

## **Need for School Psychology Services in Bangladesh: Perspectives and Challenges**

Muhammad Kamal Uddin<sup>1</sup>, Sanjida Kabir<sup>2</sup>, Jakia Rahman<sup>1</sup>, Pritiza Parmita<sup>3</sup>, and James Simon Das<sup>4</sup>

### **Abstract**

Bangladesh has experienced rapid economic growth and significant progress in expanding access to education over the past two decades. However, comprehensive programs that address the psychological and academic needs of children remain largely absent. The country faces a shortage of qualified professionals to manage students' behavioral, emotional, social, and learning difficulties. School psychology is still in its nascent stage and has yet to be recognized as an independent discipline. This study aims to explore the perspectives of key stakeholders, including educators, psychologists, policymakers, parents, and students, on the importance of school psychology services. To gather insights, we conducted focus group discussions, interviews, and personal communications, alongside a review of relevant literature. The results show widespread agreement on the necessity of school psychology services to support mental health, address learning challenges, and promote overall students well-being. At the same time, significant challenges were identified, such as the scarcity of trained professionals, limited resources, lack of awareness, and cultural stigma surrounding mental health issues. The study concludes by emphasizing the urgent need for policy support and capacity-building initiatives to overcome these barriers and ensure the successful implementation of school psychology services in Bangladesh. This paper underscores the critical role of school psychologists in enhancing both academic and mental health outcomes for millions of children across the country.

**Keywords:** Bangladesh, education, school psychology, child mental health, challenges

<sup>1</sup> Department of Psychology, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh

<sup>2</sup> Department of Psychology, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Science and Technology University, Gopalganj, Bangladesh

<sup>3</sup> Advocacy for Social Change, BRAC, Dhaka, Bangladesh

<sup>4</sup> Healing Heart Counseling Unit, Carlotta Centre, Dhaka, Bangladesh

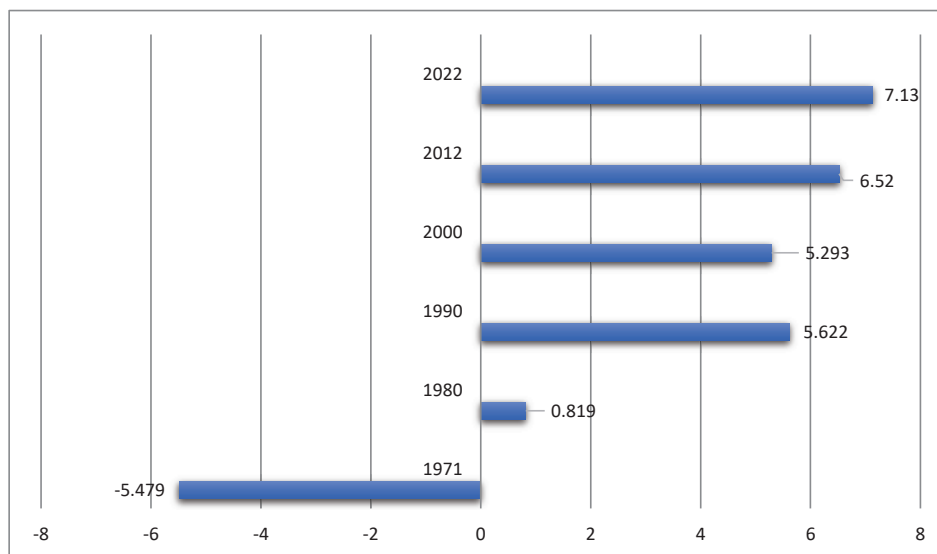
**Corresponding Author:** Sanjida Kabir, Department of Psychology, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Science and Technology University, Gopalganj, Bangladesh. Email: [sanjidabsmrstu24@gmail.com](mailto:sanjidabsmrstu24@gmail.com)

### Need for School Psychology Services in Bangladesh: Perspectives and Challenges

Bangladesh is a rapidly growing nation among South Asian countries. Its economic conditions are largely positive with robust and stable growth in Gross Domestic Product (World Economic Situations and Prospects, United Nations, 2019). In recent years Bangladesh has demonstrated much progress and surpassed her neighboring South Asian countries and many developing countries in achieving Millennium Development Goals, specially the MDG-4 and MDG-5 (Islam & Biswas, 2014). The World Bank Data (2020) revealed that Bangladesh's GDP is gradually increasing in every five years and it is a clear indication of a stable macro economy.

**Figure 1**

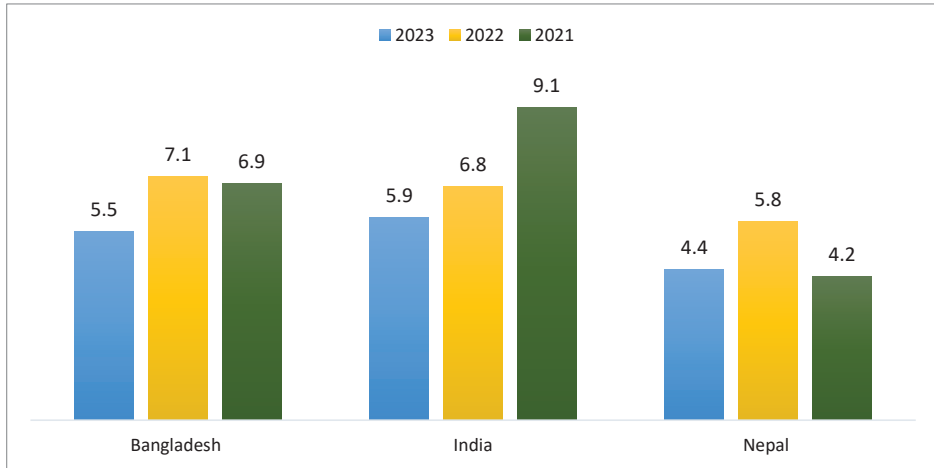
*GDP Growth Rate in Bangladesh since 1971-2024 (Source: World Bank, 2024)*



From Figure 1, we can observe that GDP growth rate in Bangladesh was -5.479%, 0.819%, 5.622%, 5.293% and 6.52% for the years of 1971, 1980, 1990, 2000 and 2012. But the rate was too high in 2022 (7.13%). These increasing rates of GDP indicates that Bangladesh is in a sound fiscal position. Moreover, its GDP's annual changes are more stable (World Bank, 2024). In this rapid growth of GDP and economic upswing, women's contribution has played a vital role. Bangladesh has significantly outperformed its South Asian peers in promoting women's empowerment, as evident by its ranking of 50th in the world rankings of nations (World Economic Forum, 2020).

**Figure 2**

*Bangladesh, India and Nepal: GDP Rate of Three South Asian Countries (Source: World Bank, 2023)*



Since 2009 Bangladesh Govt. has been made gender responsive budget for promotions of women participation in all spheres of life and social development. Female unemployment rate has decreased to 7.00% in 2022 from 7.6% in 2013 (World Bank, 2024). It is commonly observed that women are now employed in various fields that were once thought to be dominated by men, including business, hospitality, safeguarding, construction, agricultural enterprises, law enforcement, cadet programs for the Marine and Air Force, administration, and migration. Despite numerous government and non-governmental organization initiatives, there are still significant financial gaps that women must overcome. Millions of Bangladeshi women work in the lucrative ready-made garment industry, the country's largest export sector and an increasing number of women own small and medium-sized businesses (Alam, 2019).

Bangladesh's economy is expanding at an exponential rate, which impacts the nation's health care and educational systems as well (Siddique et al., 2018). The entire health system has been restructured as part of the Health and Population Sector Program (HPSP) (1998-2003) to better meet the requirements of the populace. The program's objective was to increase the use of health, population, and family welfare services by implementing a client-centered strategy that aimed to enhance the health and welfare status of the most vulnerable populations, including women, children, and the impoverished. The Bangladeshi government made a significant effort, and as a result, the publicly-funded health system's organizational structure and service delivery model experienced significant modifications. The most current reports of Bangladesh Sample Vital Statistics, 2022 (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, Statistics and Informatics division & Ministry of Planning, 2023) allow us to observe the significant changes in the health system.

Over the past ten years, Bangladesh has experienced significant changes in its educational landscape as a result of globalization's aftereffects and the rise in academics' international mobility. The "National Education Policy," which guarantees equal rights to education and human development overall, was established by the government of Bangladesh in 2010. Nearly 19 million students nationwide receive their elementary education in 126,615 primary schools, according to the Directorate of Elementary Education [DPE] (2016). The percentage of people aged 7 and older who were literate rose from 52.1 percent in 2005 to 73.2 percent in 2018, a change of over 40 percent in just 14 years.

Teachers receive training from a variety of institutions at varying levels. Based on data from the Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (2022), 67 PTIs provide a one-year certificate program for elementary school teachers. For those interested in becoming secondary school teachers, 104 different Teachers' Training Colleges (TTC) provide one-year Bachelor of Education (BEd) and one-year Master of Education (MEd) programs. On top of that, there are five HSTTIs that offer continuing education for high school educators (Sheik, 2017). Technical and vocational schools, as well as madrasahs, are the only recipients of training from certain institutions. Thirty colleges provide degrees in physical education that can be used to become PE teachers. Formal teacher training is still not widely used, though (Chowdhury & Farooqui, 2011).

When we are talking about infrastructural development, increased literacy rate, a large number of enrollment and participation in educational institutions, still there is an absence of child-friendly atmospheres (Chowdhury & Sarker, 2018). Despite the rules and policies that mandate physical activities including indoor and outdoor games and cultural activities, most school authorities and parents do not prioritize them. School administrators aren't keen on letting students participate in fun physical activities like games and sports on campus since they don't count toward students' final grades. Parents' worries about their children's safety, exhaustion, and injuries made it harder for them to participate in extracurricular activities. (Hasan et al., 2020). This dearth of physical activities makes children addicted to screens. According to UNICEF (2020), 32% of children between 10 and 17 ages are vulnerable to online violence, cyberbullying, cybercrime and cyber harassment. The reports also warn that victims of cyber bullying are at increased risk for substance abuse, low self-esteem, poor academic performance, and health issues. Moreover, suicide has been a result of cyber bullying in certain tragic cases.

Teachers in educational institutions are poorly trained and uninterested in learning science, human psychology, and communication. In research carried out, it was found that most teachers at the primary level were underqualified, and mostly secondary school graduates with third divisions (Rabby, 2008). Students are burdened with lessons and examinations (Chandan, 2019). Both the students and teachers face difficulties with overcrowded classroom settings. The international benchmark of teacher-student ratio for secondary school is 1:30, and Bangladesh has been experiencing a decline in this regard lately. One teacher was present for every forty-one students in 2016, up from thirty in 2011,

according to the draft of Bangladesh Education Statistics—2016. With only one educator for every one hundred and thirty-three pupils, the situation is much direr at public high schools (Anam, 2017). Overcrowded classrooms make learning difficult for students and make it harder for teachers to devote individual attention to each. There will be more strain on the school's common areas, restrooms, and playgrounds, which impacts the learning environment as a whole (Stifan, 2019).

Children are getting inadequate or poor-quality parental time as they both are working outside. If we look the data of Labor Force Surveys (LFS) of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) from 1999-2000 to 2016-2017, we will find that the numbers of workers have rapidly increased for both male and females. In 1999-2000 the male and female participation in workforce were 32.2 million and 8.6 million respectively but in 2016-2017 the numbers were 43.5 million and 19.9 million (Raihan & Bidhisha, 2018). On the other hand, rising literacy and declining fertility rates result in smaller family size (UNICEF, 2015) or nuclear family, and in these nuclear families, children have to remain at home without parents or sometimes without a family member. When both parents are working outside of the home, their children suffer from social, emotional, behavioral and bonding issues, and increase screen addiction (Nair, 2018).

Apart from all the aforementioned issues, the National Mental Health Survey of Bangladesh for 2018-19 revealed that 14% adolescents and children aged 7 to 17 are suffering from mental health issues. The survey also revealed that most of these children are suffering from autism spectrum disorders and other neuro-developmental issues and 95% of them do not get or take any help from mental health professionals (Rahman, 2019). According to research conducted by Hossain et al. (2014), a significant portion of adults (6.5% to 31%) and children (13.4–22%) in Bangladesh experience mental health illnesses. The flip side of this is that there were 185 cases of neurodevelopmental abnormalities in children in 2013, up from 68 cases per 1,000 in 1988 (Khan & Durkin, 1995). Concerns about their child's neurodevelopment are leading more parents to seek help, which is consistent with a trend toward smaller families caused by falling fertility rates and growing levels of education (UNICEF, 2015).

In this context, given the close association between education and the social and economic growth of a country, the role of school psychologists is especially relatable here in Bangladesh. School psychology is a specialized branch of Psychology that focuses on enhancing academic performance, designing strategies and programs to address problems of learning and adjustment, and consulting with educators and parents on issues of development. In addition to having completed a minimum of a specialist-level degree program that involves a supervised internship, school psychologists have advanced training in both psychology and education. A school psychologist builds a pathway toward a promising future that includes academic success and commitment to preparing a child to be a good citizen.

### **Assessment of the Need for School Psychological Services in Bangladesh**

To assess the need for school psychological services in Bangladesh, a two-day-long seminar on “School Psychology for Quality Citizen”, was jointly organized by the Bangladesh School Psychology Society (BSPS) and Policy Research Center.bd (PRCbd) on 30th and 31st January 2020 at the Royal Resort, Dhanbari, Tangail, Bangladesh. The seminar was targeted towards the students, teachers, and parents of three educational institutions of Dhanbari and a team of 47 members including a number of school psychologists, academicians, researchers and other experts in the relevant area led the seminar. There was a series of events intended to highlight the importance of school psychologists in helping all students thrive. The program also proposed actions that contribute to flourishing students and school communities and help the school staff, students, and parents. The assessment conducted there showed that there were several cases regarding different psychological issues of the students, teachers and parents that should be taken care of immediately which endorses the importance of School Psychology in Bangladesh. Data has also been collected through interviews and focus group discussions with a number of academicians, students, teachers and parents. Each participant in this study received a briefing on the overall goals of the study and was asked to volunteer for it. The study adhered to the guidelines of the Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

#### ***Interview***

In this study, data was collected from 46 interviewees, including school and college teachers, parents, school and college students, school principals, and school administrators. This was a face-to-face structured interview conducted by the authors.

Data obtained by interview revealed that students, teachers and families are not satisfied with the role of school in fulfilling the needs of the children. Some schools do not have playgrounds and washrooms are not clean and hygienic. In some schools, students are physically abused by teachers. Although many teachers use corporal punishment, some of them think that corporal punishment can never control children’s behavior. Some students reported feeling of embarrassment to talk to their teachers about problems occurring in their families which causes difficulty in concentrating on their studies and regular work. As a result, the quality of student-teacher relationship is being compromised causing adjustment-related problems for students. Some parents also feel that their children are not always able to share their problems with their teachers and their children are being bullied at school and sometimes there is no action being taken to prevent it. Most of the students, teachers and parents agreed upon the need for school psychological services to manage these problems through helping the school authority in taking preventive measures, planning and implementing interventions for ensuring a safe and friendly school environment.

#### ***Focus Group Discussion***

In a ‘Focus Group Discussion’ to get the point of view of the stakeholders related to education sector, we tried to identify why our schools need school psychologists and how

they play a vibrant role in schools. Focus group discussion was organized with 10 people, including the host, who were aware of school psychology. The entire discussion was conducted on zoom and took 1.20 minutes to complete. The discussion was recorded with the consent of all participants. This record was then transcribed into written form.

The content analysis of the discussion generated several themes that play a role in children's overall development. Firstly, it recognizes the importance of ensuring equity and supporting social-emotional learning for all students through school psychological services. With a student population of increasingly diverse needs, it is crucial to frame a coordinated plan around students' learning and academic success. Then, a teacher's orientation has been recognized as playing a vital role in the mental, physical, emotional, moral, social, and intellectual development of children. Teachers are role models who work harmoniously for the achievement of some mutually agreed goals of the school, and such schools are generally considered to have a strong culture and are preferred over others. Again, the risk of developing an internalizing or externalizing mental health problem can be lessened by changes in the school environment and by the implementation of evidence-based school programs. In this case, School Psychology has a very crucial role to play to ensure the overall development of our children. Finally, without the assistance of large grants, partnerships and structure, it is not anticipated to bring about changes in existing policy to provide students with the support needed to be successful in school and life. Accomplishing this task required a common vision by leaders and stakeholders, and infrastructure changes in partnerships with community organizations, including the local universities.

### **School Psychology in Bangladesh**

Children and adolescents in Bangladesh are currently facing various challenges in domains such as academic, adaptive, social, emotional, behavioral, moral etc. and school psychologists in this country are making an effort to provide a common framework for helping children and adolescents with psycho-educational assessment, consultation, interventions, research and evaluation, in-service education, and administration. Additionally, School Psychologists try to help boost up potentials of learners without specific problems by applying principles of positive psychology. There is a not-for-profit professional organization named Bangladesh School Psychology Society (BSPS) which represents and supports the profession of School Psychologist by advancing effective practices to promote the highest standards of ethics, training, and professional practices in the provision of psychological services in the primary, secondary, and tertiary level academic institutions that include schools, madrasahs, colleges, universities, or any other teaching-learning and training institutions in Bangladesh. The BSPS is committed to guiding services like assessment, intervention, consultation, collaboration, and many more. Since its inception in 2017, the members of the BSPS have helped shape and develop School Psychology as an academic and applied branch of Psychological Science in Bangladesh.

### **Activities of School Psychologists in Bangladesh**

School Psychology as an applied field creates and supports theories and practices in psycho-educational services to address and solve problems which learners of all ages may experience. A group of school psychologists has been handling the cases of migrant children from Covid-19 affected countries such as Italy, China, Saudi Arabia, UAE etc. Most of the migrated children are suffering from fear of death, fear of social stigma, Trauma, Insomnia, and mental health-related issues. Some of them are working in the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD)'s Migrant Resource Centre project and handle the cases of migrants, returnee migrants and their families. The responsibilities of this program are included below:

1. Emergency Support
2. Psycho-social counseling for individual returnee
3. Case Management
4. Reintegration
5. Research
6. Awareness Session
7. Facebook Post, Facebook Live and Blog Writing

Besides these a number of school psychologist has been appointed to provide counseling services to the Rohingya people and host community people. Many of the school psychologists are currently working in different government organizations, hospital settings, schools, and as academicians in renowned educational institutions of the country as well.

### **Activities of Bangladesh School Psychology Society during Covid-19 situation**

Like the rest of the world, Bangladesh faced significant challenges in combating the Covid-19 pandemic since the virus was confirmed to have spread to Bangladesh in March 2020. In the new normal world, people were facing new scenarios like working from home, unemployment, home-schooling of children and managing the fear of the virus. The Bangladesh School Psychology Society ([www.bsps.org.bd](http://www.bsps.org.bd)) has taken the initiative to provide free of cost online psychological support services, tele-counseling and other services to help and support people in this distressful situation, to help people cope with this social isolation through their official Facebook page (<https://web.facebook.com/bsps.org/>), a widely used social network in Bangladesh. Psychology teachers, alumni, and students of MS in School Psychology program provided tele-counseling and telecast live shows on psychological and Covid-19 related topics for the Bangladesh School Psychology Society. Thus, school psychologists have been playing a crucial role in promoting positive mental health through various activities.



## Conclusion

The view, aims, objectives, goals and principles of education policy of Bangladesh have been set to inspire the students, to stimulate the intellectual and practical qualities of the learners, to reflect the constitutional guarantee at all levels of education, to foster creative and thinking, to remove socio-economic discrimination irrespective of race, religion, and creed, to create a society free from the curse of illiteracy and many other aspects. Emphasis should be placed on the psychological environment in the school where children spent the most crucial part of their childhood. In this regard, a school psychologist would be the very right person to bring out the best in a child through interacting with the child, parent, teacher, and school's administrative staff. Working together, they can promote competence, achievement, and resilience in children.

The vision of school psychological services is that all children and youth thrive in school, at home, and throughout life. To place highly qualified school psychologists to fulfill this vision, initiatives must include addressing critical scarcities in school psychology. This can include a shortage of qualified faculty in graduate education programs, absence of training institutes, training programs, and lack of approved internships and qualified internship supervisors in the field of school psychology. In Bangladesh, the use of standardized psychological tests and tools for psychoeducational assessment is not common here. A few reputed private schools might have managed to use some of the psychoeducational assessment tools and have appointed trained counselors in their schools. Without suitable school psychology services, the present education system may not be able to effectively help the students face future challenges. So, the aims of schooling can be achieved by creating some provisions by constructing infrastructure for the growth of school psychology and appointing professionally trained school psychologists in all schools.

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