



**Consortium for Research on  
Educational Access,  
Transitions and Equity**

**Primary Education in Rural Bangladesh:  
Degrees of Access, Choice,  
and Participation of the Poorest**

**Christine Sommers**

**CREATE PATHWAYS TO ACCESS  
Research Monograph No. 75**

**February 2013**



**University of Sussex  
Centre for International Education**



Consortium for Research on  
Educational Access, Transitions & Equity

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## List of Acronyms

BANBEIS	Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics
BBS	Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics
BRAC	(formerly) Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
CAMPE	Campaign for Popular Education
CREATE	Consortium for Research on Education Access, Transitions and Equity
DfID	Department for International Development (UK)
EFA	Education for All
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GPS	Government Primary School
LGED	Local Government Engineering Department
MEB	Madrasa Education Board
MOPME	Ministry of Primary and Mass Education
MP	Member of Parliament
NCTB	National Curriculum and Textbook Board
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PEDP	Primary Education Development Plan
PESP	Primary Education Stipend Programme
PTI	Primary Training Institute
RNGPS	Registered Non-government Primary School
SLIP	School-level Improvement Plan
SMC	School Management Committee
Tk.	Taka (Bangladeshi currency)
UEO	<i>Upazila</i> Education Officer
UIS	UNESCO Institute for Statistics
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Social and Cultural Organisation
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

### Exchange rate

Average exchange rates (2011): US\$1 = 73 Bangladeshi Taka; GBP£1 = 120 Bangladeshi Taka

Purchasing power parity conversion rate (2008): 100 Bangladeshi Taka had the same purchasing power as US\$3.92

(Source: databank.worldbank.org)

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The views expressed in the paper are my own, and not necessarily those of the Fulbright Program, Open Society Foundations, or BRAC University.



## **Preface**

This monograph explores educational access in a poor rural part of Bangladesh and offers unique insights into the realities of efforts to universalise participation and provide some degree of parental choice. It explores relationships between government and non-state actors of many different kinds and how these shape opportunities for the poor. It also identifies what factors seem to support and limit access and improved quality and how recent developments interact with concerns for social justice and the development of new inequalities related to different types of non-state provision including private schools and those which are faith-based.

The landscape of provision in many parts of Bangladesh is complex with many different providers coexisting in various degrees of competition with each other. Despite this it remains true that not much more than 50% of children proceed beyond grade 5 and many are “silently excluded “ by being nominally enrolled but frequently absent, overage, and well below expectations on learning progress.

BRAC schools are a well-known and well established system of non-state provision which provides enhanced access selectively to the locations in which it works. The effectiveness of this system is based on a variety of factors that include managing classroom size, semi-scripting of lessons, regular support for community-based teachers, and feedback systems that identify problems and resolve them.

The BRAC system demonstrates that it is possible to provide sustained access with worthwhile learning outcomes at low prices. However, it is clear that this and other non-formal systems will never be the provider of last resort and that government must play this role and develop practices that ensure that every child is reached and that schooling is affordable and of sufficient quality to result in learning in line with the national curriculum.

The recent development of private schools in some rural areas, and private tutoring alongside them is having an impact on the dynamics of provision. Since in both cases access is determined partly by the ability to pay the research highlights concerns that these developments may exacerbate inequalities. Similarly the growth of Ebtedayee and Quomi madrassas is influencing patterns of access to education. This parallel system of access to education may or may not be delivering the learning outcomes in the national curriculum, and its impact on social justice is yet to be determined.

This research is based on extensive and intensive fieldwork in a village environment and speaks directly to the realities on the grounds of how commitments to Education for All are being translated into realities in rural Bangladesh. It provides a reminder that despite the success stories and in Bangladesh include rapid progress towards gender equity in enrolments, high and apparently equitable enrolment rates conceal much unevenness of access , inequitable choices, and participation which falls short of delivering the elements of the “expanded visions of access” which create has developed. There is much food for thought in this thorough and perceptive monograph which speaks to the agenda needed to persist with the goal of universal access and successful completion of basic education through to 2015 and beyond.

Keith M Lewin  
Director of CREATE  
Sussex  
March 2013

## **Summary**

The paper examines the quality and access dimensions of primary education providers in a poor rural area of northwest Bangladesh, with a focus on the social justice implications of a multi-tiered and poorly regulated system. Government, registered non-government, community, private, and non-formal schools, as well as madrassas, comprise the schooling options at the primary level. Based on an in-depth ethnographic study examining a small sample of each type of school from one particularly resource-poor sub-district, the research shows what factors affect education quality and how familial, financial, social, and institutional difficulties limit students' access and participation in primary school.

Through an examination of strategies, policies, and shortcomings among the various kinds of schools, the paper aims to illuminate how the government's lack of regulatory and accountability mechanisms among primary education providers affects quality and social justice in a significant way. The quality and relevance of madrassa education is called into question, private fee-charging schools serve only those with ample financial resources, and non-formal schools fill but a small niche. The research concludes that while other providers can help to meet demand and generate innovation, the responsibility ultimately falls on the government to ensure quality education for all children among these providers and in its own government-funded school.

## **Primary Education in Rural Bangladesh: Degrees of Access, Choice, and Participation of the Poorest**

*Education is unearthing the absolute humanity, manipulating every individual's intense openings, bonding between individual and society, interconnecting amidst people and nature, diminishing inequality between the literate and illiterate, harmonizing one's inner self with what is functional, expanding and cultivating knowledge-based imagination and beauty consciousness, prosperity, and totality in life through application of knowledge.*

-Rabindranath Tagore

### **1. Introduction**

Bangladesh's Primary Education (Compulsory) Act of 1990 mandated the provision of public education and the enrolment and attendance of children between the age of 6 and 10 years.<sup>1</sup> The 1990 World Conference on Education for All (EFA) in Jomtien, Thailand, further focused Bangladesh's primary education priorities, and the country developed its first National Plan of Action to achieve EFA. Recent education policy in Bangladesh has centred on EFA and Millennium Development Goal (MDG) targets. With just 2.4 percent of GDP expenditure on education, Bangladesh ranks in the bottom tier on government spending for education internationally, and a majority of the cost of primary education is met by families.<sup>2</sup>

Bangladesh's recent economic performance is impressive. Its annual growth exceeded 6% in 2011 and 2012 despite global economic woes, and the incidence of poverty fell from 57 in the early 1990s to 31.5% in 2010 (World Bank 2012). Despite these gains, "close to 30 per cent of the country's 164 million population remain below the poverty line earning less than US\$1 a day" and there are persistent rural-urban and socio-economic disparities for entry and participation in primary school (Ahmed et al 2007, p. 1).

In recent years, the government and international donors have made significant investments in expanding primary education, but education spending as a proportion of GDP is still lower in Bangladesh than in many other developing countries. To date, Bangladesh has reached over 90% net enrolment for primary-school aged children and its schools have achieved gender parity. However, these impressive achievements have not been paired with a corresponding increase in education quality and barely half of children complete the primary cycle. Given the improvements in enrolment over the last few years, the opportunity now exists to shift resources from expanding education to focusing on education quality improvements and redefining education priorities to target those who continue to be excluded from education, especially poor and marginalised communities. Forms of exclusion range from physical inaccessibility for

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<sup>1</sup> Primary school in Bangladesh as defined as the first five grades of school, from Class 1 to Class 5.

<sup>2</sup> Chowdhury & Nath (2009) cite an average government expenditure of 1253 TK (or US\$17)/student/year at government and registered non-government schools, whereas the household costs are estimated to be 2500TK (or US\$34)/student/year.

disabled children and those living in remote communities to silent exclusion of enrolled students who are not learning. While the public sector serves the majority of children in primary school, non-state providers have created additional programs that target a wide range of students, including those in poor and marginalised communities. Bangladesh has twelve kinds of primary schools, including those funded by the government to various degrees; private, fee-charging schools; non-formal schools; and religious schools for Islamic education. Within this diverse system of multiple providers and funding sources (outlined in Section 4), the government provides little regulation of non-state institutions and often “takes the path of least resistance and supports a system of provisions offering different qualities of education, regardless of equity consequences” (Ahmed et al 2007, p. 72). The government’s hands-off approach to primary schools outside of the public system does indeed affect quality and equity in a significant way.

The Consortium for Research on Educational Access, Transitions, & Equity (CREATE), a DfID-funded academic research programme, and the Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE), an umbrella organisation for over a thousand NGOs working in the education sector in Bangladesh, have written extensively on primary education access in Bangladesh. Much of the literature describing the various primary providers, however, has been the result of desk studies or has been informed primarily by government sources, resulting in significant limitations in understanding how specific schools function, especially in remote rural areas. Within the broader context that has been described by CREATE and CAMPE, I examine schooling at the micro level, using an in-depth qualitative study to paint a more detailed picture of the primary education landscape in one poor rural community. In particular, this study attempts to provide answers to the following research questions:

- 1) What is the relationship between the government and private actors in providing primary education in Bangladesh, and how does this shape and define education options and opportunities for poor and marginalised communities? How are various kinds of schools funded and managed?
- 2) How is quality best defined in the Bangladeshi primary education system? Are traditional measures suitable, or are new/additional measures needed to best assess these institutions?
- 3) What factors limit or support access to these different schooling options in a poor rural community?
- 4) How can one begin to understand the social justice implications of the available education options, their quality, and accessibility through a human capabilities approach?

After describing the methodology used and context of the study in Sections 2 and 3, this paper will begin to explore these questions by describing the particulars of each kind of education provider in Section 4. Section 5 defines social justice and human capabilities, and these will be put into context with a discussion of quality and access in education and the factors that influence them. Section 6 details two case studies. Section 7 provides some overall conclusions.

This study will provide a deeper understanding of rural primary education in Bangladesh, giving life to the statistics, and adding voices from within the system. Quality and access are viewed as the two central tenants in evaluating the various education options from public, private, and religiously-oriented providers. The study finds that social justice is deeply affected and the

development of human capabilities is hampered in a system where education choices lie primarily with those who can afford to pay for it.

## **2. Methodology**

The objective of this study was to add depth to an existing body of research on education in Bangladesh, by examining the primary schooling landscape in a particularly poor area of rural Bangladesh, and deconstructing the social justice implications of the primary education system. To this end, the study uses a mixed-methods approach, blending ethnography with analysis of quantitative and qualitative data from participant observation and interviews with head teachers, the *upazila* (sub-district) education office, and NGO education officials. An extended stay of nine months at the research site, together with an analysis of diverse forms of data allowed me to create a research design that incorporated information relevant to the local culture and context (Marshall & Batten 2003). The logic behind the chosen methodologies was that an in-depth look at different kinds of schools, including private, state-funded, and religious ones, both through observation and interviews with teachers, paired with focus groups with parents and long-term community observation, would reveal insights into school qualities and the structural and social barriers to children's access and participation at school.

The research took place over the course of fourteen months in Bangladesh, from September 2010 to November 2011, with five months of intensive Bangla language study followed by nine months at the research site. During this time I learned the physical and educational landscape of the sub-district, or *upazila*, making dozens of informal visits to schools and building a rapport with the community of teachers, students, government officials, and NGO workers in the education sector. The *Upazila Nilbari Officer* (UNO), the chief appointed political office of a sub-district, and government education officials working in the *upazila* office were informed of and approved of the research at this time. Relationships with community members and my increased command of the language offered additional insight into education, health, the seasonal nature of the economy, family structures, and other religious and cultural elements of the local society.

The school—including its physical infrastructure, administrative policies, and headmasters and teachers—was the initial unit of analysis. In June I identified schools to use in my sample; the 26 chosen schools served as a purposive sample of seven kinds of primary education providers (explained in section 4). The school distribution is shown on a map in the Appendix. I then created, translated, and tested my data collection instruments, making necessary modifications. In July 2011, I worked with a translator and research assistant to conduct 26 semi-structured interviews of headmasters at the different kinds of schools. All school visits were unannounced and included an interview with the head teacher and the completion of an observation schedule. In each case, after being briefed on the nature of the study, respondents were informed that they were free to decline to participate. Each head teacher verbally consented to the interview and the observation of the school. During the interviews, respondents were not pressured to answer questions with which they were uncomfortable. The interview questions probed information about the school administration, students, costs, resources, teacher qualifications and motivations, and relationship to the *upazila* government. After each interview, the data were reviewed for errors. The research assistant, a local high school English lecturer, provided additional feedback and interpretation of the data based on his extensive knowledge of the local education system.

The second phase of data collection, spanning from August to November was threefold, consisting of 1) “expert interviews” with government education officers and NGO workers; 2) focus groups with parents, and; 3) school observations. Eight experts were interviewed and included *upazila*-level government education officials and staff from various local NGOs. I spoke with each of the education officers working in the *upazila* education office, the director of the local *Upazila* Resource Centre (a government-run an education training centre), and education programme managers at three active NGOs. They provided insight into broader government and non-government education policy and management information. Focus groups were conducted among groups of consenting parents of children attending different kinds of schools and afforded insight into how education decisions are made at the family level, cost of education, and community perceptions of various kinds of schools.

Pure classroom and school observation proved impossible at any of the schools at the research site because it caused too much commotion. Instead I engaged in participant observation that led to a deeper relationship with two schools. These two schools—one fee-charging private school and one registered non-government (but government-funded) school—were selected for further study. As part of my research, I received enthusiastic permission from the principals and teachers to teach Grade 3 English classes at the two schools every day for one month. In doing so, I gained significant insight into the schools’ day-to-day operations and administration, the students’ capabilities, and the teachers’ behaviour, attitudes, and methods.<sup>3</sup>

A primary constraint within the research was language, as English was not prevalent among the local population. I attempted to mitigate this limitation by working with a local translator/research assistant. In addition, most local, district, and national-level government documents are in Bangla only, which limited my access to written information. There was a significant lack of education data at the local level, which raised serious issues of legitimacy of national education data and statistics. Very few schools, for instance, had reliable data regarding attendance, repetition and dropout rates. Finally, my visibility as a foreigner facilitated my access to almost everything, including parents, schools, and government officials, but likely accentuated observation bias. I checked bias in the work and data analysis, frequently reviewing my findings with several Bangladeshi colleagues both locally and in Dhaka.

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<sup>3</sup> At all stages the Code for Ethics in Research in Education (AARE 2005) was followed and all participants explicitly agreed to their participation in the research.

### 3. The Context

Figure 1: Map of Bangladesh



Dimla *upazila* was chosen for the study because of its remote location and high incidence of poverty, along with the logistical support available. Dimla *upazila* has a population of roughly 305,000 and is located about ten hours by bus travelling northwest from Dhaka. It is bordered by India to the north and partially bordered by the Tista River to the east, including some *char* areas, or shifting impermanent river landmasses particularly vulnerable to flooding. It is one of six sub-districts in Nilphamari District, and Nilphamari is one of eight districts that make up Rangpur Division, which is one of six divisions in Bangladesh.

Nilphamari's population density is 1,152 inhabitants per sq. km with an average household size of 4.3 members (BBS 2011). Nilphamari District is among a handful of districts with the country's highest incidence of poverty at 52% in 2005, compared to a nation-wide average of 40% (Bangladesh Government, General Economics Division Planning Commission 2008).

Unlike some other regions of the country, Dimla *upazila* is almost entirely comprised of one ethnicity speaking a single language, and differences between Muslims and Hindus were muted in the face of widespread overall poverty.

The population of this region has lower annual food consumption than any other region of Bangladesh, and is prone to food insecurity and pre-harvest seasonal hunger known as *monga*. In this context, *monga* means “seasonal deprivation of food during lean months of the year when households do not have adequate employment, income, savings, and, hence, are subject to deprivation of food” (Khandker 2009, p.4).



#### 4. Bangladesh Primary Education Basics and School Types

Table 1 shows the most recent official gross and net enrolment rates in primary education in Bangladesh. Gross enrolment rates include under and over-aged children who enrol for a class outside of their own age/grade level, which explains how the number can exceed 100%. Gross and net enrolment rates cannot appropriately assess children's participation and access to schooling because of a high number of drop outs (Ahmed et al 2007).

Official education statistics include neither non-formal education institutions, which serve 1.5 million children or roughly 9 percent of the primary age-group, nor *Quomi* madrassas, for which no reliable figures are available, but which serve between hundreds of thousands and a million children by some estimations, primarily boys (Barkat et al 2011).

**Table 1: 2010 gross and net enrolment rates in primary education in Bangladesh**

	Population (6-10) yrs.	Enrolment (All ages)	Enrolment of primary school age (6-10 yrs)	Gross Enrolment Rate	Net Enrolment Rate
Total	15,751,788	16,904,546	14,947,002	103.48%	93.52%
Female	7,620,131	8,536,586	7,612,203	107.08%	98.23%

Source: BANBEIS (2010)

Bangladesh's primary education providers comprise a wide range of public and private schools, including those that are government-funded, privately funded and operated, and religiously funded and oriented. The background and descriptions of schools below are intended to complement, rather than substitute, the existing literature. In particular, this builds upon Ahmed et al's (2007) description of eleven types of primary schools in Bangladesh<sup>4</sup>.

This research focused on seven kinds of primary schools that fall under four general school groups in Dimla *upazila* and intends to provide a deeper portrayal of how the various schools function. This section will examine the following types of schools in greater detail:

- I. Secular government-funded schools
  1. Government schools
  2. Registered non-government primary schools (RNGPS)
  3. Community schools
- II. Non-formal schools

<sup>4</sup> Ahmed et al (2007) also include 1) non-registered primary schools (seen in Figure 2 as government affiliated but unregistered); 2) primary classes attached to high schools; 3) experimental schools (which exist at Primary Training Institutes in each district only); and 4) now defunct satellite schools in their list of eleven primary providers in Bangladesh. Ahmed et al (2007) do not include Quomi, or unregistered, madrassas, which I have added as an additional provider of primary education. Ahmed et al (2007) classify Ebtedayee madrassas separately from primary sections attached to high madrassas; for the purposes of this research, the two are grouped together.

4. BRAC (or other NGO) schools
- III. Fee-charging schools
  5. Private schools
- IV. Madrassas (education with a focus on teachings on Islam and the Qur'an)
  6. *Aliya* madrassas (known as *Ebtedayee* madrassas at the primary level)
  7. *Quomi* madrassas

Table 2 below shows the total number of each kind of school in Dimla upazila, as well as the number of schools that were included in the sample. At each of the 26 schools included in the study, I completed an interview with the head teacher and filled out an observation schedule, as explained in Section 2 above. The two schools where I undertook the month-long participant observation began with the same interviews and observation schedule and are included in the total number below.

It was not possible to get *upazila*-wide numbers of students at each kind of school. In absence of this data, it is helpful to include Nath & Chowdhury's (2009) findings of the percentage distribution of students enrolled among different kinds of rural schools. Their data show 57% of rural primary students attending government schools, 20% at registered non-government primary schools (RNGPS), 1% at community schools, 10% at non-formal schools, 3% at private schools, and 8% at *Aliya* madrassas.<sup>5</sup> They cite even higher percentages of students in the region of study in RNGPS and non-formal schools, at 33% and 17% respectively.

In the region of study, fewer than 50% of students attend government schools, amplifying the necessity of exploring the implications of such a multifaceted system. Of interest is that many parents said that they sent their children (in the same family) to different kinds of schools – one parent might have children attending madrassa, a non-formal school, a private school, and government school.

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<sup>5</sup> Students attending *quomi* madrassas were not included in their calculations and little reliable data are available for the number of *Quomi* institutions or students.

**Table 2: Total numbers of each kind of school in Dimla**

Kind of school	Total #	# in sample
Government	72	4
Registered non-government primary schools (RNGPS)	99	3
Community	3	2
Government affiliated but unregistered	9	0 <sup>6</sup>
Temporary registered	1	0
Ebtedayee Madrassa	26	3
<i>Quomi</i> Madrassa	Unknown <sup>7</sup>	1
Non-formal	25	6
Private	17	7

Source: Interview with the Upazila Education Officer on 31/7/2011

#### 4.1 Secular government-funded schools

Secular government-funded schools are defined as those which are non-religious, registered with the government, and administered through the Directorate of Primary Education (DPE) and regional, district, and sub-district education authorities. These schools use the national curriculum created by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) and receive funds for operating costs and teacher salaries from the government. While schools that are referred to as “government schools” (both in this paper and in Bangladesh) fit within these confines, two other kinds of schools in Dimla *upazila*—registered non-government primary schools, or RNGPS, and community schools—also fit within these bounds, despite the misnomers. The two latter schools actually form second and third tiers of government primary schooling. In Dimla, each of these schools receives only government funding, despite being funded at a fraction of their government school counterparts. Interestingly, the RNGPS and community schools have been the engines driving the increases in Bangladesh’s primary enrolments for the last two decades during the Bangladeshi government’s push to achieve education for all in collaboration with its international donors. The *upazila* is divided into catchment areas, and all children fall within the catchment area of one government-funded school, whether that is a government school, RNGPS, or community school. The *Upazila* Education Officer stated that there is no limit to the number of children that can register at a school within their catchment area. Parents

<sup>6</sup> “Government affiliated but unregistered schools” and schools with “temporary registration” from the government represent a small fraction of the total schools (each less than 1% of the total schools in Dimla *upazila*) and were not included in the sample due to logistical constraints.

<sup>7</sup> Neither the *upazila* education office nor any other source was able to provide the exact number of *Quomi* madrassas in Dimla *upazila*, but one madrassa head teacher estimated there to be four of them.

and teachers indicated the possibility for children to register at another government-funded school outside of the child's own catchment area, but this process was unclear.

The number of government schools barely increased between 1990 and 2008, from 37,655 government schools in 1990 to 37,672 in 2005 (Ahmed et al 2007). The number of registered and non-registered primary schools, however, increased more than fivefold in the same period, from 8,262 in 1990 to 43,762 in 2007 (Chowdhury & Nath 2009). The growth of these schools met demands for increased enrolments during that timeframe. The number of students attending government schools actually decreased from 1990 to 2007, whereas the number of students attending registered and non-registered primary schools increased from 1.8 million to 7.9 million during the same period (Chowdhury & Nath 2009).

These three kinds of government-funded schools are monitored by the *upazila* education officers who are supposed to make monthly visits to each of the government and RNGPS schools. Community schools have less frequent government oversight, but are still under the government's supervision. In addition, the *Upazila* Education Officer (UEO) holds monthly meetings with head teachers from these schools. Students of each grade are assessed three times annually at the school level, and all Class 5 students must sit for the government-administered *Shomaponi* terminal exam in order to pass through to lower secondary school.

While these schools have historically provided only classes 1 through 5, the government has begun a pre-primary programme for 5 year old children in these same schools. Pre-primary classes began in all government schools in 2011 and will be rolled out in the RNGPS in 2012.

The Primary Education Stipend Programme (PESP)<sup>8</sup>, a government-funded initiative which started in 2002, nationally provides a stipend of Tk. 100/month to 40% of primary school-aged children coming from poor rural households attending government-funded schools<sup>9</sup> (Ahmed et al 2007). In theory, students must meet minimum standards of 85% attendance and achieve 33% marks on term examinations in order to qualify for the stipend. Because of the high level of poverty in Dimla *upazila*, 100% of students at government-funded schools meeting the attendance and marks criteria would be eligible. According to the *Upazila* Education Officer and all of the headmasters that were interviewed, a budget shortfall results in only 90% coverage. The ineligible 10% are chosen according to their wealth by headmasters at the school level. Eligible families with two children receive a maximum of Tk. 125/month, while families with three children in primary school receive no additional stipend. Stipends are dispersed quarterly to parents at individual schools.

With regards to teacher hiring at government-funded schools, candidates apply at the sub-district or district level and take a written exam. This is followed by an oral exam if their scores are sufficient; teachers are hired based on their performance on these exams. While there is no systematic means of pre-service teacher training in Bangladesh, teachers hired at government-funded schools are eligible to attend a one-year full-time, residential teaching training at the

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<sup>8</sup> Though Ahmed et al (2007) state that some madrasa students are eligible for the stipend; this was not the case among any madrassas in Dimla *upazila*.

<sup>9</sup> Tk. 100 is roughly equivalent to US\$1.33. Refer to section 5.5.1 for more information on school costs.

district-level Primary Training Institute (PTI) in Nilphamari District<sup>10</sup>. The *upazila* education officer decides when newly-hired teachers will go for training, usually within their first few years of teaching. The participating teachers' posts remain vacant without substitution until their return. Teachers also undertake basic in-service and subject-based training that is developed at the national level by the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (MOPME). These trainings (including Bangla, English, science, social science, and math) occur at the *upazila* Resource Center, an in-service training institute housed at a government school in each *upazila*. Teachers are rotated through the trainings, receiving one to three trainings per year; trainings range between three and six days each.

Government-funded schools are also eligible for significant additional financing for infrastructure, administrative costs, and teaching materials. The Second Primary Education Development Project (PEDP II), Bangladesh's multi donor-funded education improvement initiative from 2004 to 2011, focused on infrastructure improvements and extra teachers for some schools. Following PEDP II, PEDP III runs from 2011 to 2015 and aims to continue gains in net enrolment rates, primary completion rates, and improve other quality measures in schools, such as improved teacher recruitment and training, book disbursement, infrastructure development, and student learning measures (World Bank 2011b). The secular government-funded schools have received the most benefit from the PEDP projects, and generally have modern and solid infrastructure based on a standard building plan used nation-wide.

The School-Level Improvement Plan (SLIP) is a government entity under the MOPME which provides primarily teaching aids and sports materials to government-funded schools. In addition to SLIP, the Local Government Engineering Department (LGED) serves as another source of government money for infrastructure improvements for government-funded schools. According to the *Upazila* Education Officer, all government-funded schools were supposed to receive Tk. 20,000/US\$267 for school development from SLIP, but that the funds were not available due to previous mismanagement. Among the sample schools, headmasters identified SLIP as the source of teaching aids. Each school in the sample received a standard set of posters with topics ranging from Bengali and English alphabets and numbers charts to elementary mathematics to nutrition and road safety. At each sample school the charts were stored in the teachers' room or headmaster's office, and in all cases these were inaccessible to students. Teachers complained that they were not complementary to lessons from the students' textbooks. A small number of government-funded schools included in the study were recipients of infrastructure improvements through LGED, including construction of extra classrooms and teacher rooms. Many more schools reported shortages of classroom space or classroom furniture.

This section has described the similarities among the three kinds of secular government-funded schools. The following three sections will describe the particulars of each of those kinds of institutions in turn. The secular, government-funded schools, as well as the other types of schools described below, are compared in Table 3 at the end of Section 4.

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<sup>10</sup> One such institute exists in each of Bangladesh's 64 districts.

#### **4.1.1 Government Schools**

After the end of Bangladesh's Liberation War in 1971, the primary education system was nationalised, with all primary schools and their employees taken over by the new government through a 1973 ordinance and the Primary Schools (Taking Over) Act in 1974. In doing this, the new country combined a patchwork of various public and private schools and integrated them into a national system. The schools that were nationalised in the early 1970s under these laws are the bulk of government primary schools in present-day Bangladesh. The schools that existed at the time of nationalisation in 1974 were concentrated primarily in urban areas and municipalities. As explained above, the number of primary schools has grown very slowly as other, less expensive government-funded schools (including RNGPS, community schools, and *Ebtedayee* madrassas) have expanded to meet growing demand, particularly in rural areas such as Dimla *upazila*.

School teachers and administrators are hired at the district level and serve as full government employees, with full civil servant benefits, including full medical and housing allowances and pensions. As national civil servants, government school teachers can exercise mobility among government schools nation-wide.

Each *upazila* has one "model school", intended to be exemplary of government education within the *upazila*. The model school is also the location of the *Upazila* Resource Centre, the site of the subject-based in-service training for government employees. These schools receive their students from a predetermined catchment area, though students from outside the catchment area are sometimes allowed to enrol.

Government schools' infrastructure fits a national standard model, and they are constructed using solid materials (such as bricks and concrete) with at least one and sometimes two classrooms per grade with bench seating behind long desks. Large blackboards were standard in each room with large shuttered windows, and drinking water available from a well on-site. Government schools have a uniform code, and most (though not all) students were wearing uniforms all the time. All government schools are equipped with a room for the teaching staff, including tables and chairs, filing cabinets, and some teaching aids. These schools distribute free books to the students and do not charge fees for tuition, though students may be required to pay exam fees (12 Tk/\$US 0.16 three times/year) or other small fees throughout the year, in addition to purchasing their school supplies (such as notebooks, pens, uniforms).

#### **4.1.2 Registered non-government Primary Schools (RNGSP)**

RNGPS are schools that were established privately or by communities after the nationalisation of primary schools in the 1970s and have since received government recognition and registration, and as a result, oversight and funding. In Dimla *upazila*, these schools do not receive any funding from non-government sources. Calling these schools "non-government" is a misnomer, in that they are actually a second tier of government schools that has proliferated as a lower cost means of increasing education infrastructure to meet new enrolments under the government's push to achieve education for all. In order to receive government registration, schools must meet certain criteria (including having a minimum number of enrolled students) and go through a seemingly opaque and arbitrary administrative process. Rather than funding and constructing

schools in areas where there is need, the government waits for schools in existence to try to register and then delays that process with registration limits and administrative hurdles to avoid or postpone providing even the most minimal financial support to schools in these least served areas.

Once registered, RNGPS become eligible for additional government funds for infrastructure improvements and administration while RNGPS teachers become eligible for 90% salary subvention. While the government defines its salary contribution as 90%, the reality in Dimla is that teachers make no more than what is provided by the government. It was never clear who was expected to contribute the remaining 10% for the salaries and any other maintenance or administrative costs, but it was clear from talking to headmasters that none of them received any additional funds whatsoever from any other party. Bangladesh's Constitution outlines the provision of free and compulsory primary education, and the RNGPS are not allowed to charge fees or receive any "official" contributions from parents or others as such. Household costs for education are already high in Bangladesh (as mentioned in section 1) without the existence of fees, and the students who go to RNGPS in Dimla have no or very little extra money. One headmaster said that even asking children to bring 20 TK (US \$0.29) for exam fees would cause the students to stop coming to school.

The only differentiating administrative feature of RNGPS from government schools is the presence of local school managing committees (SMCs). SMCs consist of a small number of local parents and elite (such as important businessmen) in the school's neighbourhood. These SMCs play a role in teacher selection, but all RNGPS teachers are hired with the necessary involvement and approval of the *upazila* education office, so the government wields ultimate control in this domain as well. The SMC's signature is required for RNGPS teacher pay and leave requests, but these relatively minor administrative technicalities mark the greatest extent of difference between teachers at RNGPS and government schools. Like their counterparts in the government schools, RNGPS teachers are sent to obtain the same aforementioned PTI training and expectations for teaching are the same. Unlike those at government schools, RNGPS teachers are hired at the *upazila*, rather than district level. These teachers are government employees but not national civil servants; they are hired to work in a specific school and they do not have the same possibility of transferring within the system to another school and they do not receive the same benefits.

RNGPS infrastructure is standardised and consists of a brick and concrete building with three classrooms and one small teacher room. Usually classes 1 – 3 attend school in the morning and classes 4 -5 attend in the afternoon to accommodate for the limited classroom space and teaching staff. The same teachers will teach one class in the morning and another in the afternoon. Like government schools, these schools distribute free government textbooks and do not charge any tuition fees, though students may be required to pay exam or other small fees throughout the year. They also have bench seating with long desks, large blackboards, shuttered windows, and a well with drinking water on-site. RNGPS do have a uniform code similar to that of the government schools, but only a small fraction of the students was ever wearing them.

### **4.1.3 Community schools**

Dimla's two community schools were founded in the mid-1990s, when the *upazila* government announced a programme for supporting communities that wanted to start a school. The school site had to be at least two kilometres from any other school, and the community was required to donate 33 decimals of land and Tk. 10,000<sup>11</sup>. With these conditions met, the government provided the financial resources to build a two-room school, and local teachers were hired at the *upazila* level and provided a government salary (equivalent to or slightly less than the base salary of the teachers at RNGPS, around Tk. 4500/month or US\$60) with no benefits. The community schools in Dimla started providing only classes 1 and 2, but have since added classes 3 and 4. One of the schools has expanded to offer Class 5. The two community schools said they are striving to become RNGPS because this would afford them increased funds for administration and teacher salaries/benefits from the government.

Despite their name, community schools are essentially a third tier of government-funded schools. Where the RNGPS require a functioning school before receiving government registration, the community schools required only a land donation and minimal financial contribution before receiving government support. After the initial community donation, these schools were taken under the ownership and management of the government and integrated into the government system. However, they receive a fraction of the financial resources and monitoring of that available to government schools, despite not receiving any other private resources. Similarly, the teachers are the least well-paid of all teachers receiving their salary from the government. In total, the schools receive minimal teacher salaries and monthly contingency funds equivalent to Tk. 30 (less than US\$0.50) to cover all administrative costs.

These schools tend to be in very poor, underserved areas where there is very little money available in the community to contribute to them, especially given that parents already face the costs in sending their children to school.

These schools are the most resource-poor, with the least amount of classroom space and smallest monthly contingency allowances. The government provided funds to build brick structures with two rooms with large chalkboards and a well for water. Unlike the other two government funded schools, the building plan for community schools does not allow for an office for the teachers or for sufficient classroom space if the schools provide more than Classes 1 and 2. One community school had constructed a temporary open-air classroom space with a metal roof adjacent to their school building to accommodate the additional classes of students. This particular school had expanded from providing Class 1 and 2 only to providing Classes 1 through 5 in recent years and experienced significant space constraints in their small building as the school population grew. Like the other two types of government-funded schools, community schools provide students with free government textbooks and do not charge any tuition or other fees excepting small exam fees three times per year. These schools had a uniform policy, though almost no students had them.

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<sup>11</sup> A decimal is a local unit of land measurement equal to 14,500 ft<sup>2</sup> or a third of an acre. 10,000 taka is roughly equal to US\$133.



Dimla's community schools are supposed to receive occasional monitoring by the *upazila* education office, but as they are located in rural areas without convenient road access, they are infrequently visited, perhaps no more than three or four times per year. To reach one remote community school in the sample, the two and a half hour one-way journey from Dimla town included a rickety river crossing consisting of two pieces of bamboo and a muddy walk through a rice paddy.

#### **4.2 Non-formal/BRAC Schools**

Nath & Chowdhury (2009) report that non-formal schools accounted for 9.6% of total primary enrolments in 2008. These schools are managed by NGOs (rather than individuals) and are funded by the NGOs themselves or by international donors through the NGOs. Across Bangladesh, BRAC (formerly the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee) runs more than 24,000 one-room, single grade, single teacher non-formal primary schools serving 750,000 students (BRAC 2011a). More than 4.5 million children have graduated from BRAC schools since the start of the programme in 1985. The programme receives no government financial support and is primarily funded by large international donors. It targets poor students who have dropped out of government-funded schools, ethnic minorities, students in rural areas who would not otherwise have education access, and students who are vulnerable, marginalised or excluded due to special needs or other reasons. Students are not charged any tuition or fees and most of their learning materials are provided by BRAC. Sixty-five percent of BRAC's primary students are girls (Nath 2005). BRAC works with local communities to plan the school hours and annual school calendar, with the goal of being flexible and responsive to communities' needs. Students complete the primary cycle in just four years, while mainstream schools require five years. Supervisory staff from the branch and regional BRAC offices visit each school at least once monthly, and each school has a parent-teacher committee that helps monitor schools' daily activities.

BRAC teachers are mostly locally hired women who have a minimum of ten years of schooling. Pre-service training consists of an initial two-week course, and teachers subsequently meet monthly for one day, experience-based refresher training sessions. They are paid monthly salaries of around Tk. 1,500 or US\$20 (similar to the salaries of the lowest-paid private school teachers in the region, but significantly less than the salaries of their counterparts at government-funded school who make from Tk. 4,500 to 10,500/month, or US\$60 to US\$140). See Table 5 in section 5.4.3 for a comparison of teacher salaries.

While there are other organisations running non-formal schools in Bangladesh, BRAC is the only organisation funding non-formal schools in Dimla *upazila*. Some of the schools are managed and run by BRAC directly, while others are contracted out to smaller local NGOs in collaboration with BRAC. Each school has a single class and teacher, with a class limit of 33 students. The schools do not have desks or chairs and the students sit cross-legged around the perimeter of the classroom with their learning materials, including books, colourful counting sticks, and a slate, placed in front of them. Uniforms are not required. Classrooms are colourfully decorated with printed learning materials and the students' own work, and BRAC staff talk persistently of creating a "joyful learning environment", both in terms of the physical space and the learning methods.

The BRAC Education Programme (BEP) describes its teaching methodologies as “learner-centred”, “interactive”, “gender-sensitive”, “pro-poor”, and “child-friendly”. BRAC has created its own books for use in the first two classes, and the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) curriculum and books are used after that with supplemental BRAC learning materials. BRAC students sit for the government *Shomaponi* terminal exam at the end of Class 5. In 2011, BRAC students obtained a pass rate of 99.83% in the *Shomaponi* exam, compared to a national average pass rate of 97.26% (BRAC 2011b). Despite this success, there is some general concern that students may find it difficult to adjust and transition to the government-funded system after attending BRAC schools, but over 90% of BRAC school graduates enrol in formal secondary school (Nath 2005).

### **4.3 Private Tuition-charging Schools**

Private schools throughout Bangladesh are mostly unregulated by the government and are highly diverse. While private schools in urban and semi-urban areas in Bangladesh are often (but not always) English medium schools, all of the private schools in Dimla *upazila* are low-fee charging Bangla-medium schools. As I did not interact with private schools in any other area, I will limit my discussion of them to those that I witnessed first-hand at the research site. In Dimla *upazila*, all of these private schools offer classes 1 to 5 for students aged six to eleven, as well as pre-primary classes for students aged four and five. All private schools in Dimla, regardless of class level, are locally known as kindergartens or KGs. Monthly tuition fees range from Tk. 80-150/month (US\$1.06 to US\$2), with additional books to buy and additional fees for registration, examinations, and other various charges. Some sample private schools reported an inability to admit every child interested in attending due to limitations on class sizes and space. Those refusing students were among the oldest and most popular schools; others had very small class sizes and seemed to be meeting much smaller demand. Some of the private schools in the sample reported giving a discount to poor parents or those with multiple students, but these seats were very limited and seemed to be decided on a case-by-case basis. These schools have stricter uniform policies and more expensive uniforms than government-funded schools, with a much higher percentage of children wearing uniforms.

All headmasters in the private schools stated that their schools operated completely independently of the government; however, as of 2010 all private schools are required to teach the national curriculum. All sample schools complied with this rule, despite no apparent follow-up from the *Upazila* Education Officer (UEO) to ensure their compliance. These schools submit the names of their students to the UEO in order to receive the requisite number of government textbooks for free, but this tends to be the extent of their official involvement with the government. Every private school in the sample also uses supplemental books in addition to the free, government-provided books. The UEO reported that some of the private schools fall under her jurisdiction, but UEO staff does not visit these schools. A local association of private schools organised to create guidelines for the schools, worked together to make sample exam questions, and pooled money for awards for exemplary students, but this group disbanded in early 2011. Though the association is now defunct, every private school in the sample had a school managing committee (SMC), though the SMC’s relationships with the schools varied on a school-by-school basis. In several of the sample schools, the founders, head teachers, or members of the SMC were current teachers or retirees from the government school system.

Private school headmasters are not currently invited to the monthly education meetings held by the UEO, but the UEO indicated that she would like for them to start attending.

Infrastructure among private schools varied greatly, though most were quite rudimentary, with bamboo or straw walls and classroom partitions and roofs made from tin sheeting. Others were operating in unfinished brick and concrete buildings; one such school had large spaces for the eventual construction of doors and windows. Blackboards in these schools were often small and shabby, and seating seemed to be pieced together with a combination of chairs and benches at various schools in the sample. None of the private schools in the sample had any teaching aids.

The head teacher of Dimla's oldest private school (founded in 1988), located in the centre of Dimla town and across the street from Dimla's government "model school", explained that the idea behind the founding of the school was borne out of a discussion between the *Upazila Nilbari* Officer (UNO, the chief appointed political officer of an *upazila*) and some influential community members who determined that a private school must be established for the proper quality education of the children of local civil servants because the quality of the local government schools was too low. At that time, the *upazila parishad* (an administrative unit) donated the land and a former government building for the school's use, while a local NGO, an influential former national minister, and other local donors gave the requisite funds to start the school. The land is still owned by the *upazila parishad* and the school is run by a managing committee. It is significant that local and national-level government officers prioritise funding and improving a private school for the benefit of the children of local civil servants and elite rather than working to improve the quality of the local government schools.

#### **4.4 Madrassas<sup>12</sup>**

Madrassas offer two types of education for children at the primary level: *Aliya* (the primary school section is called *Ebtedayee* or *Ibtidaia*<sup>13</sup>), which are reformed/registered madrassas, and *Quomi*, which are unreformed/unregistered madrassas existing entirely outside of the public sector. These both differ from secular schools in their focus on Islamic education, but are quite different from each other in degree of integration with and oversight from the government and national education system. Many madrassas, and *quomi* madrassas in particular, receive private donations from communities and individuals, who often see monetary donations to mosques and madrassas as fulfilment of *Zakāt*, or alms giving, one of Islam's five pillars. The National Education Policy 2009 provides a plan for madrassa reform, but this reform is primarily limited to *Aliya* madrassas, leaving the *Quomi* institutions entirely outside of mainstream education and reform efforts. There is no government support for the training of madrassa teachers, including those who work in schools that are partially or fully funded by the government.

The government and other sources do not have data for the numbers of unreformed and unregistered *Quomi* madrassas or the students who attend them, but estimates range from

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<sup>12</sup> In addition to *Aliya* and *Quomi* madrassas, there are other madrassas that teach Arabic and the Qur'an to primary-aged children before or after regular school hours. These courses are supplemental to students' main means of primary education and are thus not considered in this analysis.

<sup>13</sup> For the purposes of this study I did not separate independently operating *Ebtedayee* madrassas and those that are attached to a high madrassa because they are operated and managed so similarly.

hundreds of thousands into the millions of children attending them (Barkat et al 2011). The number of *quomi* madrassas in Bangladesh is unknown, and the estimates vary wildly from 5,230 to 66,300, while the *Quomi* Madrassa Board (also known as the *Befaqul Madrassil Arabia* Board), an umbrella organisation representing some of the *Quomi* madrassas, estimated the total number to be 15,530 (Barkat et al 2011). Asadullah, Chaudhury, & Josh (2009) report that the number of *Quomi* institutions is much lower than is popularly believed, stating that these institutions account for only 1.9% of total primary enrolments, with another 8.4% in *Ebtedayee* primary, and 3.5% in unspecified and undefined “other” madrassas which are non-formal and only offer religious education, for a total of 13.8% of primary students.

Madrassas are overwhelmingly rural; 86% are located in rural areas, and they are growing in number, averaging an annual growth rate of 4.4%, disproportionately serving the poor, with two-thirds of households with madrassa students classified as “absolute poor” (Barkat et al 2011)<sup>14</sup>. Asadullah & Chaudhury (2006) claim that madrassas have responded to a dearth of government-provided education options, particularly for the very poor, and that they have become the fastest growing sub-sector of the education sector.

#### **4.4.1 Aliya Madrassas**

The *Aliya* Madrassa Education Board (MEB) was established as a department of the Ministry of Education in 1979 to bring reform to madrassa education, offering registration, administration, and greater financial incentives to the *Aliya* madrassas with the condition that they teach the same secular subjects as taught in government-funded primary schools (Bano 2010; see Asadullah & Chaudhury 2008 for a more extensive discourse on madrassa reform in Bangladesh). As such, they are referred to as “reformed” madrassas. . Asadullah & Chaudhury (2008) point out that reformed madrassas (at both the primary and secondary level) “contribute significantly to the government’s efforts to expand female education, because they serve the poor, are inexpensive, and operate in rural and isolated areas that offer few other educational opportunities” (p. 225).

*Aliya* madrassa teachers’ salaries are paid at least in part by the government; they are given the same amount as RNGPS teachers (roughly Tk. 4800/month, US\$64). In addition to money coming from the government, *Aliya* madrassas may have an additional fund dedicated to the poor or orphans coming from the community or other private donations. Up to 2011, books for all subjects were provided by the MEB, but starting in 2012 these madrassas will use the same NCTB books as all other primary schools for general subjects (including Bangla, English, mathematics, social science, and science), with the MEB only providing textbooks for religious subjects. In addition, *Ebtedayee* students will begin to take the same terminal *Shomaponi* exam in the secular subjects at the conclusion of class 5. Unlike government-funded secular schools, *Ebtedayee* madrassa students are not eligible to receive the monthly government stipend.

All three *Aliya* madrassas in the sample were higher madrassas (up to class 10) that also taught primary grades. In every case, the facilities and infrastructure for the secondary students was far superior to that for the primary grades. Where secondary students attended class in solid brick structures with desks, benches, and large chalkboards, the primary classrooms were temporary

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<sup>14</sup> The term “absolute poor” is not defined in the text.

structures made of tin and bamboo and often lacked many of the basics, including quality chalkboards and sufficient seating. These madrassas reported oversight from the *upazila* Secondary Education Officer, an office separate from the UEO that monitors secondary schools. They had no relationship with or supervision from the UEO.

Parents choose whether to send their children to *Ebtedayee* madrassas; all students attending these madrassas also have the option of attending secular government-funded school in their catchment area. Teachers and parents explained in interviews and focus groups that families chose to send one or all of their children to madrassas for a variety of reasons, including strong religious sentiment, to meet social expectations, and to have one or more children in the family learning about Islam (see also Asadullah, Chaudhury, & Dar 2006). The decision is also frequently underpinned by the belief that religious children are more likely to care for their parents in their old age. Head teachers said that they recruited students in annual meetings appealing to the religious sentiments of parents. One head teacher from an *Aliya* madrassa in the sample said, “The perception is that if students go to a government school they will get a better job, but if they study at madrassa they will not, so the weaker students come here.” This sentiment was reinforced in focus groups and among other education officials I spoke with; they repeated that *Aliya* madrassa education tends to be for weaker students, a finding echoed by Asadullah, Chaudhury, & Josh (2009). Interestingly, Asadullah, Chaudhury, & Dar (2006) find that graduates of *Ebtedayee* have significantly lower test scores in secondary school than their peers who attended secular institutions.

#### **4.4.2 *Quomi* Madrassas**

Due to the lack of oversight by the government and the absence of a central governing body, there is a dearth of reliable data on the *Quomi* madrassa system. *Quomi* madrassas do not operate under the auspices of the Bangladeshi government at all; they are not registered with the government and do not follow the national curriculum. They instead operate independently or register with *wafaqs*, umbrella madrassa organisations that represent different schools of Islamic thought (Bano 2010). Funding for *quomi* madrassas varies, though it seems that most are funded entirely by communities and domestic or foreign private donations. I often heard that Bangladeshi expatriates living outside Bangladesh choose to build a mosque or start a madrassa if they have extra money as a means of fulfilling *Zakāt*<sup>15</sup>. Ninety-one percent of *quomi* students are male and most institutions are single-sex; 85% of *quomi* madrassas are residential with room and board costs covered by the institution’s own funds, so costs to students and their families are quite low (Barkat et al 2011). Barkat et al report that 15% of students are orphans, and that 90% of *quomi* madrassas maintain dedicated funds to help poor students.

The number of students in *Quomi* madrassas at all ages and grade levels is also unknown. *Quomi* madrassa students are not separated into grades; rather, there are different subject-based “streams” and students can go from one stream to another. Some students solely focus on *Qur’an* memorisation and/or recitation; others learn Arabic and the *Qur’an* or study Islamic rules and regulations. The residential nature of the institutions means that students’ activities can go all

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<sup>15</sup> This claim was further validated when I met a group of Bangladeshis living in London, England in September 2011, who invited me to visit the *quomi* madrassa and mosque they had funded and built upon my return to Bangladesh.

day, with various schedules of recitation, prayer, and other study. *Quomi* education generally focuses more on rote memorization and repetition of religious texts than on critical thinking (Asadullah & Chaudhury 2006).

The *quomi* madrassa I visited was in a rural area, a few kilometres from the nearest town and surrounded by rice paddies, and its sign advertised a mosque, madrassa, and orphanage. Tucked behind a large mosque, the madrassa consists of one long concrete building divided into three classrooms with a small garden and large grassy yard shaded by several trees. It is residential, housing 55 boys, of which eleven are orphans, and 3 resident teachers. The students' belongings were tucked into trunks pushed to one side of one of the rooms, and the boys were sleeping on thin blankets doubled over when I arrived. The room where they sleep doubles as a classroom. The boys' usual schedule begins at 4 am and goes until 9:30 pm, and the day is broken up into periods of *Qur'an* recitation, prayer, and study, with breaks for sleeping, eating, and bathing.

The headmaster, who also serves as imam of the adjacent mosque, explained that the madrassa was established in 1997 as an institution for "true religious teaching only"; they denied the request of a former Member of Parliament who expressly asked that the institution be established as an *Aliya (Ebtedayee)* madrassa. It offers three streams: 1) *Hifzul*, where the students memorise the entire *Qur'an*; 2) *Nourani*, which is the *Quomi* madrassas' equivalent to *Ebtedayee*, where students learn Bangla, English, mathematics, social science, and Islamic history, though these subjects are not standardised by the government and; 3) *Kitab Khana*, where students take classes in social science, mathematics, as well as Arabic grammar, literature, and logic. The *Nourani* section uses books purchased from the *Quomi* Madrassa Board in Dhaka, while the other two sections use religious texts only. The Board serves as the oversight body of the institution, coming for annual audits, producing books to use in the *Nourani* section and offering 30-day trainings for *Nourani* teachers. The head teacher said that there were two other such madrassas in Dimla *upazila* and four other smaller ones that only offered a *Hifzul* section.

Twice each year, students go door to door collecting rice and money from the community, and the sales from this collection provide the money for the teachers' salaries, which are around Tk. 2900/month (US\$39, plus room and board). The head teacher said that people are attracted to give because they believe that donating to the mosque or madrassa in this life will be rewarded in the after-life. Though Barkat et al (2011) state that no government funds are available to orphanages at *Quomi* madrassas, the headmaster reported receiving Tk. 350/ month (US\$4.7) per orphan from the government. He said that this money is used towards the operating costs of the madrassa, including the boys' boarding costs. The expenses for the students and their parents are very low, as all the children board onsite ten months out of the year. There is no tuition or other fees, only the cost of their clothing and perhaps some study materials, though those are mostly covered by the madrassa.

#### **4.5 School Comparisons**

Table 3 below is a tool for making comparisons among different schools. This is meant to bring together some of the basic characteristics and provide a simple means of comparing them.

**Table 3: Comparative matrix of school types**

	Government	RNGPS	Community	Non-formal BRAC	Private/	Ebtedayee Madrassa	Quomi Madrassa
Full government salaries	■						
Partial government salaries		■	■			■	
Full government benefits	■						
Reduced government benefits (Tk. 449 – 775/mo)		■				■	
Teachers paid an average of <1500 taka				■	■		
Gov't-provided contingency fee of ~Tk. 500/mo	■						
Gov't-provided contingency fee of~ Tk. 200/mo		■					
Gov't-provided contingency gee of ~ Tk. 30/mo			■				
School charges monthly tuition fees					■		
School charges tri-annual exam fees	■	■	■	■	■	■	
Students required to buy uniforms <sup>16</sup>	■				■		
Teachers trained at Primary Training Institute	■	■	■				
Teachers receive subject-based training	■	■	■				
Teachers receive systematic training from NGOs				■			
Use NCTB books and curriculum	■	■	■	■	■	■ <sup>17</sup>	
Use supplemental books and materials				■	■		
Class 5 students take government <i>shomoponi</i> exam	■	■	■	■	■		
Class 5 students take <i>shomponi</i> exam designed by Madrassa Education Board						■	
Mostly (more than 90%) female teachers				■			
Mostly (more than 90%) male teachers						■	■
Students eligible for Tk. 100/month stipend <sup>18</sup>	■	■	■				
Majority of students are residential/live at school							■
Periodic monitoring visits from <i>upazila</i> ed. Office	■	■	■				
Habitually offer pre-primary for students <6 yrs	■	■ <sup>19</sup>			■		
Received PEDP II infrastructure improvements	■	■					

Source: Personal research, including interviews with head teachers and education officials

<sup>16</sup> This is based on whether or not students were actually wearing uniforms during the school visits, not the schools' official uniform policy.

<sup>17</sup> Starting in 2012

<sup>18</sup> Available for 90% of students, contingent upon 33% marks and 85% attendance

<sup>19</sup> Pre-primary was introduced in all government schools in the sub-district in 2011, and will be introduced in all RNGPS in 2010, according to the *Upazila* Education Officer.

## **5. Analysis**

### **5.1 Social Justice and Human Capabilities in Education**

This paper aims to analyse the multitude of primary education providers in Dimla *upazila* within a framework focused more broadly on social justice and human capabilities. A vast body of literature analyses these two concepts. These will be defined briefly here and used to frame the below discussion on education quality. It is outside of the scope of this paper to analyse them in great depth.

Historically, education policy makers have used a human capital approach to direct investments in education, defining the merit and value in education by its capacity to prepare individuals for employment, increasing development through economic wealth, both on an individual level and through Gross Domestic Product (GDP). This framework also acknowledges that the full return on education investments is can be limited by high levels of inequality, with inequalities related to gender, rural/urban divide, and regional diversity flagged as especially significant (Tikly & Barrett 2011). More recently, the human rights approach to education advocates for children's right to education, rights in education, and rights through education (Tikly & Barrett 2011 citing Subrahmanian 2002 and Unterhalter 2007). This approach has underpinned the movement for Education for All and a focus on child-friendly schools.

A number of scholars, including, most prominently, Nancy Fraser, have also examined the education sector through a social justice perspective. Social justice here is defined as “parity of participation” and the idea that social structures allow all individuals to participate in decision-making on equal footing (Fraser 2008).

Building on work focused on social justice, scholars, most notably Melanie Walker and Amartya Sen, have also used the concept of capabilities to assess the purpose and efficacy of education efforts. Human capabilities are those skills that individuals need to achieve the various ‘functionings’ that they value. Capabilities are “potential functionings”, potential on one hand, and outcome on the other or, stated differently, “freedom and rationality combined” (Walker 2006, p.165). Walker (2006) stresses that “education is a matter of social justice, and that schooling is a site for state intervention and public policy” (p. 164), and that “individual freedoms...depend on social and economic arrangements” (p.166). Walker is also careful to point out that schooling can reproduce existing inequalities, echoing Sen's (2009) argument that economic, cultural, and political hurdles prevent the full participation of disadvantaged groups.

Supplementing these human capital and right-based approaches with Fraser's work on global social justice and Sen's capability approach allows for an analysis of how education contributes (positively or negatively) to social justice. In addition to identifying education as central to boosting economic potential through livelihoods and reducing insecurity, as with the human capital approach, Sen's capabilities approach considers the intrinsic value of education as a capability in its own right (Tikly & Barrett 2011).

The capability approach is not a complete theory of social justice in education and it may need to be supplemented by additional theories (Walker 2006). That said, the capability approach does ask a new set of questions about education and schooling and their place in forming human



capabilities. This resonates with Bangladeshi poet and philosopher Rabindranath Tagore, cited at the beginning of this paper, stating the function of education as “*harmonizing one’s inner self with what is functional, expanding and cultivating knowledge-based imagination and beauty consciousness, prosperity, and totality in life through application of knowledge.*” It is this framework that guides the discussion of education quality and access among the various primary education providers in Dimla *upazila* below.

## **5.2 Defining Quality and Access**

In recent history, Bangladesh’s primary education priorities have centred on expanding enrolment to achieve the EFA targets, MDGs and upholding legislation mandating free primary education for all children ages 6 to 10. This rapid expansion did succeed in increasing access and enrolling large numbers of students (see Section 4), but the quality of government-funded schools arguably deteriorated as the classrooms filled. Average drop out and repetition rates in the primary grades skyrocketed from 5.6% and 8% in 1998 to 11.5% and 10.9%, in 2008, respectively (Nath & Chowdhury 2009). Each sample school was asked about repetition and dropout rates among their students, but only two of the schools admitted to having any students drop out at all. Considering that official statistics indicate that only 50.1% of students enrolled in class 1 ever complete the full cycle of primary education, local school-level data and national data are highly incongruent. Aktar (2011) cites a 2008 National Assessment Survey by the Directorate of Primary Education stating that only 12% and 14% of students in class 3 and 5, respectively, achieved mastery in the Bangla competencies of reading, comprehension, and writing.

These metrics indicate that many children face serious problems attending and learning at school over the course of the primary cycle. A discussion of quality and access is central to understanding the social justice implications of schooling. Pairing an examination of school quality with an assessment of access (which children go to which kinds of schools), provides an understanding of what is actually occurring in the classroom and why students’ experiences may differ both between and within schools. This thereby sheds light on what capabilities students cultivate in their experience at school.

Before undertaking the research, I envisioned defining quality through standard input and outcome metrics that included a combination of students’ achievement, teacher qualifications and years of experience, and infrastructural quality (Pigozzi 2006 and others). Nath & Chowdhury (2009) cite five dimensions of quality as delineated by UNICEF: 1) learners; 2) environment; 3) content; 4) processes and; 5) outcomes founded on the rights of children to survival, protection, development and participation. While the research was underway, however, I found these metrics either to be impossible to obtain or lacking in significance in terms of the individual children’s experiences at school; school quality varied among different kinds of schools and from one child to the next in the same school. Test scores, for instance, were not always available and were often illegible paper records, and I questioned their validity and relevance as an indicator due to widespread reports of cheating. Teacher qualifications and years of experience were easy to obtain, but seemed to give an incomplete picture of teachers’ attendance, motivation and behaviours at school. The achievements of one-room non-formal schools without traditional infrastructure (desks and benches, gender-specific toilets, open space,

and so on) indicated that conventional infrastructure measures are also less relevant to learning in this context.

Within this framework, I have attempted to adapt a new set of quality measures relevant to the context of this research in rural Bangladesh. In creating working indicators, I considered the literature on quality, available data, relevance to the context, quality as it was defined by the local community (in interviews and focus groups), and the applicability to a human capabilities approach. The revised view of a quality education in this context, thus, is four-fold, including 1) students who are physically and mentally ready for school; 2) motivated teachers who attend school and their classrooms; 3) effective teaching methods and materials, and; 4) perceptions of a particular's school quality by education stakeholders, including teachers, parents, and education officials. While this list lacks precise quantitative metrics for assigning values to these four points, a wealth of qualitative data allows for making informed observations regarding school quality in light of the aforementioned characteristics. A simple matrix of these qualities is expanded in Table 4 below.

Access shapes children's participation and capability development within the education system. While access is often defined by gross and net enrolment figures and completion rates from primary, Lewin (2007) put forth a conceptual framework that adds depth to an understanding of access by characterizing exclusion from primary education according to four zones: children who (1) never attend primary school; (2) drop out before completing primary school; (3) are enrolled but who do not regularly attend and who are not engaged in learning (silent exclusion), and; (4) those who do not make the transition to secondary school after completing the primary cycle. This conceptual framework is useful when examining the factors affecting quality and access in the sections below, as they facilitate an understanding of students' degrees of participation at school, and thus the potential development of their capabilities, as defined above. Poverty and exclusion from education have been strongly correlated, and Hossain & Zeitlyn (2010) offer an extensive discourse on access and equity in Bangladesh for those interested in further exploring this topic.

### **5.3 Quality in Context**

The matrix below offers an overview of how the four quality metrics described above manifest in each schooling option. The following four sub-sections explore related issues that impact one or more of the metrics described. Some of these are also elaborated on in the subsequent sections on access.

**Table 4: Qualitative Quality Matrix**

	<b>1) Student readiness</b>	<b>2) Teacher behaviour</b>	<b>3) Teaching methods</b>	<b>4) School perceptions</b>
<b>Government Schools</b>	Long hours for class 3-5 students problematic without food at schools.	More frequent visits from gov't education administrators results in oversight and relatively greater accountability to government standards. Questionable teaching activity in classrooms	Teachers receive standardised training at PTI; teaching methods focus on rote memorisation and are often not learner-centred.	Perceived corruption in teacher hiring among teachers and parents. Perception among parents that children at government schools must attend private tutoring in order to learn well.
<b>RNGPS</b>	RNGPS serve many poor children; many families reported not eating three meals/day. Many students inappropriate age for their grade. Rates of student absence are very high.	Teacher motivations affected by tiered salary system (see below). High rate of tardiness and absence. Low teaching activity among teachers present.	Gov't training and materials provided, though RNGPS teachers are behind gov't counterparts in line for training. Similar to gov't schools, teaching methods are rote and not learner-centred.	Last choice for parents among mainstream gov't-funded schools. Perception among parents that children at government schools must attend private tutoring in order to learn well. Perceived corruption in teacher hiring.
<b>Community Schools</b>	Located in remote areas with high incidence of poverty. Malnutrition among students a big problem.	As above, teacher motivation impacted by tiered system. Frequent tardiness and absence.	As gov't and RNGPS, but teachers' time was further strained with insufficient staff. Teaching quality suffered as a result.	Perceived corruption in teacher hiring. They were often the only option in the area given their remote locations. Parents reported low quality.
<b>Nonformal/ BRAC Schools</b>	Students and families supported with school scheduling responsive to their needs. Special provisions and assistance for disabled or grade/age-inappropriate students.	Teachers are hired from local community and are trained, supported and monitored significantly by branch and regional offices.	Community awareness that BRAC teaching methods are "different", integrate song, dance, and rhyme. Attempt to create "joyful learning environments"; use of colourful materials.	Top choice among focus group parents. Seen as providing quality education at no cost; manageable for poor families. Complaints that spaces or schools do not meet demand.
<b>Private Schools</b>	Students generally clean and well-dressed in uniforms. Malnutrition less a problem among socio-economic group that can access these schools.	Teacher accountability to parents and administration results in fewer absences and more teaching time. Some teachers hold private tutoring sessions outside of school.	Teachers are untrained, but monitored by school administration, many whom have teaching experience. Supplemental books enhance mandatory gov't curriculum.	Focus groups report quality at private schools in association with payment for tuitions. Seen as schools for those with the means only, not accessible to all.
<b>Aliya Madrassa</b>	Poor students more likely to attend.	Teachers are untrained. No exterior accountability mechanism from gov't or other.	Teachers don't receive training. Standardised materials from the government.	Parents reported that students with less ability are sent to madrassas.

<b>Quomi madrassa</b>	Students living away from their families. Room and board facilities imply regular meals for students. Camaraderie among boys studying together.	Unknown. Teachers may receive some training in specialised Islamic subjects though this is not standardised. No practical, skill-based training.	Teaching methods are often rote memorisation. Teaching materials limited to Qur'an and Islamic subjects, no other skills training.	As many rural <i>quomi</i> madrassas are also orphanages, they are seen as an option for families who cannot tend their own children. Religious education only.
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## 5.4 Factors Affecting Quality

### 5.4.1 Pre-primary Education

With the huge increases in primary enrolment in the past two decades (and despite high dropout rates before Grade 5), Bangladesh seems to have partially shifted its focus to pre-primary education for 4 and 5 year old students. While all sample private schools offered tuition-based programs with pre-primary classes to cater to this age group, BRAC and the Islamic Foundation also offer free pre-primary education programs that target other demographics. The Islamic Foundation is a government-affiliated organisation which serves to monitor and guide the relationship between the government and the religious community. Nationally, Bangladesh is rolling out pre-primary classes in government schools and RNGPS; pre-primary classes in government schools were introduced in 2011 and there were plans to start the programme in RNGPS in 2012. All of these programs offer short one to two hour programs for younger children, focusing on teaching the alphabet and the numbers. The ability of these various providers to enrol and teach younger children could raise education quality, with increased school readiness at the primary level, or increase inequality among children who do not have access to pre-primary and then find themselves behind their peers upon entering primary. This is certainly a topic that should be explored in greater detail in further research.

### 5.4.2 Contact hours, attendance, and teaching activity

Bangladesh's average annual classroom contact time in government-funded schools is one of the lowest in the world, at 587 hours per year (compared to an average of 779 hours/year in OECD countries or 1,200 hours/year in China, for example) (UNICEF; OECD 2011). In addition to official contact hours, unofficial days off from school or early dismissal, school closings due to extreme weather, and teacher and student truancy and tardiness affect the quality and quantity of schooling that children receive. Schools with limited classroom space, especially RNGPS and community schools, almost always run classes in a shift system, often holding Grade 1, 2, and 3 in the morning and Grades 4 and 5 in the afternoon, effectively cutting down on students' classroom hours. Parents, teachers, and administrators reported that schools were closed entirely in December and that they were very slow to reopen in January; full operation often did not resume until sometime in February. The fasting month of Ramadan and the following *Eid-ul-Fitr* holiday marked school closings for most or all of that month. UNICEF (2009) cites student absenteeism in Bangladesh at 19% and Nath & Chowdhury (2009) cite teacher absenteeism at 12-13% (with half on leave) with additional high levels of tardiness among rural primary school teachers. Disaggregated among school types, nearly 50% of teachers in government-funded

schools and *Ebtedayee* madrassas were late, compared to 12.7% of teachers in non-formal schools.

In addition to lower than average contact hours across the board in Bangladesh, many government-funded schools, especially RNGPS and community schools, run their classes in shifts due to limited classroom space, disproportionately affecting students in Classes 3, 4, and 5. Class hours for students in Class 1 and 2 were usually from 9:30 am to 12:15 am at all of the different government-funded schools, but where students in government s

BRAC schools avoid many of the scheduling problems that government schools face by setting an annual school calendar in collaboration with local communities, working to create school hours and an annual calendar that appropriately responds to families' need to have their children helping around the house and in the fields, especially during harvest time. Parents felt that private schools were more accountable because their salaries were being paid through students' tuitions, and that they had an imperative to cover all of the material as such.

In addition to the official and unofficial days off and teacher absenteeism, parents in focus groups said repeatedly that they perceived teachers at government schools and RNGPS to be "sleeping" at school. During my time in schools, I did see RNGPS teachers actually sleeping or otherwise not working during class time, both in teachers' lounges and in classrooms. I also frequently saw government, RNGPS, and private school students on the road returning from school during school hours; they informed me that school had been let out early.

The lack of continuity and unpredictability of school hours, paired with a general lack of teacher accountability at government-funded schools, and the inefficiency of teaching activities when students and teachers were in the classroom seriously affect children's capacity to learn at school.

### **5.4.3 Teacher Motivation and Benefits**

Teachers interviewed at all of the different school types indicated that their level of motivation was linked to their pay. This was especially acute at the government-funded schools, with teachers at government schools, RNGPS, and community schools compensated with pay and benefits at different rates despite doing essentially the same job. Average pay for the head teachers at all the different kinds of schools is tabulated below.

In interviews, RNGPS teachers claimed that their level of motivation was impacted by their salaries, averaging Tk. 4800/month (\$64), including their reduced benefits with no pension, less than half that of their government schoolteacher counterparts (all inclusive). Community school teachers echoed the complaints of the RNGPS teachers. Numerous head teachers revealed in interviews that they felt they were a lower class of teachers despite doing the same job as teachers in government schools. Government teachers' elevated salaries are well-known to RNGPS and community school teachers, and it is perceived as unfair that they make so much less. Further, because they are not seen as full government employees, they are constricted to the school of their hiring and cannot move to another school as teachers at government schools. These policies create a tiered system of government-paid teachers with the same job but with different status and class, thus negatively affecting these RNGPS and community school teachers' motivations and school quality as a result. It was clear that individuals with

government jobs had the expectation of a certain level of compensation (including salary and benefits) that did not exist outside of the government-funded system.

BRAC teachers are almost entirely women, and almost none of them would have jobs if they were not teaching for BRAC. Many of these women stated that they felt empowered in their position as teachers, gaining a role and a voice within their communities. Their classroom hours were limited to mornings and they still had time to attend to their households during the day, and they had no expectation of the salary or benefits of a government employee.

Private school teachers were also paid low salaries and lamented that they did not make more money. I heard private school teachers say repeatedly that they were grateful to have work, however, and like BRAC teachers, their teaching time was officially over at or around noon, leaving the afternoon free for them to pursue other concurrent economic opportunities. This included teaching private tutoring, working in shops or medical dispensaries, doing agricultural work, or working at home.

**Table 5: Average monthly head teacher pay (including benefits) among sample schools**

	Government	RNGPS	Community schools	Non-formal	Private schools	<i>Aliya</i> Madrassa <sup>20</sup>	<i>Quomi</i> Madrassa
BD Taka	12,120	5,909	4,800	1,500	2,283	3,527	4,833
US Dollar	\$166	\$81	\$66	\$21	\$31	\$48	\$66

Source: Author's interviews with head teachers

#### **5.4.4 Corporal Punishment**

A 2008 UNICEF children's opinion poll reports widespread and pervasive use of corporal punishment in Bangladesh, with nearly 88% of schools using switches or sticks for disciplinary purposes. The report claims that poor children were more likely to experience corporal punishment, and with greater severity and frequency than wealthier students; 5.6% of children in rural areas do not go to school or drop out of school for fear of punishment by the teacher. Punishment could include humiliation, insults, or violence, such as hitting or slapping, (Reddy & Sinha 2010). Children's fear may be compounded by students' inability to pay any additional fees at school; Reddy & Sinha (2010) suggest that children's inability to pay fees and other "extras" at school may result in their "overt or covert maltreatment" ( p. 14).

In the schools I visited, all teachers with few exceptions carried bamboo switches into rooms at class time; in most cases these were the only teaching aids employed. Teachers at the schools in which I taught asked repeatedly why I didn't take a switch into my classroom or how I could discipline the students without the stick. Students in my classroom would implore me to beat children who were misbehaving, sometimes trying to hand me a switch.

<sup>20</sup> A teacher's salary was used in the case of the *Aliya* madrassa, as the headmasters interviewed were responsible for both the primary and secondary sections, thus inflating their pay.

Despite the evidence, no schools admitted to using any punishments at all during head teacher interviews, instead reporting that discipline consists of trying to make students understand poor behaviour so they do better next time. One headmaster acknowledged that children punished at school would be unwilling to continue attending. This would seem to indicate an understanding of corporal punishment's drawbacks as a discipline technique. In 2011, Bangladesh's Supreme Court issued a ruling prohibiting corporal punishment in schools, though it seems that this could prove difficult to enforce (Global Initiative to End Corporal Punishment 2012). In sum, widespread corporal punishment threatens children's physical and emotional well-being and participation at school.

#### **5.4.5 Relevance of Content in Madrassas**

The national primary curriculum as developed by the NCTB is the standard at the primary level among all of the schools with the exception of the *Ebtedayee* and *Quomi* madrassas, which provide education specifically centred on teaching about Islam and the Qur'an. A discussion of the relevance of the national curriculum would be interesting, but outside the scope of this paper.

Islamic-focused education may impact children's capability to form their own identity (Walker & Unterhalter 2007). The reformed *Ebtedayee* madrassas have made great strides in providing an Islamic-focused education that is on-par with the norm at government-funded, private, and non-government secular schools by converting to the national curriculum and having their students take the same Class 5 *Shomoponi* exit exam in all subjects except Islam. This gives primary students at *Ebtedayee* madrassas an education that would allow them to gain skills and knowledge similar to their peers at secular schools, though their achievement may be lower (Asadullah, Chaudhury, & Dar 2006). Two head teachers from madrassas in the sample, however, lamented their lack of resources as an impediment to offering "modern education."

Despite the reforms and the use of the more modern curriculum in the *Ebtedayee* madrassas, students social networks and attitudes may be affected and influenced toward a more traditional attitude than their peers who attend secular schools (Asadullah & Chaudhury 2006). Some of this impact may come from their teachers; younger men or female madrassa teachers may pass on more modern values to their students (Asadullah & Chaudhury 2006).

Students at *Quomi* madrassas, most of whom learn religious subjects exclusively, likely fail to learn skills necessary for the modern economy, and their job prospects may be limited to the religious sector, working in mosques or madrassas. Furthermore, the values that these institutions promote may not align with the civic values essential for democracy and social integration (Asadullah, Chowdhury, & Josh 2009). This likely has significant consequences for these individuals and for society at-large, but given the *quomi* institutions opaque nature and the lack of data on the number of students and institutions or what happens inside, these consequences are impossible to qualify.

### **5.5 Factors Affecting Access**

#### **5.5.1 Schooling Expenditure**

Despite Bangladesh's commitment to free primary education, much of the cost of primary education falls on the parents, an unmanageable burden for the poor in this community. While

none of the school types, save private schools, charge tuition, families face many other costs of sending their children to school, including exam fees three times per year, as well as school supplies (including school bags, notebooks and pens, uniforms, lunches or snacks during school days). Optional but widespread private tutoring adds additional costs to primary schooling (see section 5.5.3).

In addition to costs of materials, transportation, school uniforms, and mid-day snacks for students, almost 90% of households make some kind of direct payment to schools (Ahmed et al 2007). “The annual private per student expenditure, on average, has been found to account for 54% of the annual total per student expenditure in non-government registered madrasahs [sic] and 59% in government schools, while it is as high as 88% in non-government non-registered madrasahs [sic], 82% in non-government non-registered schools, and 77% in non-government registered schools” (Ahmad 2007, p. xxiv). In rural areas, families shoulder an average of 63% of the cost burden, or nearly Tk. 2,200/year [US\$29]. Per student expenditure among families from the wealthiest quintile was nearly two and a half times more than that of households in the poorest quintile (Nath & Chowdhury 2009).

In focus groups, parents of school-aged children said that anyone who can afford it will send their children to private school, but the tuition and related costs are far beyond their limited means, especially for families with many children. The government-funded schools and madrasahs, as a result, are a provision of last resort for those who can't afford anything else or who are unable to enrol in the limited places offered at non-formal schools, and many find difficulty in meeting all educational expenses even when tuition is free. Sabates et al (2010) cite the importance of reducing direct and indirect costs of education to zero for the poorest, and that subsidies are one possible element to ensure sustained enrolment of these students. The current stipend program, as explained below, is poorly targeted and insufficient, and thus not fully removing these cost barriers to schooling for the poorest.

The Primary Education Stipend Programme (PESP, described in detail in section 4.1 above) provides impoverished families with a Tk. 1200/year (\$16) stipend for one primary-aged child in government-funded schools (with marginal increases for additional children). Parents and teachers alike lamented that this money, which was cash dispersed to parents in tri-monthly intervals, was not spent by families on education and was not a sufficient amount for meeting families' education expenses. Parents and teachers agreed that the direct distribution of school supplies (including pens, notebooks, bags, and uniforms and/or school feeding programs) would be a more efficient means of ensuring that dedicated funds directly met educational needs. Hossain and Zeitlyn (2010) outline the ways in which the stipend is insufficient, poorly targeted, and how its conditionalities place unrealistic attendance and attainment expectations on those who most need it.

### **5.5.2 Poverty and Vulnerability**

As alluded to above, poverty has a considerable impact on children's schooling, in terms of enrolment, participation, attendance, and success. Nath & Chowdhury (2009) report that “78.1% of the children of *always in [financial] deficit* households, 84.3% of the children of *sometimes in deficit* households, 87.9% of the children of *breakeven* households and 91% of the children of *surplus* households were currently enrolled” in school (p. 67). While a significant burden of the



cost of schooling falls on all parents, poor parents must consider the actual and opportunity costs of primary schooling. Even at schools with no tuition costs, students must buy notebooks and pens and parents must consider their children's absence at home and their limited contribution to household and agricultural work. Parents and teachers at government-funded schools reported that many students missed class for want of basic school supplies, such as pens and notebooks (see Al-Samarrai 2007 and Ahmad 2007 for more information on primary schooling expenditure and costs).

While poverty affects student enrolment, children “who have poor health, lack basic school equipment and live in the catchment areas of non-government schools (who are also often the poor) are more likely to be silently excluded – that is enrolled and overage, attending irregularly or poorly achieving” (Hossain & Zeitlyn 2010, p. vii). Poor students' silent exclusion considerably impacts their participation and achievement at school.

Parents' education levels correlate with students' participation, and marginalised families less willing and/or able to prioritise and provide financial and academic support towards their children's schooling. The logistics of school administration are also affected by poverty; poor families are less likely to have their children's birth registration or other formal record of the children's ages and misconceptions of children's age-appropriateness are common (Nath & Chowdhury 2009), leading to difficulties with school registration and placement. Teachers at government-funded schools informed that some poor parents attempted to enrol under-aged children in government-funded schools in order to receive the schooling stipend, while other parents perceived six-year old children to be too young to begin school.

### **5.5.3 Private Tutoring**

Private tutoring (supplemental paid studying of academic subjects outside of school hours, locally known as “private tuition”) is a critical element of many households' financial burdens for education, and some estimates state that the cost of tutoring makes up the largest percentage of private expenditure on schooling (Ahmad 2007). Given the deficiencies in education quality at most schools, many families choose to supplement their children's education with these outside reinforcements. Nearly 38% of primary-aged students pay for private tutoring, with percentages climbing from roughly 25% of students in Class 1 to over 50% of students in Class 5 with boys much more likely to receive this support than girls (44% versus 31%) (Nath 2007). No *Ebtedayee* madrasa students and only a very low percentage (3.4%) of non-formal school students pay for private tutoring (Nath 2007).

Opportunities for private tutoring seemed to exist almost everywhere in Dimla *upazila*; at a minimum, older secondary school students or other adults offer private tutoring, and I spotted coaching centres in even the most remote areas. Given the prevalence of tutoring, households with the resources can purchase higher quality education in the private schools or additional education through tutoring. Parents say that children who attend government-funded schools need to pay for additional private tutoring in order to learn, but students at these schools (particularly RNGPS and community schools) often are least able to afford that additional expense.

Families reported private tutoring costs of at least Tk. 100/month per subject, with most students taking two subjects or more. Costs for private tutoring tend to increase with the teacher or tutor's credentials or reputation, and teachers may be negatively incentivised by the possibilities of earning outside of regular classroom hours. Nath (2007) points out the inequities in educational opportunity and performance that result from this trend toward private tutoring among those who can afford it. Cameron (2009) suggests that schools should shift toward curricula and teaching methodologies that limit or eliminate the need for private tutoring; a laudable goal that would help to equalise quality among the schools. This would likely prove difficult to implement and regulate under the given bureaucratic structures and prevailing education institutions.

#### **5.5.4 Gender and Poverty**

Students' genders play an important role in poverty and schooling choices. During a focus group, one parent informed that "parents' preference is for boys; girls will leave the home to go to their in-laws' home [after marriage]". While Ahmed (2007) concluded that parents no longer discriminate against girls because family per student expenditure for boys and girls is about the same, I found higher enrolments of boys across the board in the private schools, and was told by headmasters that boys are preferred for education in the better private schools as they will bear the brunt of supporting their parents later in life, while girls will be lost to the families of their in-laws. This inequality is likely more pronounced in a region where early marriage is still prevalent, with the youngest girls married before the end of the primary cycle (despite a legal marrying age of 18 for girls). Nath (2007) found that boys were much more likely to use supplemental paid private tutoring than their female peers – 44% versus 31%. More in-depth research examining parental choices for children would reveal interesting insight into the often gendered reasons why parents send children in the same family to different kinds of schools.

#### **5.5.5 Seasonality**

The poor tend to be most vulnerable to *monga* (seasonal hunger), malnutrition, natural disaster, and seasonal variations for employment. These concerns are a real impediment to children's readiness for learning and participation at school. Mothers in focus groups reported eating one meal per day during *monga* time for several months of the year, with their children missing school in favour of fishing or otherwise searching for food to eat. In addition to absences, nutritional deficiencies adversely affect children's cognitive development (Sabates et al 2010 citing Grira 2001). "Chronic malnutrition pervades all socioeconomic strata in Bangladesh, affecting 56 percent of children among the poorest and 32 percent among the wealthiest quintiles" (World Bank 2011b, p. 1).

Many poor families or household heads are forced to migrate in search of seasonal work, sometimes unsettling their children's education. With the exception of the non-formal BRAC schools, no schools in Dimla are responsive to seasonal demands, and parents and students frequently reported missing school during harvest season or at other times when children needed to work rather than attend school. BRAC schools created the annual school calendar with parents to ensure the highest probability that students would be able to attend school while attending to necessary household duties, including chores and work in the fields, especially during the busiest harvest times.

### **5.5.6 Disability**

Physical and mental disabilities among students and their parents cripple families' coping mechanisms and further strain limited financial resources, including those related to education. Approximately 10% of pre-primary and primary-school aged children are disabled (Bangladesh Bureau of the Census, cited by UNICEF 2009), but school infrastructure and transport systems do not tend to meet the challenges presented by disabilities, and teachers are not trained in meeting disabled children's special needs. BRAC again is an exception, providing assistive devices to handicapped children and providing additional support to its teachers. Beyond BRAC's limited programming, there is no provision for making primary education accessible to the disabled.

## **6. Case Studies**

To gain depth of understanding and analysis, I selected one private school (School A) and one RNGPS (School B) for closer study so as to better understand the difference between public and private Options. I made advance arrangements with school headmasters to teach Class 3 English at these two schools six days a week for a month. This section will provide a closer look at how quality and access manifest in particular schools and how the subsequent implications for social justice are understood.

### **6.1 School A: The private school**

At School A, the private, low-fee charging school (monthly tuition between \$1.30 and \$2, depending on which class students attend), I joined the children in class after their morning calisthenics routine, straight lines of clapping students walking into each classroom. The school was established in 2008 by a retired government high school headmaster with 37 years of experience in order to tackle the problem of weak students that he saw during his tenure in the government system. He donated the land that the school sits on just one kilometre north of Dimla town, and donations of Tk. 70,000 (\$933) from local development funds from a Member of Parliament over the past two years helped to establish the school's infrastructure (indicating the benefit of local power networks). The headmaster does not draw a salary but is present each morning, walking to every classroom to see that classes have begun, and he stated that he personally offers free coaching/private tutoring to students in Class 5 after school. As a well-known figure in the community, he said that many parents want to send their children to his school. The school currently offers pre-primary classes for students age 4 and 5 as well as Classes 1 to 8.

Teachers at School A were hired ad-hoc and work without contracts or benefits, though their salaries are above the average among private schools in the sample in Dimla *upazila*. The teachers' attendance at school was regular, with classes starting by 8:40 am (ten minutes after the official start time of 8:30) at the ring of a large brass bell. The administrator stated that the teachers are accountable to the parents whose tuition money pays their salaries and to the headmaster, who relies on their performance to uphold the school's reputation.

School A's infrastructure is rudimentary—simple mud floors and thatched bamboo walls that don't keep out the voices of the students next door. However, Class 3 students wear neat uniforms, always have notebooks and pens on hand, do extra handwriting practice every night, and know how to read and write in English, a required subject from Class 1 in Bangladesh. On the first day, the teacher informed me that the students had already finished the government textbook, so we could start again from the beginning with a review. The students were most comfortable repeating rote sentences and vocabulary and were obviously not used to learner-centred teaching styles; they were uncomfortable learning grammar that had to be applied outside of memorised examples. The limitations of this pedagogical practice was clear, in that students did not have the capacity to build new sentences with the words that they had learned or use their knowledge outside of the teacher's examples.

## **6.2 School B: The registered non-government primary school (RNGPS)**

School B, a second-tier government-funded school with civil servant teachers located next to the hospital in Dimla town, runs classes in two shifts to manage its limited number of three classrooms: Class 1 and 2 attend in the morning and Class 3, 4, and 5 officially attend from noon until 4:15 pm. To contrast, Class 3, 4, and 5 students at the nearest government school are in session from 9:30 am to 4:15 pm; the government school students have nearly three more contact hours than their counterparts at the RNGPS each day.

The headmaster was present only a handful of days over the course of the month that I spent there, and I saw him engaged in teaching activity just once. The three other teachers' attendance at school was marginally better; most days two teachers were present, though they were engaged in teaching activity less than half of the time that I was at the school. The former teacher room had been converted into a safe lockable space for a well for water; the headmaster reported the well's pump had been stolen twice before. Space for the teachers had been relocated to a few tables in the largest classroom. I found the teachers sleeping with their heads on the table as an unattended class of 4<sup>th</sup> graders ran wild, there was no chalk, my classroom smelled like urine, and there were bats noisily nesting in a space above the door. Two of the teachers' young children also went to school with their mothers, providing many distractions.

On my first day at the school, the teacher informed me that the students were on page 58, about three-fourths through the government textbook. When I started the lesson, it quickly became clear that the students could not understand or read, and most could not write the letters of the English alphabet. Of the 68 students on the official register for Class 3, nearly all were consistently marked present but I never saw more than 37 students in attendance. It would have been impossible for the classroom to hold additional dozens of children. The students who do attend are a wily bunch, especially the boys, punching each other, shouting, and imploring me to hit other children who are misbehaving. At least a third of each class was wasted in attempts at discipline. Many students were grade-age inappropriate; students in Class 3 were as old as 14<sup>21</sup>. These children often sat in the back of the classroom and were most reluctant to participate. On several occasions students were not able to do the assigned exercises in class for lack of paper or pen. Less than 15% of students wear the standard blue uniforms. A minor Hindu holiday for which the school closed officially for one day resulted in an unofficial three-day holiday as the school lacks structure and discipline and teachers and students seem to use any excuse not to come to school.

## **6.3 Case Study Comparisons**

My experience in these two schools unearthed several revelations about quality and access at schools in Dimla. The table below sums up some important dimensions in understanding the student experience in the two case studies. It is clear that students who can afford investments in primary school do so beyond just paying for tuition at a private school. Many of these students live outside of walking distance from school and have the resources to travel to a school of their choice by rickshaw, motorcycle, or other means. They pay for supplemental education outside of

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<sup>21</sup> See Hossein (2010) for a further discussion age-grade incongruence in primary and secondary schools in Bangladesh.

school hours using private tutoring, and they benefit from smaller class sizes with teachers who have greater accountability to their parents who are paying for the tuition.

**Table 6: Comparative matrix of sample private school and RNGPS students**

	Private School	RNGPS
Average student attendance	86.2%	46.7%
Class size (official register)	29 students	68 students
Percentage of age-grade inappropriate students	4%	62%
Percentage of students taking private tutoring	63%	36%
Percentage of students who walk to school	44%	100%

Source: Interviews among present students in Class 3 on 30 October 2011.

The students in the private school experienced benefits in each of the four quality indicators outlined in Section 5. While not all students had attended pre-primary, many had and they were at an institution where pre-primary was considered standard. Monitored by both the school administration and the students' parents, the teachers' attendance and behaviour at school was regular and scheduled class time was more or less respected, resulting in students being engaged in learning a high percentage of the time that they spent at school. Students were more disciplined all-around, in part because the norms at the school had been clearly established around appropriate student behaviour. Corporal punishment was still a threat, but students respected behaviour norms for the most part. The community identified this school as one that was high quality, especially given that the headmaster was a known personality who had recently completed a long career in a government school. Teaching methods were not dissimilar to those rote methods used in government-funded schools and this certainly impacted students' autonomy and learning and empowerment, but this was relatively standard at most schools of all types throughout the *upazila*. This reflected the norm of teaching in learning that I saw in all school types except the non-formal schools, which purposefully integrate learner-centred pedagogy.

The RNGPS, on the other hand, failed students in all of the quality measures I identified. Students were not ready for school; the absenteeism of more than half the class on most days clearly indicated that students and/or their families did not prioritise, were not ready for, or did not value school. No pre-primary courses were available. The teacher behaviour was appalling; it is easy to understand why children would stop attending if their teachers have irregular attendance or if they are not engaged in teaching most of the school hours. This begins to explain why a one-day holiday expanded to three days with no notice; any change in the routine seemed to be an excuse to take time off. While I did not witness corporal punishment first-hand, the students' insistence that I beat children who were misbehaving would indicate that they were accustomed to this method of discipline.

Regarding access, however, it was clear that the private school was not accessible to students who could not afford the tuition as well as the cost of uniforms and other necessary supplies.

Students received free government-issued textbooks but were required to purchase several additional books to supplement their learning. These costs significantly increased the total amount that parents had to pay. Additionally, 63% of the students from my Class 3 section were already taking private tutoring to supplement their schooling. This demonstrates their increased access to valuable education services outside of schools. This school did not have any scholarships or other means of accommodating poor children and had no special provisions for disabled children.

The RNGPS, on the other hand, was accessible for enrolment to anyone living in the catchment area. This option came at very little cost, primarily consisting of the cost of notebooks and pens, especially given that most students did not carry a school bag or wear a school uniform. Many students were lacking even in notebooks and pens, the most essential school supplies. For the 36% of students that did pay for private tutoring, this likely comprised the bulk of their expenditure on education. All parents that I spoke with from this school community said that their children attended this school because they could not afford anything else. Beyond enrolment, though, it was clear that the significant majority of students remained in the third zone of exclusion, meaning that they were ‘silently excluded’ from educational access and thus learning minimally or not at all at school; nearly half the students on the register were always absent, students above their age/grade level did not participate, and the school environment was not conducive to learning with the multitude of discipline issues. These observations are consistent with the findings from the CREATE survey data, where silent exclusion was indicated by poor attendance, low attainment, repetition, and students overage for their grade (Sabates et al 2010).

All of these factors have significant implications for human capabilities and social justice. If social justice is defined as “parity of participation” as referenced earlier, it is quite clear that students at these two schools participate unequally in education and schooling both in and outside school structures, and that the difference is largely based on their level of income and agency. While the private schools are not focused on developing full capability sets in their students, they do provide them with an education that serves as a basis for continuing their schooling in the higher grades. The RNGPS fails to develop the minimal capacity to read and write, with considerable consequences for their ability to continue schooling or move ahead. The community perceptions of the school’s poor quality impacted the enrolled students’ social standing as well. This would all indicate that this system does indeed reinforce systemic inequalities based on poverty, where those who can afford it purchase as high quality education as is available, while those who cannot pay suffer in low-cost, low-quality alternatives.

## **7. Conclusions**

This paper set out to demonstrate how Bangladesh's primary education landscape comes together to provide education for all, and to illustrate particular dimensions of access and quality in a poor rural area. Bangladesh's more than 16.5 million primary school-aged children have a right to education, and the country's future will be shaped by education policies and practices in place today. With more than 70% of the country's population living in rural areas and 31.5% of the country's population living below the poverty line (World Bank 2012), Bangladesh's successful commitment to enrol children in primary school must be followed by an earnest dedication to quality improvements among all primary education providers. The primary education landscape includes a wide array of providers that reaches most children, but poor and vulnerable students are still left out or left behind, whether by never enrolling, dropping out before completing grade 5, or in joining the ranks of the "silently excluded" who fail to meaningfully learn in their classrooms. This was clear from the research in Dimla, where I witnessed first-hand the high levels of absenteeism, unprofessionalism by teachers in some government-funded schools, and perceptions of low quality by parents of primary-school aged children in government-funded schools.

BRAC schools provide an excellent option targeting a small number of poor, marginalised, or at-risk students and communities, proving that high quality education is possible without expensive infrastructure investments. BRAC schools' success and their desirability of local parents is due to numerous factors, including small classrooms, learner-centred teaching methods, supplemental curriculum and teaching materials, flexible scheduling responsive to local needs, and a cadre of local teachers that are supported and held accountable by their community and the BRAC branch and regional offices. Feedback mechanisms at BRAC schools ensure that students understand the lessons before moving on. BRAC and other non-formal providers play an important role in developing innovation in education and in reaching students excluded by virtue of geographic inaccessibility, disability, minority ethnicity, and other factors. While BRAC primary schools are seen as the best option among rural parents and enhance the individual children who attend them, non-formal schools will never expand to meet the needs of all of Bangladesh's poor or otherwise vulnerable students, and the responsibility lies with the government to create practices and policies that provide primary schooling that is affordable and properly prepares children for the future.

Private schools in rural areas similarly serve a niche market, meeting the demand of families who can afford additional education expenses. Private tutoring, too, provides additional education a la carte for those who can afford it. These options only serve to increase inequalities between those who can afford it and those who can't, though they do afford a higher quality option than currently offered by most government-funded institutions. The reality for poor students in rural areas is that they will end up in government-funded schools unless they receive one of the extremely limited places in a BRAC school. The quality of these government-funded schools seemed to further decrease in pockets of geographically distant or poor communities, thus leaving the most marginalised communities with the fewest options and least agency. The multi-tiered government-funded system with three levels of government financing magnifies the inequalities in the government system.



The growth of *Ebtedayee* and *Quomi* madrassas indicates that religious education must be included in dialogue on education policy, and the government's gains in bringing *Ebtedayee* under closer government regulation is a positive step to ensuring that students at those institutions receive an education similar to that of their peers in secular government-funded schools. The lack of data or knowledge of *Quomi* operations, including number of students and funding sources, presents the government with a tricky and politically sensitive challenge. Despite this, it is the government's responsibility to ensure quality education for *all* children, including those at *quomi* institutions.

Inadequate resources, management capacity, and lack of commitment are all obstacles to strengthening the national education system to ensure a sustainable means of providing quality primary education for all (Nath 2005). The establishment and implementation of PEDP III in 2011 marks a critical attempt by the Bangladeshi government to improve its public primary schools and denotes a real opportunity for Bangladesh to provide a higher standard of education to all of its citizens through improvements to the multi-tiered mainstream education system. PEDP III's strategies to increase participation of poor and disadvantaged children, improve access and reduce social and regional disparities include expanding pre-primary education, improving physical school facilities, integrating health and nutrition programs into schools, revamping the stipend programme, creating more inclusive policies for disadvantaged children, and coordinating more closely with alternative education providers (Bangladesh Government 2011a p11). These are all important steps in tackling the inequities and injustices inherent in the current system, but achieving these goals will require accountability mechanisms and real financial commitment at the national level together with a willingness to invest time and embrace change at the local level.

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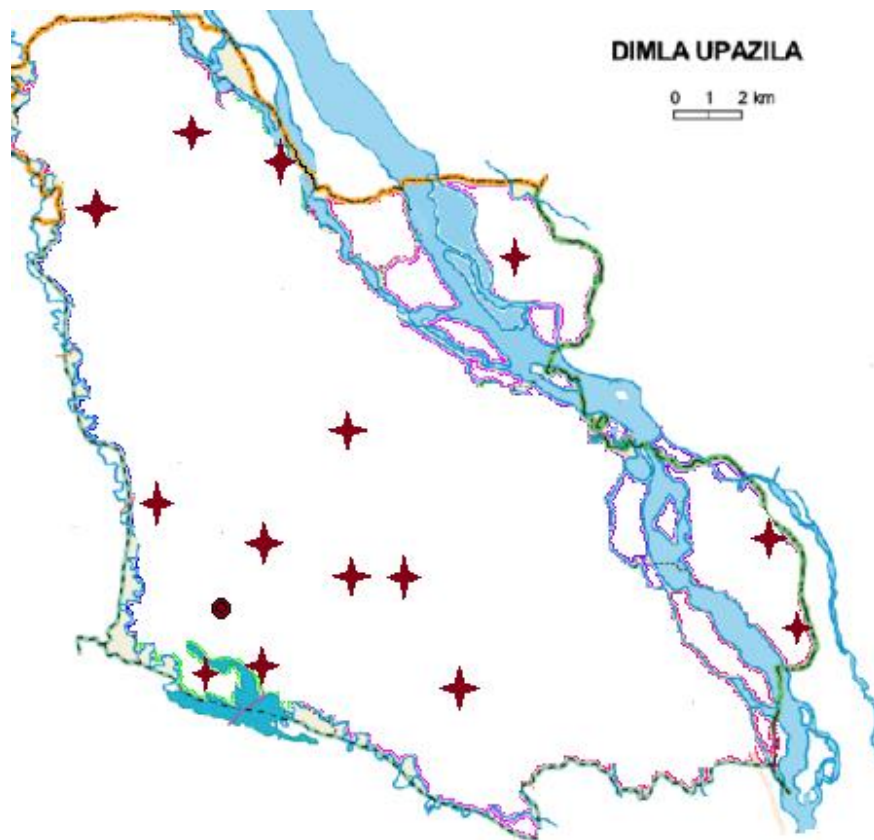
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## Appendix 1

### Map of schools visited in Dimla upazila



Stars indicate the location of 18 schools that were visited outside of Dimla town. (three of these school sites were very close to one another). The circle represents Dimla town, which was the site of the remaining eight school visits.



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### Report summary:

Government, registered non-government, community, private, and non-formal schools, as well as madrassas, comprise the schooling options at the primary level in Bangladesh. A product of more than a year of ethnographic research, this paper examines the quality and access dimensions of primary education providers in a poor rural area of northwest Bangladesh. The research shows what factors affect education quality and how familial, financial, social, and institutional difficulties limit students' access and participation in primary school. The research concludes that while other providers can help to meet demand and generate innovation, the responsibility ultimately falls on the government to ensure quality education for all children among these providers and in its own government-funded schools.

### Author notes:

Christy Sommers spent a year and a half in Bangladesh researching rural primary education as a Fulbright Fellow through the United States Department of State and as a grantee for Open Society Foundations Privatisation in Education Research Initiative (PERI). Christy has worked as a teacher, teacher trainer, researcher, and international development consultant in West Africa and South Asia. Her research interests include South Asia, Education for All, basic and primary education, education privatisation, and madrassa education. She is currently running an experiential education programme for adolescents in Senegal.

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