ARTICLE

Teachers' Quality and Secondary School Improvement in the Rural Context of Bangladesh

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Over the last three decades, many educationalists and researchers have provided multiple models of school improvement. In most models, teachers' quality is recognised as a central feature of the school improvement process. In Bangladesh, the government has, for years, taken various policy initiatives to improve secondary education, but the gap between rural and urban schools remains clearly visible. A lack of quality teachers, insufficient school resources, improper learning environments, and mostly inconsistent policy guidelines are hindering the progress made. In this conceptual paper, the researchers argue that, for school improvement to be effective, policy reforms and change initiatives must focus on the development of teachers' quality and schools' capacity equally to manage change, as these two factors are interconnected. To counter these barriers, this paper recommends a multi-level intervention framework. At the policy level, the study proposes targeted financial incentives and decentralised recruitment to improve rural teacher retention. At the school level, it advocates for inter-school collaboration to share limited resources and strengthen change management capacity. Finally, at the classroom level, the paper calls for increasing teacher autonomy and integrating student feedback to adapt national curricula to local rural contexts.

Keywords: secondary education, teacher quality, school improvement, rural education, educational policy

Introduction

The Constitution of Bangladesh and other policies state that the state shall adopt effective measures to improve education and communication, thereby reducing disparities in living standards between urban and rural areas (Ministry of Education, 2010; Ministry of Law, 2010). Despite various initiatives to reduce disparities between rural and urban areas, Bangladesh is still struggling to improve its education system in terms of teacher quality, physical facilities, school improvement, and student achievement, especially in rural areas (World Bank, 2013). In light of this, the paper contends that policy reform and change initiatives must give equal weight to enhancing teachers'

Editor's Note: This article is published to highlight persistent structural challenges in Bangladesh's rural secondary education sector. Readers are advised that the analysis draws primarily on policy documents and literature from the previous decade. While specific indicators may have evolved in the intervening period, the theoretical framing and proposed improvement model remain highly pertinent to contemporary debates on educational quality. Additionally, due to the time elapsed between initial submission and final publication, the data reflects the context at the time of writing. The Editorial Board acknowledges this duration and considers the contribution to retain value for current policy and research discussions.

professional quality and strengthening schools' capacity to manage change, given the interdependence of the two. Therefore, the paper aims to scrutinise the secondary education system in rural areas of Bangladesh to identify the barriers and possible implications for school improvement. Therefore, this paper seeks to scrutinise the secondary education system in rural Bangladesh in order to identify the barriers to, and potential implications for, school improvement, drawing on international frameworks to propose a multi-level intervention strategy

Methodological Note

This conceptual paper is influenced by the World Bank report *Bangladesh Education Sector Review: Seeding Fertile Ground—Education that Works for Bangladesh*, published in 2013. The report prompts an examination of why the gap between rural and urban secondary schools persists despite the Bangladesh government's policy initiatives to improve schools over the years. In response, the paper analyses the government's initiatives relating to secondary education through a document-based inquiry.

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Rather than undertaking a systematic literature review, the study adopts a critical policy analysis approach to deepen conceptual understanding and lay the groundwork for future empirical research. Documents were selected according to two criteria outlined by Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007): first, the inclusion of policy documents such as the National Education Policy, outcome-based documents including World Bank and Asian Development Bank (ADB) project reports, and published empirical studies; and second, the use of keywords such as "policy initiative", "secondary-level education in Bangladesh", and "gaps in school improvement" to guide the search.

To interrogate these materials, a thematic analysis framework was used to identify the disconnect between policy rhetoric and the realities of rural schooling. The analysis unfolded in three stages. The first involved initial coding, during which documents were reviewed for explicit and implicit references to barriers affecting rural education. A deductive coding strategy was applied, focusing on mentions of "teacher quality", "resource allocation", and "management capacity" as key constraints. The second stage synthesised these codes to map the identified barriers—such as limited incentives and rigid top-down management—against the government's stated objectives, thereby revealing the structural reasons why policy initiatives often fail to reach rural contexts. The final stage involved deriving action levels by aligning the emerging themes with a multi-level framework of school improvement. This enabled the recommendations to be organised across three interconnected layers—policy, school, and classroom—ensuring that the proposed interventions address root causes throughout the education system.

Conceptual Understanding of School Improvement

Over the last three decades, numerous researchers have sought to determine the effectiveness of school improvement through their empirical research (Hopkins, Ainscow, and West, 1994; West, 2010; West, Ainscow, and Stanford, 2005). For instance, Velzen et al. (1985) define school improvement as a systematic and sustained effort to change learning conditions and related internal conditions within a school to accomplish its educational goals more effectively. In addition, Hopkins and colleagues (1994) emphasise the importance of enhancing student outcomes and strengthening the school's capacity to manage change to facilitate school improvement. As they mention, school improvement is about leveraging student achievement through improvements in the teaching-learning process and other conditions in the school that support it. Additionally, Stoll (1991) asserts that enhancing schools' internal conditions can positively impact student achievement. In this case, teachers can play a significant role in school improvement by strengthening the school's internal conditions to ensure better student outcomes, while accounting for both global and local changes.

Teachers' Quality and School Improvement

A significant number of studies have reported that teachers' quality and school improvement are intertwined, with school improvement defined as educational change with the twin purposes of enhancing student attainment and developing the school's capacity for change management (Hopkins et al., 1994). Therefore, teachers should be at the centre of the school improvement programme, as they are the ultimate practitioners of the changes initiated. In addition, case studies of successful schools have suggested that teachers committed to both the school and its leaders' vision for change are important factors in their success (Herman et al., 2008, cited in Rosenberg, Christianson, & Angus, 2015). However, a school's quality is evaluated based on students' achievements, measured through several standardised national tests and examinations, while teachers' quality is the underlying factor in those achievements.

Quality teachers are indispensable for sustainable school improvement. Taking this point into account, Velzen et al. (1985) maintain that educational change is difficult without the cooperation of fellow teachers and the endorsement of the school leader, even in a single classroom. Thus, developing teachers and enhancing the teaching-learning process in the classroom are at the heart of school improvement. In this regard, many more qualified teachers with appropriate pedagogical, technical, and content knowledge are required for effective teaching and learning in the classroom, which, in turn, enhances students' outcomes.

There has been a significant need for quality teachers in Bangladesh's education sector in recent years; however, systematic, top-down policy changes and externally driven initiatives have constrained teachers' involvement in strategic planning and decision-making. Additionally, teachers face constant pressure due to heavy workloads and low morale, which contributes to high staff turnover, particularly in rural areas. However, before embarking on the primary analysis, the following section provides an overview of the context of secondary schools in Bangladesh.

Context of Secondary Schools in Bangladesh

In terms of management and ownership, there are two primary types of secondary schools in Bangladesh: public and private. More than 98% of secondary schools in Bangladesh are privately run, whereas only 327 out of 19,684 are fully government-funded, according to the Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (2014). Surprisingly, public schools are located in urban areas, while private schools are found only in rural areas. According to the Bangladesh Education Statistics (2014), the distribution of secondary schools across urban and rural areas reveals a stark imbalance between public and private provision. In urban regions, there are 3,889 private secondary schools compared to just 302 public ones. This disparity is even more pronounced in rural areas, where private institutions number 14,566, while public schools total only 14. There is a huge quality gap between these rural and urban schools. Along with grants for infrastructure development, private

secondary schools receive government funding covering 80 per cent of teacher salaries, based on school registration and eligibility criteria. Alongside, students in both government and non-government schools receive free textbooks (Karim, 2004).

The teachers at these secondary schools are primarily graduates of various subjects, but many hold third-class degrees (Thornton, 2006), especially in rural areas. In Bangladesh, teaching is still considered a low-paid profession, and teachers are often dissatisfied with their salaries; thus, they seek ways to supplement their income through private tuition outside school hours (Latif & Johanson, 2000).

In fact, Bangladesh has one of the largest low-cost education systems in the world (Hussain, 2000). As Karim (2004, p. 26) argues, "Existing schools face shortages of classrooms, furniture, and other supplies as well as overcrowding. …There is a severe shortage of teachers and existing teachers lack adequate professional skills." Moreover, externally imposed policy recommendations put increasing pressure on teachers to professionalise to meet the quantitative milestone, demoralising teachers and discouraging high-quality teachers from entering the profession. Therefore, with these unsatisfied teachers, secondary schools in rural areas are struggling to cope with local and national changes.

Barriers to the Development of Rural Schools

Bangladesh has been struggling to implement an effective education policy, prepare and recruit qualified teachers, and provide adequate resources in schools for years. The foreword to the National Education Policy notes with regret: "Thirty-nine years have passed since we emerged as a free nation, but no Education Policy has been put into implementation" (Ministry of Education, 2010, p. iii). The main weaknesses are hidden in that statement. Bangladesh has established several education policy commissions to develop its education sector, but most of these policy guidelines have not had a chance to make an impact; instead, they have been casualties of political agendas, subject to continuous change by successive governments. It points to persistent weaknesses in the state's commitment to the education sector, contributing to a nationwide system characterised by low-quality schooling.

On the other hand, the geographical locations of rural secondary schools, in most cases, keep them isolated from urban areas and from better resources. For example, 66% of the total Bangladeshi population lives in rural areas (World Bank, 2014). Most of these students are first-generation school-goers, and their illiterate and/or least educated parents cannot correlate education with financial benefits in their lives. These families are "forced to cost-benefit analysis, and they decide that the benefits of sending their children to school do not outweigh the costs" (Rouse, 2012, p. xvi). As a result, they send their children to farms to do seasonal agricultural work rather than sending them to school (Rosenberg et al., 2015), and some parents send their children to work in metropolitan areas. Other factors that constrain rural schools from improving include a lack of basic facilities

(such as drinking water, toilets, electricity, and learning materials) and an inadequate learning environment (Bana, 2010).

Along with the above-mentioned factors, rural schools face serious issues in providing a full range of qualified teachers and the supporting resources to ensure success (Barley & Beesley, 2007). As Rosenberg et al. (2015) argue, a rural school's distance from an urban centre or metropolitan area can affect its staffing patterns and access to external supports. In addition, its distance from universities and metropolitan centres can hinder its ability to leverage external professional development opportunities or engage with external support providers (Johnson & Strange, 2007; Monk, 2007, cited in Rosenberg et al., 2015, p. 194). Equally, they argue, distance from an urban centre can also affect residents' employment opportunities.

In effective schools, attracting and retaining high-quality teachers is a significant challenge, especially in rural areas (Parsley & Barton, 2015). Additionally, teachers are often required to teach multiple content areas due to the limited number of teachers in rural private secondary schools. Insufficient resources and inadequate facilities are often accepted as a fact in rural secondary schools in Bangladesh. Student achievement in these schools is significantly lower than in urban schools (BANBEIS, 2014). Likewise, students' absenteeism, inattentiveness during class, and dropouts remain high (BANBEIS, 2014). There is a lack of a proper study environment at home for rural students, and, as a result, they arguably lead an undesired life. Moreover, unattractive school environments, inadequate teaching aids and equipment, and traditional teaching-learning methods obstruct students' joyful learning in Bangladeshi rural secondary schools. "While each of these problems is formidable, collectively they can significantly constrain the educational achievement of all youth served in such settings, and that may limit the attainment of even the most promising students" (Chance & Segura, 2009, p. 1).

Secondary School Teachers' Quality in Bangladesh

According to the National Education Policy (Ministry of Education, 2010) and the Draft Education Law (Ministry of Education, 2016), secondary school teachers who do not hold a one-year Bachelor of Education (BEd) degree must hold a BEd degree within 3-5 years of joining the teaching profession. There are 14 government teachers' training colleges (TTCs), 136 non-government TTCs, and the Bangladesh Open University (BOU), which offer professional degrees for secondary school teachers in Bangladesh (BANBEIS, 2014). These institutions differ in their institutional infrastructure, management, and quality, even though government and nongovernment TTCs follow the same curriculum. However, the quality of the programmes offered by BOU and private TTCs is a subject of intense criticism due to their flexibility in course management.

The National Education Policy 2010 also suggests that teachers for private secondary schools will be certified and

recruited by the Non-Government Teacher Recruitment and Certification Authority of Bangladesh (NTRCA), which conducts teacher certification exams and publishes the list of certified teachers for private secondary schools to recruit. However, NTRCA's transparency has been repeatedly criticised by educators and researchers.

However, teaching in secondary private schools is the least attractive job for job seekers, even among teachers in other sectors in Bangladesh. Teachers' salaries and other benefits are significantly lower than those at other educational institutions. Here, it is worth noting that individuals over 30 years old are generally not eligible to join any government service in Bangladesh, although there are very few exceptions. Therefore, they try to secure other jobs by this time, and people who cannot find other employment often attempt to enter teaching in private secondary schools as a last resort, sometimes even by illegal means.

The government has undertaken substantial initiatives to develop secondary schools, though their impact is relatively low in rural areas. Bana (2010) strongly criticises these development initiatives, noting that external efforts drive most and therefore have a limited impact. However, the Bangladesh government has initiated several development projects for secondary education sector development (for example, secondary education quality and access enhancement project [SEQAEP], secondary education sector investment programme [SESIP], teaching quality improvement programme in secondary education project [TQISEP]) with the help of the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, and other international donor agencies. Among them, SEQAEP works with low-performing schools; TQISEP focuses on increasing secondary school accountability through monitoring and evaluation; and SESIP helps Bangladesh's secondary schools become more efficient, equitable, and of higher quality (World Bank, 2014; ADB, 2009, 2013). Despite these initiatives, the secondary education system continues to struggle to deliver quality education.

Possible Actions to Remove the Barriers

Over the last decade, Bangladesh has made significant progress in educational development, particularly in terms of student enrolment, gender equality, and reducing the high dropout rate in secondary education. However, poverty in rural areas and urban slums remains widespread, impeding educational development (ADB, 2009; World Bank, 2014). Therefore, significant changes are required at the policy, school, and classroom levels to move forward.

Actions at the Policy Level

In the neoliberal era, certain policy reforms have promoted the marketisation of education, generating a competitive "quasi-selective" system that channels disadvantaged children into lower-performing schools; as a result, these schools are increasingly outpaced by their higher-performing counterparts. Thus, this remains a significant challenge for policymakers to achieve sustainable improvement in schools

(West, 2010; West et al., 2005). In addition, politicians and policymakers introduce various systems (e.g., standardised national tests) to make teachers and schools accountable to the state and stakeholders. However, evidence shows that accountability and increased competition do not work as strategies for improving the quality of education; moreover, they turn schools into test-preparation centres and lead the education system into a situation of "innovation overload," where people quickly become exhausted (Hopkins et al., 1994, p. 12). Therefore, what is needed to improve secondary schools is an implementation-friendly and needs-based policy that keeps schools at the centre of the policy process.

Tam and Cheng (2007) offer five potential evidence-based features to increase overall teacher quality that should be considered when teacher development policy is made; they are: upgrading teacher qualifications; orientation of training and incentive structures; shifting towards the reflective practitioner model; building a professional learning community; and consolidating the teacher education sector. In addition, to attract quality teachers to rural secondary schools, performance-based pay and compensation for additional working hours would be motivating. To recruit and retain teachers in rural schools, the government can also introduce targeted financial incentives to increase teachers' wages; training programmes to develop local talent; and strategies to counter teachers' feelings of isolation (Rosenberg et al., 2015), such as the SEQAEP project. Important regulations to ensure the quality of teacher education programmes in private TTCs and BOUs should be developed and implemented by a central management authority. In addition, there should be a correlation among the three significant types of teacher education providers.

Education's share of total public expenditure remains small (approximately 2.2% of GDP and 12.4% of the total budget) and has not been significantly increased in recent years. The government should take necessary initiatives to increase investment in education. Additionally, the planning and implementation of education programmes require careful coordination between the two ministries—the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education—and their respective education departments, according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO; 2011).

Actions at the School Level

In addition to the policy guidelines, schools should be the focus of development. However, it is often assumed that externally driven strategies are not the only feasible means of school improvement (West, 2010, p. 96). Schools can perform better when they work collaboratively to improve within the school, between schools, and beyond the school (Ainscow et al., 2012).

Hopkins and colleagues (1994, p. 96) argue that "School improvement works better when a clear and practical focus for development is linked to simultaneous work on the internal conditions within the school." Furthermore, they suggest

working within the school by following three steps together: translating policy guidelines into school priorities, creating internal conditions to manage change, and embedding these priorities and conditions within an overall strategy; as a result, student and staff outcomes will be enhanced. On the other hand, there is substantial research evidence that, under the right circumstances, collaboration among schools can help develop one another's capacity by sharing resources, working together to invent new responses, and offering mutual support (Ainscow, Muijs, & West, 2006). Alongside this, a school might encourage local community involvement in its improvement, especially in rural areas where schools lack resources and have weak infrastructure. Successful school improvement requires quality teachers and, to some extent, effective management and leadership. Inevitably, the school culture and teachers' attitudes are two basic components of a successful school.

Actions at the Classroom Level

Teachers make a significantly greater difference in students' lives than schools do. As enhancing students' outcomes is the fundamental goal for school improvement, teachers play an important role in the classroom through the teaching-learning process (Ainscow et al., 2006). In so doing, teachers need a climate of trust, supportive environments, and a learning atmosphere at the school where they can try new ideas, learn from each other, and have their voices heard in planning and the development of the school. Most effective external agents not only work in the school, but also in the classroom (Chance & Segura, 2009; West, 2000). At the same time, through school-to-school collaboration, evidence shows that many teachers are interested in working together to extend their professional learning and find ways to improve the quality of education they provide their students in the classroom (Ainscow et al., 2006).

Limitations

This study is subject to several limitations. Firstly, the analysis is underpinned by policy documents and statistical data primarily derived from the period 2010–2016. Whilst specific quantitative indicators may have evolved in the intervening years, the theoretical framing and identified structural disparities remain pertinent to contemporary discourse on educational quality. Secondly, as a conceptual paper employing a critical policy analysis approach rather than a systematic literature review or primary empirical fieldwork, the findings are drawn from a specific subset of outcome-based documents and government reports. Consequently, the conclusions regarding teacher quality and school improvement are strictly contextualised within Bangladesh's rural secondary education sector and may not be entirely generalisable to urban settings or other educational tiers.

Conclusion

Taken together, the evidence suggests that, regardless of other influences, children and young people in rural disadvantaged contexts continue to make the least educational progress. In most instances, government initiatives target all schools equally; as a result, the gap between high- and low-performing schools remains wide. To minimise this gap, school improvement initiatives should be school-focused and implementation-friendly rather than politically or ideologically driven. The state should place teachers and schools at the centre of policy reformation. Given the challenging circumstances in rural areas and the need for school improvement initiatives, the government should also take significant steps to strengthen teacher preparation, recruitment, and retention to sustain rural schools' capacity to manage change.

Thus, when high-quality teachers collaborate within schools, across schools, and beyond to strengthen internal learning conditions, student outcomes are correspondingly enhanced. This relationship is illustrated in Figure 1, adapted from West (2000), Hopkins et al. (1994), Stoll (1991), and Velzen et al. (1985).

Figure 1
Key Aspects of Improving Teachers' Quality and Student Outcomes
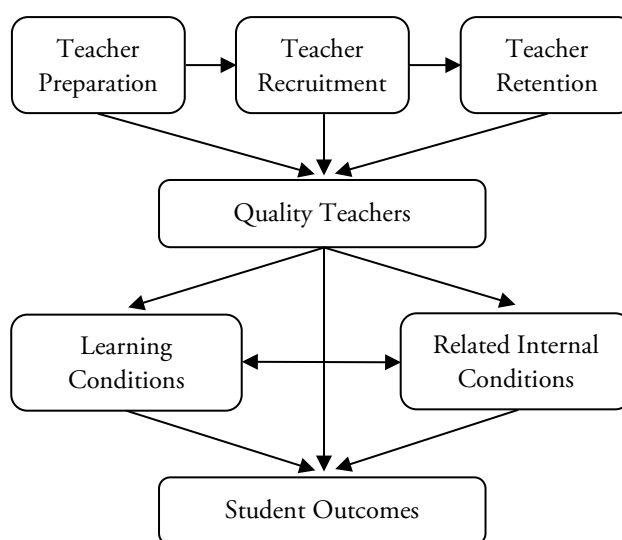
Furthermore, the government should review earlier education policy documents and translate the recommendations into action by allocating sufficient budgets for educational development. Policymakers should develop realistic plans for rural schools and equip teachers with the authority, resources, and training necessary to meet their students' needs (West, 2000, 2010; West et al., 2005; Ainscow et al., 2006). For education to contribute meaningfully to the economy, it is essential to ensure the employability of school graduates, which in turn can motivate disadvantaged parents to enrol their children.

Nevertheless, further scholarly research and development work is required in rural contexts to identify viable approaches to school improvement, particularly in countries such as Bangladesh. Such research can help determine effective strategies for strengthening teacher quality, which in turn can enhance student outcomes in rural secondary schools.

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