

An Analysis of Sub-District Education Officers' Practices in Supervising Curriculum Implementation at Primary Schools in Bangladesh

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Received on Dec 12th, Revised on Dec 24th, Published on Dec, 30th 2024

ABSTRACT

This study examines the practices of Education Officers (EOs) in overseeing curriculum implementation and teaching activities of primary school teachers in Bangladesh. The aim of the study is to identify the challenges faced by the EOs and how they mitigate them in the contexts of bridging the knowledge gap and their impact on educational quality. Data was elicited from a group of purposive samples in the form of experienced EOs from the district. The study managed to explore how EOs assist teachers in implementing academic curriculum, policies and enhance teaching and learning outcomes through interviews and field observations. The findings showed that the UEOs faced a multitude of challenges which stem from a number of internal and external sources. They had to rely on a number of strategies to mitigate the challenges to ensure that they could undertake their routine tasks well and achieve the objectives of their jobs. Using effective communication, empathy by putting themselves in the teachers' shoes, walk the talk by showing rather than just telling and using available ICT and social media educational tools are among the strategies utilized by the EOs. These useful insights will provide policymakers with valuable insights into strategies to increase EOs' effectiveness and strengthen Bangladesh's educational system. In conclusion the EOs, the higher authorities, and the whole education fraternity in the country must put concerted efforts towards education albeit all the resources and logistical shortcomings that hamper teachers and schools.

Keywords: *Curriculum, Education Officers, Practices, Quality Improvement*

ABSTRAK

Studi ini meneliti praktik-praktik yang dilakukan oleh Petugas Pendidikan (Education Officer/EO) dalam mengawasi implementasi kurikulum dan kegiatan mengajar guru sekolah dasar di Bangladesh. Tujuan dari penelitian ini adalah untuk mengidentifikasi tantangan yang dihadapi oleh para EO dan bagaimana mereka mengatasinya dalam konteks menjembatani kesenjangan pengetahuan dan dampaknya terhadap kualitas pendidikan. Data diperoleh dari sekelompok sampel purposif dalam bentuk EO yang berpengalaman. Studi ini berhasil mengeksplorasi bagaimana EO membantu guru dalam mengimplementasikan kurikulum akademik, kebijakan, dan meningkatkan hasil belajar mengajar melalui wawancara dan observasi lapangan. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa UEO menghadapi banyak tantangan yang berasal dari sejumlah sumber internal dan eksternal. Mereka harus mengandalkan sejumlah strategi untuk mengurangi tantangan untuk memastikan bahwa mereka dapat menjalankan tugas rutin mereka dengan baik dan mencapai tujuan pekerjaan mereka. Menggunakan komunikasi yang efektif, empati dengan menempatkan diri pada posisi guru, menunjukkan dengan menunjukkan dan bukan hanya memberi tahu, serta menggunakan alat pendidikan TIK dan media sosial yang tersedia adalah beberapa strategi yang digunakan oleh para EO. Wawasan yang berguna ini akan memberikan para pembuat kebijakan wawasan yang berharga tentang strategi untuk meningkatkan efektivitas EO dan memperkuat sistem pendidikan Bangladesh. Kesimpulannya, para EO, otoritas yang lebih tinggi, dan seluruh pendidikan di negara ini harus melakukan upaya bersama terhadap pendidikan meskipun ada kekurangan sumber daya dan logistik yang menghambat para guru dan sekolah.

Kata kunci: *Kurikulum, Petugas Pendidikan, Praktik, Peningkatan Kualitas*

INTRODUCTION

Primary education is the cornerstone of an individual's academic voyage, exerting a crucial influence on future learning and personal growth. For a successful learning environment, effective communication is the linchpin in primary education. It is the bridge that connects teachers with their young students, facilitating not only the transfer of knowledge but also emotional and social development (Margas, 2023). In the realm of education, the functions and practices of local education officials play a pivotal role in enhancing the quality of education, refining teachers' professional abilities, and overseeing education at the community level (Khan et al., 2014; Kingdon & Muzammil, 2013). The focus of the study is on Upazila (sub-district) Education Officers (henceforth UEOs), who serve as local education officials and lead the Upazila Primary Education Offices. They closely collaborate with government primary schools within their districts and bear the responsibility for overseeing and administering the entire government primary education system in their respective sub-districts or Upazila. Their main objectives are to increase student enrolment, improve school completion rates, and reduce dropout rates, all while enhancing the quality of primary education (Alam, et al., 2023). Consequently, the effectiveness of school improvement and primary education management at the Upazila level relies heavily on the competent leadership and managerial skills of these UEOs (Habib, 2022).

Problem Statement

Despite the significance of the Education Officers' (henceforth EOs) responsibilities, it has been recognized that in developing nations, the professional competence of district education officers is underdeveloped, and they encounter numerous challenges in fulfilling their duties (Ahmed, 2018a). Additionally, the strategies for managing education within school districts need to be more effective in countries like Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan (Khan et al., 2014). Consequently, researchers have stressed on the need to adequately prepare district education officers to fulfil their roles in attaining educational objectives and boosting students' academic performance (Bhayo et al., 2018). There is insufficient knowledge and empirical data regarding the practices and difficulties faced by UEOs in Bangladesh when they supervise teachers in English language classes at primary schools. The environment in which UEOs function is filled with bureaucratic obstacles and a lack of resources (Saha, 2023), and these constraints will impact their capacity to successfully execute improvements. Within Bangladesh, primary education is not merely a basic entitlement but also a pivotal component in the nation's socio-economic progress.

Despite some improvement efforts, a crucial gap exists in understanding the role of the EOs, the key administrative figures for observing and assisting educational institutes in achieving outcomes. Bangladesh has placed significant emphasis on education, particularly ensuring quality primary education, since gaining independence. As a country with one of the largest primary education systems in the world, it has made primary education a key priority in its development efforts (Ahmed, 2018a). The instructional role of EOs is to enhance educational programs and support teachers in delivering high-quality instruction effectively.

This highlights the fact that supervision is a crucial element in the teaching, learning and assessing process, and it must be maintained to be of high standards to ensure the overall educational goals could be achieved (Ahmad et al., 2021). Key aspects of a supervisory role involve setting the school's mission, managing the curriculum and instruction, overseeing the teaching and learning process, tracking student progress, and encouraging continuous improvement (Alam et al., 2023). A particular area of concern for example is the English language curriculum implementation at schools and in the case of primary education it serves as a foundation for learners to develop to a higher level of studies to achieve global competitiveness which is a key element to access future opportunities (Ahmad et al., 2017). EOs play a pivotal role in supporting teachers in improving English language teaching, but their specific contributions and challenges in this domain remain underexplored.

This study seeks to fill this gap by investigating the practices, challenges faced and mitigation strategies used by the EOs in Bangladesh, for both urban and rural settings. The lack of empirical data on this topic currently hampers the ability to assess the effectiveness of their efforts in promoting quality education, especially in English language classes, which are critical for equipping students with essential communication skills in a globalized world (Ahmad & Mohd Said, 2013).

This study aimed to gain insight into the challenges that UEOs encounter and the strategies they employ to tackle these challenges. Moreover, it sought to gather recommendations from UEOs for enhancing their roles and practices. Research Questions; 1) What are the UEOs roles and practices in the curriculum implementation supervision at the schools? ; 2) What are the challenges faced by the UEOs in fulfilling their roles? And 3) How do the UEOs mitigate the challenges?

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research approach was chosen due to its exploratory nature where the researcher will have to go to the field and directly meet the samples who are the subjects of the research. Responses from the identified purposive samples can provide insights into people's actions and experiences within their natural environments, shedding light on how they interact in social groups and navigate their daily lives when faced with certain phenomenon (Ahmad, et al.,2017). By utilizing qualitative data to reveal the underlying beliefs, practices and difficulties faced by UEOs and primary school teachers, this study is able to probe and do thorough investigation of the phenomenon being studied. Furthermore, qualitative research offers detailed explanations of phenomenon, typically addressing questions related to 'how' and 'why' rather than 'how much' or 'how many' (Creswell, 2007). Ten experienced UEOs who directly engage in monitoring instructional activities of primary school teachers in a sub-urban district were selected as purposive samples in this research. This due to their experience and expertise in their respective task which enabled them to provide insightful responses to the research questions. Data was gathered from a series of in-depth interviews with the UEOs where each one lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour. All the interviews were transcribed, and the transcripts were coded thematically to identify patterns and categories in the UEOs experiences. This data was analyzed and triangulated via simple document analysis and class observations to ensure the validity and reliability of the responses and findings as per qualitative study by Ahmad et al. (2017).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

EOs of Bangladesh in the primary sector often face various challenges when they conduct monitoring visits and when they want to give training to primary school teachers due to the lack of resources. This includes briefing and training for English language teachers. For example, there were lack of effective curriculum support, and logistical difficulties, such as accessing remote schools, highly qualified English teachers, insufficient access to digital resources. All the teachers interviewed in the study disclosed several factors which they feel serve as challenges such as resistance from senior English language teachers, administrative barriers and a lack of continuous professional development opportunities. These crucial aspects were also highlighted studies such as by level Rahman (2023) and Milon and Ali, (2023) and addressing them are essential for effective English teaching at primary schools. Below are excerpts showing sample responses from the teachers on their practices during supervisory visits and the obstacles that they normally encounter;

Officer 1-Challenges (female, 9 years experience)

"I face difficulty in determining whether the instructional strategy is effective for the kids. Discipline was lacking in the classroom when the observation was made. The Senior teachers' sometimes show limited cooperation and potential resistance to fresh ideas shared"

Officer 2-Challenges (male, 10 years experience)

"I sometimes encounter the situation where the teachers did not properly plan the lesson. Their use of interactive teaching techniques is limited and when being observed, the teachers show that they feel uneasy or defensive. There were situations where there were low levels of student participation during the lessons"

Officer 3 -Challenges (female, 8 years experience)

"I noticed that the ineffective class planning by the teachers might result in poor instructions during the lessons. The efficiency of teachers is hampered by the frequent shortage of teaching resources at schools, such as visual aids or textbooks. Large class

sizes make it more difficult for teachers to keep everyone under control and give each student individualized attention. It might be challenging for an education officer to strike a balance between administrative and monitoring responsibilities”

Komalasari et. al (2020) highlight that the role of headmasters or school principals are important in terms of improving education quality. For a good learning environment, to face the challenges successfully, and meet educational goals, effective management, teacher support, and providing proper infrastructure are crucial. Islam, et al. (2019) discuss the supervision of primary education primarily falls under the purview of UEOs who navigate the intersection between national educational strategies and local administrative contexts. Below are excerpts of sample responses on the factors which the UEOs feel are the source of the obstacles and challenges.

Officer 4-Source of Challenges

“I'm still learning how to properly evaluate various educational philosophies. Maintaining discipline can be difficult for teachers at times, particularly in large classrooms. Fear of change or a lack of faith in novel approaches are common causes of resistance especially among more senior teachers”

Officer 5-Source of Challenges

“Actually, many educators are not well-trained in contemporary teaching methods. ...to make it worse interactive learning is hampered by crowded classrooms and a lack of resources. So the teachers could view the visit and monitoring by us as a way to point out flaws rather than provide constructive criticism”.

Officer 6-Source of Challenges

“Many schools actually face resource limitations as a result of inadequate government financing and infrastructure issues. Professional development opportunities for teachers are usually inadequate. Exams, extracurricular activities, and administrative responsibilities put a lot of strains on many teachers. To make it more challenging, the present hierarchical educational culture may prevent candid communication between the UEOs, the teachers and the school administrators”

Officer 7-Source of Challenges

“From my experience, many misunderstandings actually occurred from poor communication between the teachers, the school administrators, and the visiting education officers. For a number of years, I would say that there is inadequate accountability in the systems that it frequently permits inefficiencies to continue. This sometimes defeats the purpose of our monitoring visits to schools as the previous issues and lackings were not fully improved”

As a whole the findings show that the UEOs in their practices of conducting monitoring visits to schools to supervise the teachers are faced with a lot of internal and external challenges. Despite the important role that they play within the education systems many of their input and feedback to resolve issues at the grassroots levels namely the teachers and students in the classrooms at the schools could not be fulfilled by the higher authorities due to several limitations namely finances. In many situations the UEOs need to play multiple roles when facing the teachers including consoling and cheering them to get their motivations up against. Some of the UEOs themselves confided in the interviews that despite the presence of technological innovations that currently renders a lot of support to teachers, there are still many prolonged issues that hinders effective teaching and learning. Tibriji and Chowdhury (2023) emphasize that EOs are pivotal in bridging the gap between policy directives and classroom realities in Bangladesh's primary education system. They are tasked with a wide range of responsibilities, including the implementation of educational policies, the supervision of teaching practices, and the provision of professional development for teachers. According to Saha, (2023) One of the most significant challenges faced by Education Officers in Bangladesh is the scarcity of resources.

These limitations affect their ability to conduct regular school visits, provide adequate instructional materials, and offer ongoing professional development to teachers. Additionally, bureaucratic constraints often impede their ability to make timely decisions and implement necessary changes in the schools under their supervision. These challenges are further compounded by the socio-economic and cultural diversity of the regions they serve. Habib (2022) in his study focusses on situation where the effectiveness of UEOs are frequently impeded by constraints such as limited financial resources, bureaucratic hurdles, and socio-cultural obstacles. Below are excerpts that show sample responses on the efforts undertaken by the UEOs to mitigate the challenges;

Officer 8- Mitigation Strategies

“Examine several courses to spot trends and comprehend the conduct of the teachers. During visits, promote student involvement and help keep the peace. Gain the trust of educators by paying attention to their worries and making modest, doable adjustments”

Officer 9-Mitigation Strategies

“Give helpful criticism and highlight areas that need work. Set up frequent training sessions for participatory teaching and lesson planning. Assure educators that the purpose of monitoring is to help them grow, not to be critical”.

Officer 10-Mitigation Strategies

“Offering helpful critiques in a kind and encouraging way. Setting up frequent training sessions to improve the pedagogical abilities of educators. Pressing the local education office to provide better funds and resources. Finding and filling in particular gaps using performance indicators and lesson observations. Creating a helpful learning environment by enlisting the help of parents and local authorities. Promoting the use of digital tools to support teaching and learning processes is known as technology integration”.

As a whole, the UEOs undertakes a number of measures to mitigate the issues and challenges that they face during their routine tasks of doing monitoring visits and supervising various teachers at many schools within the sub-districts. They disclosed that they need to rely on their experience and communication skills to manoeuvre through the obstacles and challenges faced. The presence of innovative technological materials, ICT and social media, become free and cheaper source of learning materials and avenue for learning that the UEOs capitalize on to assist the teachers and students at the schools. All these efforts are encapsulated within a professional and personalised relationship gradually built between them and the school community. This relationship is developed based on trust and based on the willingness of the UEOs to put themselves in the shoes of their chargers as guided by policy documents, guidelines and best practices propagated by the higher authority within the department and the ministry of education.

The roles played by UEOs are especially crucial in maintaining educational standards and ensuring that schools adhere to the curriculum and teaching guidelines set by the government. The EOs as a whole act as the primary link between the central educational authorities and individual schools, ensuring that policies are effectively translated into practice at the local level (Rahman, 2023). Their ability to support and guide teachers, particularly in adopting innovative and effective teaching methods, directly impacts the quality of education provided to students. Many recent studies highlight the evolving nature of UEOs' responsibilities in educational management and their strategic significance in advancing educational agenda of encouraging community involvement (Saha, 2023). They play a crucial role in overseeing the teaching activities of primary school teachers and carrying out educational programs.

In Bangladesh, there is still limited amount of research and factual data concerning the specific responsibilities of EOs. There is insufficient data documented on how EOs at the sub-district level practice their roles, manage their day-to-day responsibilities and mitigate challenges (UNICEF Bangladesh).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study has shed light on the roles and practices of UEOs in the context of primary education management in Bangladesh. The findings from this study increases the understanding of the role of UEOs in improving teaching and learning at schools by exploring their experiences. It recognizes the challenges faced by the officers and aims to contribute to the enhancement of their roles and practices, ultimately benefiting the quality of primary education in the region. The insights are expected to make a significant contribution to the academic literature, the policy-making process and the upgrading of the quality of education the management and its effectiveness in the country.

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