Shikkhangon: A Non-Disruptive Primary Education Center for the Underprivileged Children in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Over the last few decades, Bangladesh has achieved significant progress in providing access to primary education for all children. But, the underprivileged segment of the population still cannot send their children to schools, primarily due to the inflexible nature of the traditional school system that conflicts with their lifestyle and livelihood. Also, the quality of students' achievements under the traditional system suffers due to low quality of pedagogy. In order to provide a quality education befitting the lifestyle of the underprivileged, a departure from the traditional schooling is proposed. This new model allows students to access and learn from motivated resident teachers in a setting conducive to their lifestyle. Teachers and other learning tools are available when students need them. Students are free from the fear of failure and allowed to achieve their learning competencies at their own pace. Parents don't need to be self- conscious about their own ability to guide their children or worry about their social or economic status. The proposed new model can be tried and tested in a pilot implementation to assess its merit.

Keywords: education for underprivileged, non-disruptive primary education model, resident teaching, primary education in Bangladesh, early grade learning success

1   CONTEXT

Over the last few decades, Bangladesh has achieved a few milestones in the education sector including free primary and secondary level education for all, free and timely distribution of textbooks, and standard national exit exams at grades 5, 8, 10, and 12 (Rabbi, 2008). The government has also expanded its education reach by converting a large number of private schools into public schools. The Government Primary School (GPS) system, along with the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) primary school (BPS), a non-governmental primary school system, and other community and private schools together helped make early grade education accessible to almost all of the population, although the quality of education is yet to show any notable improvement. A number of studies (UNICEF, 2009; Asadullah & Chaudhury, 2013; & Chabbott, 2006) on the primary education system in Bangladesh have consistently identified several issues including quality of pedagogy, high drop-out rates, unfriendly format/schedule for the disadvantaged population, lack of support at home, inadequate teaching qualifications, poor facilities, limited contact hours, etc. Across the board, lack of quality in Bangladesh's primary and secondary education systems is now affecting access to higher learning as demonstrated by the

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dismal success rate in the Bangla language in the 2014 Dhaka University admission test (Habib & Chakraborty, 2014). Despite remarkable success in providing access to schools, a large segment of the primary school age children (6 – 10-years old) still cannot take advantage of the opportunities offered due to, or as a result of, some of the factors mentioned above. After decades of focus on building schools and providing access to schooling, results and research now clearly demand for shift in focus towards the quality of education (Center for Global Development, 2013). Efforts must now be geared towards developing education approaches that ensure equitable access for the disadvantaged in a quality learning environment for all primary school-age children.

2   LEARNING THEORIES AND PRACTICES

Quality of education depends on the learning theory and practices implemented in the pedagogy. Learning theories have evolved since the early development. Behaviorists believe learning is a process of understanding and conditioning (changing) behavior through reward and punishment (Myers, 2012). To affect change in behavior, a desired outcome is established in advance and the learning environment is arranged. Traditional approaches of learning such as curriculum-based testing and direct instruction follow this theory.

The current education system in Bangladesh, implemented by the British rulers during their rein of Indian subcontinent, focuses on rote learning – to produce an administrative and clerical working class – without any attention to the context (Rabbi, 2008). This method of learning doesn't allow students to transfer their knowledge to a different setting. Learning based on students' prior knowledge of their social and cultural context can help them understand the deep structure of the lesson they are taught and transform that knowledge in understanding advanced topics and in applications of daily life (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989). Cognitive theorists believe the human brain is a processor of information and is capable of creating new knowledge when the learning of an advanced issue is built on top of prior knowledge of the topic (Boeree, 2000). The individual learner is given higher priority over the learning environment in cognitive theory, meaning the social and cultural context of the learner is more important for developing the learning practices (Smith, 2003).

The theory of constructivism promotes the idea that the individual learner constructs novel information by fusing together his/her background knowledge and the new concept (Bodner, Klobuchar, & Geelan, 2001). Constructivists allow students free exploration within a given framework. Teachers are merely facilitators of active learning, discovery, and knowledge building. Another branch of cognitive learning, the transformative learning theory, explains the process and ability of learners to modify and reinterpret information into new knowledge (Taylor, 2008).

Modern educationists believe new knowledge cannot be installed in students, it rather can be developed by challenging the learner's prior knowledge (Marzano, 1991). When challenged, students will learn to adjust their prior knowledge towards the new concepts. Most of the recent reforms in education focuses on cognitive ability of human beings and contextual learning where students and teachers have more freedom in utilizing various tools and techniques and pedagogy can be customized to match individual student competency (Sahlberg, 2011).

For the underprivileged children in Bangladesh, application of learning theories in designing pedagogy cannot even take place until students are able to access the devices of learning – classroom, teachers, learning environment, and supplies. This paper addresses the most fundamental barrier to learning for the underprivileged. The paper presents a framework that removes those social barriers for the economically disadvantaged children and their families, offering a new kind of learning environment – a departure from the traditional school. Traditional schools in Bangladesh promotes rote learning through the process of direct instruction in classrooms offered within the fixed school hours, assigned homework, and structured exams. Even though traditional schools exist in every community in Bangladesh, poor families cannot afford to send their children to these schools because children are needed to help their families during the same hours of the day. Also, the social pressure to do well on homework and exams works as a deterring factor. Poor families cannot afford the time or money for private tutors to help their kids be successful in school. The framework concept presented here offers a learning environment where students can learn at their own pace, teachers have control over the pedagogy, and the underprivileged community is afforded the flexibility it needs for the children's education.

3   OBJECTIVES

It is clear that Bangladesh has come a long way in providing access to schooling, but large systems like GPS and BPS (Khan & Samadder, 2010) have not been able to solve the dropout problem. Also, these systems have not been very successful in dealing with the quality of learning. These issues are more pronounced in the communities with disadvantaged population. A new approach to primary grade (grades 1 to 5) education proposed here will achieve two primary objectives. These objectives are to:

Establish a primary school equivalent innovative model learning center for the rural disadvantaged communities that will remove the barriers of accessing and completing fifth grade education.

Ensure early grade learning achievements through motivated teachers, technology, and conducive environment.

The prevailing primary education system in Bangladesh is a remnant of the country's colonial past, thrust upon the people to produce a class of labor that could aid and assist the British rulers. Had the goal of this imported education system been to educate the masses it would have considered the glorious indigenous elementary education system that existed before. The current education system in Bangladesh struggles to meet Education for All (EFA) goals set by the World Education Forum in The Dakar Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2000). In Bangladesh, the lack of success in educating the economically disadvantaged communities stems from the fact that the current education system is not indigenous to Bangladesh and suffers from contextual disconnect with its culture, heritage, and prevailing socio-economic conditions. For an education model to be successful its main ingredients must come from the indigenous culture and lifestyle, and be customized to meet the realities of, and prepare students for, the modern world. A successful example of this approach is the reformed education system in Finland (Sahlberg, 2011). Finland, after experimenting with various models over multiple decades, decided to empower teachers and the local community to make pedagogical decisions. Finnish education framework focuses on an individual student's learning competency rather than disruptive formal testing. Students and

teachers are not preparing to be successful in tests, though the teachers are constantly monitoring progress of every student and taking measures to help those that need extra support.

4   SHIKKHANGON CONCEPT

To satisfy the two objectives stated above, this paper proposes a reformed learning center,

Shikkhangon, based on the indigenous *Pathsala* model that existed in Bengal before the colonial British rule. Pathsala didn't have a classroom or a fixed time period for classroom instructions. Students used to visit the *Pondit* (the teacher) house (the Pathsala) to get lessons. In the proposed model – essentially a modern Pathsala – teachers will reside in the learning center campus situated at a centralized location within the community it serves and will be available to teach several times throughout the day. Key components of this learning center concept are:

1. *A campus with resident teachers*: Unlike conventional residential schools where students reside, this modest campus will house resident teachers with their families. There will be five teachers, each teaching one of the core five subjects of the national curriculum – language arts (Bangla), language arts (second language – English), math, science, and social science. Each teacher's residence will include a well-equipped and comfortable room for pedagogy. The campus will also include a garden of fruits and vegetables, and a playground. The campus will be powered with solar energy and will provide safe drinking water and proper sanitation. The fruit and vegetable garden will help students learn about gardening as well as provide fresh and healthy snacks for both teachers and students. The playground will be available to children at all times of the day. If a teacher is unable to reside on campus, s/he will still be available throughout the day in the assigned quarter for teaching.

2. *Superior teaching and learning*: Teachers must be sufficiently educated and trained for effective teaching and, paid well to be motivated. Teachers hired for the Shikkhangon must possess a college degree (preferably post-graduate) and will be paid enough to feel financially secure. Financially secured teachers will be able to concentrate on teaching, as well as learning for self-improvement. Teachers will be selected from the local community, when possible, to ensure they understand, and are sensitive to, the local language, culture, and social dynamics. Teachers will be trained to handle children with care including those with learning disabilities.

   The most innovative and critical feature of the Shikkhangon will be the open access to teachers.

   Teachers will be available several times throughout the day to teach and help students. Extended availability of teachers will help students, especially those that are slow in learning, access much needed help. The open access model will allow children to receive lessons and learn at their own convenience and pace, without disrupting their daily chores and livelihood help they might need to provide to their families. Students will also have access to portable electronic devices loaded with Khan Academy (https://bn.khanacademy.org/), style video tutorials developed by Agami as per the Bangladesh curriculum. These devices will help students review topics at their own time

and as much time as they need. Together with open access to motivated teachers and self-help video tutorials, student will have the learning environment befitting their lifestyle. All learning will take place in the Shikkhangon and students will not be required to do homework. This will ensure parents won't feel intimidated and discouraged either for the lack of their own educational incompetence to help with their children's studies or for their financial inability to hire a private tutor.

3. *Enhanced learning*: Alongside teaching as per the national curriculum, teachers will have access to other supplementary books and materials to enhance their pedagogy in order to ensure student achievement towards the expected level of learning in reading, writing, comprehension, and calculation. In addition, teachers will be trained to provide instructions on extra-curricular topics such as health and hygiene, environment and natural resources, basic emergency preparedness, diversity, and tolerance, etc.

4. *Student assessment*: Except for the government-conducted fifth grade exit exam, the Primary School Certificate (PSC), there will be no annual/formal exam as a mechanism for assessing student achievements and promote students from one grade to the next. Teachers will be trained to perform assessment of each student's progress towards an achievement target in reading, writing, comprehension, and calculation. Teachers will have the full authority and responsibility for continuous in-classroom assessment of each student's progress, record-keeping, and changing instructions progressively. Based on the assessed progress, each teacher will determine when a student has satisfactorily completed the target and ready to appear in the PSC exam. A student may not take the PSC exam until s/he is recommended so by all teachers. If a student displays below satisfactory performance in certain subjects, that student may continue to receive additional learning time in those subjects while moving forward on other subjects. Lack of standardized tests and assessments will help teachers to focus on students' learning instead of teaching for success in tests. Students can also enjoy learning without having to worry about failing in tests. If a student needs to move to a different school before passing the PSC, that student will be provided a transfer certificate with recommended enrollment grade for the new school based on his/her overall progress.

5. *Enrollment and retention*: Unlike conventional schools, there will be no formal selection or enrollment process for students. Any child between 5 and 8 years of age will be welcome to learn at the Shikkhangon. There will be no fee or cost to parents whatsoever. Profiles of all children receiving instructions at the Shikkhangon will be recorded by each teacher for the purpose of tracking progress. Each teacher will evaluate every incoming student's knowledge in his/her subject and start providing instructions accordingly. Retention will not be forced on to students or their parents. Open and flexible access to learning, discreet assessment technique, no commitment, pressure, or cost to parents, focus on learning rather than passing exam, motivated teaching faculty, and a safe and comfortable environment will ensure student retention. Retention and completion of the learning cycle will be monitored through the teachers' records on each student.

5   A DEMONSTRATION PILOT

This model for primary education has the potential for revolutionizing the early grade learning in Bangladesh. The model can be tested through a demonstration pilot project in order to evaluate its merit. If the demonstration Shikkhangon project proves to be successful, it is likely to convince Bangladesh government for adoption and incorporation in the new model village initiative (Byron, 2014). A demonstration project plan would include the following:

1. *Project setup and site selection*: Within the first month of the project funding, a project team would be put together and the project site would be finalized. Preference for the project site would be given to remote areas where access to education is still a challenge. Due to the remoteness of the project site, the cost of land is expected to be very reasonable.

2. *Construction and setup of the Shikkhangon (year 1)*: Within the first year, the Shikkhangon campus will be designed and constructed. In parallel to the construction of the Shikkhangon, qualified teachers will be hired, and necessary instructional materials, textbooks, equipment, and devices will be purchased – all within the first year. Khan Academy style video tutorials for grades 1 – 5 will also be produced. Teachers will be trained, and student evaluation framework and materials will be developed. Textbooks and other supplemental learning materials will be procured. Student performance assessment in reading, writing, comprehension, and calculation will be developed based on available national and international (Research Triangle Institute, 2011) resources.

3. *Learning center operation and impact assessment* : Initial impact assessment period for the pilot Shikkhangon will be the first three years of operation. Impact of the center in improving the early grade learning will be assessed each year. At the end of the three- year pilot, an impact assessment report will be published and publicized. If the initial three-year period proves to be a success, the pilot Shikkhangon will be supported for continuous operation and a revised impact assessment report will be published every year, thereafter. Knowledge and experience from the pilot will be shared with the government and Non-Government Organizations (NGO) for wider adoption.

6   CONCLUSION

The goal of the Shikkhangon is to demonstrate a rural primary education model capable of fulfilling desired and equitable learning outcomes for the targeted disadvantaged community. The proposed model is a departure from the existing school system but rooted in the indigenous lifestyle of rural Bangladesh. Key elements of this model are designed to ensure that students stay in the learning path and achieve and surpass the stated goal of reading, writing, comprehension, calculation, and basic knowledge in a variety of topics in science and social sciences. This model has the potential to prove that all children in the primary school age (6 – 10 years) irrespective of their conditions at home will reach and exceed early grade learning competencies in both Bangla and English languages. In addition, children will achieve the expected competencies in other subjects as per the national curriculum and successfully complete the PSC exam. A successful demonstration of this model will create the impetus for the government and NGOs for wider adoption.

The Shikkhangon is a yet to be tested for success in primary grade learning for the economically disadvantaged rural communities in Bangladesh. Whether this concept will work or not can be proven only through a study that implements and evaluates a demonstration project. Implementation cost of the Shikkhangon concept is likely to be higher than the traditional school, which may become an issue for wider adoption in an emerging economy like Bangladesh. A cost-benefit analysis of a demonstration project will help quantify the long-term economic benefits the country would derive from educating the population segment that is otherwise likely to remain illiterate and an economic burden. Local context is an important factor in any implementation of the concept, hence modification and adaptation of the concept may be necessary in a setting different from Bangladesh.

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