

Controversies and Navigation of Inclusive Education in the Context of Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT: *Inclusive education is one of the most important steps to promote integration of special learners in our society, yet it is not much familiar or established everywhere. Collaboration with mainstream students is a big platform to make them efficient citizen. It ensures their holistic development and flourishes their individual identity. All the children have equal right to participate and get opportunities of education together; especially these segregated groups need to be surrounded by people who will lift them higher. But practically the way is full of difficulties. Differences persist in policymaking, curriculum, classroom arrangements, teaching-learning system, evaluation, materials, teacher training and so forth. This paper tries to identify and reduce the gap between the practices of these two educational sectors. In this respect, mainstream educators and practitioners have been interviewed to know their interest, expectations and doubts about this assimilation. Besides, some successful cases have been observed closely with a purpose of bringing it in practice from the conceptual stage.*

Keywords: *Inclusion, special and mainstream education.*

I. INTRODUCTION

There is a growing concern among the policy makers, educators and practitioners to include special education in the mainstream schools. Inclusive education highlights one education policy for all. It integrates disable learners in the mainstream system, with some modified arrangements meeting their needs. Inclusive study believes, instead of special setting, Students with mild disabilities can perform better in adapted mainstream classrooms. ‘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). [1]

But the debate is also prevalent about its practicality. When this practice takes place, situation doesn’t get very inspiring as it is anticipated theoretically. A lot of difficulties arise that make the goal almost impossible to reach and sometimes even the circumstances become very much discouraging and critical to handle. In this study, it has been tried to show those gaps between the theory and practice, along with some attempts to reduce the existing gaps.

In Bangladesh, there is a huge gap between mainstream education and special education. Special learners are mostly segregated from mainstream schools because of the traditional beliefs making them inferior, marginalized and stigmatized. Some professionals also consider it impractical. This is mainly due to the lack of efficient people to implement inclusive education, deficiency of knowledge and practical skills, limited fund to aid, inadequate research, legislation and so on. Till now, very little steps have been undertaken in support of it. Attitude towards inclusion is still very rigid here. Some NGOs and INGOs are working to promote the idea, but most of the attempts are discrete, not synchronized. A comprehensive analysis considering these efforts has not yet been done. The paper is concluded with some hope that this movement will come out of all of these limitations contributing enough to make them one of us.

II. TYPES OF SPECIAL NEEDS

‘Children with disabilities include those children who have learning difficulties, speech difficulties, physical, cognitive, sensory and emotional difficulties.’ (World Bank, 2003) [2]

The most common disabilities are –

- Visual impairment
- Speech impairment
- Hearing Impairment
- Physically challenged
- Down syndrome
- Dyslexia
- Cerebral Palsy
- Hyperlexia
- Mental Retardation

- Autistic spectrum disorders (ASD)
- Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
- Emotional disturbances
- Intellectual disability

III. WHY INCLUSION

Education is their basic right. To meet this right for all of them, inclusion has no alternative. "Regular schools with this inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all; moreover, they provide an effective education to the majority of children and improve the efficiency and ultimately the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system." (UNESCO: 1994) [3]

Some strong reasons in favor of this movement are as follows,

- In the context of Bangladesh, inclusive education will have a good contribution to make all these manpower resource rather than constraints.
- They need good exposure of natural behavior before them. This will help to make the optimum use of their potentials and inclusion in the society.
- One of the most effective ways to alleviate all their complexes is to increase their attachment to the mainstream community. It helps them to develop fast if they get model they can follow.
- For their holistic development, it helps a lot providing a facilitative environment. In inclusive setting, peer support encourages mutual understanding and acceptance.
- The number of special schools is not sufficient to accommodate all the target disable learners.
- If the number of the students is few, it is not much cost effective to make special schools close to every area. In fact, in rural areas, distance becomes one of the major obstacles to send them to school.
- Diversity in the classroom will help non-disable students to know individual differences that will broaden their knowledge and experience. They will become strong personality and good soul by learning to accept the change, to cope with adversity, to extend their help to others and finally to be patient.

IV. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN GENERAL AND SPECIAL LEARNER

These two streams of learners are dissimilar in different aspects-

Communication: The main disparity lies in effective communication. The strategies and responses are not same always, expressed differently. They tend to be rigid, highly introvert and sometimes show idiosyncratic behavior. So, sometimes to understand the level of their comprehension correctly becomes a challenge. It might be misinterpreted following a series of wrong feedback. Hence, the teacher has to observe them with extra care and intelligence. In this regard, another noteworthy point is they get scared to be introduced to new people. So, adjustment to any change is a special concern for them.

Learning Aptitude: According to the types and severity of disability, it varies. For intellectual disability, like Down syndrome, it may be limited. Again, some of them exhibit extraordinary talents, but that is not necessarily uniform in all the fields. Area and level of talents differ individually. It is very important to identify and nurture their individual strengths. This concern of gifted talents is pertinent to non-disable learners too.

Memory: They usually have a short memory. So repetition of instruction is necessary.

Time: The required time to comprehend and respond is not similar. Comparing to the general students, they are a little or much slow to catch. So, time allotment should be higher.

Attention: They are easily distracted and can't concentrate for a long time. They also sometimes exhibit reluctance to follow instruction.

Classroom Activities: Their attitude, participation and performances are not identical. Sometimes they participate actively, sometimes keep quiet and don't attempt to do the tasks. They mostly get horrified when they fail to accomplish any task. Some of them enjoy group activity; some are motivated in individual task.

Homework: They might struggle in self-study and doing homework alone.

Feedback: They may not be able to catch general feedback on any lesson or task. Individual feedback is essential.

Class size: Large classroom is a serious obstacle for successful inclusion. The number of students should be maintained ensuring enough attention to all of them.

Learning Material: Materials depend on their individual needs. All of them don't show same level of interest or performance in any material. Here, appropriate assorted materials are necessary.

Assessment: Based on their performance level, assessment procedure need to be modified. Sometimes, some of them might need separate individual assessment.

The further differences might be noticeable in some more unpredictable ways.

V. CURRENT CONDITION IN BANGLADESH

Though it was mentioned in the UN convention to provide education to special learners "in integrated school settings" and "in the general school setting", it is still beyond imagination in mass level. Educating disabled children is more like a charity and welfare in our country. The picture is not very promising, rather highly discriminating. Education has not been firmly established as their right. It has been mainly practiced in separate special schools that are the only means of education for them. The attitude is gradually changing among educated people. But, in Bangladesh, for poverty, a considerable amount of children is still deprived of education. In that society, the condition of these disable children is really very pathetic. When every minute survival is a constant struggle for them, the question of receiving education is an absurd need.

'Inclusive education' is not a very familiar term in our society. People do not have clear ideas about it; most of them are not yet ready to welcome the system. Not even the parents of special children. There is discomfort from parents of both regular and special kids. Both of them consider special setting good for their growth. It is believed that they need to be treated separately and differently. These prejudiced practices are very deep rooted in the society. They also have mistaken ideas about the result of inclusion.

"Lack of information, combined with discriminatory attitudes towards persons with disabilities at all levels of society, contributes to the continued neglect of their right to education" (UNESCO, 2009). [4]

VI. OBJECTIVE

The study aims first of all to find out the problems that arise while implementing this strategy, and finally to encourage inclusive study exploring success of some case studies. Through the interviews with teachers, administrative bodies and parents of mainstream education, limitations of inclusion have been tried to explore. Then it endeavors to assess and analyze those successful attempts in inclusive setting that may contribute to convince policy makers of the mainstream school to keep some space for special children. The investigation was done to know their level of success, teaching-learning strategies, techniques to integrate, way of assessment and challenges faced by the teachers. It is expected to change the mindset of current and future educators, practitioners, government and other patrons to develop or modify policies in this field. It will also help to improve the running inclusive schools giving suggestions and updating the issue.

VII. METHODOLOGY

A survey has been done to find out the existing attitudes towards inclusion in Bangladesh. In this respect, a number of teachers (50), administrators and parents of non-disable students of five renowned Bangla and English medium mainstream schools in Dhaka city have been interviewed. Out of these five, two of them were public and three were private.

The teachers were asked the questions on the following areas.

1. Their age, gender, educational background, teaching experience and level of teaching.
2. Their idea and interest about inclusion.
3. Any previous experience of handling challenged students and the difficulties encountered.
4. The encouragement, support and training provided by the administration to deal special students.
5. Estimated difficulties
6. Reaction from the peers and effects on them
7. Troubles in curriculum, materials and assessment
8. Time management
9. Available special arrangements
10. The social benefits of this integration

The parents were requested to share their opinions on the following matters:

1. Their willingness to welcome inclusion
2. Reasons for their reluctance
3. Possible effects on their children
4. Positive influence on them
5. Contribution in social advancement

VIII. RESULT

Following outcomes were found in the survey:

- The people associated in mainstream education mostly were not ready to welcome it. 80% of them strongly believed that special setting would be more helpful for their better development.
- The teachers had much doubt on the success rate of it. 70% teachers believed it will not work out. 20% were confused and only 10% were optimistic if enough supports would be provided.
- 15% teachers had previous experience of handling minor disable students. Even they were not much hopeful about the situation. Experienced teachers were willing to receive slightly disable learners, not the severe cases.
- Comparatively young and new teachers were more interested in inclusion. They did not have much idea but were ready to accept the challenge.
- 90% teachers thought the process of handling these learners would be pretty time consuming that might be appeared as one of the toughest constraint to complete the syllabus for the mainstream students.
- Educated parents were mostly enthusiastic to start it. 60% parents welcomed them; rest of the 40% went against the idea due to some fear and discomfort. Positive parents believed their children would learn to be good citizen being tolerant, sensitive and respectful to others.

The interview expressed the following difficulties from different aspects -

Negative Attitudes in Mainstream Education: This subject is still not under the consideration of mainstream academicians. It is still being studied and practiced by the special educators. A very few number of mainstream schools show their interest towards inclusion. Creating space for the development of the special learners is not considered as their social responsibility. They consider it a very noble job, but have sort of escapist attitude towards it transferring the duties on special schools.

Reluctance of Authorities and Administration: Mainstream school authorities are not so much interested in inclusion due to arranging the support and extra care. The concept is not pretty much clear to them. They are not even interested to understand it. Some of the mediocre schools are trying to accommodate them, but can't provide enough support teachers or meet their needs properly. They don't arrange relevant training program for the teachers. Some of them charge much higher from special students.

Competitive Admission Test: Selection procedures in the top ranked schools in Dhaka city are highly competitive. Candidates have to qualify in the difficult written test and perform well in the step-by-step thorough interviews. These are not always possible to serve by the special learners. In fact, disability is considered as the discredit to qualify in this procedure.

Pressure for Good Result: The renowned schools are mostly aware of the academic result that is uncertain to be accomplished by these learners.

Peer Effects: Teachers are worried of its effect on the general students. 40% teachers believe that the pace of learning of the regular student will be affected. They also think that the good students may not be benefitted from the teaching strategy that is below their level. They will finish activities fast and get bored and distracted while waiting for the others to finish. The teachers are also worried of the unpredictable attitude of disable learners. They think they can get violent that will break the learning environment of the class. They can also disrupt learning by distracting others while solving the tasks. At the same time, the disable learners may feel less confident, shy and get more introverts among the better performance of non-disable students. Excess curiosity or pity towards them also makes them uncomfortable. Sometimes some verbal and other abuses also take place that affects them the most.

Physical Inaccessibility: The structures of school building, classroom and other arrangement have not been done aiming them. Bringing this change is expensive and unfeasible for most of the schools.

Clash in curriculum, materials, teaching-learning process and assessment: The existing curriculum both in English and Bangla medium schools do not address the individual learning needs. There is no flexibility for the children with disabilities. The classroom environment is not even friendly for the general students. There is a one-way lecture based teaching-learning process and limited teaching-learning materials. All these fields need to be revised and modified requiring a huge effort, time and money that is not possible for low budget schools.

Support Teacher: They need individual attention and assistance that is not possible to serve in mainstream classes. To make sure their proper development, required student-teacher ratio is 1:1 that is another big limitation for the mainstream schools. Administration is reluctant to provide so many extra supports as it is not cost effective.

Lack of Training and Resource: Teachers lack adequate support, aid and training in teaching and handling these children. There is a serious deficiency of experienced, conscious and skilled people in this field. There is no allocation in the school budgets to encourage and initiate this type of training. The following table shows the summary of the result. The x-axis and y-axis represents the constraints and the number of the teachers participated respectively.

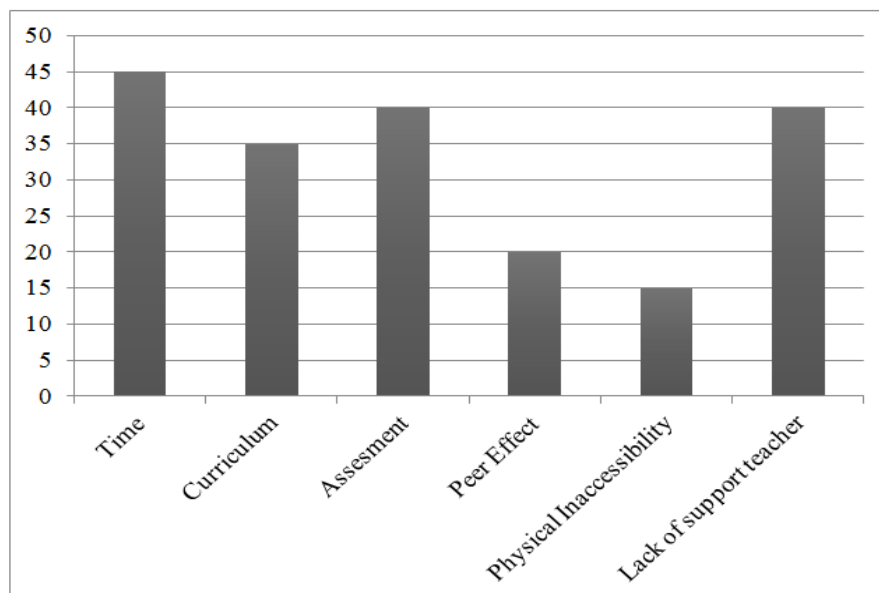


Fig -1: Main Constraints to Implement Inclusion

Some other discriminatory approaches existing in different sectors of the society have been described below.

Economic Discrimination: There is much reluctance to intake them in mainstream job market, even after meeting the requirements successfully. Their economic insolvency causes much injustice towards them. Some families are not interested to give them time due to their inability to take family responsibility in future.

No Motivational Aid and Fund: There is a very poor amount of fund or aid to uplift this idea. It is one of the most challenging jobs, still teachers and other associated peoples are not getting proper remuneration that will motivate them. Special teachers and educators are giving almost voluntary service to advance this section of education. The amount of research and study in this context is not significant.

Social Problems: These segregated peoples are cornered and ignored everywhere. Parents have to face much hardship if they bring them in community places to socialize their kids. They sometimes feel shy to talk about the issue; even try a lot to hide it too. There is negative attitude and unfriendly environment everywhere. This strong social barrier makes the situation worst.

Poverty: Poor parents are more interested to use them as a source of money by creating sympathy. Where the primary needs are not even served for their non-disable kids, existence for disable kids becomes a vital question.

District and Rural Level Condition: Apart from the capital or center points, the prevailing picture is very much disappointing. Numbers of special schools are few in district level and rarely found in rural areas. Government primary schools lack skilled teachers and the resources. The establishment of inclusion will require much struggle here.

No Practice of Law: No strict law has been enforced yet to establish their right.

Gender Issue: Girls with disabilities have the risk of being sexually and emotionally abused. This insecurity makes the parent reluctant towards sending them to school.

‘Most poor women and girls with disabilities, whether urban or rural, experience triple discrimination for being female, disabled and poor. As girls' needs generally receive lower priority than boys' needs, so girls with disabilities receive even lower priority when trying to obtain health care, treatment and education. Parents are afraid to send their disabled daughters to school fearing stigmatization and sexual abuse. Most parents prefer to spend their limited resources on educating their boys rather than their girls.’ (UNICEF. 2003) [1]

IX. CONTRIBUTORY BODIES WORKING IN THIS FIELD

In the recent years, government's contribution in this section has been noteworthy. They have been raising different programs to create consciousness and to ensure their quality education and development. But inclusive education has not been adopted here yet. They have started to provide training on teaching disable learners, but in policy making or in the curriculum, no change has been accomplished promoting inclusive setting. Bangladesh signed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2007.

'The National Education Policy 2009 also emphasized on the education for students with disabilities in the general education setting (Ministry of Education, 2009) The government has formed a committee for inclusive education under the Ministry of Education with representatives from the Ministry of Social Welfare and UNESCO to promote education for children with disabilities in regular schools. '(UNICEF. 2003) [1]

UNESCO, UNICEF and some other NGOs are contributing a lot to establish the inclusive practice. Salamanca Statement (1994) is one of the most powerful steps in this regard. There, the main principle was – "Schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, emotional, social, linguistic or other conditions."

Under the supervision and donation of Bangladesh Army, some effective projects have been also running. But all these are discrete attempts. Co-ordination among them is essential to get the success.

X. STORY OF SUCCESS

In spite of the prevailing negative attitudes, some institutes have adopted inclusive education partially or completely. Some minor disable learners have been accepted in different mainstream schools too. The story of some of their success is going to be exhibited below.

Cardiff International School, Dhaka: CISD is a mainstream English medium school that welcomes special children in their regular classroom. They have a comprehensive Learning Support Department, which provides intensive and specialized programs for disable learners. They apply separate S.E.N. (Special Education Need) and individual learning needs through the assistance of their support team. Teaching Assistants work in each class providing extensive support for all students giving additional time. Classes are kept small to ensure individual help. The level of each student's ability measures the amount of time.

For special learners, an Individual Education Plan (IEP) is prepared consulting to their parents and teachers. Educational psychologist and medical professional also work to help them. They also ensure respect and help from other non-disable learners. Any teasing or bully carries punishment. Their moral is to teach behavior towards each other regardless of differences. [5]

Proyash and Prottoy (inclusive school): Two most successful examples of inclusive school in our country are 'Proyash' (Bangla medium) and 'Prottoy' (English medium)- two devoted organizations working for the special learners run under the patronization of Bangladesh Army. They have successfully overcome the obstacles related to inclusive education.

Proyash provides pre-school and primary to secondary education and vocational training to all types of learners. Their goal is either mainstream or rehabilitation through job placement. Instead of special education program, NCTB (National Curriculum and Textbook Board) curriculum is followed at every stage with flexibility. IEP is specially designed taking care of individual needs of the learners. It is a training and research center too. Besides the educational support, they have medical care and therapeutic services as Speech and Language Therapy (SLT), Occupational Therapy (OT), Physiotherapy, Behavior Therapy and Counseling, Hydrotherapy and Music Therapy & Yoga. The students come here at the age of 2-3 years and start Early Childhood Development Program (ECDP). After next 2-3 years they are sent to mainstream schools or promoted to special schools based on their level of development. If any student is not able to mainstream, he/she is provided appropriate vocational training for employment. They have been able to mainstream a number of students successfully in regular schools. A good number of their students also have completed their primary School Certificate (PSC), Junior School Certificate (JSC) and Secondary School Certificate (SSC) exam. Prottoy is currently providing education up to standard three having an aim to make it up to O level soon.

The school made the changes in physical accessibility for the disable learners. The curriculum, teaching-learning system and assessment process have been modified to assist those learners. Disable and non-disable learners attend the same class, and they participate in games and cultural activities together. ALL of them follow the same lesson but the strategies and techniques vary from student to student. Rote learning is discouraged. Peer learning is encouraged to assist one another. To assess their performance, written, oral and observational tests are taken. [6]

Individual Success

Oni: (Pseudonym) a fourteen years old girl studying in 8th grade in Singapore International School in Dhaka, is a talented creative designer who has both physical and motor disability from her birth. She had lots of complexities both in physical movement, speech and communication. But her parents always tried to give her social exposure and admitted her in mainstream school. They chose comparatively less renowned school with small sized classroom where her individual needs would be entertained. She was first admitted into Mary Curie School in Dhaka. After completing kindergarten, she was transferred to Singapore International School, Dhaka. In both of these schools, teachers were highly supportive for her proper growth and she could complete the years with her mainstream peers with success. She followed the Cambridge Curriculum. From her childhood, her mother found her inclined to fashion design and she used to encourage her to do so. Now, besides studying, she is doing very well in fashion designing. She dreams to be a professional fashion designer. She still has the physical and speech impairments, but she could overcome her communication problem a lot. Her parents consider her mainstream Schooling the reason behind her success.

Rajin: (Pseudonym) Rajin is an autistic baby of 6 years who is attending mainstream school (Mastermind School, Dhaka) in Nursery class. In the school interview, he performed well so faced no difficulty to get admission. He is following general curriculum for the regular students and attending the same exams. He is not getting any extra support teacher in his class. His level of autism is slight, so instead of a disable child he is considered as a challenged baby. As he is reluctant to talk to other peoples and very restless, his teachers face difficulties to make him concentrate and follow instruction. His mother and elder brother are used to giving much time and effort before him. He can read and write well but reluctant to interact, communicate and play with others. He mainly learned alphabets and words through the videos from you tube. He has high interest in audio-visual materials.

XI. DISCUSSION

From the result of the survey, the decision can be taken that, based on the level and types of disability; special learners can be successfully adopted in the mainstream schools. But before that, a number of modifications in different stages discussed above have to be ensured. For the successful inclusion, some recommendations are going to be mentioned below.

1. Mainstream schools, administrators, and all educators need to be updated with the positive impact of inclusion. Synchronization and coordination among governments, policy makers, NGOs and educators of both mainstream and special education is required.
2. Individual learning needs must be addressed and attended through IEP (Individual education plan).
3. Extra support, monitoring and time is the main prerequisite. A number of well-trained support teachers are needed in this concern.
4. There might be different customized curriculum according to their level. Each of them are unique, so instead of general strategies, exclusive schemes might be more effective. Evaluation, testing system should be flexible. If necessary, individual testing may be suggested. The mainstream materials need to be presented in some adapted and modified form. Assistive devices also need to be arranged.
5. Target should be not only to achieve academic success, rather to real-world accomplishments. It must be remembered that they are good at different skills that sometimes go beyond theoretical education.
6. Government can motivate poor parents by giving allowances if their kids are sent to school. It is also the duty of government to provide them work according to their skills. Motivational workshops among mainstream schools need to be arranged. Moreover, to provide training and other resources are also, part of their main responsibilities.
7. Law should be enforced to have some reserve seats in the mainstream schools for them.
8. Fund raising program has to be arranged. Handsome payment must be ensured to motivate the teachers. The success mainly depends on the effort of the teachers.
9. Peer students should get some separate lessons to have good ideas on how to accept and cooperate with them. They should be collaborated in games, music and other cultural activities. Encouragement must be provided to behave well and not to show any curiosity or pity towards them. Peer effects can be extremely significant for them to cope in the mainstream school. The most important thing is to make them feel easy and enjoy the classes. Both teachers and classmate have to work together to achieve this goal.
10. Physical viability should be improved for the physical disable learners by small range modifications in classroom spaces, stairs, washrooms, doors, seats etc.

XII. CONCLUSION

‘The kids who need love the most will always ask for it in the most unloving ways’ - these disadvantaged kids really need our affection and love. We just have to touch their heart. The slogan used by the international disability movement - “Nothing about us without us” tells us perfectly why they should be included among us equally. They need to grow in a loving and caring society that will extend supportive hand towards them not making isolate. Exclusion of them from the mainstream education would make the Millennium Development Goal of ‘Education for All’ unsuccessful. Until and unless this group does not become physically, economically and psychologically independent, the whole nation will be lagging behind. To achieve this desired independence, inclusion has to be introduced soon.

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