

CHALLENGES TO OPTIMUM ENROLMENT IN TO PRE-PRIMARY EDUCATION IN A RURAL AREA OF BANGLADESH

SK. Abdur Rab¹ and A K M Obaydullah²

¹UEO, Ministry of primary and Mass Education, Dhaka, Bangladesh

²Instructor, URC, Ministry of primary and Mass Education, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

¹Email: rabsura@gmail.com, Cell No: +8801716058450

²Email: obayd77@gmail.com, Cell No: +8801716209933

Abstract

At present, pre-primary education is a very important issue globally, because it has an impact on lifelong learning. The physical, linguistic, social and emotional expressions of the children are developed through proper completion of pre-primary education. For this reason, the Government of Bangladesh is strongly committed, both nationally and internationally, to ensure pre-primary education for all the eligible children. The Government has set an operational framework for pre-primary education in 2008 (Ministry of Primary and Mass Education, 2008). The long-term vision includes ensuring access to preschool for all the children aged from three to below six. However, at the moment, the Government is trying to provide the pre-primary education to all the children aged from five to below six. Through this framework, the Government has already taken several initiatives. However, despite of these efforts, according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2015), the enrolment rate is 53% in Bangladesh. Therefore, the researcher performed this study to explore the reasons for the low enrolment rate. The parents, school management committees, parents-teachers associations and some officials were the participants of this research. Semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, observations and document/record analysis were used to investigate the reasons. Different categories of primary schools, for instance, government primary school and newly nationalised government primary school were selected from different demographic areas for focus group discussions, observations and document/record analysis. The results indicated that there were several reasons behind this situation, for instance, the lack of social awareness about the pre-primary provision; infrastructural problem and the lack of human resources. However, it must be acknowledged that this is a case study within a small demographic area, hence, it is recommended that further research should be undertaken to achieve more generalized outcomes.

Key word: Challenges, Optimum Enrolment, Pre-Primary Education, Rural Area

1. Introduction:

The focus of this research is to explore the reasons for the low enrolment rate into pre-primary education (PPE) in a rural area of Bangladesh. It examines the beliefs, expectations and views of all the stakeholders on PPE; the factors that promote/inhibit the PPE enrolment and finds out the most feasible, short-term and long-term strategies to increase the enrolment into PPE in that area. Parents (P), school managing committees (SMCs), parents-teachers associations (PTAs), teachers as well as some officials, like District Primary Education Officer (DPEO), Assistant District Primary Education Officer (ADPEO), Upazila Education Officer (UEO) and Assistant Upazila Education Officer (AUEO), were the stakeholders of this research. Moreover, two primary schools (PSs), one was government primary school (GPS) and the other was newly nationalised government primary school (NNGPS), were selected to collect the data. Pseudonyms, such as A and B, were used to represent the school names.

The literature review revealed that the enrolment rate into PPE of some countries, for instance, England, France, Belgium, Italy, Argentina and China, are high, whereas some other countries, for instance, India, Sri Lanka and the majority of the African countries cannot perform better in PPE. It is evident from the literature review that investment is a major factor to increase the enrolment rate. Countries who perform better in PPE have considered parental issues; issues related to children with special educational needs (SEN); infrastructural issues, as well as safety, health and nutrition issues. Moreover, the government's policies, decentralisation,

community participation, low teacher-student ratio, and availability of staff including public and private investment, are the issues that promote the enrolment. On the other hand, Barriers to achieving a high enrolment rate include indifference towards policy-making, unwillingness to invest publicly and privately, unaware parents, lack of curriculum and teaching learning materials (TLM), shortage of trained teachers and staff; poverty, expenses related to PPE, socio-economic conditions; lack of awareness about children with SEN, inadequate infrastructure, absence of school meals, immigrant population, parents' academic qualifications, insufficient teacher salaries, ethnicity, demographical, and linguistic issues. In Bangladesh, the Government has taken some important initiatives; for instance, developing proper guidelines for PPE, government- non government (GO-NGO) collaboration, and investment for PPE.

Primary Education (PE) is the foundation of all education. In Bangladesh, the Government is trying to ensure quality PE for all. In addition, the Government is committed to implementing the Article seventeen of the Constitution which is "a mass-oriented, universal, free and compulsory education" for all (Directorate of Primary Education (DPE), 2017). The PPE has an impact on lifelong learning. The physical, linguistic, social and emotional expression will be developed if the children complete PPE. For this reason, the Government of Bangladesh is strongly committed, both nationally and internationally, to ensure PPE for all children. Therefore, the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (MOPME) has set an operational framework for PPE in 2008. The long-term vision includes ensuring access to preschool for all the children from three to six years old. However, at the moment, the Government is trying to provide PPE to all the children aged five to below six years (MOPME, 2008). Through this framework, the MOPME has already taken some initiatives, for example, recruitment of pre-primary teachers (PPTs); providing financial incentives and textbooks to the students; budget allocation for decorating classrooms and purchasing TLM; allocation of fund for School Level Improvement Plan (SLIP) and for the SEN children. However, as Ahmmed and Mullick (2014) point out, policy makers often design educational policies that are not based on contextual and empirical evidence. It is therefore paramount to conduct an in-depth qualitative research that can explore to what extent the policy has an impact on enrolment into the provision; what obstacles and barriers there are to increase the enrolment rate and only then to suggest possible policy initiatives. Despite initiating different types of steps to ensure access into PPE, the enrolment rate is 53% in Bangladesh (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2015), whereas the enrolment rate into PE is 97.6% (DPE, 2017). So, it is necessary to know the actual reason for the low enrolment rate. The study therefore aims to provide policy makers evidence-based information that will contribute to the better understanding of the issues surrounding the enrolment into the PPE provision.

2. Aim and Objective:

The aim of this research was to investigate the reasons of the low enrolment rate into PPE in a rural area of Bangladesh. It was intended that the research findings will help the educational authorities in making their policies. It was also intended that the research project will explore the strategies to increase the enrolment rate into PPE. For this reason, the research was designed based on the following three objectives:

- I. To identify the beliefs, expectations and views of all stakeholders on PPE about the children aged from five to below six.
- II. To explore the factors those promote/inhibit the PPE enrolment.
- III. To find out the most feasible, short-term and long-term strategies to increase the enrolment into PPE in a rural area of Bangladesh.

3. Research questions:

Taking into account the previously mentioned aim and objectives to investigate the reasons for the low enrolment rate and to identify strategies for achieving an optimal enrolment rate, three research questions were developed which are mentioned below:

- I. What are the beliefs, expectations and views of all stakeholders on PPE about the children aged from five to below six?
- II. Which factors promote/inhibit the PPE enrolment?
- III. What would be the most feasible, short-term and long-term strategies to increase the enrolment into PPE in a rural area of Bangladesh?

4. Methodology

This research was a qualitative exploratory study because the research questions of this study were exploring the problem. Therefore, the researcher looked at only one geographical area to collect the data for investigating the

reasons. The researcher used an inductive approach to analyse and interpret the collected data. The interpretation included several stages of coding which are discussed later on.

The probability sampling provides more bias-free participants, selected from the total population by random sampling. However, more time and budget may be needed for this type of sampling. To conduct this study, the researcher used the non-probability method, although it was not bias-free and was chosen through availability, either by convenience, quota, or snowball techniques. Moreover, it was more usable because it could be conducted more effortlessly, rapidly and without considerable pecuniary obligation. Different groups of parents, different types of teachers as well as SMCs and PTAs members were selected for the focus group discussions (FGDs). Officials from different levels were also considered to gather information. Furthermore, different categories of government PSs, for instance, GPS and NNGPS, were selected from different regions, which helped to triangulate the data. In addition, statistical evidence was collected to support this research. The researcher of this study selected a standard sample size that 2 FGDs, 2 Class observations, 2 School observations, 5 Interviews, Document analysis from 2 different schools. Semi-structured and one-to-one responsive interviews were conducted to collect the data from five different departmental officials, such as 1 DPEO, 1 ADPEO, 1 UEO and 2 AUEOs, to get accurate scenario. Moreover, for conducting interviews, very little mechanical equipment is needed. The researcher prepared a clear list of topics and questions in advance for the semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interviews were adopted regarding the order in which the topics were considered and gave the interviewees chances to create thoughts and talk more generally about the issues raised by the researcher. The answers were open-ended, and there was more stress on the interviewee expanding points of interest. They were easy to understand. The interviewees were encouraged to share their ideas, thoughts and experience without any hesitation. The questions were read out to the interviewees and afterwards urged to give answers or talk about their own particular ideas and experiences. The researcher obtained permission from the participants to record the entire sessions, with the intention of translating them into English and accurately identifying as well as preserving all the findings. Some of the participants had to be encouraged to express their thoughts, ideas, and experiences and to engage in the discussions, whereas some other interviewees discussed eagerly.

Although FGD should consist of between six to nine people or sometimes fewer than six (Denscombe, 2007), the researcher invited eleven participants for every FGD to maximise the diversity of data. Every group consists of a HT, an AT/PPT or both, members of SMC and PTA, parents of enrolled children and those whose children were not enrolled into PPE, both groups of parents with SEN children-those whose children were enrolled and those whose children were not enrolled into PPE, as well as the parents whose children were already attending PE provision. It was difficult to gather participants for FGDs because teachers were busy, members of SMCs and PTAs had other duties and some parents were day labourers or engaged in other tasks. The summary of the participants are presented in Table1:

Name of the schools	Number teachers (HT, AT and PPT)	Number of SMCs and PTAs members	Number of parents	Total number of Participants
A	3	2	6	11
B	2	2	7	11
Total	5	4	13	22

Table1: Summary about the participants of FGDs

Observations:

In this research, classroom observations were conducted by the researcher to know how teachers taught and how students behaved in the classrooms, as well as to observe physical environment in the classrooms. The classrooms were first observed and then, FGDs were accomplished in order to help teachers and researcher to refer to some related issues from the observations. The teachers had chances to express their perceptions and implementations more evidently as they exemplified their explanations referring to the time they were observed.

Document analysis:

Documents of two schools were analysed by the researcher to collect data from other sources to have an accurate scenario. In this study, the researcher analysed official statistics or documents/records following a checklist. For document analysis, the researcher requested the HTs to provide the child survey reports. However, they were not able to provide the consecutive documents of several years. One HT provided the report of the years 2016 and 2017, while another gave only the report of 2017. They reserved only the hard copy in the file and no soft copy at all. Documents were assessed in relation to the four basic criteria: authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning. The researcher analysed the documents considering the total number of children aged between five to six in the catchment areas and how many children enrolled in the respective school.

Data analysis

An inductive method was used to analyse the data. Before analysing the data, the researcher organised and prepared the data in a systematic way. After organising and preparing the data, he listened and watched the audio and video recordings again and again. The researcher also read and examined the classrooms and school observation checklists and documents iteratively to know the details of what were said, what were done, what were observed and what were portrayed through the data. These provided an essential platform for coding and categorising the data. After completing these tasks, the author started to transcribe the recordings to English and put things together and created some preliminary codes following the research questions. Then, he divided the data according to the two categories: the positives and barriers. Out of that, he looked at some key themes or patterns to create descriptive codes. The primary themes and patterns were categorised and subcategorised and made a link with codes. In the analysis process, researcher prioritised certain parts of the data, reduced the number of codes, categories and themes as well as developed a hierarchy of codes, categories and themes. Then, he moved towards key concepts. Finally, he developed some generalised conclusions based on the relationships, patterns and themes that had been identified in the data and linked it to the literature review.

5. Findings and analysis:

The analysis of the data showed that all the participants appreciate PPE. The parents think that their children are habituated to go to school and it motivates them. "Now my children say that mother, make me ready for school", said one mother. According to them, PPE is a good concept, because the children will do better in the next stage of education, success in life, perform better result from the beginning and positive change will happen in their life. Sometimes, the parents are influenced by the leadership and good behaviour of the HTs and trust them and send their children to school. One of them said, "I did not enrol my child due to the previous head teacher was not good in manner, but now I have already enrolled my child because present head madam is very good".

The members of SMCs and PTAs acknowledged that PPE is a good idea because it makes preparing the children for further education. They have taken strategies to implement it. However, some of them do not perform their duties what they suppose to do. Some of them proactive, whereas some of them less proactive.

Observations and document analysis

The analysis of the observations and documents/records confirmed that there are many reasons behind the low enrolment rate into PPE, these are discussed below:

- **Safety:** The researcher observed that the schools did not have boundary to protect the children.
- **Infrastructure and transportation:** The author also evidenced that there were no pre-primary classrooms (PPCs) in both the schools. The school "A" had a classroom made by the fence, whereas the pre-primary session was conducted along with the students of grade four in a room in the school "B". Toilet facility was sufficient for the general student in the school "A", while it was insufficient in "B". There were no additional facilities for the SEN children; the conditions of some roads were not good and there were no school buses to transport them.
- **Teachers and staff:** The researcher confirmed that the school "A" had only one PPT, even though he was absent because of eighteen months DPED training. On the other hand, the school "B" did not have any PPT; other teacher conducted the PPE session. In addition, there were no staffs in both the schools. It was also evidenced that there were no specialised teachers for the SEN children in both the schools, although the HTs had received a five days training on inclusive education (IE).
- **Resources:** The author confirmed that TLM was insufficient and there were no playing instruments in the school fields, although only one small toy was observed in each school. Moreover, there were no multimedia facilities in the PPCs. Furthermore, there was no clean drinking water in the schools. However, the author also confirmed by some document analysis that the DPE provides BDT 5000 for purchasing TLM and BDT 40000 for the SLIP grant to a school every year.
- **Economic poverty:** The researcher evidenced by asking some children in the classrooms that they did not have their meal because of poverty. All the students came from lower class families. He also confirmed by some document analysis that the MOPME provides BDT 50 to a mother every month.
- **Additional duties:** During the observations, the researcher evidenced that some teachers were performing administrative duties which were not related to the teaching-learning process.

The summaries of the school observations and classroom observations are given in Table 2 and Table 3 respectively.

Name of the schools	Condition of PPCs	Total PPE children	Present children	Is it colourful?	Multimedia facilities	Textbooks	Sufficient TLM	Is PPCs decorated with varieties of
A	not good	39	33	no	no	39	no	no
B	no PPC	22	13	no	no	30	no	no

Table 2: The classroom observations

Name of the schools	Number of buildings	Condition of buildings	Number of PPCs	Number of PPTs	Clean drinking water	Toilet facilities	Buildings and toilet facilities for SEN children	Staff facility	Boundaries and playing	Total students	Total teachers
A	2	1 is good	1 (made by fence)	1	no	available	no	no	no	610	11
B	1	Bad	0	0	no	not available	no	no	no	135	3

Table 3: The school observations

Suggestions from the participants

The analysis of the data showed that the participants provided some suggestions for increasing the enrolment rate which are stated below:

- **Increasing awareness:** The participants suggested for developing awareness between the parents and local community about PPE. They also suggested for changing the perspective about the SEN children.
- **Safety:** They suggested for constructing boundaries around the schools for ensuring safety for the children.
- **Infrastructure and transportation:** They recommended for increasing infrastructural facilities, for instance, constructing new buildings or classrooms to accommodate the children including the SEN children; increasing toilet facilities; roads reconstruction and providing school buses to transport the children.
- **Recruitment of teachers and staff:** They advised to recruit PPTs for NNGPS; to recruit additional teachers for the schools that have many children and to recruit specialised teachers for the SEN children. They also suggested for recruiting staff.
- **Initiating training for all:** They suggested for introducing training for all teachers, especially for HTs who supervise and monitors the PPTs and take necessary steps for implementing PPE. Moreover, they recommended for providing training for the SMCs and PTAs to introduce their responsibilities. They also suggested for initiating PPE training for the UEOs and all the AUEOs for effective monitoring and supervising.
- **Resources:** They suggested for increasing budget for purchasing more TLM and playing instruments. In addition, they recommended for initiating multimedia based classrooms and providing electricity for those schools that do not have the electricity. Additionally, they suggested for ensuring clean drinking water in the schools.
- **Economic poverty:** They suggested for introducing school meals for cognitive development of the children, which helps to increase the enrolment rate. They also proposed for increasing financial incentives. A nice summarising comment from the one Head Teacher was given as below:
'...the enrolment rate will be increased if the school meal and school bus are provided, school building, boundary and toilet are constructed; incentive for the children is needed to increase, more budget for creating an attractive environment and more teachers are also very important to increase the enrolment rate into PPE'.
- **Additional duties:** The participants recommended for removing extra duties, for instance, administrative duties and the duties of other organisations, such as the election department and the health department.

6. Discussion:

The researcher selected semi-structured interviews, FGDs, observations and document analysis to collect more accurate picture to answer the research questions. The data reflected the views of a variety of stakeholders who were directly or less directly involved in the process of PPE enrolment. The author collected the data from two schools and twenty seven participants including SMCs, PTAs, teachers and officials from different levels. The

coding process identified key themes that related to the analysis of challenges and opportunities as regards PPE provision.

The purpose of collecting varieties of data from different stakeholders and sources was to acquire a holistic view of the participants about PPE and the actual reasons for the low enrolment rate into PPE. This might help to be identified in terms of what short-term and long-term strategies might be effective to increase the enrolment rate. Education is important not only for gaining content knowledge but also for learning how to live. "The main purpose of education should not revolve around the acquisition of a pre-determined set of skills, but rather the realization of one's full potential and the ability to use those skills for the greater good" (Dewey, 1897 cited in Talebi, 2015, p.4). PPE is vital for the advancement of physical, linguistic, social and emotional expressions of the children. The physical development occurs through play and exercise based learning. Mannerisms can grow from the good behaviour of teachers and classmates. The linguistic expressions are supported via conversations with teachers. Moreover, the socialisation and emotional expressions can be improved by cooperative learning and/or playing and sharing with others. The analysis of the data indicated that the cognitive, emotional or psychomotor developments of the children are recognised by all the stakeholders.

The stakeholders confirmed that PPE provides pre-schooling concept to the children and prepares them for formal learning. Moreover, they believed that PPE encourages the children; makes familiar with schools and removes hesitation and fear from them. Furthermore, they confirmed that the PPE develops mannerism. They can also learn about personal hygiene which was also confirmed by the researchers Diazgranados et al. Therefore, a positive change can happen in their life. As a result, they perform better from the beginning of their student life and better performance is achieved in the next stage of education. Furthermore, the participants suggested that it helps to reduce the dropout rate and increase school completion rate. In addition, the stakeholders have a strong belief that PPE helps the children to be involved in the process of acculturation. In other words, they will be socially well-adjusted and productive adults as well as will contribute to the economic growth of the country. Moreover, it helps to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty and contributes to developing a better, more equitable and more prosperous society. For these reasons, the parents enrol their children and the MOPME and DPE introduce different types of initiatives, for instance, recruitment of PPTs; providing financial incentives and textbooks; allocating budget for decorating classrooms, purchasing TLM and for the SLIP grant. It also allocates budget for buying assistive devices for the SEN children (MOPME, 2016; DPE, 2016). Moreover, the authorities at different levels are trying to facilitate the parents to enrol their children.

From the findings, it was evident that the stakeholders suggested for expanding preschool programmes more widely for ensuring children to have the chance to gain the foundation of school readiness skills to develop positive, medium to large and statistically considerable outcomes on the emergent language and literacy, the emergent numeracy and the socio-personal skills.

7. Recommendations:

Based on the information obtained from the research, it is possible to recommend the following short-term and long-term strategies:

Short-term strategies

- The Government should create the changes gradually in educational policies so that the community people can get the opportunity to participate in the policy making.
- Raising a wider social awareness of education is needed to challenge prejudice; to remove class differences and for poverty alleviation from the society.
- The Government can encourage local communities to build provisional classrooms and boundaries around the schools by using local resources before they allocate to every individual school.
- The MOPME could initiate training for the officials, SMCs and PTAs about PPE because they work at the grassroots level. School administration; monitoring and supervision; planning and management; how to face natural disasters; awareness developing especially about the SEN children might be included in the training.

Long-term strategies

- The Government can introduce an education programme and consider funding in the following areas: Firstly, they could allocate funding for building a classroom in every school for PPE provision. Secondly, the infrastructural facilities should be taken into account for the SEN children. Thirdly, the issue of transport from the bus distances should be considered mainly because of the safety of the children.
- The meals are important for the schools. Two types of strategies can be developed. Firstly, the MOPME may supply dry meal by contacting agreement with private organizations. Secondly, the

school may get a small fund from the Government and supplement it with the money donated by the local community.

- The MOPME should develop a policy to recruit the PPTs in every NNGPS. It is also important to recruit at least one staff for every school to reduce the load of administrative functions from the teachers.
- As a huge number of children are studying in the pre-primary and primary level, it is difficult to manage and monitor them. However, managing and monitoring are inevitable for reviewing the progress of enrolment. Therefore, an effective national IT system is required to be developed that would be easy to monitor the enrolment of the children, their attendance, retention and progression. In fact, the system could be used for monitoring all children in primary education. In this way, the Government could collect the data for the necessity of incorporating the information into the policies.

Conclusion

After discussing and evaluating the data, it seemed that the MOPME, the DPE and the related authorities, for instance, the officials, the teachers and the committee members, are trying to increase the enrolment rate into PPE. However, there are some problems in different levels that inhibit the optimum enrolment, for example, the lack of social awareness; insecurity; infrastructural problem; economic poverty; the lack of transportation; limited teachers; the absence of PPTs in NNGPSs; the absence of school staff; the lack of teachers' training except PPTs; long time DPED training; the absence of ICT based classrooms; the lack of proper documentation of the data; the lack of electricity of some schools; the lack of TLM and playing instruments and the limited budget. Moreover, the natural disasters, social prejudice and the absence of SEN child-friendly school environment are also the reasons for the low enrolment. Additionally, the lack of involvement of politicians around PPE is an issue. Some members of SMCs and PTAs, as well as some teachers are also seemed to be indifferent to their responsibilities.

After all, the findings are not sufficient to support the research questions without further research, but it may be an indication that more budget is required; more communication is needed to reduce the gap between the parents and the teachers; the parents need to be more aware of PPE; the people should aware of social prejudice; the involvement of political persons are needed as well as the responsibilities of the teachers, SMCs and PTAs should be improved to increase the enrolment rate into PPE.

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