for all, private investors have naturally entered the scene. Two things are noticeable here. First, students from private primary institutions do best in national exams. Second, education is considered a commodity in contradiction to the constitution of the nation. Financially challenged students have no place in schools with top performance.

*Teacher Qualification*

In a research carried out by A. F. M. Fazle Rabbi, it was found that most teachers at the primary level were under qualified – mostly secondary school graduates sport third divisions<sup>9</sup>. Most teachers also lack any sort of training and are not mentally suitable as teachers and mentors of the



minds of the future generations. In many cases, teachers are more interested in private tutoring rather than mentoring and teaching in regular classes and students greatly suffer from this both academically and financially. Apparently lax appointment requirements for primary teachers are partly to blame for this. Moreover, the government should bear blame since primary school teachers are given extremely poor salary and a status that is lowest among the government employees<sup>9,3</sup>. Thus understandably high caliber applicants are dissuaded. The government needs to realize that this self-defeating policy is reflected in the quality and commitment of the teachers. It may be noted that where primary schools are expected to provide at least 900 contact hours per year, less than 10% actually do so<sup>10</sup>.

#### *Infrastructure*

Many schools outside the city corporation areas do not have proper school buildings and lack basic conveniences such as chairs and tables, water, electricity, and even toilets. 5% of schools do not have toilet facilities in Bangladesh while another 14% have to make do with just one. The average ratio of student to toilet is 150:1.<sup>3</sup>

Poor infrastructure discourages teachers to leave cities and work in rural and suburban areas. The student-teacher ratio thus varies greatly between urban and non-urban schools. Poor infrastructure also affects retention of students, which is another major problem<sup>3</sup>. Special attention must be given to remedy the existing situation.

#### *Teacher Student Ratio*

As of 2008 the average number of teachers was amazingly less than 5 in all types of schools. The teacher-student ratio in public schools was 1:54, in private schools, 1:35 and madrasahs, 1:45 (Fig. 4). The lowest ratio is seen in private schools and these schools perform best in public examinations and at the tertiary level such as St. Gregory's High School students.

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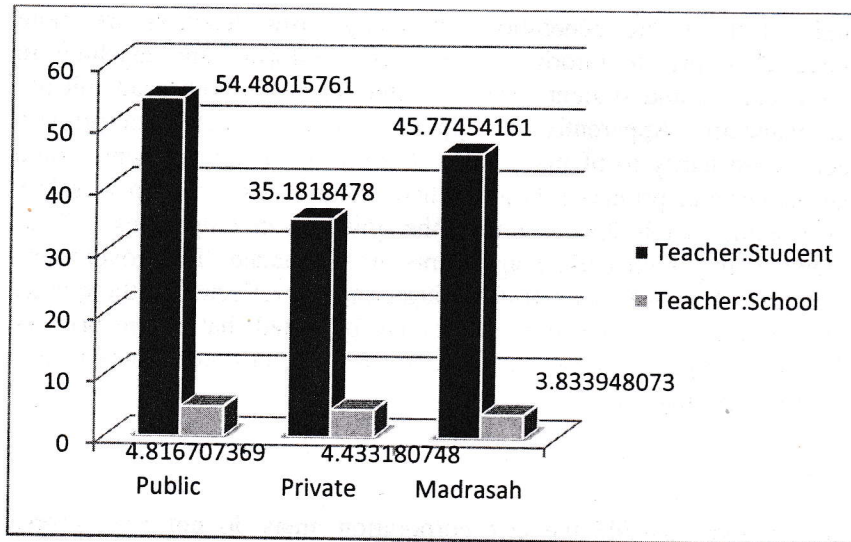


Figure 4: Teacher-Student and Teacher-School Ratio (Data: UNICEF<sup>3</sup>)

One of the most important factors, in fostering a healthy standard of education, is a keeping the teacher to student ratio at a minimum or in other words maintaining small class size. In the developed world, where the standards of output are highest, the class sizes are lowest. At the same time, in countries that are struggling with maintaining standards have large teacher-student ratios (Fig. 5).

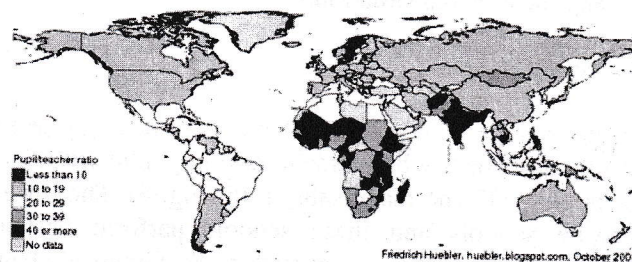


Figure 5: World Map Showing Teacher-Student Ratios<sup>8</sup>

In Bangladesh this ratio is high in all types of schools. The average ratio is 40 students to 1 teacher (fig. 6). In countries with the best educational systems the teacher-student ratio is much lower. In Finland and the US the ratio is only 1:14.

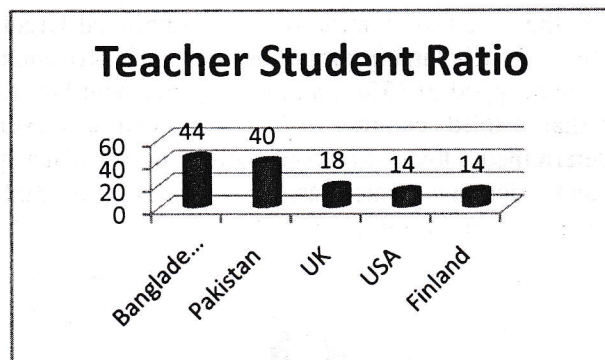


Figure 6: Teacher-Student Ratio<sup>11</sup>

As the quality of education imparted greatly depends on this ratio, it is kept at a minimum) in the developed countries<sup>12, 13, 14</sup>. In fact the UK has been criticized for having large class size (26 students)<sup>15</sup>.

In Bangladesh the average ratio is very high and this ratio reaches a much more appalling figure in the non-urban schools due to the disinterest among teachers to go outside the urban areas. There are just 5 teachers (fig. 4) for over 200 students in primary schools. The quality of education provided in non-urban schools in Bangladesh is pitiful and this is seen in the national exam results. Non-urban schools perform poorly<sup>16</sup>. It may be noted here that the ratio is 1:20 in the famous St. Joseph Higher Secondary School and College which has very high performance in national exams<sup>17</sup>.

#### *Enrollment and Retention*

Success has been achieved in the enrollment sector and the MDG to bring every child to school by 2015 is within reach. This journey has been very slow, however. In the first Five Year Plan of 1973 the enrollment goal was 73% (by 1978) which was only achieved in 1992<sup>2, 18, and 10</sup>.

The major failure is in retention and ensuring completion of grade 5. The first education commission of 1972 takes seriously this failure of the primary education system of Bangladesh. The dropout rate mentioned at that time was an appalling 63%. Kudrat-i-Khuda's aim was to reduce this

to 52%<sup>9</sup>. Over the decades retention rates has improved largely credited to the government's scholarship programs and lunch provision. In 2010, the dropout rate dropped to 35%<sup>2</sup>, a great improvement but nonetheless, is still more than a third. In order to increase retention reasons for this need to be determined. Obvious reasons include poor teacher quality and curriculum and vacations which are not suitable for students from poverty stricken and rural families (Fig. 7).

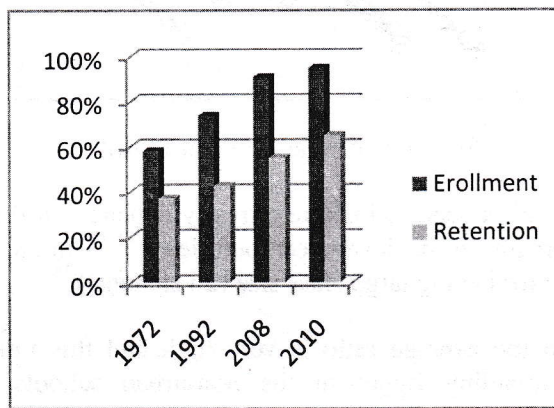


Figure 7: Enrollment and Retention of Students (Data: 2, 9,10, 18)

#### *General education emphasized*

The curriculum that is prescribed at the primary level is either a generalized one or a religious one. These curricula do not really hold much for students of poor families as children from these families need to become earning members at an early age. Stipends and scholarships along with lunch are given to increase retention but the situation obviously demands more.

As recommended by the latest education commission there should be a drive towards vocational schooling. This would not only provide a basic education but would also be in the interest of children who would otherwise graduate from primary schooling without gaining anything from it for kick-starting their professional life.

Thus a re-structured generalized curriculum designed to prepare students for vocational training is needed in place of the existing fully generalized

and the religious oriented curricula. This curriculum may be more practical and appealing to students and may help raise retention rates.

*Method of Teaching and Evaluation*

One of the most unfortunate things about education at the primary level and education in general in Bangladesh is the style of teaching. Memorization is the standard way of learning. Teachers expect students to memorize a huge amount of data and regurgitate them during exams. Courses are not designed to stimulate discussion and analytical thinking in classrooms. Students are thus cheated. Furthermore, when the amount of memorization becomes overwhelming, students naturally look for short cuts. They search for 'suggestions' to reduce the amount of study material. Another fall out is the 'leakage' (sales) of actual question papers. Students also employ innovative methods of cheating – the same innovativeness of which the teacher and the education board could have made better use. Students employ cheating under the system because they find it as the only alternative (to memorizing impossible amounts) left to them. The responsibility again falls on the teachers and those who set the syllabi. Thus the teacher in the present system teaches very little and the student learns very little other than cheating and regurgitation. Memorization at the scale required seriously encourages cheating and discourages thinking and so the existing system produces unthinking generations of dishonest future leaders. How can one expect Bangladesh to progress?

According to the UNICEF, Bangladesh, the culture of memorization discourages students tremendously and is a major cause of poor achievement and low retention. They also cite this as a reason for high failure rates and repetition of classes which forces students to spend almost 9 years in primary school instead of 5<sup>3</sup>.

Overwhelming syllabi and a culture of memorization coupled with stressful hall exams which gives comparative evaluation create cheating, over-competitive and selfish individuals who will only perform in return for benefits. Einstein thus laments, 'Our whole educational system suffers from this evil. An exaggerated competitive attitude is inculcated into the student, who is trained to worship acquisitive success as a preparation for his future career'<sup>19</sup>.

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*Bureaucracy*

One of the biggest problems, worldwide, is bureaucracy. In Bangladesh, the government efforts often come under fire. From the upazila level to the head office corruption is said to prevail affecting teacher transfers and quality evaluation. Development and project implementation are also hampered and delayed severely as funds get tied up in bureaucratic red tape.

Sometimes there are discrepancies even in official data on primary schools in Bangladesh. Besides this the administration is centralized which creates rigidity and policies often are made in light of city schools and students. For example, the school calendar does not follow the agricultural cycle and seasons. This is a problem in rural areas where most schools are and this is responsible for high absenteeism and in the end, poor retention<sup>3</sup>.

*Education in Finland*

On the international scene, Finland, where the school starting age is 7<sup>20</sup>, has been the top in education in the world for many years. Finnish students' performance in 'Programme for International Student Assessment' (PISA) examinations has been unbeatable<sup>21</sup>. There is much to be learned from their success.

The most striking feature of their system is the recognition of education as a right and not a business. There are private learning centers in Finland. However, amazingly, they are also totally free. By government mandate<sup>22</sup> they operate like public schools providing all facilities that public schools provide. Finnish educators also realize the importance of small class sizes. The national average teacher-student ratio is 1:14 and in higher grades, in lab classes, which are a daily affair, the class size is limited to 16<sup>20, 21</sup>.

Furthermore, the government of Finland provides excellent facilities for children ensuring maximum comfort. One example is the interior of schools which are beautiful and kept very clean. They are clean enough for children to take off their shoes and socks. This teaches them cleanliness and additionally, 'no shoes and socks' make learning a more pleasant experience. The environment is meant to reduce the sterile

formal feel of schools and make them more informal.

The curriculum in Finland is also unique and most innovative. The philosophy is to allow students to enjoy learning and to learn about themselves and discover their potential. Keeping this in mind, teachers absolutely refrain from overwhelming the students. There is also only one state curriculum or in other words their primary education follows a unified curriculum (Fig. 8). This curriculum is, however, flexible and provides teachers independence in classrooms<sup>22</sup>.

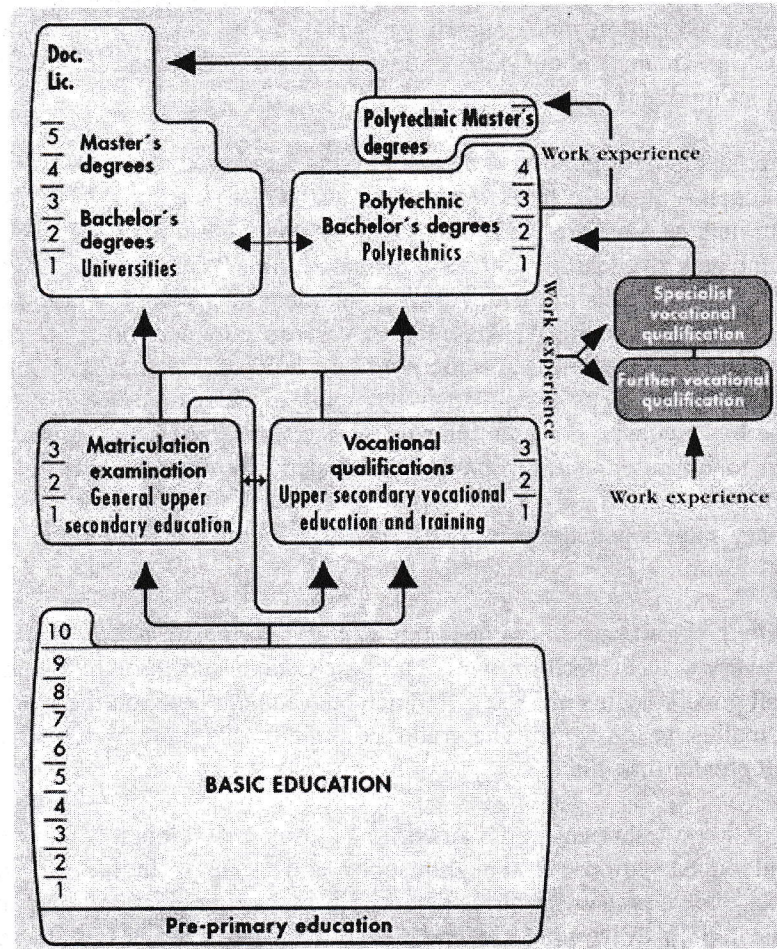


Figure 8: Unified Curriculum Till Grade 9 in Finnish Education<sup>24</sup>

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The focus of education in Finland is unique. The Finnish students spend far less time in the classroom studying. Students are not burdened with work – little or no homework is provided<sup>20</sup>. Physical exercise and outdoor activities are a big part of their curriculum. Finnish students also get a 75 minute recess compared to the half hour recess that is usually the case elsewhere. There is also a great emphasis on reading for pleasure and watching TV which allows learning outside the class and helps to develop independent thinking<sup>23</sup>. There is also emphasis on learning 3 languages and furthermore there are courses in art, music, cooking, carpentry, metalwork, and textiles carpentry etc. that give students a well rounded education and encourage students to opt for vocational schooling. In fact, about 43% choose to go to vocational school after completing their high school<sup>20</sup>.

The philosophy of grading and evaluation is also based upon what is best for students. Just like homework, there are very few exams. The aim is not to make a comparative evaluation of students but to make sure every student gets the lessons. Students are also almost automatically given promotion, which is prudent. Holding a student back is one of the worst things a school can do. Weak students are given extra support so they can overcome their weaknesses while not being held back a year. The grades of students are kept unpublished but used to determine the needs of individual students. For a failing student decisions to help the student are taken together with the parents of the student. Retaining a student in a class is considered only a last option. Best of all, at the very end of the primary experience there is a mandatory standardized test – the only major exam.

Due to the close care of teachers and lack of demoralizing strategies each and every student perform well. The best student and the worst student are all good students and the difference between the best and the worst is the smallest in the world. The graduation rate is also quite high – 93% -- much greater than the US<sup>20</sup>.

This is not a testament to the amount of money a developed country can spend on education but the philosophy and strategy. In fact, Finland spends 30% less than countries like the US but their education is superior to the US in every way. Teachers in Finland are paid less than their American counterparts as well. It is also not a result of the number of



hours teachers give students. In Finland, as mentioned earlier, the number of hours students spend in schools is less than in Asia and teachers are required to teach only four hours daily. The teachers in Finland are also given 2 hours a week for personal professional development.

One very important reason for their success is the high quality of Finnish teachers. The minimum requirement to be a primary school teacher is a Masters degree and then teachers are chosen from only the top 10%<sup>20</sup>.

Even though the salary in Finland is less than that in the USA, the salary is quite substantial and is a reason for attracting the best qualified teachers. An annual salary of \$29,000 can be viewed as equivalent in buying power to appx. 40 to 50 thousand taka per month<sup>20</sup>.

## 6. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Education at the primary level is extremely important for development of children's minds and its impact falls upon students' entire lives. Several key factors which plague the education of Bangladesh have been pointed out in this article. The biggest of which is the lack of unity of the curriculum followed at the primary level. This poses serious threat to patriotism. Ultimately the country suffers and our country has fallen behind significantly socially, politically, economically and also in science and technology on the international stage. Furthermore, alarmingly, the country is stepping backwards from its founding concept of secularism. Issues brought up in this article need to be addressed immediately. Following is a list of recommendations based on this study.

1. Taking into consideration the needs and resources of the country, a unified primary education system with unified standardized syllabus under central supervision to offset problems created by the current discordant school systems is necessary. And quite naturally, when a primary education policy is created based on the needs and resources of a country, only one type of education system can prevail.
2. Education is a birth right as well as a constitutional right and so must be free.

3. A shift from heavy syllabi and culture of memorization is imperative. Children should not be bored or overworked lest they develop distaste for learning. They should be taught to love learning and learn and think independently.
4. The minimum standard of teachers should be elevated to match international standards. Only the best Masters Degree holders should be selected. Moreover office assistants are a necessity but absent in most schools. This should be remedied.
5. Remuneration and status of teachers need elevation. Accommodation facilities can also be introduced to attract highly qualified teachers.
6. Adequate basic facilities should be maintained. Classrooms should be friendly, technologically up to date and clean. Focus should be on creating a stress free environment.
7. Special courses should be designed in such a way that children look at vocational schools as a positive option. Language courses (Bangla plus two other languages) should be taught. Courses integrating traditional skills and learning and outdoor activities should be given priority.
8. Student-teacher ratio and class sizes need to be drastically reduced to help halt the constant drop in quality.
9. Retaining weak students for a year should not be considered an option and since funding is provided for all students – extra care must be provided to weaker students so that they have a chance to reduce the gap with better students.
10. Lab classes should be introduced at the primary level for hands on training.
11. To reduce administrative bureaucratic red tape, administration should be decentralized.
12. Hall exams are a major stress source for children which make education intimidating. Big hall exams call for bigger syllabuses and so once again students are forced to depend on memorization. Such exams should be phased out and evaluation should be made based upon frequent class tests and class performance.
13. Comparative results are very detrimental. Evaluations should remain unpublished and used only for identifying student needs.

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