

Final Report of Dirha Suchana Project

(August '02 -- January '05)



A Group of Children in the Life Long Journal of ...



FIVDB and Save the Children USA



Dirha Suchana Project

Introduction

Aiming at positive impact on learning achievement the Dirha Suchana Project had been facilitating interventions since August 2002 that ensure disadvantaged children get off to a strong start in the life-long journey of learning: the name itself translates as Strong Beginnings and this was just what the project is all about. The project facilitated the access of disadvantaged children, particularly girls, in geographically remote rural settings in Sylhet Sadar, Zakigonj and Kanaighat of Sylhet and Nasiragar of Brahmanbaria district, to quality learning opportunities. Interventions that had been implemented in primary schools (70) and their catchments are in line with three Intermediate Results (IR), those were -

- IR - 1:** Children ready for school
- IR - 2:** Schools ready for children with innovative learning methodologies
- IR - 3:** Parents & community are empowered to support school & education.

From the very beginning, the implementation process was an evolving one: it created room for the potential stakeholders to take part in planning and implementing the different activities in their schools and communities. This strategy of giving ownership to the schools and communities from the very beginning was an element of the project's success. Ownership was given to a greater or lesser extent depending on the intervention but was then increased gradually over the period of the project. This ownership and empowerment of the peoples gave them a feeling of self worth. This particularly shows by the amazing amount of volunteerism the project generated. In addition the project had a great deal in facilitating the partnership among the education stakeholders which gives an aspiration of common goal to be achieved. It is only to be hoped that it will be reflected in the sustained activities over the months and years to come.

OVERVIEW OF THE FIRST YEAR

(Sept '02 – Aug '03)

In the first year the project had keen attention on building rapport with education stakeholders in school and community and also focused on consistent development of staffs' capacity alongside the implementation of project activities. To this end the sequential key steps were -

1. Project launching ceremony
2. Area and School selection (considering the disadvantaged condition and their interest)
3. DS Project Orientation workshop at upazilla level
4. Planning meeting with schools and SMCs
5. Facilitate the following project intervention in primary schools and communities
 - i. *Reception and Orientation day (for grade 1 student) at primary Schools*
 - ii. *Set up and run (70+2 additional) 72 Home Based Pre-school (HBPS) with more than 1450 children (5+) in the adjacent community of each primary School*
 - iii. *HBPS teachers capacity development through a series of formal and informal training*
 - iv. *Facilitate Parenting program (include Parenting session and Reading for Children) with more than 1450 parents of HBPS children*
 - v. *Explore opportunity, set up and run Shishu Class with 850 children (5+) in 28 Primary School along with school and SMC*
 - vi. *Shishu teachers' (volunteer) capacity building through a series of formal and informal training*
 - vii. *Facilitated Reading Buddy & Mentoring (RBM) in 53 school (20 GPS+32 FIVDB school) with more than 6400 children and 50 school teacher.*
 - viii. *Mobilized community people through CILS (Community Information & Learning Sharing) and organized 39 SAG (School Assistance Groups). They activated themselves and started mobilizing community resources and effort for school & education improvement.*
 - ix. *Facilitated Active Teaching Learning process in grade I & II through formal training workshop and non-training element (facilitation) with school teachers. Aim was to change their perception and attitude in favor of active teaching learning. To this end the project helped them in trying out different innovative techniques adopt accordingly.*

The project also undertook the following major activities under study and research in that period:

- i. Baseline assessment in the target areas
- ii. Conduct Shishu class inventory
- iii. Conduct Action Research on Reading Buddy and Mentoring Approach
- iv. Prospective study of the qualitative component of the baseline

OVERVIEW OF THE SECOND YEAR **(Sept '03– Aug '04)**

Considering the project life span (2 years), the Dirha Suchana Project had a keen attention in the second year to scale up all interventions and activities in the 70 Primary schools and their communities. The project had also been keen to strengthen the capacity of education stakeholders *(like empowering HBPS mgt. committee and shifting more responsibility to them or capacity building of SAGs which made them activated in mobilizing the community and advocacy in favor of their school improvement plan)*. The project also focused in developing partnership among education stakeholder so that actors can play their role in a coordinated way in favor of better education opportunity.

In the second year the project reviewed and accordingly strengthened the implementation process and quality of different interventions. Some of the changes were like: introducing science & environmental learning opportunities in HBPS and Shishu class curriculum, encouraging school & SAG to arrange and offer the Reception & Orientation day for grade – 1 student in a different way considering the pervious year, reduced the size of the Reading Buddy and Mentoring groups (from 30 pair to 20 pair) for smooth book transaction and introduce one more leader in each group (so one from grade – IV & another one fro grade V) with vital role.

During the first part of the second year the project facilitated transition of preschool children (HBPS & Shishu Class) to the respective primary school. During this period the School Assistance Groups (SAG) were formed in the respective schools and started working alongside the school and SMCs to mobilize parents and community people for their active participation in school improvement. The project had its Annual Review Workshop (14-15 Jan '04) in which different stakeholders, along with DS staff from three project areas shared their findings, lessons learned and challenges of the last year. The review highlighted the importance of ownership of the DS intervention in the primary schools by the community, local level government officials as well as by the School Management Committee.

During the Second part of the 2nd year the project initiated the process of encouraging the concerned stakeholders to gradually takeover more responsibility and be shifted in a New Phase where they will be the owner and capable to get support from other source like SUCCEED project.

In this period the devastating flood caused serious disruption of normal life and all activities related with education in July and August. A total of 58 primary schools (out of 70) were suspended for a total period of 886 School Days (varies from 5 to 35 days). Similarly 53 HBPS had to suspend their work for a total period of 848 HBPS days.

During the flooding period the project kept in regular touch with the schools and communities. The project did some flood emergency respond along with the community people like cleaning & bleaching of school and repairing of school tube well & latrine with the support from NGO Forum and Save the Children-USA.

During the last two quarter (Sept '04 – Jan '05) the project concentrated on strengthening the ownership and facilitating the preparatory work for the coming year (beyond the project life) with the stakeholder (mainly the school, SAG and the HBPS Operation Committee). The project arranged three Result Sharing workshops with GO – NGO educational personnel at three project areas and a central (final) one to share achievements, lessons learned and aspirations.

The Dirha Suchana Project moved forward to reach ultimately almost 50,000 children, parents, teachers and community leaders in the targeted area in northeastern Bangladesh. The breakups of the targeted audiences are projected in the following table:

Dirha Suchana Project Audiences

Interventions Activates /	Year 2003	Year 2004	Total
ECD (Early Childhood Dev):			
HBPS Children	1473	1486	
Shishu Children	853	888	
Total ECD	2326	2374	4700
EPE (Early Primary Ed):			
Student taught through ATL technique	1305	7452	
Teacher trained on Active Teaching Learning	48	117	
Reading Buddy & Mentoring (RBM)	5191	12888	
Reception & Orientation	2000	3000	
Total EPE (Early Primary Ed)	8544	23457	31999
Parents and Community people			
Total Parents & Community People involved with DS interventions (SAG, parenting program etc.)	5538	11476	17014
G. Total			53713

Note:

1. Repetition of the number in the target audience is little more than 3650; the project trained or involved around **50,000** stakeholders during its operation period (including preschool & school student, teachers, parents, community people like SMC & SAG members etc.)
2. Detail quantities achievement are presented in the Result Framework in the appendix-1

Key outcomes of the project

The Dirha Suchana Project conducted a longitudinal study through out its life span to know the changes over time in the target schools, success of the children with preschool (ECD) experience, community awareness and parents' commitment towards improving quality education.

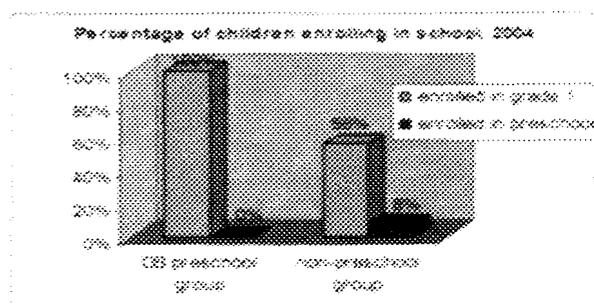
Summary of final research results

This summary report discusses the results of research on the Dirha Suchana (DS) project, which ended in January 2005. The research asked the following questions:

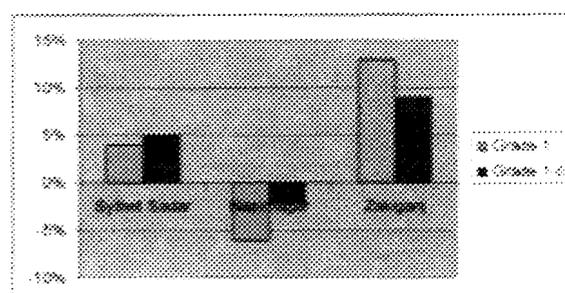
- What change is there over time in the target schools in students' enrollment, attendance, school retention and examination results?
- What difference is there in the success of children with different (or no) preschool experience?
- What changes are there in classroom behavior and the teaching/learning environment?
- What changes are there in parents awareness and involvement?
- What changes were there in community involvement and commitment to quality education?

Findings are drawn from several research studies undertaken in each of the three target areas: Zakiganj, Sylhet Sadar and Nasirnagar: a tracking of core educational indicators for the 70 target schools, 2001-2004; a comparison of a sample of children (n=560) with different preschool experiences; case studies tracking a sub-sample of these children through grade 1; classroom assessments at different points in time; an evaluation of the reading buddy study; an evaluation of parent and community involvement; as well as conversations with a variety of stakeholders.

- The two sets of preschools established by DS in the three target areas – community-based HBPS centers and school-based Sishu Classes – were both well received by communities. After some initial skepticism about the non-academic quality of the program, parents came to feel that their children learned a lot through play, songs and stories, and they pointed especially to their gains in confidence and self-discipline, and their enthusiasm for learning. Teachers also saw them friendly, self assured and well prepared for school. Children themselves experienced preschool as a joyful learning experience. The determination of communities to keep these programs running even in the absence of formal support is a testimony to the impact they have had in the minds of local people.
- 100% preschool sample children enrolled in grade 1 (with the exception of 6 who transferred out of the area). Only 56 percent of non-preschool sample children (NPS) enrolled in grade 1, while an additional 8 percent enrolled in a preschool. In all, 36 percent of NPS children were enrolled in no-program in 2005.



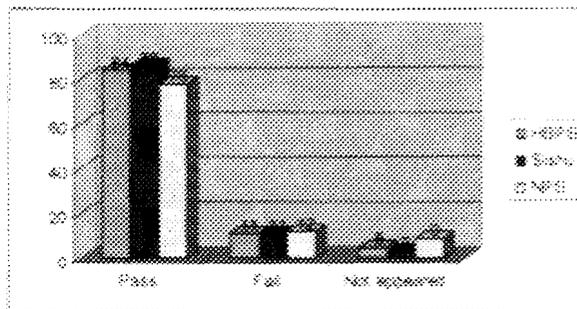
Enrollment in grade 1, 2004



Change in attendance by area, 2001-2004

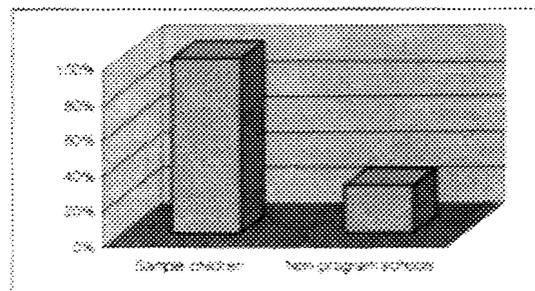
- There was a highly significant ($P < .001$) increase in attendance in the target schools between 2001 and 2004 – from 60 to 66 percent in grade 1, and from 62 to 67 percent in grades 1-5. This improvement was concentrated in Zakiganj and in Sylhet Sadar ($P < .001$). Attendance in Nasirnagar fell during the project period, although not by a significant amount. Overall, preschool children had significantly higher attendance rates than non-preschool children ($P < .001$).

- Preschool children as a combined group passed at a significantly higher rate than non-preschool children ($P=0.037$). Both HBPS and NPS children did significantly better in Zakiganj than in the other two areas.
- Sample children, as a group, had better pass rates than the larger grade 1 population (82 vs 69 percent). In part this can be explained by the relatively higher representation of preschool children in the sample group.
- No significant difference could be found between boys and girls in any area, with one exception – sample boys had significantly higher marks in math than sample girls. Children from extremely poor households and children with illiterate mothers had significantly lower pass rates ($P<0.05$).
- The highly significant differences between Zakiganj and the other target areas in almost all quantifiable measures is related by a number of staff to the greater involvement and team spirit of the Zakiganj field staff, who had shared living quarters in this isolated site and developed a good coordination; and also to the greater responsiveness and higher level of cooperation on the part of community members, teachers and school officials (which may, in turn have been a response to the higher level of team commitment.)
- The results of Nasirnagar which is comparatively poor need further investigation.



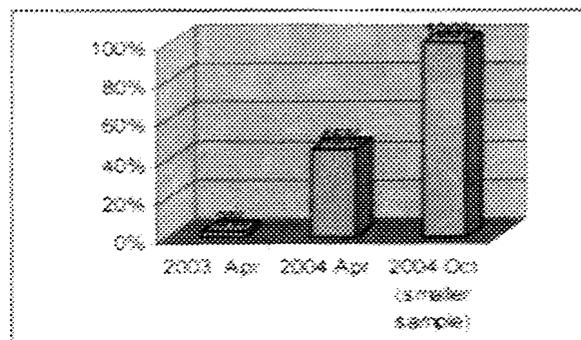
Exam results for grade 1 by preschool group (2004)

- All the sample children, both preschool graduates and non-preschool children, re-enrolled in school in 2005, except for 7 who moved away. Seventeen percent (17%) of these children repeated grade 1, but all of them have returned to school. This compares very favorably to the average 27 percent grade 1 dropout rate recorded by the government education offices for these areas.



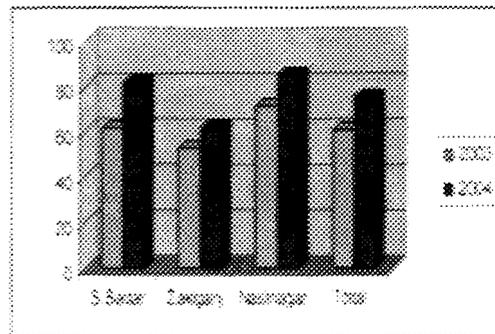
2005 re-enrollment of 2004 grade 1 children

- Classroom assessments conducted in April 2003 and April 2004 in 19 schools, and again in October 2004 in 8 schools, indicate relatively little change in teacher preparation, but some marked change in the teaching methods observed, with greater attention being given to discussion and group work. The greatest changes were seen were in the area of teacher interactions with children and in children's behavior. By the end of the program, the majority of teachers were rated as friendly, responsive, encouraging and patient, and the majority of children had moved from being passive and unengaged to being lively and involved.



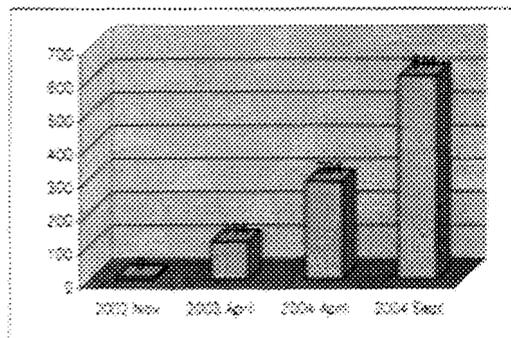
Teachers rated as -
Friendly, responsive, encouraging and patient

- Despite these improvements, staff reports and observation by outside observers suggest that most of the changes in teaching methods had a rote quality, and that there was little evidence of deep seated change. Teachers, on the whole, did not build on the higher readiness and skills of preschool children, rather they saw the competence of these children as an indication that they needed less attention, and the children remained unchallenged.
- Almost all case study children, including those who attended preschool, said that it was difficult to keep up with grade 1 work unless they received extra help outside of school. Almost all case study parents expressed anxiety at their capacity to provide this help themselves, or to pay for extra help from a tutor.
- The reading buddy program, while a welcome addition in most school did not result in a high level of reading activity, but more focus on mentoring approach. Nonetheless, children appeared to enjoy the books, and parents were reported to appreciate the relationships encouraged between children by this program.
- The DS project resulted in higher parent awareness of their role in their children's education and a greater willingness to take that role seriously. In part this can be related to the preschool exposure and in part to the reception and orientation day activities, which welcomed parents as full partners in the school. Parent visits to their children's teachers were estimated by teachers to have increased by between 10 and 20 percent between 2003 and 2004. There was most likely an increase in the first year of the program as well, but this was not documented. The case studies suggested that parents whose children had attended preschool were more inclined to be critical of teachers and schools.



Grade 1 parents (%) visiting the school

- The DS project resulted in a much higher level of community interest and involvement in the schools. Although many communities were initially reserved and even hostile to the involvement of DS staff in the schools, they quickly became drawn into the project in most cases. A tracking of the number of community volunteer hours in the schools over the time of the project reveals an average increase from 9 hours a month (mostly school management committee members) to 614 hours a month (including volunteer sishu teachers, school action group members, reading buddy volunteers).



Average volunteer hours per school

- This community involvement has translated into a determination to keep the various project interventions running after the termination of DS. Almost all schools carried out the reception day activities at the opening of the 2005 school year, and there are plans to continue the reading buddy programs. Every HBPS center and sishu class has re-opened in 2005, although it is not clear how long they will be able to stay open, given the current lack of support.

Conclusions:

The research indicates that the DS project has been marked by strengths and weaknesses, successes and disappointments. But the strengths more than balance the weaknesses, and the disappointments offer a valuable opportunity for learning.

Implications for SUCCEED

The lessons from this research could have been applied constructively to the DS project had it continued. Instead, we need to think about how, potentially, they might apply to SUCCEED. There are some program implications first, and then thoughts about the research and monitoring.

- DS has demonstrated that it is easier to change the behavior and expectations of children and parents than those of teachers. But unless teachers are really equipped to respond to and build on the capacities of more able and prepared children, the potential of these children will obviously not be realized. This seems to call for not only much better and more intensive training than DS was able to provide, but also a willingness on the part of teachers to accept that their current approaches are not accomplishing much. It is not clear what it takes to reach the “hearts and minds” of this many teachers, especially without the full interest and cooperation of local education officials, who set the standard for teacher engagement by controlling jobs and salaries. It is worth noting that Zakiganj, the one really successful area in the DS project, was also the only area in which staff felt they had the full cooperation and enthusiasm of the upazila education officer. It would seem vital for any project of this kind to start by building this sort of relationship.
- It is clear that prepared preschool children have the capacity to stimulate important changes in teacher behavior. It is also clear that the *relative* presence of prepared and unprepared children in a grade 1 classroom has an impact on classroom interactions and management, and that we really do not have a good understanding of these dynamics. Nepal’s findings suggested that a handful of ECD children can quite easily be integrated into a class with positive results for all. BRAC’s findings suggested that a large proportion of preschoolers can result in some real management issues. SUCCEED anticipates that, with two community-based preschools and a school-based preschool for each school catchment area, they should be able to prepare all children for grade 1, which should override these kinds of issues. But if there are schools where this turns out not to be the case, it might be worth considering special support for the non-preschool children. This might entail something as simple as a careful pairing of GPS/NPS children with prepared children who could mentor and support them through the early weeks and months.
- There seems to be a critical need to respond to the very short contact time in grades 1 and 2. DS case studies indicate that even children who had been through preschool felt a strong need for help outside of school in order to understand and complete their work, and those families in most cases were unable to fill this need. This small sample is not enough to generalize from with confidence. However, it does stand to reason that an hour or two of classroom time is not sufficient to accomplish much, especially if teachers are pressed to make it through a set curriculum. Although a broad effort to provide children with more learning opportunities outside of school would be extremely valuable, especially over the long run, it would probably not meet the need these children are expressing for assistance on a daily basis just to help them cope with the next day’s class. There are a number of ways in which fairly structured support outside the classroom could be provided – whether through “homework clubs” which provide some trained support, though literate neighbors who are willing to commit themselves to being available to a handful of children, or through various child-to-child approaches. It seems that the important thing would be for these kinds of arrangements to be structured and formal in terms of their availability, but flexible and ad hoc in terms of their capacity to respond to a range of needs.
- Although attendance improved significantly in DS schools, and although preschool children especially attend school more regularly, attendance can still not be considered adequate when 30 percent of children are absent on any given day. Attendance this low obviously impedes progress for individuals and for the class as a whole, and complicates

the teacher's task. It would be well worth considering some more focused interventions to improve attendance in SUCCEED schools (for instance, some sort of prize or recognition for the class with the best attendance each month, or for any child with 100 percent attendance, highly visible monthly or weekly attendance graphs posted in each school, follow-up for any child absent more than 3 days a month etc..)

Some points regarding research methods:

- Research can serve a number of purposes – providing formal outcomes for donors, or for program learning after the fact; serving as a continual source of learning for program through the involvement of program staff in the research process; contributing to awareness raising, involvement and empowerment for beneficiaries. In early discussions with DS program staff, we decided to make use of DS staff as researchers because of the opportunity this would give them to understand the effects of their work and to give them the chance to reflect on what they were doing. We recognized that this meant using relatively simple tools and competing for time with the demands of the program. DS field staff were extraordinarily committed to making sure data was collected – but the time pressures were extreme. I don't really know whether the benefits outweighed the burden. It would have been interesting to have a debriefing discussion with staff at various levels to determine whether this decision was justified. It would also have been extremely valuable to have much more intensive involvement of program staff at every level in the data analysis – since this is where the real learning comes in. This was a wasted opportunity in terms of staff development. The chance was not available however – an expression of the fact that program needs tend to trump research/learning needs when there is a conflict in time. This is necessarily, then, a partially-informed opinion, but we would feel that some combination of a separate research team along with the involvement of program people in some aspects of data collection might be the most workable situation. Given the few opportunities we had to discuss their findings with field staff carrying out case studies, it is clear that these committed young people were deeply interested in debating the effects of the program, and that they had some valuable insights.
- Involving community people in data collection and sharing results with them is clearly another powerful way to take any program to a new level. The outcomes of the Ds project can be shared with them. We would have recommended strongly at this point that time be taken to disaggregate all results by school, and to present and discuss these findings with the larger school community in the context of the more general findings, so that people would have some sense of where their school stood in relationship to the larger effort. We hope SUCCEED will be able to build in the time for this kind of activity. It seems to me to be an essential avenue for real sustainability.
- A really questionable aspect of the DS research concerned the use of school records rather than standardized test measures. The reasons for this choice have been discussed above. In retrospect, and given more time and considerably more capacity, it would have been wise to use a standardized tool (another reason, perhaps, for bringing in a more skilled research team.) But looking back, we would not have wanted to choose between them; we feel that using the school records was extremely valuable. These are the practical measures that determine whether or not a child moves ahead in school; they indicate how schools and teachers are responding to the interventions; they are measures that schools themselves and local education officials are likely to respond to; the attention given to these measures, in the case of DS, resulted in substantial improvements in school record keeping. A combination of the two would be very useful, and each could shed light on the other (for instance, by demonstrating how standards vary from school to school; by indicating the extent to which standardized measures of learning correlate with school results, and to marks in specific subjects; by pointing to specific ways in which teachers may be failing to build on the skills of their students, and so on.)

- The fact that the Zakiganj and Sylhet Sadar schools will be part of the SUCCEED project presents, as we have discussed, a monitoring dilemma. In the case of Zakiganj especially, these schools are likely to have quite a different baseline, and some thought will have to be given to how to incorporate this. Regardless of how the overall monitoring decisions are made, it seems that a separate small study of these children could serve as a valuable advance guard – a way to demonstrate early on whether impacts are in fact fading in grade two, whether the existing involvement of parents and community members provides a measurable head start even for the non-preschool children, and so on.

Dirha Suchana Project

IR	Major results	Activities	Performance 2003				Performance 2004			
			Target		Achievement		Target		Achievement	
			# of activities	# of participants	# of activity	# of participants	# of activity	# of participants	# of activity	# of participants
IR-1: Children ready for school	Early childhood development and school readiness enhanced in program areas.	1. Home based pre-schools	70	1400	72	1473	70	1400	71	1486
		2. Shishu Classes in schools	30	900	28	853	30	900	30	888
		3. Reading for Children (Parents)	70	1400	72	1372	70	1400	70	1570
		4. Parenting program	70	1400	72	1437	70	1400	70	1575
		5. Meeting with Shishu Parents	29	866	28	835	30	861	46	902
		Sub-total	269	5966	272	6080	270	5961	287	6171

Result Frame work

IR-2: School Ready for Children	Enhanced learning	1. Interactive teaching learning materials and approaches	School involved & Student taught	20 (School)	2265 (Pupil)	12 (School)	1305 (Pupil)	70 (School)	7489 (Pupil)	69 (School)	7452 (Pupil)
			Materials	A set of material for grade -1 Math & Bangla developed and distributed to 70 schools.							
		2. Training for teachers trained	28 (School)	52 (teacher)	28	48	62	105	61 (School)	117 (teacher)	
		3. Teacher manuals on teaching methods developed & distributed	-	-	-	-	2	140	2	150 (copies)	
		4. RHM in schools	53	5017	53	5191	103	10992	103	12886	
		5. Orientation & Reception	28	7027	28	10991	70	22144	70	30011	
Sub-total	129	14361	131	17535	305	40730	303	50166			
IR-3: Parents and Community Ready to support school / education	Community and local government engaged in school improvement.	1. Activate or establish school management committees and PTA	SAC	50	550	50	413	70	770	70	719
			PTA	50	1158	50	710	70	1698	46	804
		2. HHPS mgt. / Operation Comm.	42	330	44	348	42	330	70	629	
		3. Create School Assistance Group (SAG)	39	367	28	293	42	408	39	403	
		4. Share results at national level (also local level)	1 regional	100	1	90	4	350	4 (local & national)	285	
		5. CHS workshop	39	1033	24	567	42	980	39	942	
		6. Comm. Meeting by CHS	15	268	28	5445	69	5174	67	9548	
		6. CHES	-	-	-	-	03	-	05	900	
Sub-total	235	3706	234	7276	338	9360	336	14329			