

Inclusion of Students with Disabilities in Mainstream Primary Education of Bangladesh

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Abstract

Over the years Bangladesh has shown a remarkable progress in primary education. Inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream primary education is also increasing year by year. But in the context of quality teaching-learning for all, Bangladesh is still a far away from effective inclusive education. Inclusive education requires some additional arrangement within the mainstream system that is really a challenge. The present paper reports on the prevailing situation of education of students with disabilities in general education setting and reviews the inclusive education related policies and legislation framework existing in Bangladesh. This paper also suggests further initiatives and strategies that must be taken into consideration for the effective inclusion in primary education of Bangladesh.

Introduction

“Inclusion” in education is about ensuring the rights to education of all learners, regardless of their individual characteristics or difficulties, in order to build a more sustainable society (UNESCO 2003). However this means that inclusive education initiatives often have a particular focus on those groups who have traditionally been excluded from educational opportunities. Among these vulnerable groups, students with disabilities are often the most marginalized within education systems and within society in general. Traditionally, they have experienced exclusion, discrimination and segregation from the mainstream and from their peers. They have often been placed in separate classes and schools or indeed, have been denied access to education of any sort. The inclusive education approach is particularly important for these groups. It is stated that education for the students with disabilities should be provided “in integrated school settings” and “in the general school setting” (UN Convention 1993).

In the recent years Bangladesh has achieved a significant progress in access to basic education. Bangladesh has undertaken various measures with regard to Education for All (EFA). As a result, the net primary enrolment rate has increased from 65% in 1997 to 91% in 2007 (Jahangir 2008). More remarkably, Bangladesh has already achieved one of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of gender parity in primary and secondary education (Nasreen, et. al, 2007). Also, the enrollment ratio of students with disabilities in primary education is increasing year by year (Annual Sector Performance Report, Directorate of Primary Education, 2009). But still there are a lot of shortfalls and

challenges in implementation mechanism for inclusion of students with disabilities and promotion of quality education in mainstream primary education in contemporary Bangladesh.

Policy and Legislation for Education of Students with Disabilities in Bangladesh

The constitution of Bangladesh has clearly spelled in its article 28 (3) that ‘No citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth be subjected to any disability, liability, restriction or condition with regard to access to any place of public entertainment, or admission to any educational institution’.

In 1995 the first national policy for the disability was approved by the Government. An Action Plan to operationalize this policy was approved in 1996. The Bangladesh Parliament adopted its first comprehensive disability legislation, the Bangladesh Persons with Disability Welfare Act 2001, in April of that year. To implement the National Policy on Disability and the Disability Welfare Act, the government formulated a National Action Plan on 24 September 2006. The Action Plan is very comprehensive, involving forty-six Ministries and divisions of the government to undertake specific activities for persons with disabilities (Jahangir, 2008). The National Education Policy 2009 also emphasized on the education for students with disabilities in the general education setting (Ministry of Education, 2009).

Also, Bangladesh is a signatory to the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (Spain, 1994) and the Dakar Framework for Action (Senegal, 2000), and endorsed the Education for All (EFA) framework (Jomtien, Thailand, 1990) and other international conventions such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). All these convention highlighted the right to quality education for students with disabilities.

The Government of Bangladesh adopted Standard Rules for supporting persons with disabilities especially in education in 1993. Bangladesh signed and ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2007. Government signed CRPD’s Optional Protocol in May 2008.

Current Status of Students with Disabilities in Primary Education of Bangladesh

Finding the current status of education of students with disabilities in Bangladesh is a difficult job indeed. The existing statistics are ‘only an approximation of the configuration of types of disabilities’ (Ackerman and Huq 2005). This is acknowledged in the Second Primary Education Development Program (PEDP-II) Action Plan (2005) where it is noted that ‘in Bangladesh disability is not included in any routine data collection or surveillance system.

There is great variation in the statistics on the numbers and types of disabilities in Bangladesh, and in part this may be due to the social stigmatization of the persons with disabilities in the country, as well as issues over classification. It is useful to understand the kinds and relative ranking of disabilities among children aged 6–11, as reported in the PEDP-II Action Plan on Special Needs Children’s Education. The numbers and percentages of students with disabilities are much larger in the Action Plan estimates than are presented in the Baseline Study of PEDP-II. It is mentioned in the PEDP-II Baseline Survey that a total of 45,680 students with mild disabilities are enrolled in primary schools, of whom 25,833 are boys and 19,847 are girls. Only a small number of schools (less than 1 per cent) were reported to have accessibility for students with physical disabilities (Ackerman and Huq 2005).

A study pointed out that ‘girls with disabilities are at high risk of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. Fear of such abuse often dissuades parents from sending their daughters to school’ (Centre for Services and Information on Disability, 2004). A study conducted by the Directorate of Primary Education in 2001–02, with support from Department for International Development (DFID) and technical support from the Cambridge Consortium, found that more boys with disabilities enrolled than girls, and also confirmed that girls who did enroll were subject to physical,

emotional or sexual abuse (Nasreen and Tate 2007).

In spite of Ministry of Primary Education, the Ministry of Social Welfare, Department of Social Services, is the responsible agency for the education of students with disabilities, and it has been practiced since the 1960s (ibid 2005). Students without disabilities have access to different types of schooling under the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (MoPME). MoPME is fully responsible for Government Primary Schools (GPS). On the other hand, Registered Non-Government Primary Schools (RNGPS) and community schools, for which the Government is partly responsible, make up a sizable proportion of the 11 different types of primary schools in Bangladesh, enrolling almost 18 million students (Directorate of Primary Education, 2002).

It is estimated that 1,735,121 children in Bangladesh, out of a total population of 18 million children in the 6 to 11 age range, are having disabilities. This number represents approximately 9.8 percent of the 6 to 10 year olds (grades 1-4) and 9.9 percent of the 10 to 11 year olds (grade 5). In other words, a conservative estimate is that almost 10 percent of all children within those age ranges have a disability that requires special schooling. This is shown by type of disability in Table 1, without designation of degree of involvement (i.e., mild, moderate, severe, or significant disabilities). It should be mentioned that the types listed are not inclusive; for example, autism spectrum disorders are not included (Ackerman, et.al, 2005).

Table 1: Types of disabilities for children age 6-11 by number (percent)

Type of Disability	Number (%)
Physical Disabilities	720,076 (41.5)
Visual Impairment	341,819 (19.7)
Hearing/Speech Impairment	340,084 (19.6)
Mental Retardation	128,398 (7.4)
Cerebral Palsy	121,458 (7.0)
Multiple Disabilities	58,994 (3.4)
Mental Illness	24,292 (1.4)
Total	1,735,121 (100)

Source: Based on APCD Report/JICA, as quoted in the PEDP-II 'Action Plan: Situational Analysis, Strategies and Action Plan for Mainstreaming Special Needs Children's Education'(2005)

Data on enrollment of students having any of five types of disabilities of mild levels were collected through School Survey 2007 (DPE 2008). The types of disabilities included in the questionnaire were physical disabilities, visual impairment, hearing/speech impairment and mental retardation. However, as per the 2007 School Survey data, there were a total of 53,303 students with disabilities of various types enrolled in GPS and RNGPS, as of March 2007. Table 2 below provides enrollment of students having any of the above-mentioned disabilities in GPS including Experimental School and RNGPS by gender and by type of disabilities.

Table 2: Enrollment of students with disabilities in primary schools (%)

Type of disability	GPS			RNGPS			Total (percent)
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	
Physical Disabilities	5509	4102	9611	2050	1436	3486	13097 (24.57)
Visual Impairment	2983	2284	5267	992	789	1781	7048 (13.22)
Hearing Impairment	1544	1426	2970	727	685	1412	4382 (8.22)
Speech Impairment	5927	3640	9567	2389	1674	4063	13630 (25.57)
Mental Retardation	5753	4995	10748	1917	1831	3748	14496 (27.20)
Others	260	223	483	91	76	167	650 (1.22)
Total	21976	16670	38646	8166	6491	14657	53303 (100)

Source : School Survey Report-2007, Directorate of Primary Education (2008)

It is interesting to note from the above table, that contrary to the overall and general trend of girls' enrollment in schools being higher than that of boys, the enrollment of girls with disabilities is lower than that of boys both in GPS and RNGPS. The situation was similar in the Baseline Survey 2005. Perhaps girls having physical disabilities are more unlikely to be sent to schools compared to boys having similar disabilities (School Survey Report 2007, DPE).

The report also explains that, although the data about the number of 6-10 years old children by gender and by type of disabilities were also collected for the catchment area of each school, the same have not been used for reporting percentage of students with disabilities enrolled or percentage of students with disabilities out of school for the reasons of reliability of data.

Table 3 : Students with disabilities attending school (Survey Data)

Type of Schools	Survey in 2005			Survey in 2006			Survey in 2007		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
GPS	18,921	14,375	33,296	19,359	14,841	34,200	21,976	16,670	38,646
RNGPS	6,912	5,472	12,384	7,419	5,954	13,373	8,166	6,491	14,657
Total	25,833	19,847	45,680	26,778	20,795	47,573	30,142	23,161	53,303

Source : School Survey Report-2007, Directorate of Primary Education (2008)

Table 3 shows that since 2005, the number of enrolled male and female students in primary schools is increasing rapidly. As Figure 1 shows, the number of students with disabilities enrolled in GPS and RNGPS increased by 70% between 2005 and 2008. Of the 77,500 students enrolled in 2008, about 25% belong to four sub-categories (physical disabilities, visual impairment, hearing impairment and mental retardation). The results exceeded by far the annual growth rate target of 5% in the enrollment of students with disabilities (Annual Sector Performance Report, Directorate of Primary Education, 2009).

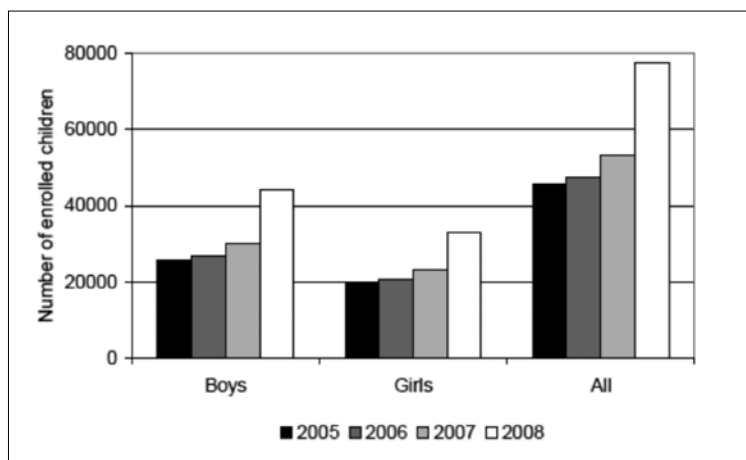


Figure 1: Number of enrolled students with disabilities in primary schools (2005-2008)

It is very difficult to assess whether this increasing trend reflects the fact that head teachers have become better in identifying students with disabilities or whether more students with disabilities have been attracted to school (and, if so, what might be the determinant) [Annual Sector Performance Report, DPE, 2009].

Present Initiatives taken by the Government

PEDP-II was clearly envisaged as the program of the government for the formal primary education sector, to be implemented by Directorate of Primary Education, with coordinated support from development partners. There are clear implications for the addressing of equity and inclusion in the very design of PEDP-II. The purposes and more detailed objectives of the PEDP-II baseline survey were:

1. To improve the quality of primary education in Bangladesh through the introduction of Primary School Quality Level (PSQL) standards
2. To make primary education accessible for all students in Bangladesh
3. To adopt a student-centered approach i.e. inclusive approach in the classroom

The components of PEDP-II are:

Component 1: Quality improvement through organizational development and capacity building

Component 2: Quality improvement in schools and classrooms

Component 3: Quality improvement through infrastructure development

Component 4: Improving and supporting equitable access to quality schooling

Among these four components, component 2 and 4 highly emphasize on inclusion and better learning of all students including students with disabilities. Component 4 focuses on promoting and facilitating access to quality schooling for those students who have never attended formal primary schooling, or who have dropped out before completing grade 5, such as students with disabilities. Another intervention under PEDP-II to reach those currently excluded from mainstream education will be the introduction of innovative grants to support programs based on

collaboration between communities, government and civil society. There had been no overall attempt at a cross-cutting approach with the defined goal of inclusive education for all students. These interventions are a direct effort by government to overcome the diversity, poverty, and other barriers, that prevent students from accessing and completing school (Nasreen et.al 2007).

PEDP-II has a list of 24 Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). Many of these indicators “*The number of students with disabilities out of school reduced by 30 percent by 2010*” is directly related to inclusion in mainstreaming. Also, a set of Primary School Quality Level (PSQL) indicators and benchmarks prepared for PEDP-II of which “*Students with disabilities/special needs attending school*” is much more highlighted for education of students with disabilities.

Strategies for developing a more inclusive educational system through PEDP-II

- Ensure that the needs of marginalized groups (disability) are taken into account and incorporated into mainstream education
- Develop approaches, policies and strategies to address diversity in education
- Influence government policy and develop management to support inclusive practice
- Ensure indicators for monitoring to reflect inclusive practices
- Support teachers to deliver needs-based teaching
- Develop curriculum and materials in the light of inclusion
- Create learner friendly classroom that encourage all students’ participation

Action Plan for Inclusive Education for Students with Disabilities on PEDP-II

The draft of the Action Plan, *Situational Analysis, Strategic and Action Plan for Mainstreaming Education for Students with Disabilities*, was made. The overall objective of this PEDP-II action plan is to provide education for all students with disabilities and special needs in Bangladesh. It is noted that the vast majority (75 per cent to 85 per cent) of students with disabilities could be helped by quite simple arrangements within the regular school system and by ordinary teachers who have received some training in inclusive practices and understand the needs of their learners. This suggests that the regular school classroom is the first option of education for these students. The educational provision should of course be commensurate with the student’s actual need. In this way, expensive and scarce expert services would be reserved for those who really need them. The Action Plan outlines the some elements to implement this overall approach.

Teacher Training Program on Inclusive Education

Most of in-service teachers’ training program is executed by some NGOs. In the training program the activities covered are mainly: i) Training of teachers involved in teaching students with disabilities, ii) Follow-up activities of trained teachers at their working places and iii) Development and dissemination of information and communication materials (Noman, et.al, CSID, 2006). In the govt. sector, Directorate of Primary Education provide field level in-service training for the classroom teachers on students with disabilities and how to teach them in the ordinary classroom with some additional arrangement. The Instructors of URC and other officials act as trainers of the 2 to 3 days training. But there is no effective follow-up and the manual used for the training is not well organized to meet the learning needs of students with disabilities.

Role of NGOs

Although the Ministry of Social Welfare, the Department of Social Services and the National Foundation for Development of the Persons with Disabilities, the three government bodies, cater to the needs of persons with disabilities, a good number of NGOs are also working in this area. Out of 40,000 NGOs in Bangladesh approximately 400 state that they are working in the field of disabilities (Nasreen and Tate 2007). One estimate is that out of the approximately 2.6 million children having disabilities in Bangladesh, 'fewer than 1500 have access to an education in special schools sponsored by the Government of Bangladesh' and 'only those with selected disabilities (hearing impairment, visual impairment and mental retardation) are served' (Ackerman *et al.*, 2005).

The National Coordination Committee (NCC) on Disability was set up to provide a forum for open dialogue between the government and NGOs in order to promote mutual understanding and cooperation and to identify and discuss issues that impede cooperation on disability issues between the government and NGOs. The NCC, which was started in 1993, works in close cooperation with the National Forum of Organizations Working with the Disabled (NFOWD), which is the umbrella organization of the NGOs in Bangladesh. The National Foundation for the Development of the Disabled is an organization established to provide necessary guidance and support to the government and NGOs regarding disability issues. The NGOs work mainly on orientation of disabilities and their different implication for inclusion, in-service training for teachers, social awareness, and mobility training for the students with disabilities and so on.

A Brief Critical Analysis of the Prevailing Situation

As a policy, concept and practice inclusive education is at a nascent stage of development in Bangladesh. There is a big gap between policies and practice, and the country is facing some challenges with the actual implementation of this philosophy. Policies, legislation, curriculum, teacher training program, classroom arrangements, availability of teaching-learning materials and teaching-learning process imply that this is not really so. The mainstream school system support is not well equipped to meet the diversified needs of all learners particularly of students with disabilities. There is limited accountability to see if all students are in school or to see which students are not in school. Because of this, we should intensify the efforts in the special school with professional care and increase financial and human resource scarcity.

Inclusive education is primarily understood in context of students with disabilities alone and within this too, students with mental retardation are not seen as educable. Many groups of students with disabilities are dropping out from the mainstream formal education. The National Education Policies of Bangladesh just mentioned the need of meeting learning needs of different students, but have not adopted inclusive education. The recent Education Policy 2009 also does not include any guidelines to either address or facilitate inclusive education. The current in-service teacher training and foundation training curriculum of Primary Teachers' Training Institutes are not revised in order to provide training in developing a teaching method regarding differences among students and promoting inclusive practice in schools and communities. Most of training does not focus on teaching students with disabilities in inclusive settings.

Attitudinal barriers from all levels are seen— from policy makers, to implementers and beneficiaries. Within the education system the curriculum is one of the major obstacles for inclusion. The existing curriculum is not very flexible in terms of teaching students with disabilities. It lacks the required flexibility to cater to the different learning needs

of all students. So, implementation of inclusive education in Bangladesh requires some challenges and if we cannot overcome these we never reach our final goal for education.

Implications

- While education for normal students is controlled by Ministry of Education, it is painful that education for students with disabilities is directed by Ministry of Social Welfare. So, educational provisions for students with disabilities should be moved from Ministry of Social Welfare to the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education. This stresses that students with disabilities are entitled to education service as a right, rather than being object of charity.
- There is an absence of reliable and consistent data on the magnitude and educational status of students with disabilities. This makes it difficult for educators, policy-makers and programmers to understand the nature of the problem, and identify possible solutions. So it is needed to carry out a comprehensive survey to identify the magnitude of the students with disabilities so that it is possible to understand the nature of disability and identify the needs of students with disabilities.
- Since teachers are the protagonist in implementing inclusive education, so it is very important to know their perceptions towards teaching students in inclusive classroom. A study can be conducted in this regard. According to the findings, an operational framework for including and teaching students with disabilities in general classroom can be developed.
- The curriculum lacks the required flexibility to cater to the needs of students with disabilities. There are limited developmentally appropriate teaching-learning materials for both students with and without disabilities. The teaching-learning process does not address the individual learning needs of students. Teachers lack training and experience in teaching and handling students with disabilities. So, inclusive education should be addressed in both pre-service and in-service training for teachers and head teachers. Classroom teachers should be trained on use of curriculum with regards to learning needs of students with disabilities. And, in-service teachers training on inclusion should be classroom practice orientated and appropriate teaching methods and materials should be incorporated in the training manuals.
- As education of students with disabilities requires comprehensive and strategic involvement and coordination among ministries, departments, NGOs and others catering to disability, an inter-agency coordination structure should be developed to facilitate responses to the special needs of the students with disabilities.
- Attitudes from different level are also big obstacles to effective implementation of inclusion in mainstreaming. To overcome this issue the teacher training institutions, school administrators, and all staff in the system need to be updated with the positive aspects of inclusion. Awareness raising on disability issues with regard their educational needs should be systematically initiated at all level.
- Lack of proper screening and identification system to assess the disabilities sometimes make misconceptions. So, mechanisms have to be developed for early identification and assessment of students with disabilities in comparison with their peer age level.
- Evaluation and feedback processes are needed for assessing academic performance of all learners, including students with disabilities. The focus of evaluation needs to go beyond academic achievement, especially for students with disabilities. Suitable provisions to existing approaches and practices of examination and evaluation should be introduced (e.g., extra time, writer facility for students with visual impairment, etc.).
- Quality of school building is another barrier for inclusion of students with disabilities - easy to enter and accommodate, in particular for students with physical disabilities. Accessibility to school should be improved by making minor modifications to the physical structure of schools (buildings ramps, accessible toilets, wide doorways,

more space in classrooms, etc).

- Lack of resources related to disabilities and inclusion can make positive output in teachers' and students' attitudes toward disability in classroom. Supplementary reading materials reflecting disability issues should be introduced in the ordinary education system.

Conclusion

Education of students with disabilities is considered as a matter of general charity and welfare rather than a right that every child should demand. The agenda of inclusive education presents a considerable challenge. However, it is a challenge which countries have shown themselves able to meet. The Salamanca Statement and Framework undoubtedly gave a boost to this process worldwide. Much of the attention in the development of inclusion strategy for the students with disabilities in mainstream education has been focused on the school and, particularly, the classroom. However, many of the barriers which remain lie outside the school. They are at the level of national policy, of the structures of national systems of schooling and teacher training. In order to achieve the goal of quality education for all learners in the classroom all these barriers should be removed out. Bangladesh is still struggling with some issues of quality education in the basic education level those can be resolved through inclusive approach to education. Effective inclusion of the students with disabilities in the mainstream primary education can play a vital role for ensuring the "Education for All" by 2015 in Bangladesh.

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