



FAITH AND EDUCATION IN BANGLADESH: APPROACHES TO RELIGION AND SOCIAL COHESION IN SCHOOL TEXTBOOK CURRICULA

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Table of Contents

Introduction	2
Education in Bangladesh: Sociohistoric Context	3
Social Cohesion: A Framework	5
Research Methodology	7
Findings	9
Discussion of Findings	20
Conclusions and Proposed Next Steps	22
Endnotes	24

ABSTRACT

Bangladesh's education systems face new challenges as the disruptions linked to the COVID-19 crisis have closed schools and stimulated debates about future priorities and opportunities. Acute socioeconomic pressures and interreligious tensions in neighboring countries reveal fault lines among communities and highlight the importance of positive approaches to building social cohesion in a richly diverse society. These changes raise the bar on demands for quality approaches that address the ethos and skills essential for plural modern societies. Among critical issues are how religious topics are taught in schools and how these curricula support social cohesion objectives. This paper presents findings of a review of religious teaching in school textbooks, conducted to explore how far these curricula contribute to the nation's social cohesion objectives and to identify areas of concern and potential improvement.

The conclusions and recommendations of this Berkley Center publication are solely those of its author(s) and do not reflect the views of the center, its leadership, or its other scholars.

“The pandemic can easily become a spiraling cycle of destruction given our existing fragilities. On the other hand, the corona crisis can be an opportunity to transform and create a ‘new Bangladesh,’ which will empower all its citizens to re-embrace the freedom of independence on our 50th anniversary in 2021.”

–Manzoor Hasan, OBE, and Dr. Sanual Mostafa¹

INTRODUCTION: RESEARCH GOALS

Bangladesh’s ambition to graduate to middle-income status in 2024 represents a historic milestone and challenge. Bangladesh is committed to the broad goals set out in the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which highlight interdependence and the inseparability of economic, social, and ecological determinants of prosperity.² While Bangladesh’s performance has far surpassed expectations, earning it the epithet “development miracle,” the 2020 COVID-19 crisis highlights many persisting challenges. Two have special significance: promoting communal harmony during a turbulent period in a region facing significant social, economic, and religious tensions; and building education systems that prepare students for contemporary life and promote essential civic values.

Social sustainability, vital to sustainable development, needs to be a centerpiece of Bangladesh’s strategic framework for development. Unsustainable social conditions like social marginalization and social injustice threaten the welfare of even highly prosperous economies.³ Social imbalances of power and wealth detract from sustainability.⁴ Societies can prosper only where there is mutual commitment between members and a collective sense of community.

While social sustainability is obviously important, it is a complex and multifaceted topic, with both individual and collective interfaces. Social dimensions of sustainable development may be the least explored aspect of the global SDG framework, in both analytical and practical terms.⁵

With a dynamic process of social exchange involved, designing and applying measures of social sustainability is difficult, as various international organizations have come to realize.⁶ The nature of social relations cannot be as readily quantified as economic measures of progress; universal measures can obscure social diversity and variations in social conditions. This is evident in SDG 4, which recognizes education as a key strategy for promoting social inclusion and equity, both elements of social sustainability. SDG Target 4.7 catalogues several values that education is to assure, including human rights, gender equality, and the appreciation of cultural diversity.

Social sustainability, vital to sustainable development, needs to be a centerpiece of Bangladesh’s strategic framework for development.

In Bangladesh, as in many countries, the consensus reflected in the SDG framework, including for example SDG 4.7, has somewhat limited resonance. This is partly because information about what underlies the SDGs is restricted to quite narrow communities: policymakers and those involved in development project design, who are immersed in the topics. More significantly, however, they offer little insight into the sociohistorical context. Providing such context can help establish measures that benchmark progress. SDG indicators aim to convert abstract concepts, such as social cohesion, into more specific metrics,⁷ since direct measures⁸ of concepts like cultural diversity are difficult. Indicator-based approaches carry the risk of disjunction between the data used and the social reality it presumes to depict.⁹ This is particularly acute for measures of social sustainability where only local realities can give concrete forms to global challenges¹⁰ within distinct sociohistorical contexts and through the nuances of dynamic social relations.

The framework of social cohesion offers conceptual resources to assess and advance social sustainability within a particular society. The concept has significant power at local and national levels,¹¹ but it needs to pass through the prism of local realities, projecting a continuum from the individual to the global scale. Social sustainability involves the sustained improvement of individual and social welfare.¹² The concept (and broad international discussions of the topic) focus on the community as the foundation.¹³ Social cohesion reflects the strength of the social fabric, the depth of trust in society, and the level of safety ensured for people, together upholding the well-being of members of that society, both present and prospective. It can further economic and ecological goals by helping to build necessary popular support for a sustainability agenda and stimulate economic exchange between diverse actors in the economy.¹⁴

Building social sustainability involves processes that transmit norms and values supporting elements of social cohesion across generations.¹⁵ Education is evidently a key process, with its social purposes.¹⁶ Education systems have a well-understood potential to foster social cohesion. Educational institutions such as schools and madrasas are where various forms of sociocultural values, legitimated ideologies, constructed knowledge, and accepted norms are taught, learned, and negotiated. Schools and education systems help develop at the nation-state level “national...common sense.”¹⁷ Less positively, they can be ideological state apparatuses that subjugate individuals into ruling class ideologies through curricula prepared by a society’s powerful groups.¹⁸ Some scholars argue that a society’s dominant groups tend to compete to create “collective national memory designed to meet specific cultural, economic, ideological and social imperatives”¹⁹ through a process of “imaginative ideological labor.”²⁰ Social cohesion is important both because education is a powerful means of inculcating socially cohesive values but also a potentially dangerous tool that can produce or accentuate fissures across social fault lines. Education is thus an established arena for advancing social sustainability through socially cohesive norms.

This review explores social cohesion in education, linking it to Bangladesh’s overall development goals. It particularly highlights textbooks as an expression of social context. The review complements an earlier analysis of delivery of education by religious institutions.²¹ The next section briefly outlines the Bangladesh education system, illustrating the complexity of its multiple providers and varied constituencies and its roles as a prime site where social differences are manifested and normative contestations are mediated. The third section outlines literature on social cohesion and thus the analytical frame used for this study. The fourth section outlines research methodology. The review’s findings are analyzed and discussed in the penultimate sections, followed by brief conclusions and suggestions for next steps.

EDUCATION IN BANGLADESH: SOCIOHISTORIC CONTEXT

The Bangladeshi education system is a labyrinth that has grown increasingly more complex over the years since independence in 1971. Bangladesh’s cultural, moral, and historical identities have been debated and contested without intermission between the covers of school textbooks in a process one scholar describes as “unstable and caught in a recurring politicized flux.”²² The contemporary system was shaped by various social and political forces that in turn produced deep social rifts. These divides are essential to understanding social cohesion in Bangladesh.

The newly liberated People’s Republic of Bangladesh distanced itself from the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. This was evident in the recommendations of the first Education Commission (Qudrat-e-Khuda Commission), which emphasized the need for secular education at all levels.²³ However, the military regime in power from 1975 until 1990 changed Bangladeshi identity politics, shifting it from a secular and ethnic “Bengali” identity to a state-based and pseudo-Islamic “Bangladeshi” identity. The aim was to build political legitimacy and take Bangladesh out of the “Indian shadow.”²⁴ Since electoral democracy returned in 1991, narratives about the history of Bangladesh have reflected battles between the two major

political parties, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Bangladesh Awami League (BAL). Both parties found “willing groups of intellectuals”²⁵ who appropriated historical narratives following their party lines.²⁶ Since 2008, however, the BAL has been in power, giving it a unilateral advantage in reforming the curriculum as it suited their political values. Even so, several Islamic lobbying groups have been successful in demanding changes in the curricula in recent years.

The evolution of Bangladeshi national curriculum textbooks, especially the narrative of national history, can be categorized as five timebound stages. Table 1 illustrates the forces that have been at play in Bangladesh, shaping education as an ideological instrument and a value-generating and propagating system. The significant roles of specific religious and ethnic forces are also evident, indicating the fault lines in Bangladeshi society along which identities and values can diverge.

TABLE 01

Major Stages of Textbook Change in Bangladesh

Stages of Textbook Change	Features
1. Pre-1971	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pakistani historical narratives based on Lahore and central India • Islam-centric but not overly anti-Hindu • Little credit is given to East Pakistan in the grand narrative of the creation of the nation • Perfunctory mentions of notable Bengalis such as A.K. Fazlul Huq
2. 1972-1975	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The British regime as colonial power is replaced by the West Pakistani regime • The heroic birth of Bangladesh and the significance of the Liberation War are prominently celebrated • Bengali nationalism became the binding force for the war-torn nation
3. 1976-1990	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Military influence on textbooks • Islamiyat was introduced as a mandatory subject from Grades 1-9 under Zia-ur-Rahman regime • Hussain Muhammad Ershad, another military autocrat, made Islam the national religion • Ershad also made religious education mandatory up to Grade 10 • Distinctly anti-Indian and pro-Islamic ethos
4. 1991-2008	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Electoral democracy restored • The BNP government elected in 1991 continued the curriculum from the military regime • Awami League rewrote the curriculum in 1996 when they came to power after 21 years • BNP and its right-wing coalition returned to power in 2001 and revoked the interim curricular changes of the BAL era
5. 2008-present*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awami League remains in power for three consecutive terms, providing a consistency in the curriculum • The first ever National Education Policy of Bangladesh came into being in 2010, which provides directives for textbooks • Islamic groups’ demands have resulted in changes to the content of textbooks in recent years • New curriculum review is currently underway, aiming for a 2021 release

Source: Rosser²⁷

*Note: Rosser divides the chronology of the evolution of Bangladeshi textbooks in four stages. Another stage is added to contemporize.

SOCIAL COHESION: A FRAMEWORK

To assess the education system in terms of social cohesion, it is useful to clarify what is meant by the concept.

Etymologically, “cohesion” finds its root in the Latin *cohaes-*, past participle stem of *cohaerere*, “to cleave or stick together.” Social cohesion refers to a social phenomenon based on “extent of connectedness and solidarity among groups in society.”²⁸ Human characteristics, values, and beliefs that bring individuals, groups, and communities together have received scholarly attention for decades. Le Bon’s²⁹ theory of collective behavior and contagion looked at group and community typologies and their psychological characteristics.³⁰ Freud saw social cohesion as based on shared characteristics among individuals in groups.³¹ Schneider and McDougall³² focused on “intrinsic collective mentality with levels of reciprocity and a common way of feeling and thinking” as features of social cohesion.³³ Festinger, Back, and Schachter saw the importance of the “desire of individuals to maintain their affiliation with a group” as one of the main determinants of social cohesion.³⁴ French sociologist Durkheim envisioned a cohesive society based on mutual moral support.³⁵ The more recent emphasis (1990s onwards) on procedural aspects of social cohesion is reflected in a definition used by scholar Judith Maxwell: “Social cohesion involves building shared values and communities of interpretation, reducing disparities in wealth and income, and generally enabling people to have a sense that they are engaged in a common enterprise, facing shared challenges, and that they are members of the same community.”³⁶

Contemporary conceptualizations of social cohesion focus on inclusivity and redistributive economic growth for all. One scholar highlights the importance of “developing a community of shared values, shared challenges, and equal opportunity ... based on a sense of trust, hope, and reciprocity.”³⁷ A cohesive society is capable of ensuring “wellbeing of all its members, minimizing disparities, and avoiding marginalization.”³⁸ The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) sees a society as cohesive “if it works towards the well-being of all its members, fights exclusion and marginalization, creates a sense of belonging, promotes trust, and offers its members the opportunity of upward social mobility.”³⁹

Definitions and conceptualizations of social cohesion have sharpened over the years, but existing definitions still fall short of addressing the multiplicity of values and cultures that characterize sociopolitical environments. Risks include minimizing appreciations of levels of conflict in a society⁴⁰ or assuming too much trust among groups who possess different cultures and values.⁴¹ The definitions in use may fall short of accounting for the shifting nature of the societies today.⁴² Cultural diversities and power relations among groups are often overshadowed by the veil of an ideology of cohesive society. One comprehensive definition of social cohesion aims to address these shortcomings:

The ongoing process of developing well-being, sense of belonging, and voluntary social participation of the members of society, developing communities that tolerate and promote a multiplicity of values and cultures, and granting at the same time equal rights and opportunities in society.⁴³

This definition reconnects to discussions about social institutions such as schools and their roles in social development, which situate the social cohesion function of education at the heart of each nation’s education system and highlight it as a main reason why nations invest in public schooling.⁴⁴ Education is increasingly expected to promote inclusion and cohesion at the school, community, and larger society levels, in the face of perceived threats to social integration such as increased pluralism, individualism, multiculturalism, civic apathy, immigration, and ethno-religious and civic conflict.⁴⁵

Education's role in maintaining social integration has risen on policy agendas in recent decades⁴⁶ alongside a significant shift in the ontology and epistemology of social cohesion: from social solidarity to social inclusion based on labor market forces; from a macro-societal perspective to a micro-level individual and community-focused approach to social cohesion; and from a social integration theory to a social capital theory of social cohesion. Education's role in social cohesion-related discussions has also changed towards a notion that the bedrock of social capital theory lies on the economic benefits of education as a socializing force.⁴⁷

This review takes a sociocultural approach, rather than a social capital approach, to social cohesion. In that spirit, it highlights cohesion in society at large that involves not only bonding and trust within particular groups and communities but also between them. It also entails some common sense of citizenship and values. It is thus inevitably concerned with questions of power and resource distribution, conflict and conflict resolution, and the state forms, institutions, ideologies, and cultures that shape these in any given country.⁴⁸ This understanding goes beyond forging bonds of trust between diverse groups within society. It also seeks substantive points of commonality that individuals identify with, linking them together in the single cohesive whole of the society. It addresses critiques of earlier conceptions of social cohesion that did not adequately appreciate the dynamism of social difference and the ways this affects social cohesion. Viewing social cohesion as an ongoing process wherein diverse groups tolerate and promote difference connects it to the concept of pluralism. In its descriptive sense, pluralism refers to an empirical reality of diversity. It may also entail the prescriptive norms of tolerance, respect, and understanding. In this prescriptive sense, pluralism not only positively affirms diversity but also drives active engagement across diverse groups, fosters dialogue across social divides, and builds social cohesion. Hence, pluralism may be conceptualized as the process of constructing the base for a shared social identity among diverse groups.

Diverse identities are pertinent at different strata of society, that is, at the individual, group, national, and global levels. They reflect grouping along specific dimensions: cultural, ethnic, religious, linguistic, and gender typologies. In a normative inquiry into shared values a broad view of contemporary Bangladeshi society, and particularly the education system, is instructive. Today's Bangladeshi education system, with its many secular and religious education providers, has been shaped by the country's historical vicissitudes. Unanswered questions and sometimes fractious debates pivot around different groups' visions of education and their differing modes of delivery.

In the mosaic of multiple providers and visions, questions about values have evoked particular reflections in recent years. This results from necessities inherent in a fast-developing nation like Bangladesh, whose economic growth demands disrupting shifts in society that affect human and ethical values. Key foundational and educational policy documents such as the Constitution of Bangladesh, the Education Policy of 2010, the Vision 2021, and Vision 2041 espouse nationalism, social justice, democracy, and secularism as the bedrock of political and developmental doctrines. Fundamental rights and freedoms enshrined in the Bangladesh Constitution and the international human rights principles to which Bangladesh is committed together embody a set of values that undergird Bangladeshi society.

Moreover, all the enacted education policy and other aspirational documents highlight the importance of promoting ethics, values, and moral development of children and youth. Bangladesh has adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development where global citizenship education (GCED) is a part. GCED aims to develop understanding, skills, and values that students need to operate in resolving the interconnected challenges of the twenty-first century.

Today's Bangladeshi education system, with its many secular and religious education providers, has been shaped by the country's historical vicissitudes. Unanswered questions and sometimes fractious debates pivot around different groups' visions of education and their differing modes of delivery.

This review addresses only a fraction of the nation's values that are at stake. It is neither exhaustive nor representative of any hierarchy among values. Despite Bangladesh's strong commitment to a democratic, pluralistic, and socially cohesive society, its national ethos is still paradoxical, contradictory, and highly contested. The focus here is on the values of human rights, social justice, minority rights, discrimination, equality, and interdependence between different groups as a set of values especially pertinent to the question of social cohesion.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This review applied a qualitative content analysis method in examining how Bangladeshi national curricula and Quomi madrasa textbooks reflect the ideologies of social cohesion, pluralism, and diversity. Textbooks are important cultural artifacts in the educational process, where narratives and stories are purposefully selected for children who go through a process of socioemotional “structured becoming” during their school years.⁴⁹ School textbooks, then, are intentionally designed to promote national identity, ethos, citizenship, and patriotism among children. Textbooks, as the primary site for transmission of knowledge, are powerful instruments in creating shared social constructs and in the enterprise of nation-building.⁵⁰ We see schools as sites of sociocultural reproduction of power and privilege where textbooks are part. Since the Bangladeshi education system is highly diverse but centralized, a comparative qualitative content analysis method was applied to understand how Bangladeshi national curriculum and parallel madrasa curriculums portray sociocultural differences and diversity in terms of identities and values in selected textbooks.

Qualitative content analysis involves the close reading of small amounts of texts, with interpretation by the analyst and contextualizing it in new narratives.⁵¹ This approach involves a hermeneutic, reader response-oriented research stance, and so can be critical as well.⁵²

We selected 33 literature/language, social science, and religion textbooks from Grades 3, 5, and 7 from both Quomi and Aliya streams and analyzed dialogues, descriptive contents, and illustrations. The rationale for selecting both Bangla and English literature and language textbooks is that children's literature and language textbooks have been historically linked to identity formation, negotiation, and reproduction.⁵³ During recent debates over Bangladeshi curriculum, literature books were at the forefront.⁵⁴ In selecting social sciences textbooks, there is a general consensus among scholars that social science books are usually the most contentious due to purposefully selected historiography of a country, regions, social philosophies, and practices. One scholar maintains that, “The battles over textbook narratives in Bangladesh epitomize the appropriation and containment of the social studies curriculum by political factions with specific allegiances.”⁵⁵ On the other hand, religious studies textbooks provide important insights about interreligious and gender perspectives along with political indoctrination.⁵⁶ We chose Grades 3, 5, and 7 in order to create a purposeful and balanced sampling of textbooks from both the national Aliya and Quomi curricula. Quomi madrasas only offer non-Islamic subjects up to Grade 8. Our selection of grades and textbooks, then, provide two types of data: how themes of social cohesion, pluralism, identities, and values are addressed in one grade across the subjects and if/how there is a linear progression across the grades. We particularly framed our analytical framework in three major categories: identity, diversity and pluralism, and social cohesion. These three categories are then divided into several thematic subgroups (see Table 2).

School textbooks, then, are intentionally designed to promote national identity, ethos, citizenship, and patriotism among children. Textbooks, as the primary site for transmission of knowledge, are powerful instruments in creating shared social constructs and in the enterprise of nation-building.

TABLE 02**Analytical Framework**

Analytical Frame		
Thematic Category	Subcomponents	Items to Identify
Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual identity • Group identity • National identity • Global identity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who is who and how are personal, social, national, and global identities constructed by the self and others? • Distortions and stereotypes • Balance of material distribution
Diversity and Pluralism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural • Religious • Ethnic • Linguistic • Gender • Attitude and perspectives toward diversity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Representation of cultural diversity • Interests in other cultures • Approval and tolerance for other cultures • Recognition of multicultural situations in Bangladesh • Approval of values of cultural diversity • Desirable perspectives on culture • Criticism of inappropriate perspectives toward culture • Distortions and stereotypes • Balance of material distribution
Social Cohesion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interdependence among cultural groups • Sense of social justice • Respect for human rights • Equality • Minority • Discrimination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognition of and actions towards building a cohesive society • Recognition and actions for assuring human rights • Recognition and actions for equality • Types and present conditions of minority • Relationship between/among majority and minority groups • Recognition of and actions for integrating minority groups into larger society • Concept of discrimination • Present conditions and examples of discrimination • Efforts for improvement • Distortions and stereotypes • Balance of material distribution

Source: Adapted from Cho and Park⁵⁷

FINDINGS

This section tabulates the main findings from the textbook review, starting with findings from a review of National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) textbooks, followed by the Quomi findings.

TABLE 03

NCTB Bangla

NCTB Bangla		
Theme	Thematic Component	Findings
Social Cohesion	Construction of Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual identity highlights national, class, familial, and moral values and reflects broad ideologies of patriotism, heteronormativity, and majoritarianism • National identity constructed through national flag, national anthem, national heroes, the country's unique natural beauty and resources, and unadulterated Bangladeshi rural life • Global identity projected as pan-Islamic with references to Islamic icons, the Prophet, and pilgrimage to Mecca • The only non-Bangladeshi identity discussed is the aggressive role of Pakistanis during the Liberation War in 1971
	Pluralism and Diversity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Text dominated by representations and experiences of middle-class, rural Muslim families. • Social diversity presented as binaries: ethnic (majoritarian Bengali and ethnic minorities), linguistic (Bangla speaking and non-Bangla speaking), gender (men and women), religious (Muslim and non-Muslim), geographic (rural and urban), political (freedom fighter and Pakistani army) and moral (good and bad) • Bengali ethnic identity predominates • Representations of minority ethnic groups are romanticized and ethnocentric from the dominant group perspective • Gender is balanced in visual representations and characterization • Gender bias towards presenting the experience of boyhood over that of girlhood • Increasing male and female segregation in visual representations past Grade 3 • Gender norms and stereotypes privilege male bodies over female counterparts • Metaphor of care-giving and nurturing motherhood intertwined with national identity
	Socially Cohesive Values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Bangla language textbooks have limited scope to imbue values of diversity and pluralism since the books are dominated by monocultural, monolingualistic, majoritarian, and patriarchal ideals

Source: Data collected for analysis and summarization from NCTB (2019) *Amar Bangla Boi* textbooks for Grades 3 and 5 and *Anondopath* and *Shoptoborna* for Grade 7

TABLE 04
NCTB English

NCTB English		
Theme	Thematic Component	Findings
Social Cohesion	Construction of Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual identity highlights national, class, familial, and moral values and reflects broad ideologies of patriotism, heteronormativity, and majoritarianism • National identity is expressed in reference to the national anthem • This identity is constructed with elements of Bangladesh’s political history including the Liberation War and Bengali cultural heritage, tied to the Language Martyrs’ Day • Global identity is shaped in contrast to and in interaction with Western cultural identities, presenting a Western contribution to the advancement of development and literacy in Bangladesh • A sense of global responsibility is conveyed in the notion of collective responsibility for global challenges like climate change
	Diversity and Pluralism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited representation of social diversity in Bangladeshi society • Bangladeshi culture is largely equated with Bengali culture • Similarities between Bangladeshi culture and global trends are highlighted, but Eastern culture is presented more favorably than Western culture • Bengali ethnic identity predominates • Image of ethnic homogeneity is both textually and visually maintained • Muslim religious identity predominates, but there is also some representation of Hindu religion • These expressions of religious identity are found in the naming of characters and the choice of notable places in a given region of Bangladesh • Gender is balanced in visual representations, but characterization maintains gendered biases • Gender norms and stereotypes privilege male bodies over female counterparts • Some gender tokenism in the inclusion of a few female characters challenging traditional gender roles
	Socially Cohesive Values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difference in socioeconomic class is presented but not connected to notion of social justice • Ideas of moral behavior are discussed, including concepts of sharing, integrity, and commitment • The notion of just deserts is also explored in relation to stealth, solidarity, and indolence • Equality and discrimination emerge in the presentation of intelligence, talent, and shrewdness, while extraordinary ability is implicitly connected to entitlement • Human rights issues such as notions of ownership and culpability are presented as not having exclusive right over one’s own talents and culpability is shown to attach to a group for the actions of an individual group member

Source: Data collected for analysis and summarization from NCTB (2019) *English for Today* textbooks for Grades 3, 5, and 7.

TABLE 05
NCTB Social Studies

NCTB Social Studies		
Theme	Thematic Component	Findings
Social Cohesion	Construction of Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual identity emphasizes attributes of nationality, reflecting the broad ideologies of patriotism, heteronormativity, and majoritarianism • National identity is built through a narrative of Bangladeshi political history that identifies the different group interests that shaped Bangladesh’s struggle for independence against Pakistan • The sense is that Bangladeshi national identity also draws from Bengali cultural identity • Global identity is expressed in the legal and political cooperation of states through the United Nations and a broader sense of global society based on notions on interdependence and mutual regard
	Diversity and Pluralism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited representation of social diversity in Bangladeshi society • Bangladeshi culture is largely equated with Bengali culture, with more emphasis on heritage than contemporary cultural practices • Bengali ethnic identity predominates • Ethnic minorities are discussed as a separate collective, with descriptions of their cultures, lifestyles, religions, languages, and food habits • Major religions in Bangladesh are discussed along with their important festivals and events • Women’s rights and entitlement to opportunities are presented as endowments of the state • Gender equality is articulated as a principle but in practice, the scene of the Liberation War is rife with gender stereotypes (men as the active agents of liberation and women as their peripheral supporters providing food, shelter, and information)
	Socially Cohesive Values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is discussion on human rights which asserts that the state respects human rights and further that women’s rights are those which are recognized as such by the state • Some of the specific human rights mentioned include those concerning the right to education, freedom of movement, equality before the law, freedom of religion and thought, and equal rights for men and women • Child labor is presented as the violation of children’s human rights

Source: Data collected for analysis and summarization from NCTB (2019) *Bangladesh o Bishhoporichoy* textbooks for Grades 3, 5, and 7

TABLE 06

NCTB Islam

NCTB Islam		
Theme	Thematic Component	Findings
Social Cohesion	Construction of Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual identity is shaped from tenets of Islamic faith, emphasizing norms such as obedience to parents, honesty, service to humanity, benevolence towards animals, etc. • Ethical and religious standards are imposed on the reader without space for asserting agency • Sense of Muslim group identity and solidarity predominates • National identity is framed as a part of religious faith, invoking Muhammad’s love and sense of obligation towards his birthplace (Mecca as the norm) • Global identity is pan-Islamic, capturing Muslim-majority parts of the world in its frame • Religious practice is fused with Arabic language, establishing a dependence on Arab culture and a sense of community with Arabs
	Diversity and Pluralism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Muslim culture and Arab culture predominate the texts • Non-Muslims are explicitly described to be deviants • A Jewish character in the text is described as being irresponsible, glutinous, and cowardly • Bangla is referred to as “our language” • Dehumanization of the role of the mother in breastfeeding • Idealization of the Prophet in masculine terms • Different prayer rules prescribed for men and women, and women’s posture is depicted is more submissive • Virtue of obeying one’s mother is emphasized
	Socially Cohesive Values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social inequality is recognized, and zakat is prescribed as the remedial measure • Punishment is prescribed for 10-year-olds for failing to pray

Source: Data collected for analysis and summarization from NCTB (2019) *Islam o Noitik Skikhha* textbooks for Grades 3, 5, and 7

TABLE 07
NCTB Hinduism

NCTB Hinduism		
Theme	Thematic Component	Findings
Social Cohesion	Construction of Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual identity is shaped from tenets of Hindu religious faith • Morality is defined by reference to precepts of Hinduism • Saints are described as models of behavior • Hindu group identity is expressed in normative terms • National identity is connected to ideology of patriotism: hardship and sacrifice for one's country are encouraged • A sense of global identity is built through mentions of other parts of the world including Iran, India, and Ireland
	Diversity and Pluralism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hindu religious culture predominates texts • Other religions are mentioned, including Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism • Instruction to follow one's own religion and acknowledge other religions • All religions are described as being different paths to seek the Hindu deity • Concept of God is masculinized • Gender stereotypes concerning male and female roles in the household and public spaces are reinforced • Women are described as the image of God and therefore deserving of respect
	Socially Cohesive Values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Religiously sanctioned violence is legitimized for restoring the balance of good and evil and defending against enemies of Hinduism

Source: Data collected for analysis and summarization from NCTB (2019) *Hindudharmo o Noitik Skikhha* textbooks for Grades 3, 5, and 7

TABLE 08

NCTB Christianity

NCTB Christianity		
Theme	Thematic Component	Findings
Social Cohesion	Construction of Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual identity is based on a Christian worldview that recognizes individual purpose to be seeking, loving, and praising God • The uniformity of Christian faith is asserted and solidarity among Christians is encouraged • National identity is forged from patriotism and nationalism, and Christians' contribution to Bangladesh's independence is highlighted • A sense of national superiority is fostered • Global identity is based on the sense of belonging to the global Christian community
	Diversity and Pluralism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Christianity and Christian religious practices permeate the texts • A primary difference between males and females is stated to lie in greater physical strength of the former, and difference in clothing is also mentioned • The father in a family is presented as the supreme, authoritative figure
	Socially Cohesive Values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ideas of social justice, human rights, and equality are present in the texts, but there are moral imperatives to act rather than specific entitlements

Source: Data collected for analysis and summarization from NCTB (2019) *Christodhormo o Noitik Skikbha* textbooks for Grades 3, 5, and 7

TABLE 09
NCTB Buddhism

NCTB Buddhism		
Theme	Thematic Component	Findings
Social Cohesion	Construction of Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual identity emphasizes merit, empathy, moderation, frugality, civic duty, and ethical conduct based on the character of Buddha • Buddhist group identity is prominent • National identity ties together Bengali group identity (Language Movement) and the Liberation War to create a narrative of a homogenous nation • Global identity encompasses the presence of Buddhists around the world, including Thailand, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and India
	Diversity and Pluralism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The distinctness of Buddhist faith is identified with notions of purity, integrity, discipline, welfare, and safety • Non-Buddhists are not to be denigrated or ill-treated • Buddhism and its adherents are presented being intrinsically of good moral character • Gender stereotypes in household roles are maintained, and male children are presented as being more important than female children
	Socially Cohesive Values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concept of karma posits that those who are disabled, physically unattractive, or born into disadvantageous life circumstances deserve their ill-fortune • Donation is prescribed as a justice measure for social inequality • Civil society and duty of care are encouraged • Equality of all living beings is promoted

Source: Data collected for analysis and summarization from NCTB (2019) *Buddhobhormo o Noitik Skikbha* textbooks for Grades 3, 5, and 7

TABLE 10**Quomi Bangla**

Quomi Bangla		
Theme	Thematic Component	Findings
Social Cohesion	Construction of Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual identity highlights Islamic values, and moral character is defined according to Islamic terms • Muslim group identity is expressed through descriptions of rituals and Islamic teachings, and the sense of Muslim superiority is pronounced • National identity is couched in Islamic terms as patriotism and described as a sunnah of the Prophet • The country's unique natural beauty and resources and unadulterated Bangladeshi rural life are also referenced • Global identity projected as pan-Islamic with references to the Prophet and pilgrimage to Mecca
	Diversity and Pluralism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Middle Eastern and Arab cultural practices feature prominently • A small fraction of the content of each book is authored by non-Muslim writers • Islam is presented as the comprehensive truth, while other religions are suggested as containing partial truths • Non-Muslim Arabs during the Prophet's time described as bloodthirsty killers • Some acknowledgement of contributions of Muslim female scholars • Minimal gender diversity: text speaks to male reader
	Socially Cohesive Values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sense of social justice derived from Islamic precepts

Source: Data collected for analysis and summarization from Befaqul Madarisil Arabia Bangladesh (BEFAQ) *Adorsoho Bangla Path* textbooks for Grade 3 and 5 and *Shabitto Shougat* textbook for Grade 7

TABLE 11
Quomi English

Quomi English		
Theme	Thematic Component	Findings
Social Cohesion	Construction of Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual identity highlights Islamic values, and moral character is defined according to Islamic terms • Religious identity and biological sex are identified as key elements of the self • Muslim group identity constructed through Islamic practices and culture, and it includes a subcategory of madrasa students • National identity construed as part of Islamic faith, such that the predominance of Islam in Bangladesh is signified as characteristic of the nation • Global identity projected as pan-Islamic with references to Islamic history and Saudi Arabia
	Diversity and Pluralism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Muslim and Bengali social groups predominant in the texts • One Christian king is mentioned who sought to wage war against Islam • Hindus and British portrayed as historically unjust and oppressive towards Muslims • Bangla is exclusively identified as the mother tongue • Males represented more than females • Males shown as displaying much wider emotional range than females • Father's name and profession accorded more importance than the mother's
	Socially Cohesive Values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social inequality is recognized and zakat is prescribed as remedy • Poor people described as passive beneficiaries • The value of freedom is mentioned

Source: Data collected for analysis and summarization from BEFAQ *My English Book* textbooks for Grades 3, 5, and 7

TABLE 12**Quomi Social Studies**

Quomi Social Studies		
Theme	Thematic Component	Findings
Social Cohesion	Construction of Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual identity highlights Islamic values, and moral character is defined according to Islamic terms • Muslim group identity constructed through Islamic practices and culture • National identity construed as part of Islamic faith, such that the predominance of Islam in Bangladesh is signified as a characteristic of the nation • Global identity projected as pan-Islamic with references to Islamic history and Saudi Arabia
	Diversity and Pluralism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Muslims are portrayed as maintaining good family environment • Hindus are described as historically oppressive • Non-Muslims are described as primitive and superstitious • Bangla is referred to as the mother tongue • Ethnic minorities like Garo, Khasi, and Monipuri discussed in racist and stereotyped language • Gender biases like father construed as principal authority in household and mother as subordinate
	Socially Cohesive Values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children presented as beneficiaries of care and obligated to obey

Source: Data collected for analysis and summarization from BEFAQ *Bhugol o Shomaj Porichiti textbooks* for Grades 3 and 5

TABLE 13**Quomi History**

Quomi History		
Theme	Thematic Component	Findings
Social Cohesion	Construction of Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual identity highlights Islamic values and moral character is defined according to Islamic terms • Muslim group identity constructed through Islamic practices and culture • National identity construed as part of Islamic faith, such that the predominance of Islam in Bangladesh is signified as a characteristic of the nation • Global identity projected as pan-Islamic connecting to a sense of global Muslim brotherhood
	Diversity and Pluralism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Muslims and tenets of Islamic faith predominate • Muslim architecture and literature are highlighted • Non-Muslims are shown to be subjected to degrading treatment • Males are overrepresented compared to females • Males shown as displaying much wider emotional range than females
	Socially Cohesive Values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children presented as owing unwavering obedience to elders

Source: Data collected for analysis and summarization from BEFAQ *Itihas Path* textbooks for Grades 3 and 5

TABLE 14**Quomi Religious Studies**

Quomi Religious Studies		
Theme	Thematic Component	Findings
Social Cohesion	Construction of Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual identity highlights Islamic values, and moral character is defined according to Islamic terms • Muslim group identity constructed through Islamic practices and culture • National identity is expressed in terms of a generic duty to love one’s country and not damage its wealth or resources • Global identity not distinctly present, though references to different prophets across history create the sense of global Muslim presence
	Diversity and Pluralism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Muslims and tenets of Islamic faith predominate • Non-Muslims are described as <i>kafirs</i> (infidel or non-believer) • Islam is presented as the only ethical code
	Socially Cohesive Values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social inequality is recognized, but no measure beyond sympathy towards the poor is advocated • Several examples of non-Islamic practices being punished

Source: Data collected for analysis and summarization from BEFAQ *Islami Tahzeeb* textbook for Pre-Primary to Grade 5.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings from this study frame the broad goals of social sustainability in the local sociohistorical context of Bangladesh. Thus, the study sets a benchmark for assessing progress in fostering social cohesion through the contemporary Bangladeshi education system. In analyzing the extensive set of findings illustrated above, the NCTB and Quomi systems are contrasted to reveal institutional patterns and their normative underpinnings. The analysis groups together findings from the languages, the social sciences and history, and the religions textbooks.

Bangla and English Languages: There are interesting variations both within NCTB language textbooks and between the NCTB and its Quomi counterpart. The most striking difference between the findings from NCTB Bangla and English textbooks lies in different worldviews they project. NCTB Bangla textbooks emphasize a majoritarian ethos drawn from Muslim-Bengali experiences. By contrast NCTB English textbooks draw on Western perspectives, bringing the national in conversation with the international in a globalized world. However, diversity within Bangladeshi society is still obscured in these texts. On the other hand, the Islamic worldview is deeply entrenched in both Quomi Bangla and English textbooks. The Quomi system shapes identity at all levels by invoking precepts of Islamic faith and fixates wholly on instilling core Islamic teachings, limiting the practical relevance of these texts from the perspective of language-learning. Moreover, the exclusive focus on projecting an Islamic worldview obscures alternative perspectives and ways of life. This limited horizon of exposure is unlikely to foster an appreciation for diverse religions and cultures.

Social Studies and History: NCTB social studies texts lay greater emphasis on projecting a particular image of social diversity in Bangladesh that recognizes minority groups only in the shadows of the dominant majority. Thus, for instance, the Grade 7 social studies textbook states that the birth of a free Bangladesh was the most momentous event in the life of Bengalis as a nation, thereby excluding the experiences of all non-Bengali Bangladeshi ethnicities. A similar trend is observed in Quomi social studies and history texts, except where the NCTB books offer token mentions of minorities. Quomi texts take this further with the use of stereotypical and degrading language. For example, the Grade 5 social studies textbook in the Quomi stream uses the denigrating term *upojati* to refer to Bangladesh’s ethnic minorities.

Religions: Within the NCTB system, the four major religions in Bangladesh are offered in separate textbooks. Each text offers a view of the particular religion in an isolated orbit, proclaiming its superiority and explicitly or implicitly denigrating other faiths. There is only a single text in the Quomi system, which similarly aggrandizes Islam and rebukes non-Muslims.

Based on these broad trends, it appears that the contemporary Bangladeshi education system is suited more to exacerbating social tensions than to improving them for enhanced social cohesion. The distinct ideological undercurrents to these different texts are also visible, signifying the need for a coherent strategy for recasting the education framework to better fulfil the social purpose of education to ensure social sustainability in Bangladesh.

It appears that the contemporary Bangladeshi education system is suited more to exacerbating social tensions than to improving them for enhanced social cohesion.

The analysis of textbooks evokes the paradoxical nature of the constitution of Bangladesh: On one hand it espouses the idea of secularism and inclusive society regardless of religion, race, and ethnicity; and on the other it highlights the Muslim majoritarian ethos. The NCTB textbooks in particular make significant attempts to include the country’s sociocultural diversity. There are conscious efforts to become gender neutral, albeit heteronormatively, in the visual representations of bodies. Both language and social studies textbooks identify the ethnic and linguistic diversity of the country. The religion textbooks generally strive for ethical living, handpicking appropriate examples of peace and justice from the respective religion. However, the textbooks also clearly spread values of middle-class Bengali Muslim nationalism across the pages. Both language and social studies textbooks valorize a “Bengali spirit” narrative as a biproduct of two successful historical movements—the Language Movement of 1952 and the Liberation War of 1971. This narrative is problematic on at least two fronts. It provides a truncated and manipulated version of history, and it otherizes and marginalizes non-Bengali, non-Muslim, and non-Bengali speaking minorities of the country.

Although Bangladeshi national curricular textbooks are often lauded for being less communal than other South Asian countries such as Pakistan,⁵⁸ the religion textbooks are not bereft of different modes of othering. Religious studies are mandatory in the national curriculum, where adherents of four major faiths are permitted to study their own religion textbooks, which is an example of Bangladesh’s commitment to secular and pluralistic principles at schools. However, a closer look at the textbook materials shows that there are hardly any opportunities and avenues for inter- and intra-religious dialogues in and outside of the classroom. The books are often didactic in their approaches to teaching religious dogmas. Each book glorifies its adhering religion in developing a pan-religious identity that crosses national borders. Since children are highly susceptible to the knowledge transmitted through textbooks, the religion textbooks may perpetuate an impression of superiority resulting in social othering and exclusion, given that each tradition implicitly or explicitly asserts its own superiority in the textbooks. In rural settings, most of the schools do not have a religious studies teacher, which then raises questions as to the actual effectiveness of these books for the children. Moreover, the availability of religious studies textbooks based on four major religions also marginalizes children from Bangladesh’s indigenous and folk religious traditions.

The textbooks often carefully omit discussion on social tensions and crises among different social groups inside the country as well as around the country's borders. For example, there is hardly any mention about the power imbalances between the majority and minority groups. Oppressions based on ethnic and religious identities, international tensions between Myanmar and Bangladesh and between Bangladesh and India, exodus of Hindus from Bangladesh, and insecurities of the intra-religious factions are absent in the textbooks. Similarly, other social problems such as gender-based violence, income inequality, lack of political representations and stability, human trafficking, and international and home-grown terrorism are also either not mentioned or not discussed in greater details in the textbooks.

Studies have shown that children are usually aware of the social ills around them, which they pick up from non-formal learning cues.⁵⁹ Textbooks could provide a more nuanced and systematic approach to addressing these social justice issues, offering opportunities to engage children in critical thinking and problem-solving activities.

The Quomi madrasa textbooks that are analyzed for this review also reveal similar areas in need of improvement. It is important to note that: 1) the "secular" subject textbooks of Quomi stream are generally auxiliary textbooks in addition to their core Dawra-i-Hadith curriculum; 2) there is no data on the actual reach of these textbooks. Otherwise known for their orthodox Islamic curriculum, Quomi texts do not make a conscious effort to include non-prejudiced information about the socioculturally diverse groups based on race, ethnicity, and religion. Other religious groups are often mentioned in negative terms as historically oppressors of Muslims. The books use limited numbers of illustrations of non-animated objects as well as (intentionally made inanimate) living things. Illustrations and visual aids have been used in textbooks for hundreds of years and serve major learning purposes such as to make the learning situations concrete and relatable; increase student interest, curiosity, and concentration; visually represent an action, object, and process; standardize the message; provide student-teacher learning materials feedback; and enhance creativity in children.⁶⁰ The Quomi textbooks could creatively use Islamic art traditions such as calligraphy to make the textbooks more visually appealing.

Both NCTB and Quomi streams give low priority to gender issues in their respective textbooks. Since Bangladesh's achievement in closing gender gaps in primary and secondary school enrollment is considered as an international role model, NCTB textbooks are consistent with the thrust towards "ungendering" access to education. The educational content also shows clear progress in correcting the gender imbalance in visual representations in the textbooks. The gender theme appears at different levels in the textbooks. At the macro level, an all-encompassing, evergreen, and generous mother figure has been established as a metaphor for a unifying nationhood, especially in the Bangla language and literature textbooks. Other gender roles are often marred with stereotypes and patriarchy at the social and individual levels. The English language and social sciences textbooks often offer a more diverse range of roles for female characters. Quomi textbooks overtly propagate heteronormative gender roles in the context of Bangladesh.

CONCLUSIONS AND PROPOSED NEXT STEPS

The devastating public health impact of the COVID-19 crisis is sending destabilizing shockwaves across all economic, social, and cultural institutions, deepening existing fissures in Bangladeshi society. Socially cohesive education thus takes on heightened importance for Bangladesh if it is to maintain its momentum towards achieving the SDGs.

This review reveals deep normative gaps in the values espoused and propagated, both through the government-run NCTB system and the autonomous Quomi system. The textbooks generally take diverse

approaches to national, social, and individual identities. NCTB textbooks reflect a tension between secular, nonsectarian, democratic values, and Muslim majoritarian expectations. Religion textbooks focus only on each religion, barring any opportunity to teach and learn about religions comparatively. The books do not critically discuss social problems. While the NCTB books endeavor to balance representation of males and females quantitatively, gender stereotypes as well as prejudices prevail between covers of the selected books. Quomi textbooks tend to suffer from larger pedagogical and axiological challenges. From the overwhelming emphasis on instilling an Islamic worldview at the expense of broader educational aims, to the entrenchment of heteronormativity and majoritarianism, there are serious impediments to fostering social cohesion through the Quomi education stream.

These broad conclusions offer a benchmark for appraising the education system's contribution towards enhancing social cohesion in Bangladesh and for supporting appropriate translations of global standards into local measures of progress. The normative gaps highlighted through this analytical exercise merit further research. An obvious next step is to connect these analyses to larger bodies of scholarship on processes for identity construction and promotion of pluralism and socially cohesive values to illuminate the specific contours of normative gaps in textbooks and the ways they might be inimical to cultivating social cohesion. Moreover, while textbooks are an obvious portal into the education process, various other tools can yield rich findings on the research questions that have guided this review. Other avenues for research to explore to advance the aims of socially cohesive education include classroom observation and studies on pedagogy, teacher training, and school culture.

From a policy perspective, backward designing the textbooks could be an effective strategy for either updating the existing textbooks or rewriting them with a clear and consensual vision of a sustainably cohesive society in the Bangladesh context. In this strategy, every lesson and activity should have defined learning outcomes that speak directly to diversity and pluralism themes. With such a backward design, a modular approach could stitch together the granular outcomes under a broader social cohesion framework. Textbook writers may require ongoing training and support throughout the process. Thus, by taking the next steps in research and policy outlined here, the benchmarks established through this analysis could guide innovative approaches to understanding and overcoming the impediments to social cohesion in Bangladesh.

From a policy perspective, backward designing the textbooks could be an effective strategy for either updating the existing textbooks or rewriting them with a clear and consensual vision of a sustainably cohesive society in the Bangladesh context.

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