

Educational and administrative implications of UPE

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Universal Primary Education (UPE) is a declared aim of all but a few Commonwealth countries such as Gambia, Malawi, Sierra Leone and Papua New Guinea. A survey of progress towards UPE in the Commonwealth countries was made recently by the Commonwealth Secretariat. It appears from that survey that as many as eighteen countries have already achieved UPE at 85 per cent level. Bangladesh, despite her severe constraints, has been toiling to achieve this objective since the 1930s, but with the attainment of independence in 1971, it has acquired a sense of urgency. Article 17 of the Constitution of Bangladesh (1972) states that "The State shall adopt effective measures for the purpose of establishing a uniform, mass-oriented and universal system of education and extending free and compulsory education to all children to such stage as may be determined by law". We in Bangladesh are, therefore, committed to UPE and it appears that our Government is now determined to achieve this objective by 1985.

Before proceeding further, I will raise two queries concerning the topic under discussion. My first question is: How do we define Primary Education?

In Bangladesh Primary Education comprises five-year schooling followed by a three-year Junior Secondary stage (classes VI-VIII), followed by a two-year secondary stage (classes IX-X) and a two-year Higher Secondary stage. There are a number of Commonwealth countries where the duration of Primary stage is longer e.g. it is six years in Botswana, Kenya and Zambia, seven years in Malawi, Malaysia, Singapore and Tonga and eight years in Seychelles, but in the majority of cases it is five to seven years.

The objective of Primary Education is to impart to children the basic knowledge and attitudes required of an effective member of the society. In the present-day world rapid technological advances have made the society increasingly complex and five to six years' initial schooling cannot be considered adequate today. Bangladesh Education Commission (1974) recommended eight-year compulsory elementary education for all children of the country to be achieved by 1983.

For the purpose of this Seminar, it is perhaps necessary to confine our attention to the existing duration of Primary Education obtaining in the participating countries. But should we not at this stage conceive as our perspective aim a minimum of eight-year universal education to be achieved in gradual phases? I understand that India is now shifting her emphasis towards such a goal. Bangladesh also should work for the same objective.

The second question I would ask is: Simultaneously with provision for UPE should we enforce compulsory attendance, or leave it voluntary? The practice in the Commonwealth countries varies. Ten of them have so far enforced compulsion.

In my view, in a developing country like ours UPE without compulsion will mean under-utilisation of the facilities created leading to wastage and stagnation. What is more, it will defeat the very purpose of UPE and it will take a long time to eradicate the curse of illiteracy from the country. In the Bangladesh situation, about 35 per cent of primary-age (5+ to 9+) population are outside the school system. It will be unrealistic to assume that once the requisite facilities are created in the schools all the children of the age-group or at least 95 per cent of them will, of their own accord, attend school. In this competitive world we are to march ahead in rapid strides; we cannot afford to move at a leisurely pace.

I would, therefore, maintain that we should talk about Universal Compulsory Primary Education i.e. UCPE rather than UPE. For enforcing compulsion Government will be required to adopt legislative measures by promulgating a suitable Act. Mere Act promulgation is not enough; it will be necessary to create appropriate administrative machinery to enforce compulsion, to identify the defaulters and to mete out appropriate punishments to them. In Bangladesh the Union Parishad and the proposed Gram Sarkars (the Government at the grass-root level) may be charged with the responsibility.

In the matter of compulsion another factor should be borne in mind. If the defaulters are far too many in number, it will be rather difficult to implement the Act in actual practice. The instance of Chittagong Municipality may be cited here. In this subcontinent Chittagong Municipality of Bangladesh undertook a pioneering venture and introduced compulsory Primary Education for boys with effect from 1928 and for girls with effect from 1940 and has been able to achieve by now a literacy rate of 43.44 per cent only (male 51.55 per cent and female 35.62 per cent), the average for Bangladesh being 22.2 per cent. Chittagong Municipality has not been able to cover the target-group of children even within a period of over three decades mainly on account of its failure to enforce compulsion.

With a view to minimising such difficulties, the following measures may be adopted:

- (a) Implementation of the UCPE should be preceded by a massive campaign launched by the Government and carried on by all the mass-media, by local bodies and public leaders emphasising the worthwhileness of Primary Education. The aim is to make illiterate parents education-conscious. An effective adult literacy programme will also help the cause.
- (b) Special incentives should be offered to seriously disadvantaged groups such as girls, children of very poor families, children of extremely low literacy areas, nutritionally distressed areas, famine-prone areas etc. The incentives may take the form of supply of free textbooks, free school uniform, free school tiffin and of other activities attractive to children.
- (c) The causes of drop-outs from primary classes are to be identified and analysed and effective steps taken to remove these causes. In Bangladesh about 45 per cent of children officially enrolled in class I drop off before reaching class II and 16 per cent before reaching class III. In quantitative terms every year about 1.2 million children drop off in class I and 0.5 million in class II. It may be necessary to change school-hours and holiday patterns to suit local conditions, to make school-work more interesting, to

forge effective liaison with the community and to appoint more women teachers for attracting and retaining girls.

Let us now turn our attention to other important educational and administrative implications of UPE; such implications will primarily be concerned with enrolment-projection, the creation of required facilities, the production and distribution of textbooks, the training of teachers and arrangements for proper administration and supervision.

Enrolment-Projection

Year by year enrolment-projections are the basic data for the provision of UPE and hence it is imperative that such projections are made with an adequate degree of reliability. It will do if the projection shows 90% of the total children of the relevant age-cohort, making allowances for the physically handicapped, mentally handicapped and sick children. Over-estimation will involve under-utilisation of facilities and under-estimation will lead to chaos. We must, therefore, guard against both inflation and deflation of enrolment figures. The absence of reliable records of dates of birth of children is a complicating factor in this regard. In a number of developing countries registration of births and deaths is not taken seriously and hence exact chronological ages of children are not known in many cases. I have come across quite a few students and even adults who falter when answering the simple question: "What's your age"? Before answering they pose the counter-question: "Which age? Certificate age or the real age"? Under such circumstances, it is not surprising for a person to have three dates of birth: (i) on the basis of his certificate age i.e. the age entered in the school admission-register, (ii) on the basis of his age orally transmitted by the parents/guardians which may not always be correct and (iii) his actual date of birth. In countries where such a situation prevails, instead of single age-cohorts in different Primary classes, the authorities will have to deal with, during the initial period, a sort of "age-scatter" in each class. For instance, in class I in Bangladesh where officially the age of entry is 5+, the actual ages of children may vary from 4+ to 7+.

It is, therefore, necessary to have local administrative machinery requiring individual parents to notify and register birth and deaths with the appropriate authority without fail and on default to face some suitable penalty.

Creation of Required Facilities

On formally embarking upon UPE it is necessary to go on creating every year additional facilities required for accommodating the additional number of children expected in the schools. For determining the extent of facilities actually needed in individual rural administrative units to cover the target group, "school-mapping" of the country is an essential pre-requisite. In this "mapping" the localities with peculiar geographical or demographical features must receive special consideration. Such localities may include sparsely populated hilly or forest regions, "Char" areas (i.e. river or seaside areas), tribal areas and areas criss-crossed by rivulets. The normal criteria for the size of class/school, such as distance between schools, teacher-student ratios etc. may not be suitable here.

The time-schedule should be strictly adhered to, otherwise the on-rush of pupils will be too great for the school authorities to handle, resulting in disorder and discontent. Timely and harmonious completion of different aspects

of the work is, therefore necessary. I have had sad experiences of implementation of educational projects in the 1960s; in many cases, classrooms and laboratories though completed could not be put to use for want of furniture and equipment, and when these things were procured and students admitted, classes could not be held for delay in sanctioning posts of teachers. All possible care must be taken to avoid such unco-ordinated planning.

The main facilities that must be ready for pupils in a programme of UPE are (a) classrooms/schools, (b) furniture, equipment and educational materials, (c) teachers and (d) adequate production and supply of textbooks. All the four aspects mentioned above must be completed sufficiently ahead of the commencement of the school session i.e. prior to the date the projected enrolment is expected in the schools. This presupposes, as has been emphasised earlier, co-ordination of efforts and timely execution of the different works involved. As availability of funds is the major constraint in developing countries, utmost economy must be exercised without sacrificing effectiveness. Wherever possible, physical facilities already available should be used, teachers should be urged to work harder and, if required, the existing schools may adopt two or more shifts.

Several plans for new school/buildings, ranging from permanent structures to various grades of kutchra houses should be prepared by specialists having practical experience in the field as a guide to the local authorities. Classrooms should be of optimum size but fully functional. These type-plans should also indicate details of materials required with approximate costs and other relevant information.

As regards furniture, it is advisable to produce this locally, but it should be of approved specifications. Equipment such as globes, maps, charts etc. should be manufactured within the country. Some of them may be produced from locally available materials, as has been demonstrated by the Village Education Resource Centre (VERC) at Savar near Dacca.

Production and Distribution of Text-books

Timely production of textbooks in adequate numbers is essential. They need to be well-written and well-illustrated to make them attractive to children. A separate organisation like the Bangladesh Textbook Board is required for the purpose. There should be another body to examine critically and update continuously the curriculum and also to assess the textbooks in use with a view to effecting desirable improvement. In Bangladesh, the recently established Academy for Fundamental Education may be charged, inter-alia, with this responsibility.

The introduction of UPE, according to many, involves the supply of textbooks free of cost. In Bangladesh no tuition-fees are charged in primary schools, but children purchase textbooks and necessary writing materials. In the wake of freedom in 1972, the Bangladesh Government decided to distribute textbooks free to all primary school children in the country, but the distribution machinery was inefficient and the books did not actually reach most of the schools in rural areas until May or June whereas the school session started in January. The result was utter confusion and widespread discontent; the Government stood thoroughly discredited despite its laudable motive and the idea had to be abandoned. The lesson is that if textbooks are made free for all children, effective distribution channels must be evolved first; but if the books are priced, the cost should be subsidised to keep the price reasonably low (but not so low as to make them cheaper than the paper they contain) with provision for free distribution to children coming from very poor homes.

Appointment and Training of Teachers

From a reliable enrolment-projection and from the school-mapping, it should be possible to determine the number of additional teachers required every year. Timely recruitment of teachers is vital. Teacher qualifications should be prescribed by the Government but the selection and appointment of teachers should be left completely to the local authorities. In emergency cases the Government, at the grass-root level, should be empowered to make adhoc appointments of qualified persons.

It will be necessary to strengthen appreciably both the in-service and pre-service training of teachers, especially women teachers. Massive crash-programmes for orienting teachers to their new responsibilities may also be undertaken.

About 50 per cent of primary school children are likely to be girls. But in Bangladesh the present enrolment of girls in primary schools is only 35 per cent and their drop-out rate is also very high. Paucity of women teachers (who constitute a mere 5 per cent of the total) in primary schools is reckoned as one of the major contributory causes. It is desirable that the majority of teachers in primary schools should be drawn from the female sex, as temperamentally they are considered more suitable for young children. If required, teacher qualifications should be slightly relaxed in favour of women candidates during the initial period.

Teacher training courses should have direct relevance to the primary school curriculum and should be under constant review. The Academy for Fundamental Education may look after this aspect. Classroom teachers (and also inspectors) should be encouraged to undertake, wherever possible, "action-research" in respect of the organisation of classes, the organisation of materials and the methodology of teaching with a view of improving their own practices and achieving greater functional efficiency in their day-to-day work.

Administration and Supervision

Embarking on a programme of UPE is a big affair which will vitally concern every village of the country and as such every now and then multifarious local problems are bound to arise, which will call for immediate attention. Hence a centralised administration cannot work. Zonal authorities with wide powers have to be created and the local community has to be deeply involved. Each school should have an effective Managing Committee and the smallest administrative unit of the country should be given well-defined educational responsibilities. In Bangladesh, the 4350 Union Parshads of the country have been re-organised with that end in view and what is more, the Government is now thinking of moving further down and setting up "Gram-Sarkars" (Village-Government) with a number of specific functions including the educational function.

With a view to launching the UPE programme in June 1980, the Government of Bangladesh is thinking of creating a separate Directorate of Primary Education and of creating 65 School Boards in the country in order to decentralise the administration of primary education and deal with policy-makers, the co-ordination of School Boards and other agencies involved in it such as the Textbook Board, the Academy for Fundamental Education etc. This indicates a trend definitely in the right direction.

At the same time arrangements for inspection and supervision should be adequate and efficient, otherwise much of the effort goes to waste. In Bangladesh there are at present only 465 Thana Education Officers to look after about 40,000 primary schools. Each officer is thus called upon to inspect 80-100 primary schools with 400/500 teachers. What an impossible task! In my view there should be at least one inspector for every 20 schools. In addition, occasional supervisory teams may also be organised by local authorities. Frequent inspection and supervision should reduce drastically teacher-absenteeism and pupil-truancy. Each School Board should also set up Evaluation Teams which will make sample surveys and submit half-yearly comprehensive reports on the implementation of the programme.

Before I conclude, I should like to mention briefly a small experimental venture. A UPE Pilot Project, managed by a local Managing Committee, has been operating since 1976 in the Meher Union of Comilla District. They set up 22 Feeder Schools accommodating pre-class I, class I and, if possible, class II children. The teachers are all women, drawn from the locality. The results are very encouraging. They have secured active participation of the local community who provide accommodation and space and demonstrate continued interest. They have also achieved 100 per cent enrolment of "small children" and their retention up to class II. The major difficulties experienced by them relate to overcrowding on the one hand and irregular attendance on the other, to in-service training of teachers, the fairly high cost of textbooks and stationery and occasional financial crises. They have also gained valuable insight into the cause of drop-outs.

Let me finish by reiterating that however formidable the educational, administrative and financial implications may be, UPE should be accepted as an immediate inescapable responsibility by developing countries. We must remember that the potential of the population will not be released nor the pace of development accelerated until illiteracy is liquidated, and UCPE is the only effective way of eradicating this curse completely. In Bangladesh during the last 28 years the literacy rate has stubbornly stayed in the neighbourhood of a meagre 21 per cent. What a shame! We must face the responsibility with firm resolve and courage, and as a national emergency akin to war. We can no longer afford to lose time by being fussy or shaky about financial resources, good school houses, first class teachers and ideal curriculum-syllabi. We must wage the war with whatever we have.

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