In-service Teachers' Perceptions toward Inclusion of Students with Disabilities in Mainstream Primary Classroom: A Case of Some Selected Primary Schools in Southern Bangladesh

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Abstract

The purpose of present study was to examine perceptions towards inclusion of students with disabilities among in-service teachers working in mainstream primary schools of southern Bangladesh. This paper reviewed the prevailing situation of education of students with disabilities in mainstream education setting. A number of 62 in-service teachers of 18 mainstream schools in four southern districts participated in this study. This article was based on self-rated questionnaires that were distributed to participant teachers. Also, focus group discussion was organized in each school. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequency and percentages. The major findings of the study revealed that in-service teachers had positive attitudes towards inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream classroom. The results of this study also have significant implications on how to develop in-service teachers' professional capacities for quality teaching-learning in inclusive classroom in Bangladesh.

Introduction

One of the challenges facing education system in Bangladesh is provision of education, as a constitutional right, to those learners who have been marginalized and could not be accommodated by the learning institutions because of different disabilities. Even the majority of those who are accommodated cannot fully participate in learning activities meaningfully in their classroom. These are the students whose needs are special that some modifications within the education system as whole are a precondition in order to enable them to fully participate and benefit from the process of teaching and learning. Bangladesh is still a far away from effective inclusion in terms of quality.

Since the merging of special education and regular mainstream education into a unified system now known as inclusive education, this concept has kept many educators divided. However, it appears that inclusive education has now become the preferred option where students with disabilities are given equal opportunity to learn with their peers in mainstream classrooms and an environment where they can freely interact with one another. While the seed of inclusive education had been sown and effectively implemented in most developed countries, it has yet to fully sprout in Bangladesh. It has been suggested that the success of inclusive education depends very much on teachers and their attitudes, views and perceptions on it. Because of that, teachers need adequate training in inclusive education so that they can effectively implement inclusion in their classroom, thus proper in-service training is an essential factor which may enhance teachers' capacities for inclusive education in Bangladesh.

Definition of 'Inclusion' in Education

Inclusion is defined by Schroth, Moorman and Fullwood (1997) as 'the provision of educational services to students with a full range of abilities and disabilities in the general education classroom with appropriate in-class support'. 'Inclusion' refers to all students being valued, accepted and respected regardless of ethnic and cultural backgrounds, abilities, gender, age, religion, beliefs and behaviours (Forlin, 2004; United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1994). Inclusion is a human rights or social justice principle which embodies values such as equity and fairness (Ainscow, 2005). In an inclusive

school, students are not treated equally but are given equitable support to enable every student to be able to participate physically, socially and academically with their peers. This means that the environment, curriculum, teaching methods, assessment and reporting could all need to be adjusted or differentiated. A student in a wheelchair may need ramps to adapt the physical environment. Teaching may need to cater for a student's learning needs in the same way. A student with learning difficulties may need more assistance with reading or to be able to present knowledge verbally rather than in written form. A student who has difficulty concentrating may need the amount of work to be reduced, to have tasks presented one at a time and to be shown how to self- monitor. Teaching students with disabilities is just one aspect of inclusive schools and communities.

Some of the literature on inclusion argues that teachers need training in special education to include students with disabilities (Heward, 2003; Kauffman & Hallahan, 2005; Mock & Kauffman, 2002; Zigmond, 2003). Other researchers and academics propose that inclusion in education is simply a matter of good teaching practice (Ainscow, 1999; Giangreco, 1996; Skrtic, 1995; Thousand, Bishop, & Villa, 1997).

Significance of In-service Teachers' Perception toward Inclusion: Literature Review

The hallmark of inclusive education is the teachers' willingness to accept students with disabilities. Their attitudes and knowledge about inclusion are important as these are indicators of such willingness (Manisha & Zalizan, 2006). Teachers are perceived to be integral to the implementation of inclusive education (Haskell, 2000). Research communicates the view that teachers are the key to the success of inclusionary programs (Cant, 1994), as they are viewed as linchpins in the process of including students with disabilities into mainstream classes (Whiting & Young, 1995). Lise Vislie (2003) also stated that join efforts with teachers, educationists working in this field are much more inevitable for the implementation of inclusion, a new paradigm in school policies and classroom practice. Other studies acknowledge that inclusion can only be successful if teachers are part of the team driving this process (Malone, Gallagher, & Long, 2001).

It is important to examine the attitudes of mainstream teachers toward the inclusion of students with disabilities into mainstream settings as their perceptions may influence their behavior toward and acceptance of such students (Hammond & Ingalls, 2003; Van Reusen, Shoho, & Barker, 2001). The success of an inclusionary program may be at risk if mainstream classroom teachers hold negative perceptions toward the inclusion of students with disabilities (Van Reusen et al., 2001). Negative perceptions of inclusion may become obstacles, as mainstream education teachers attempt to include students with disabilities (Cawley, Hayden & Baker, 2002).

Although there is widespread support for inclusion at a philosophical and ideological level, there are concerns in many countries that the policy of inclusion is difficult to implement. In part, this is because it is believed that teachers are not sufficiently well prepared and supported to work in inclusive ways. Inclusion requires teachers to accept the responsibility for creating schools in which all students can learn and feel they belong. In this task, teachers are crucial because of the central role they play in promoting participation and reducing exclusion, particularly of student who are perceived as having difficulties in learning. And yet too many teachers do not see this as part of their professional responsibility that implies their ignorance of importance of inclusion.

A number of studies have identified that in-service teachers' attitude has a great bearing on whether a teacher will embrace inclusion or reject it. A teacher's attitude has the power to enhance or seriously harm the life quality of students with disabilities, sometimes for the rest of their lives (Campbell, Gilmore and Cuskelly 2003; Burke and Sutherland 2004). Teacher attitude has been found to be critical in the success of managing students with disabilities. The integration of students with disabilities within the mainstream classroom depends on the teacher more than anyone else. The teacher has been considered as mediator between many potential participants in the inclusive education process (Tait and Purdie 2000). The teacher influences the students first and foremost, and can affect a student's expectations and attitudes toward learning and the social and personal development that takes place in school.

Teachers also interact with parents, the school and the community. A positive or negative teacher attitude toward inclusion in general, and/or that toward a student with a challenge, can influence a teacher's behavior and practice toward each student, and also affect the experience of each student in the class, regardless of ability. The teacher shapes the atmosphere for learning, the culture and the peer relationships within the class. So, in-service teachers' attitudes, views, perceptions are most significant for effective inclusion of students with disabilities.

Objectives of the Study

The present study aimed at achieving three main objectives:
a) To identify current status of inclusion of students with disabilities in Bangladesh
b) To examine in-service teachers' attitudes towards inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream primary classroom
c) To explore in-service teachers' views on improvement mechanism for effective inclusion in mainstream primary education

Overview of inclusion of Students with Disabilities in Primary Education in Bangladesh

In the recent years Bangladesh has achieved a remarkable 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 and Tait, 2007). Also, the enrollment ratio of students with disabilities in mainstream 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 education system in 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.

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, have 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) have disabilities. 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.

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 Government Primary Schools (GPS) and Registered Non-Government Primary Schools (RNGPS), as of March 2007. Table 1 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 1: Enrollment of students with disabilities in primary schools (%)

Type of Disabilities	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)

Among 5 types of disabilities mentioned above, speech impairment and mental retardation require specific interpretation in context of Bangladesh, these are as follows:

Speech Impairments are a type of communication disorders where 'normal' speech is disrupted. This can mean stuttering, lisps, etc. Someone who is unable to speak due to articulation problem or has difficulty producing phonemes correctly is considered person with speech impairment.

Mental retardation (MR) is a generalized disorder appearing before adulthood, characterized by significantly impaired cognitive functioning and deficits in adaptive behaviors and problem solving skills. A person with a below-average intelligence quotient (IQ)

may be considered as mentally retarded. Mental retardation refers to intellectual deficits that appear without other abnormalities.

Table 2 shows that since 2005, the number of enrolled male and female students with disabilities 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).
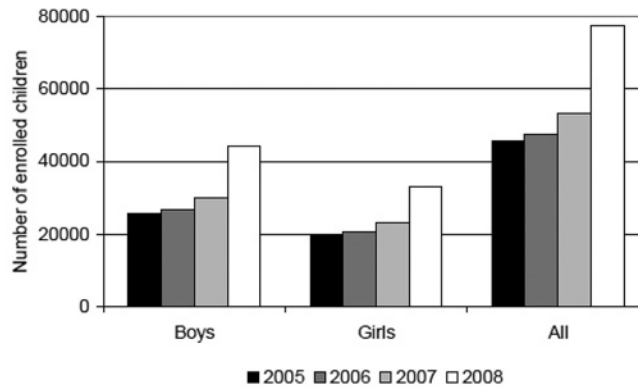

Figure 1: Number of enrolled students with disabilities in primary schools (2005-2008)

It is very difficult to assess whether this increasing trend reflects the fact that head teachers and other in-service teachers possess positive attitudes in including students with disabilities or whether more students with disabilities have been attracted to school [Annual Sector Performance Report, DPE, 2009].

Recent Initiatives taken by the Government

PEDP-II was clearly envisaged as the program of the Bangladesh government for the formal primary education sector. There were clear implications for the addressing of equity and inclusion in the design of PEDP-II. The components of PEDP-II were:
Component1: Quality improvement through organization and capacity development
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. In addition, PEDP-II had 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 were prepared for PEDP-II of which "*Students with disabilities/special needs attending school*" is much more highlighted for education of students with disabilities. Recently, PEDP-III has been started with the same objectives and activities in the field of inclusion of students with disabilities in primary education.

Methodology

Sampling
The study focused on 18 schools (10 in urban area and 8 in rural area) of 4 southern districts (Khulna, Jessore, Bagerhat and Shatkhira) in Bangladesh. All schools were government primary schools that were selected purposively, because a good number of students with disabilities were enrolled in those selected schools. The average class size in those schools was 52 students with one teacher. A group of sample in-service teachers (N=70) was purposively selected based on experience in handling of students with disabilities in their own class.

Instrumentation

A questionnaire on perceptions toward inclusion of students with disabilities was adapted. It consisted of 13 item scale, divided into two parts: a) teachers attitudes towards inclusion (8 items), b) strategies to improve inclusion in primary education (5items). The items of both parts are categorized into Agree, Neutral and Disagree point. A Focus Group Discussion (FGD) outline was contextualized containing different views for improvement strategies of inclusion also.

Procedure

All participants were given self-rated questionnaire along with an explanatory paper. They were given a week to complete the questionnaire and 62 were returned in time that can be said satisfactory. Also, FGD was organized with all the concern teachers in each sample school following the outline. The participants were requested to be available during the lunch break for some time. Researcher facilitated the FGD where everyone actively participated with different aspects in the discussion. Each FGD took about an hour to complete and finally transcription was made in the presence of participants.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were employed to analyze the raw data in the form of percentages based on three categories. The findings were synthesized according to the aspects of teachers' attitudes towards inclusion, and other related matters concerning with the effective implementation of inclusion. The thematic analysis was performed to describe FGD findings that are presented with a pie-chart.

Results and Discussion

Table-2 describes the in-service teachers' attitudes regarding inclusive education in southern Bangladesh. More than half of the respondents (67.7%) agree that students with disabilities are academically better in inclusive classrooms. Only 25.8% of the respondents agreed that the placement of students with disabilities in regular classes negatively affects the academic performance of normal students. 88.7% of the respondents believed that the negative attitude toward students with disabilities can be minimized in inclusive classrooms.

Table 2: In-service Teachers' Attitudes toward Inclusion in Mainstream Classroom

	ITEM	Agree (N) %	Neutral (N) %	Disagree (N) %
1	Students with disabilities are academically better when they are placed in inclusive classrooms	(42) 67.7	(11) 17.7	(9) 14.5
2	Students with disabilities must be integrated/ included into the mainstream school or community	(46) 74.2	(5) 8.1	(11) 17.7
3	In order to achieve the highest level of inclusion, it is necessary for students with disabilities to be placed in mainstream classes with back up support	(41) 66.13	(10) 16.13	(11) 17.74
4	The placement of the students with disabilities in regular classes negatively affects the academic performance of mainstream normal students	(16) 25.8	(18) 29	(28) 45.2
5	The academically-talented students will be isolated in mainstream classrooms when inclusion happens	(14) 22.6	(16) 25.8	(32) 51.6
6	Students with disabilities will be benefited from the inclusive program in mainstream classrooms	(47) 75.8	(7) 11.3	(8) 12.9
7	Students with disabilities have the right to receive an education in mainstream classes with peers	(53) 85.5	(3) 4.8	(6) 9.7
8	Students with disabilities will not be labeled as 'stupid' or 'weird' when placed in mainstream class	(55) 88.7	(4) 6.5	(3) 4.8

Table-3 highlights some of the issues that need the attention of the parties involved in implementing this program. Majority of the respondents (66.1%) feel that the mainstream classroom teachers lack the exposure and the skills to deal with students with disabilities and 87.1% agreed that students with disabilities need extra attention and help in the classroom. In reply to question number five, 88.7% of the respondent agreed that limited resources in teaching are critical aspects that need to be improved.

Table 3: In-service Teachers' Views toward Strategies to Improve Inclusion

	ITEM	Agree (N) %	Neutral (N) %	Disagree (N) %
1	Mainstream classroom teachers have special training and skills to teach students with disabilities	(12) 19.4	(9) 14.5	(41) 66.1
2	Students with disabilities need additional help and attention	(54) 87.1	(6) 9.7	(2) 3.2
3	Students with disabilities commit more disciplinary problems compared to the regular normal students	(32) 51.6	(9) 14.5	(21) 33.9
4	Mainstream classroom teachers received little help from the special education teachers within or outside school	(12) 19.3	(14) 22.6	(36) 58.1
5	Although the inclusion of students with disabilities is important, the available resources for teaching-learning in mainstream classroom are limited	(55) 88.7	(4) 6.5	(3) 4.8

Result of FGDs and its Implications

The findings of FGDs were analyzed thematically. Some significant issues have been identified that were discussed during the session. According to transcription of FGDs, the following factors are necessary for successful inclusion:

➤ written school policies and mission statements regarding inclusion
➤ administrative support and involvement in the inclusion process
➤ teachers' proper knowledge of disabilities and positive attitudes towards inclusion
➤ teachers' feelings of adequacy when dealing with meeting the needs of students with disabilities
➤ teachers' knowledge regarding inclusion and teaching students with disabilities
➤ professional development opportunities available in the areas of planning for instruction, behavior management, & preparation of individual program plans
➤ support personnel to assist in assessment, planning, and classroom instruction
➤ reduced class sizes when students with disabilities are included
➤ extra teaching resources at lower instructional levels
➤ community and parental involvement in the inclusion process

Among all the suggestions or recommendations, six were identified as more significant for meaningful implementation of inclusion of students with disabilities. These were namely knowledge of disability, positive attitudes, special training and skills, administrative support, collaboration with others and resource allocation.

Figure 2: Some factors that are identified as significant for successful inclusion

The responses of participants revealed that previous experience with dealing students with disabilities into regular settings appears to better prepared teachers for inclusion. Bearing these views in mind, it would appear prudent for a mandatory segment on teaching within inclusive settings be introduced into teacher training programs to prepare trainee teachers for their roles as inclusive educators.

There was limitation in this study. The sample size was too small and since the study was conducted only in 18 schools in

4 southern districts of Bangladesh, it cannot be a representative sample of the whole population of southern Bangladesh or Bangladesh as a whole. Further studies with an enlarged sample drawn from all the regions of Bangladesh are needed.

Conclusion

This study attempted to investigate the attitudes and views of mainstream in-service teachers at primary level toward the philosophy and implementation of inclusive education. Results suggest that teachers in southern Bangladesh generally hold positive attitudes toward the inclusion of students with disabilities into mainstream settings. These positive views may be attributable to an increase in the awareness of students with disabilities among the respondents.

However, there are some aspects that can be improved such as the collaboration between the mainstream and special education teachers and the preparation to train regular teachers in teaching students with disabilities. The need to provide adequate resources to inclusive classes is never been more critical. In addition, there should be an increasing effort in promoting inclusive education program to the public as well as to the stakeholders. It is evident that inclusion of students with disabilities into regular classrooms is additionally viewed as nurturing increased feelings of tolerance and respect among all participants within the inclusive setting. In order to make an effective model for inclusion of students with disabilities these aspects should be taken into consideration. Hopefully, this investigation can provide concern groups with a better understanding of in-service teachers' attitudes and views toward inclusion and toward specific educational strategies that are necessary for effective inclusion. An understanding of the various elements involved in the inclusion process will enable us to realize the tasks to which educators must attend so that students with disabilities can take their rightful places in general education classroom.

Acknowledgement

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Appendix A:
Focus Group Discussion (FGD) Outline (Key Questions)

1. Do you have students with disabilities in your classroom?

2. Are you aware of the disability / level of disability of students with disabilities in your classroom?

3. How do you feel about the inclusion of students with disabilities in your classroom?

4. Do you think that the needs of the majority of students with disabilities are met in your classroom?

5. What do you understand by the concept of mainstreaming or inclusive education?

6. Do you see yourself as a competent teacher for inclusive education?

7. What do you see as positive factors with regard to your role as an inclusive educator?

8. What do you see as obstacles to your fulfilling your role as an inclusive educator?

9. To what extent do you include the efforts / opinions of the special education teacher / support personnel, in your programming?

10. Have you made adaptations to your planning and teaching program to include the needs of students with disabilities?

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