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School Evaluation Mechanism in BRAC Education Programme

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Abstract

This paper aims to examine the existing school evaluation provision in BRAC non-formal primary education programme. Information for this paper was collected through scanning of existing documents, and discussing with the programme personnel at various levels. The examination focuses the process of evaluating school quality considering school as a unit of analysis. It was observed that there is a school evaluation system in BRAC education programme. Although the system is not sound enough it serves the programme with some limitations. There is possibility that all attempts regarding school improvement are not reflected in the evaluation process. This paper also analyses the limitations in current practices and provides suggestions for improvements.

Keywords: School evaluation, BRAC, non-formal primary education, Bangladesh

Introduction

Assessment and evaluation are two important components in any education system. Continuous assessment of the students is given priority in some systems while periodic evaluation is mandatory in some other cases. Evaluation of education systems serves different purposes – for certification, promotion, accountability, decision making, and to inform different stakeholders about the performance of schools. Evaluation has many dimensions. It can focus only on the students through assessing learning achievement, on teachers through teacher appraisal, on schools through publishing league table, or on the education system as a whole doing independent research on topics of specific concern.

Quality of education is a great concern to the policy makers. Improvement of educational quality has become priority day by day. Although some countries have dismantled school inspection in 70s majority have re-established over time. Strong relationship between evaluation mechanism and quality of schools has observed in many studies. Currently, internationally, the schools enjoy more freedom in their activities. Trend towards school autonomy has also created a justification of evaluating schools as a unit of analysis.

Primary Education in Bangladesh

Primary education in Bangladesh has expanded in recent years, but quality did not pace with quantity. There are eleven types of primary schools that run in the country. These ranges from formal to non-formal, and secular to religious oriented. Duration of primary education is five years and children aged 6-10 years are suppose to enrol in the primary education institutions. Recent statistics show that 80% of the eligible children are enrolled in primary schools, of which a quarter completes the full cycle (Chowdhury et al., 2002). Besides, a large number of over-aged children are also enrolled in the primary schools. Access to primary education significantly increased during last 10-15 years. The majority of the students enrol in the State owned schools and the non-formal schools are mostly run by the non-governmental organisations (NGO). BRAC operates the largest share of such non-formal primary schools.

Primary education is officially free in Bangladesh. However, a recent study showed that the parents paid about half of the total educational expenses of the primary school students (Chowdhury et al., 2002). Quality of education is frustrating. Less than two percent of the primary school leavers can achieve all the terminal competencies determined by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (Nath and Chowdhury, 2001). Studies have shown that the students of non-formal schools are doing better than those of other types of schools (Nath et al., 1999; Nath and Chowdhury, 2001).

There is no provision of cycle-ending examination at the end of primary education in any of the sub-systems. However, the government education department regularly classifies the State owned and the registered private primary schools every two years (Primary and Mass Education Division, undated). All such schools are evaluated through a structured and standardised system. Schools are classified into four categories – A, B, C and D.

Following ten indicators are considered for the evaluation: enrolment, attendance in class, dropout, effectiveness of school management committee, performance in scholarship examination, attendance and punctuality of teachers, cleanliness of school, parent-teacher meeting, co-curricular activities, and record keeping system. The education officials at sub-district level are responsible to do this and they themselves use the findings for school development. However, the evaluation results are not made public at large.

The aim of this paper is to examine the existing school evaluation provision in BRAC education programme. The examination will focus the process of evaluating school quality considering school as a unit of analysis. This will also include an analysis of limitations in current practices and provide suggestions for improvements.

Information for this paper was collected through scanning of existing documents, and discussing with the programme personnel at field and head office levels.

The BRAC School Programme

BRAC is a non-governmental development organisation aiming poverty alleviation and empowerment of the poor. Micro-finance, health, and education are three major fields of BRAC development activities. Women are the most disadvantaged section in Bangladesh. BRAC programmes are targeted to uplift the poor women and girls (BRAC, 1997).

BRAC considers education as a key to upward social mobility. A non-formal way of primary education has been adopted in this regard. The BRAC Education Programme was started in 1985 aiming enrolment of the children who never enrolled in schools or dropped out from the formal education system. There are two types of BRAC schools. The Non-Formal Primary Education (NFPE) is for children aged 8-10 years, and the Basic Education for Older Children (BEOC) is for children aged 11-14 years. The former is a four-year programme and the later is a three-year course. However, both cater to a five academic years from grade I to V. Covering the national competencies for primary education BRAC developed its own textbooks for first three grades of primary education (Ghosh, 1999). During the first three academic years the schools use the textbooks prepared by BRAC. Textbooks prepared by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) are used during the fourth and fifth academic years.

A BRAC school does not look like a formal school. It is a one-room school with a floor space of approximately 336 square feet. There are only 33 students on average and a teacher in a school. Of the students around two-thirds are girls. The teacher, generally a female with at least ten years of education, is chosen from the community where the school is located. The same teacher teaches a group of students throughout the course of five academic year cycle. There is no provision of annual or cycle ending examination. However, continuous assessment of students' performance is its feature.

At present there are 34,000 non-formal primary schools operated by BRAC all over the country, largest share of which is established in the rural areas.

Management and supervision

Efficient management and regular academic supervision of schools are two vital issues for the effectiveness of any education provision. A decentralised management model has been developed for BRAC education programme (Ahmed et al., 1993). Although the overall responsibility lies with the Executive Director and a Deputy Executive Director, the Head of the programme and her staff directly manage the programme.

There are three main units of the BRAC Education Programme. These are field operation unit, education development unit and monitoring unit.

Field operation unit

The field operation unit is responsible for implementing the programme at school level. This unit works from school opening to the graduation of the students. They work through region and team level offices. A regional manager heads a regional office and a team office is headed by a team-in-charge. In each team there are programme organisers (PO)/ resource teachers (RT) who are the first line supervisors of teachers and the schools. Each regional manager is responsible for 500 schools, one team-in-charge looks after 70-80 schools, a PO/RT supervises 12-15 schools and a teacher manages one school.

Regional office: There are 37 regional managers each of whom supervises around 15 team offices. The major responsibilities of the regional managers are to supervise the team offices, evaluate the performance and improve the quality of staff, approve annual budget of the teams, inspect schools, communicate with quality managers¹, and arrange logistics for the team offices.

Team office: The team office plays the most important role in the smooth running of the programme at grassroots level. There are 505 team offices and each has about 70 schools. The team-in-charge takes care of a team office. There are 4/5 POs and RTs in a team office who work under the guidance of a team-in-charge. The major responsibilities of a team-in-charge are to supervise and co-ordinate the activities of the POs and the RTs, evaluate their performances, visit each school once a month, facilitate the monthly refresher course for the teachers, participate in parents' meeting, communicate with quality manager and regional manager, and ensure supply of materials to schools.

¹ Quality managers, master trainers and batch trainers are three layers of quality assurance cadres in BRAC Education Programme. They provide academic supervision and training support at team and school levels.

Education development unit

The education development unit has two main tasks, one is development of curriculum and materials, and the other is ensuring quality of education. A group of trained and experienced persons, stationed at head office, develop and field-test new curriculum and materials. On the other hand, the field-based quality managers (QM) are mainly responsible for maintaining quality of education. The master trainers and the batch trainers help the quality managers. The quality managers communicate between head office and the field in respect to quality assurance. They participate in the weekly meetings held at team level. In each meeting one textbook is chosen for discussion and the quality managers facilitate the discussion. The master trainers and the batch trainers are facilitators in the monthly refreshers' training² of the teachers.

Monitoring unit

Regular monitoring of the programme on different issues is the main task of the monitoring unit. The unit consists of 20 members. This unit monitors the subject-wise progress of the students, teaching performance, school management issues, activities of field operations, etc. The unit place written report to the Head of the programme and the relevant field level managers and necessary directives are drawn to enhance the quality of the programme. Besides, an independent monitoring department of BRAC also monitors different issues, which also helps the management to get a real picture at field level. The findings of the Research and Evaluation Division (RED) of BRAC also help similarly. The RED also organises seminars and conferences to disseminate research findings to the staff at head office and field level. Findings of the research/monitoring and the recommendations made by the researchers/monitors are well taken and used by other two units.

Current School Evaluation Mechanism

There is no central mechanism to evaluate the BRAC non-formal primary schools. However, there is a provision to make assessment to know 'good' and 'not so good' schools. Such evaluation is done at the grassroots level by the programme organisers. Each programme organiser fortnightly evaluates the schools under his/her supervision. Although the programme organisers visit each school at least once a week to see the teaching-learning as well as other conditions of the schools but it is their duty to submit evaluation report fortnightly to the team-in-charges and the quality managers. They then provide their feedback on the performance of the schools to each of the programme organisers. The school evaluation of the programme organisers is based on three basic indicators. These are attendance in class, performance of the students and school infrastructure. In doing this the programme organisers provide three visits to each school within a fortnight.

² Refreshers' training is held once a month at team level where the teachers take preparation for the following month.

Attendance in class: The teachers' mainly record classroom attendance everyday. The programme organisers can also do head count of the students during their visit to the schools. They collect information from the teachers and find average separately for each school. The schools are categorised into three – A, B and C. If the average attendance rate is 93% or above then it is called as grade A, 85–92% is grade B and below 85% is grade C.

Performance of the students: During his/her visit to schools the programme organiser assesses the students to identify the level of performance of the schools. Rather than administering a standardised test the programme organisers prepare a short question paper containing two or three questions and ask those to each of the students. Administering such a test has serious limitation. The question paper varies with the programme organisers and even with the schools. Difficulty level of the questions also varies by school. In some cases the programme organisers of a team try to prepare the questions on same issue. Like as attendance, academic performance of the schools is also categorised into three. But there is no standard classification of students' performance. Assigning grades for schools mostly depends on subjective evaluation of the programme organisers.

School infrastructure: This includes school structure, classroom decoration, teaching quality, and cleanliness inside and outside the classroom. All these phenomena are qualitative in nature. The programme organisers do a gross assessment of these through observation. Like as before school condition is categorised into three. Using their own judgement the programme organisers make subjective assessment of school infrastructure.

Above assessment of the schools is primarily recorded in the diaries of the programme organisers. It is then shifted in the fortnightly school visit reports of the programme organisers. After providing grades on the above areas to all the schools the respective programme organiser put an overall grade to each school under his/her supervision. At this stage also the schools are categorised into three grades viz., A, B and C. In doing so, more emphasis is given on performance of the students. For instance, schools receiving grade A in students learning achievement generally get grade A as overall performance of the schools. On the other hand, schools having grade A in students' attendance and school infrastructure, and grade B in the rest are more likely to have grade B as overall performance. The programme organiser then sends the evaluation report to the respective quality manager and the team-in-charge. After getting feedback from them the programme organiser is suppose to take necessary actions to improve the quality of the school.

Major Problems in Current Practice

In setting up above school evaluation mechanism not much logistical support is needed. However, there are lots of problems in it. Although the schools are evaluated on the basis of three common indicators it seems that the current practice of BRAC school evaluation

can provide little help regarding school improvement. The main drawbacks of the system are as follows:

1. No standardised test is used to assess learning achievement of the students. In a certain fortnight difficulty level of the question items also varies among programme organisers. It creates serious problem in making comparison among the schools under the programme.
2. The programme organisers are not well trained in constructing test. So, there is every possibility of making weak items for the evaluation. Validity and reliability of the items might be questionable.
3. The programme organisers often put question items of different difficulty levels in successive fortnights so there is possibility of getting different grades in successive fortnights. For instance, grade A in one fortnight and grade C in the next or vice versa. Which can not help understanding strengths or weaknesses of the schools.
4. Evaluation of school infrastructure mostly depends on the choice of the programme organisers (i.e., very much subjective in nature). No quantifiable measurement is initiated.
5. It seems that the evaluation mostly depends on students learning achievement. So what is the meaning of collecting other information in this regard. Again, a school can not be judged only on the basis of students' performance.
6. The programme management manages the whole system of evaluation, there is no or less involvement of the teachers, parents and the community at large.
7. The evaluation report is not made available to the public. The parents and the community are not informed about the quality of the schools.
8. As there is serious bias in the assessment due to variations among the assessors, it is not possible to draw an overall picture of the state. It may hamper policy formulation.
9. A range of quality indicators is absent in existing system.

We had discussions with some of the programme organisers, team-in-charges and the regional managers about the current practice of school evaluation in BRAC non-formal primary education programme. They also realised that there are gaps in the current practice especially in generalising the findings. They also agreed that as there is no set criteria from the head office the evaluation process varies from place to place. On the other hand, they (especially the team-in-charges) claimed that existing system also helped understand the standard of the schools. According to the team-in-charges, their assessment often matches with that of the programme organisers. However, all of them felt the need to improve the current system.

Recent Innovations

The higher management of the BRAC education programme has recently understood the lacks of current evaluation practice. As a first step, an initiative has been taken to improve the students learning achievement part of the evaluation. A workshop was held on the assessment of learning achievement. As a follow-up of this workshop, a range of question items has been developed by a group in the head quarter of BRAC. The

questions are at field trial level. It is expected that the finalised question items would be used to assess learning achievement at school level.

Suggestions for Improvement of the System

Considering the limitations of the existing school evaluation practices in BRAC education programme following suggestions can be made for its improvement.

1. School quality does not depend only on the indicators currently used in BRAC programme. There are many others that can be considered. For instance, the level of community involvement and performance of the school management committee can be incorporated. Moreover, the issue of school infrastructure can be restructured through providing separate importance to each of the components in it. Classroom environment, delivery system, teaching methods used, teachers' presentation skills etc. can be incorporated in the process.
2. A structured and separate format can be developed for school evaluation. Each of the components of evaluation should be defined clearly and appropriate weight should be provided while aggregating. Standardisation of the system is very important at this stage.
3. To ensure the importance of students learning attainment in the school evaluation process all subjects should be considered every time. Separate attention should be given to it and a standardised achievement test should be incorporated.
4. Evaluation of schools fortnightly is too much. It hampers academic supervision. Quarterly or half-yearly school evaluation should be good enough, if done properly. Responsibility of school evaluation should be given to the team-in-charges instead of the programme organisers.
5. A team of experts from Research and Evaluation Division (RED) and BRAC Education Programme (BEP) can work together to develop a standardised evaluation system. Representatives from quality managers, team-in-charges, programme organisers and teachers should be taken in the team.
6. The school evaluation report should be made public at least to the parents and the community. It should also be discussed in the parent-teacher meeting and in the school management committee. The central management can publish report showing school performance at national and sub-national levels.

Conclusion

There is a school evaluation system in BRAC Education Programme. Although the system is not sound enough it serves the programme with some limitations. BRAC Education Programme is one of the successful programmes in the country, especially in terms of expansion of primary education among the poor communities. Studies on learning achievement of the students also demonstrated that the learners of BRAC schools do better compared to other types of schools (Nath et al., 1999). Mainstreaming of the graduates of these schools is also satisfactory (Nath, in press). Now, the question is how this programme is doing relatively better without having a scientific school

evaluation mechanism. Some possible reasons are as follows. Firstly, the monthly refresher training of the teachers keeps them up to date. Secondly, the programme organisers provide academic supervision regularly. Thirdly, weekly meetings of the programme organisers help them in planning for the next week. Fourthly, continuous performance monitoring also provides feedback to the programme. Finally, the teachers give highest priority to continuous assessment of the students' performance as part of everyday teaching and learning. There is a possibility that above initiatives collectively help maintaining a certain quality of the programme, but such attempts are not reflected properly in the school evaluation process. However, if a scientific evaluation mechanism is introduced with the current supervision system it may result more towards quality improvement of BRAC non-formal primary schools. The suggestions made in this paper can help in this regard.

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