

# Bangladesh

## Curriculum planning, development and reform for primary and secondary education

Muhammad Abul Hossain and Shawkat Jahan

Estimated population (1995)	118,200,000
Public expenditure on education as percentage of Gross National Product (1995)	2.3
Duration of compulsory education (years)	5
<b>Primary or basic education</b>	
Pupils enrolled (1995)	16,800,000
Teachers (1995)	189,508
Pupil/teacher ratio	71:1
Gross enrolment ratio (1995)	
—Total	63
—Male	72
—Female	53
Net enrolment ratio (1995)	
—Total	84
—Male	89
—Female	78
Estimated percentage of repeaters (1995)	7
Estimated percentage of drop-outs (1995)	55
School-age population out of school (1995)	2,260,000
<b>Secondary education</b>	
Students enrolled (1990) <sup>1</sup>	3,592,995
Gross enrolment ratio (1993) <sup>1</sup>	
—Total	19
—Male	26
—Female	12
<b>Third-level enrolment ratio (1992)<sup>1</sup></b>	
<b>Estimated adult literacy rate (1995)</b>	
—Total	38
—Male	49
—Female	26
Note :	
1. Last year available	

Source: UNESCO statistical yearbook, 1998, Paris.

### INTRODUCTION

The Government of Bangladesh recognizes that education is an important prerequisite for ensuring sustainable development. The country's constitution obligates the State to provide basic education to citizens and eradicate illiteracy within a given time frame. As a signatory to the World Conference on Education For All (Jomtien, Thailand, 1990); World Conference on Children's Rights (New York, 1990); and the EFA Summit Conference of Nine High-Population Countries (New Delhi, 1993), Bangladesh is committed to the eradication of illiteracy by the year 2006.

As a result of both government and private efforts over the last two decades, some important improvements have occurred in the primary education sector. More than 95% of children aged 6 to 10 years are admitted to primary schools and the drop-out rate is now only 38%. The literacy rate for the population over 15 currently stands at 56%, in comparison to 1971 post-liberation figures reflecting a rate of only 22% for that same group. During the past twenty-five years, considerable improvements have also taken place in secondary education.

However, although Bangladesh has experienced *quantitative* educational improvement, the *qualitative* aspects of education have become a cause of government concern. Steps have been taken to address educational quality and it is in this larger context that curriculum has come to play a crucial role. In order to place in proper perspective some of the key issues and actions taken to improve educational quality, a brief overview of primary and secondary education structures and of curriculum development is provided below.

### PRIMARY EDUCATION IN BANGLADESH

#### *Duration of primary education*

The current five years for completing primary education is an insufficient amount of time for students to obtain the requisite level of literacy, knowledge, abilities, attitudes and values for solving the problems of everyday life. The New Education Policy, which has yet to be implemented, recommends that primary education be increased from five to eight years in order to enable students to attain minimum ability levels and the capacity for lifelong learning.

TABLE 1. Bangladesh primary education institutional enrolment

Year	Total	Boys	Girls
1990	12,051,172	6,662,427	5,388,745
1991	12,635,419	6,910,092	5,725,328
1992	13,017,270	7,048,542	5,968,728
1993	14,067,332	7,525,862	6,541,470
1994	15,180,680	8,084,117	7,132,563
1995	17,284,157	9,094,489	8,189,668
1996	17,580,416	9,219,358	8,361,058
1997	18,031,673	9,364,899	8,666,774
1997	Total number of government primary school students: 11,808,345		

TABLE 2. Bangladesh primary education enrolment by gender (%)

Year	Boys	Girls
1990	55.28	44.72
1991	54.69	45.31
1992	54.15	45.85
1993	53.50	46.50
1994	53.02	46.98
1995	52.62	47.38
1996	52.44	47.56
1997	51.94	48.06

TABLE 3. Bangladesh primary education drop-out rate (% of total enrolment)

Year	Rate
1991	59.30
1992	46.60
1993	39.60
1994	38.70
1995	38.00

### *Different systems of primary education*

A number of different institutions of primary education exist including: kindergarten, general primary, Ebtadayee Madrasah and non-governmental organization schools. The standards and characteristics of these schools vary. Thus, from the very outset, differences in children's abilities, attitudes and values are created. It has become mandatory to eliminate these existing educational disparities and to introduce a common system of education. Currently, approximately 78,000 primary schools are subsumed under ten or eleven distinct categories. The following tables provide an overview of the current situation.

Beginning in May 1986, the Government decided to merge the primary school classes I and II and, concurrently, to introduce a liberal promotion policy as part of the effort to further reduce drop-out rates. With this liberalized policy, promotion from classes I to II and from classes II to III became automatic. However, assessment of pupils' performance is still supposed to occur throughout the year.

## SECONDARY EDUCATION IN BANGLADESH

### *Current general secondary education scenario*

The present secondary education system in Bangladesh encompasses grade levels 6 to 12. Most secondary schools are private. In 1996, only 3.6% of the total number of recognized schools were government schools. Secondary education is divided into three stages: junior secondary (classes VI and VII); secondary (classes IX and X); and higher secondary (classes XI and XII). Higher secondary schools can be intermediate colleges or degree colleges. A significant increase (16.4%) in the total number of secondary institutions occurred between 1995 and 1996, with secondary and higher secondary schools accounting for most of the increase. Table 4 reflects the growth in secondary education from 1991 through 1996.

Noteworthy progress in some areas and stagnation in others characterize secondary education in Bangladesh. Significant progress has been made in improving enrolment, especially among females. Programmes encouraging the enrolment of girls in secondary education have had a profoundly positive effect, with an increase in enrolment from 31.9% in 1991 to 45.6% in 1996. However, in contrast, transition, attendance, completion and pass rates remain low. Table 5 reflects the recent enrolment figures for secondary education.

In 1995, 78% of the students completing class V went on to enrol in class VI. The average secondary school attendance rate was about 60%. Completion rates for classes VI to X improved, reaching 56.4% in 1995, in comparison to 48% in 1991. However, these figures belie a highly inefficient system, with drop-out rates remaining high and pass rates in final exams declining. For example, in 1995, the estimated drop-out rates for classes VI to X and classes XI and XII, respectively, were 43.6% (49% for girls) and 38% (36% for girls). In 1997, the pass rate for the class X Secondary School Certificate Examination (SSC) was only 52.14%, compared to 64.95% in 1991. For the class XII Higher Secondary Certification Examination (LISC), the 1997 rate of 52.14% was down from a high of 64.95% in 1991. Furthermore, only 15.8% of the junior secondary school and 36.7% of secondary school teachers have professional qualifications.

TABLE 4. Growth of Bangladesh secondary education sector institutions\*

Type of institution	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996
Junior secondary	2,000	1,962	1,905	2,136	2,349	3,002
Secondary (of which Governmental)	8,715 (302)	9,038 (316)	9,190 (317)	9,352 (317)	9,363 (317)	10,776 (317)
Intermediate colleges (Governmental)	366 (11)	387 (11)	467 (11)	603 (11)	903 (9)	901 (8)
Degree colleges (of which Governmental)	547 (204)	598 (219)	603 (219)	611 (219)	671 (224)	786 (225)
Total institutions	11,586	11,964	12,085	12,566	13,286	15,465
% increase		3.3	1.0	4.0	5.7	16.4

\*Recognized schools only

TABLE 5. Bangladesh secondary institutions enrolment, 1991–98

Enrolment	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996
Junior secondary	21,2646	284,806	341,975	446,060	494,692	632,211
No. female	75,231	121,174	183,497	227,239	266,811	340,982
Secondary	2,943,473	3,463,236	3,809,515,	4,088,742	4,620,769	5,492,114
No. female	994,947	1,478,031	1,680,028,	1,858,222	2,35,973	2580,578
College	876,756	904,250	936,395,	1,127,416	1,267,706	1,246,705
No. female	214,390	248,854	291,566	367,992	422,712	436,624
Total enrolment	4,032,875	4,652,292	5,087,885	5,662,218	6,383,167	7,371,030
Female enrolment	1,284,568	1,848,059	2,155,091	2,453,453	2,825,496	3,358,184
% Female enrolment	31.85	39.72	42.35	43.33	44.26	45.56

With a view to increasing women's participation at secondary level, the Government, the Norwegian Overseas Development Agency (NORAD), the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the World Bank are supporting stipends for female students. This programme has served to increase the enrolment of women in secondary education institutions.

#### CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT IN BANGLADESH

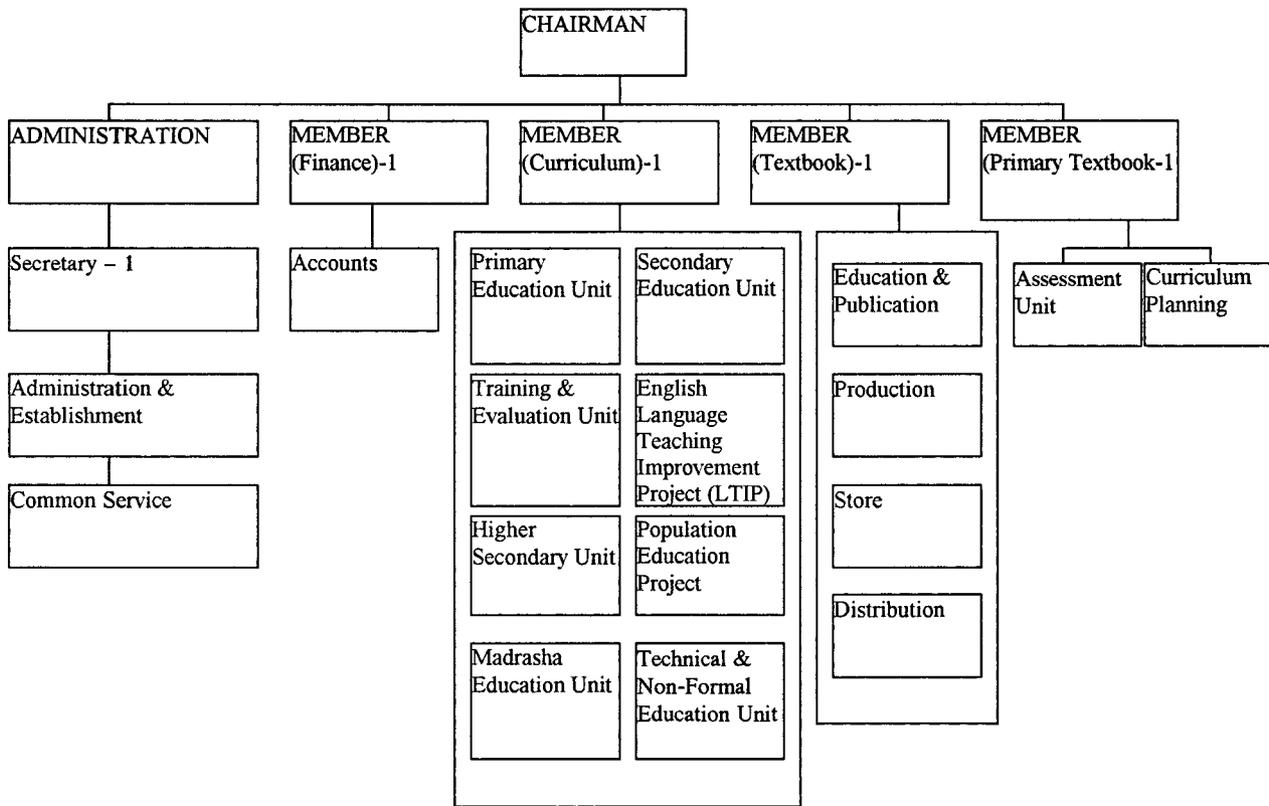
In 1982, the National Curriculum Development Centre merged with the Textbook Board to form the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB). The NCTB currently serves as the national curriculum agency for the country as a whole and has been entrusted with curriculum and instructional materials development activities from pre-primary to pre-university level. The organizational structure of the NCTB is reflected in Figure 1.

The tasks of the National Curriculum and Textbook Board include:

- completion of curriculum revision for all primary grades;
- field trials as well as the production of teaching-learning materials for classes I-V, including pupil assessment schemes;

- revision of the curriculum in education and the curriculum for pre-service education and training of primary school teachers;
- introduction of revised curriculum and materials for classes I-V in the school system throughout the country;
- development of supplementary/complementary teaching aids (i.e. charts, maps, reading-learning materials, kits, video films, etc.);
- organization of experimental and innovative activities in the content of primary education;
- development of the capacity to address women's development issues;
- provision of technical support to other institutions in developing curriculum and establishing linkages between formal, non-formal, religious education streams;
- development of training packages and participation in the training programmes for dissemination of revised primary curriculum;
- monitoring and evaluation of the training programme and development of reinforcement materials;
- development of motivational materials for media coverage;

FIGURE 1. The Bangladesh National Curriculum and Textbook Board



- revision of Junior Secondary Curriculum and materials in line with the revised primary curriculum and field trials;
- review of existing secondary curriculum and development of a plan of action for modification.

During the Third Five-Year Plan (1985–90), the NCTB undertook comprehensive curriculum renewal and modification activities in the area of primary education. The main thrust of this activity was to restructure and reform the primary curriculum to meet the demands of universal compulsory primary education, with particular focus on *qualitative* improvement. The outcome was a competency-based primary school curriculum comprised of fifty-three terminal competencies to be achieved by all primary school pupils who successfully complete the five-year primary education cycle.

In this context, the following have been developed: detailed syllabi for eleven subject areas of grades I and II; a trial edition of textbooks; teacher source books; and a continuous pupil assessment scheme, along with a register for keeping assessment records. Improvement of curricula has been undertaken with the help of foreign and domestic experts. Steps have been taken to train teachers to be able to use new materials with understanding and skill, with a view to preparing them to introduce the competency-based curriculum. The curriculum emphasizes mastery learning supported by diagnosis of pupils learning difficulties, followed by remedial instruction, appropriate teaching-learning strategies, revised instructional

materials, and tools and techniques for continuous assessment of pupil performance.

The new curriculum was implemented during the Fourth Five-Year Plan (1990–95), with new approaches towards the evaluation of pupils' achievements. The primary level curriculum has been formulated on the basis of Bangladesh's socio-economic situation, as well as the children's physical and mental make-up and their cultural awareness. Subjects in primary level include Bangla (the mother tongue), mathematics and environmental studies, social studies, science, arts and crafts, physical education, music. English language and religious studies (with emphasis on the ways of life and moral education) will be introduced in class III. Classes VI to VIII will be gradually incorporated under primary education. At these levels, the subjects to be studied will be Bangla, mathematics, general science, social studies (Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity), multi-disciplinary learning (home economics, agriculture, etc.), religion, fine arts, health and physical education. The present curriculum at the primary as well as junior secondary and secondary stages contains elements of population education, including information on the socio-economic impact of the population explosion. The content has been incorporated into the textbooks of classes III to X.

The average amount of weekly teaching hours in each grade at primary level is three hours for Bangla; three hours for mathematics; thirty minutes for music, arts and crafts, and physical education; and two-and-a-

half hours for all the other subjects. The medium of instruction is Bangla (mother tongue).

In the present curriculum, summative assessment (in the form of an annual examination in each grade) has been abandoned. Instead, a system of continuous pupil assessment has been introduced. The system requires teachers to assess students regularly for every competency acquired in a particular lesson (through observation, oral/written assessment) and to record achievement on a monthly basis using three scales (namely grades A, B and C). For grades I–II, all the students get promoted to the next classes, and for grades III–V, promotions are given on the basis of students’ achievement. No certificate is awarded after completion of the five-year primary schooling, but a scholarship examination is held annually for 20% of the students of grade 5—on the basis of which scholarships are awarded to successful students.

## CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT AT THE SECONDARY LEVEL

Under the Secondary Education Development Project of the ADB, the junior secondary school curriculum has been revised and materials prepared on the basis of competencies identified for this stage of education; approximately 150,000 teachers have received short-term training in the new curriculum; ten teacher-training colleges have been upgraded; and pre-service and in-service training programmes have been conducted. Under the ADB Higher Secondary Education Project, five new higher teacher-training institutes are being established. During 1996–98, the secondary and higher secondary curricula were revised and implemented and textbooks prepared. The monitoring and evaluation systems have been improved and implemented. Table 6 provides an overview of the curriculum development and implementation process.

TABLE 6. The curriculum: who makes which choices?

	CENTRAL LEVEL	REGIONAL LEVEL	SCHOOL LEVEL
AIMS AND OBJECTIVES	National Curriculum and Textbook Board prepares curriculum in light of national education philosophy and policy; National Curriculum Co-ordination Committee of Ministry of Education subsequently approves	Local authorities assist with curriculum development by providing suggestions	Teachers prepare lesson plans based on curriculum
CURRICULUM PLAN	Prepares syllabus and distribution of subject marks. Prepares time table.	Monitors the implementation of curriculum	Implements the curriculum at the classroom level
METHODS AND APPROACHES TO LEARNING	Field tests and finalizes the intended curriculum	Assists with the finalization of curriculum	Measures competency attainment
MATERIALS	Prepares teachers’ guides and learning materials	Distributes teachers’ guides and learning materials (local levels: divisional deputy directors, district and Thana education officers)	Utilizes teachers’ guides and learning materials in classroom
EVALUATION AND EXAMINATION	Prepares evaluation and examination plan	Implements secondary level examination (various regional boards)	Conducts terminal examinations at primary and secondary levels

### CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT: AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Some of the major deficiencies in curriculum development in Bangladesh include: (a) lack of professional expertise in the development of modern curriculum, both in the NCTB and nationally; (b) lack of a solid research base providing assessment information about the previous curriculum and the areas needing revision; and (c) insufficient curriculum emphasis on such competencies as understanding, comprehension and application.

Although the three stages of secondary education form part of a concentric curriculum development, during the actual development process there was little co-ordination between these stages. In fact, the greatest part of the work was carried out for the junior secondary stage, and then subsequently reviewed in each of the other stages where attempts were made to address areas of weak emphasis by adding content.

Another problem is the absence of a system of ongoing curriculum review. The syllabus standing committee system within NCTB is not operational. The curriculum section staff should be monitoring the curriculum

and textbooks usage and effectiveness in the teaching situation in order to ensure that they are up-to-date and relevant. Unfortunately, at present, this important work is not being done.

The establishment of a curriculum research section is urgently needed for effective curriculum development. The issues affecting the impact of curriculum change in the classroom need to be assessed objectively. Without this research base, curriculum development will continue to be based largely on ad hoc decisions resulting from the views of persons who often lack first-hand knowledge of the overcrowded and poor conditions in most schools. The staff of such a research section will require training and support, as well as increased resources, in order to perform regular classroom visits and assessments.

Lack of expertise is also a fundamental problem. Reviews of the capacity of the NCTB by different institutions in Bangladesh have repeatedly highlighted the lack of trained professional curriculum developers.

## CONCLUSIONS

Although *growth* in the primary and secondary education sectors in Bangladesh is quite satisfactory, the *quality* of education is not. However, the country is striving hard to achieve this quality and, in this context, many efforts have been undertaken with the help of domestic and expatriate experts to improve the curriculum.