

Obstacles and Constraints in Achieving Inclusive Primary Education : An Empirical Examination of Special Child Education in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Bangladesh has made significant strides in primary education, particularly in integrating students with disabilities. This research focuses on the challenges to achieving inclusive education in the Barishal division, specifically for children with special needs. Data were collected from 75 participants using purposive sampling across various schools, through structured and open-ended questionnaires. The study primarily gathered insights from teachers about the obstacles they face in implementing inclusive education. Key issues identified included inadequate training, lack of confidence, and insufficient classroom infrastructure. Participants suggested several strategies to enhance inclusive education, such as providing targeted training for educators on inclusive principles and methods, and fostering interactions between children with special needs and their peers. Encouraging these interactions helps promote participation in group activities and supports the social integration of all students.

Keywords: Inclusive education, primary education, children with disabilities, barriers, challenges, Bangladesh.

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INTRODUCTION

Since signing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Bangladesh has actively pursued the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and contributed to global discussions on their significance. The government has adopted a “whole-of-society approach,” engaging various stakeholders to meet these goals (Islam et al. 2018, Sarkar et al. 2022). However, challenges remain in aligning the SDGs with national and local development strategies, establishing strong institutional frameworks, mobilizing financial resources, collecting data for monitoring, and fostering multi-stakeholder partnerships (Khatun and Saadat 2021). Despite significant progress in economic growth and overall development, Bangladesh still confronts developmental hurdles (Sarkar, Takemoto et al. 2022). To achieve the SDGs, Bangladesh must leverage past development achievements and lessons learned. In addition to mobilizing resources and building capacity for comprehensive SDG implementation, addressing the challenge of inclusive structural transformation is crucial. This involves expanding domestic productive capabilities, diversifying production structures and technological capacities, fostering inclusive and sustainable economic growth, reducing inequalities, and maximizing the benefits of the SDGs (Mujeri, 2020).

Ensuring universal access to quality education stands as a cornerstone for any nation striving towards SDG achievement. By prioritizing investments in education and vocational training, as delineated in SDG 4, Bangladesh can leverage its youthful population to bridge the global talent gap (Mujeri, 2020). Moreover, education serves as a linchpin in reducing poverty and inequality, improving health and nutrition, bolstering economic development and labor market opportunities, and fostering peace building and democratic institutions. Bangladesh's development agenda post-2015, led by the Planning Commission's General Economics Division (GED) through a consultative process since 2013, underscores its dedication to the SDGs. This collaborative effort resulted in the formulation of 11 goals, 58 targets, and 241 measurable indicators tailored to the nation's unique context.

Recognizing universal primary education as a priority, the country's national constitution expresses commitment to ensuring quality primary education with equal opportunity for all children. Additionally, teacher training programs focus on preparing teachers to handle children with various needs in mainstream classrooms. However, with all these provisions, Bangladesh has achieved little in educating students with disabilities within regular schools. Although some private and NGO-based schools have initiated inclusive education initiatives, challenges persist, including insufficient facilities for special child education in mainstream schools and a scarcity of specific educational institutions for children with special needs.

The selection of the Barishal Division for sampling is significant due to its comparatively higher literacy rate (75.3%), exceeding the national average (56.5%), and the pivotal role inclusive education plays in the region. Nonetheless, there are ongoing challenges, including the struggle for teachers to effectively educate both typical and special needs students within a single classroom setting, thereby impeding the advancement of inclusive education. As such, this research endeavors to investigate the methodologies employed by teachers to foster inclusive education within their classrooms and to pinpoint the obstacles they encounter in facilitating and advocating for inclusive educational practices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Inclusive Education

Inclusive education, guided by the principle of 'education for all,' strives to foster societal equality by ensuring that every learner, irrespective of their individual traits or limitations, has educational access (Ahuja, 2002). This encompasses diverse attributes like race, gender, religion, culture, sexual orientation, learning style, language, and disability. Inclusion in education involves providing all students with access and equal opportunities for education and learning (Yeboah, Aloba, Charamba, & Studies, 2023). In such environments, educators adapt teaching to meet the unique needs and potential of each learner. According to Patterson and Manning (2009), achieving inclusive education depends on mainstream schools embracing inclusivity and enhancing their ability to educate all community children. It's not confined to specialized institutions but represents a broader shift in policies and practices, aiming to uphold the universal right to education. Ultimately, inclusive education lays the groundwork for a fairer and more equitable society.

Inclusive education aims to provide equitable educational opportunities for all students with special needs, advocating for their right to attend regular schools without discrimination (Kamran, Siddiqui, & Adil, 2023). While often associated with developed nations, this concept is gaining momentum in the developing world as well. Special education focuses on tailored teaching methods for children with intellectual, developmental, sensory, or physical disabilities (Dillenburger et al., 2020). In Bangladesh, despite a push for inclusive education over a decade ago, significant barriers remain. The United Nations Educational and Cultural Organization (2009) emphasizes the government's role in overcoming these obstacles to foster inclusive environments. Currently, many schools in Bangladesh are housed in multi-story buildings, which create accessibility challenges for students with mobility impairments (Mehtab, 2014).

IMPORTANCE OF INCLUSION FOR LEARNERS WITH DISABILITY

The concept of disability encompasses any physical or mental condition, referred to as impairment, which creates challenges for individuals in performing certain tasks (activity limitation) and engaging with their environment (participation restrictions). This condition can stem from physical, mental, or emotional factors such as disease, injury, congenital defects, or accidents, affecting cellular, organ, or limb levels of the individual during the active phase of the condition (Altman, 2014). Even after the acute phase has passed, residual impairments may persist, characterized by abnormalities or losses that remain once the active disease pathology has been treated or resolved (Altman, 2014). These residual impairments can alter the functioning of cells, organs, or limbs, leading to changes in their capabilities compared to before the onset of the condition. Disabilities may manifest from birth or develop over the course of an individual's life. They encompass a diverse range of conditions, including Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), physical handicaps, disabilities resulting from mental illness, visual impairment, speech impairment, intellectual impairment, hearing impairment, deaf blindness, cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, multiple disabilities, and others (Act, 2013). Various social, physical, and emotional factors contribute to the exclusion of a significant number of children from schooling.

UNESCO in 2009 identifies groups facing exclusion, including ethnic minorities, refugees, and child workers, those affected by HIV/AIDS, abused children, religious minorities, impoverished children, street children, those in conflict zones, and children with disabilities. Inclusive education, focusing on marginalized learners, can integrate those with special needs, turning them into valuable assets for their nations. When Inclusive Education is aptly arranged, it shields children with special needs while encouraging social justice, equality, and compassion among healthy ones, making them sensitive toward the needs of their peers with disabilities who, consequently, could be empowered to learn and adapt more easily to them. (Sadikovna & Azimjon o'g, 2023).

TEACHER'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS INCLUSION

Demographic factors can influence teachers' attitudes toward including children with disabilities. However, studies on age and teaching experience yield mixed results. Some research suggests younger teachers with less experience are more positive about inclusion

(Aksamit et al., 1987; Avissar et al., 2003; Avramidis & Kalyva, 2007), while others find no link between age or experience and positive attitudes (Avramidis et al., 2000). Major challenges include the severity of disabilities, lack of special aides, and insufficient training (Aalatawi & Research, 2023). Additionally, there is limited research on teacher attitudes in developing countries like Bangladesh.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study aims to identify obstacles to inclusive primary education in Bangladesh and suggest solutions. In addition to that, the research will document the status of primary education, situation of children with disabilities, challenges to inclusion, and difficulties faced by teachers and students in an inclusive setting.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The major research questions to be addressed are as follows: What is the current state of primary education in Bangladesh? What are the challenges faced by teachers in inclusive schools when teaching children with special needs? What are the problems that arise in these settings? How do teachers put into practice the education of inclusive students?

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework outlined in Figure-1 underscores the essential elements for achieving successful inclusive primary education. It emphasizes the challenges individuals encounter in advancing Inclusive Primary Education (IPE), which encompass social, economic, and infrastructural constraints, posing barriers to fostering inclusive learning environments. However, by engaging key societal stakeholders, these obstacles can be mitigated. Attaining success in primary Inclusive Education is feasible when there is a positive attitude towards children with disabilities and active involvement in their education. Various strategies can be employed to establish inclusive education, such as teacher training programs, raising societal awareness, government initiatives, among others.

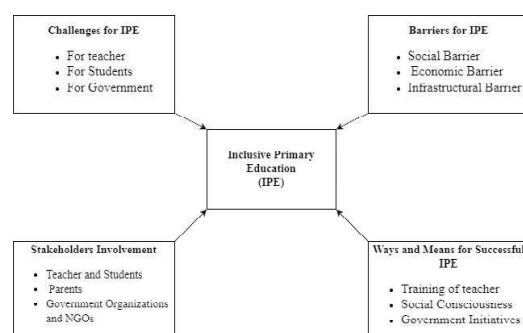


Figure-1: Conceptual framework for a successful IPE especially for the special/disabled children in Bangladesh

METHODS OF THE STUDY

Questionnaires served as the primary tool of this study for gathering data, structured based on the 5-point Likert scale. The research focused on primary school teachers, encompassing both public and private/NGO institutions, with experience in inclusive education and teaching students with disabilities. Through purposive sampling, 75 teachers from different primary schools across sub-districts in the Barishal Division of Bangladesh were selected.

To solicit participation, respondents were contacted via phone and email, and the study objectives were explained to them. Detailed instructions regarding the survey questionnaire were provided, and after agreement to participate, the questionnaire was administered electronically using Google Forms. Respondents were given ample time to complete the questionnaire, and upon submission, the responses were screened to ensure alignment with the research objectives. Open-ended responses were coded based on the provided answers, and all questionnaires underwent careful editing and coding. Simple descriptive statistics, such as percentages, bar charts, and tabular presentations, were utilized to analyze the gathered data. This analysis aimed to provide insights into the challenges and procedures linked with inclusive teaching within the respondents' institutions.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

Present Situation of Primary Education in Bangladesh

Bangladesh is committed to the attainment of Universal Primary Education as indicated in the SDGs, which ensures that all children acquire quality basic education by 2030. Thus, primary education in Bangladesh aims to enroll as many children within the age bracket of 6-10 years into schools. According to Figure-2, there was an increase in enrollments at government primary schools from 2018 to 2019, but unfortunately, a decline was observed in 2020. Conversely, enrollments at Newly Nationalized Primary Schools (NNPS) showed a consistent increase from 2018 to 2020. This trend suggests a preference among students and parents for NNPS over government primary schools.

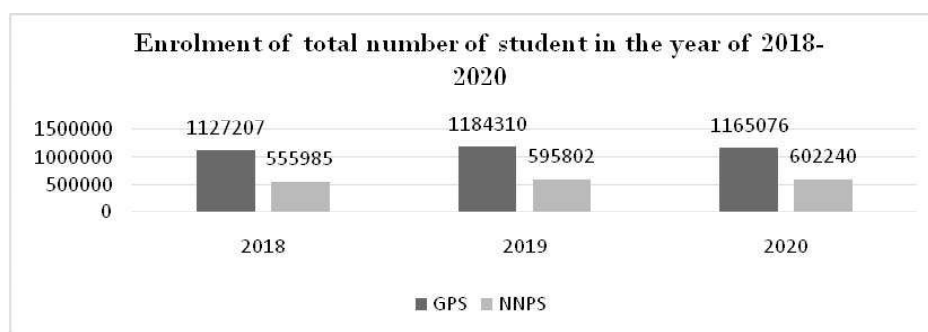


Figure- 2: Number of Enrollment in Primary School in the year of 2018-2020.

Status of Primary Education in Barishal Division

Barisal division boasts one of the nation's highest literacy rates, trailing only behind Dhaka division (BBS, 2013). Barisal's urban population boasts a literacy rate of 75.3%, well above the national average of 56.5%. Additionally, BBS data from 2013 indicates that Barishal Division boasts a primary education completion rate of 88%, second only to Khulna division. This high completion rate makes Barishal Division an ideal choice for the focus of this study.

Current Status of Student with Disabilities in Bangladesh

According to Ackerman and Hug (2005), current statistics provide only an approximate representation of the distribution of different disability types. The Action Plan for the Second Primary Education Development Program (PEDP-II) in 2005 highlights the absence of systematic inclusion of disability in routine data collection or surveillance systems in Bangladesh. Discrepancies in disability statistics in Bangladesh stem from social stigmatization and classification challenges. Insights into the types and prevalence of disabilities among children aged 6-11 years are provided by the PEDP-II Special Requirements Education Programme. Table 1 presents the various disabilities observed within this age bracket.

Table 1 : Types of disabilities among children aged 6 to 11, presented by number (percentage).

Types of Disability	Number (%)
Physical impairments.Top of Form	720076 (41.5)
Visual disability.	341819 (19.7)
Hearing/Speech Impairment	340084 (19.6)
Mental Retardation	128398 (7.4)
Cerebral Palsy	121458 (7.0)
Multiple Disabilities	58994 (3.4)
Mental Illness	24292 (1.4)
Total	1735121 (100)

[Source: Based on APCD]

Table 2: Enrollment of Special Need Children in Pre-Primary Class

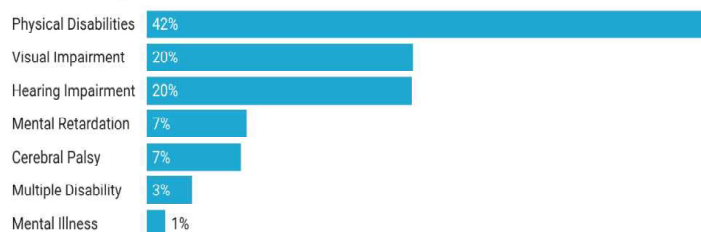
Types	Boys	Girls	Total
Physical impairments	4,340.00	3,020.00	7,360.00
Visual disability	1,209.00	1,021.00	2,230.00
Hearing Impairment	713.00	667.00	1,380.00
Speech Impairment	2,554.00	1,996.00	4,550.00

Mental Illness	3,336.00	2,548.00	5,884.00
Autism spectrum disorder	1,163.00	789.00	1,952.00
Multiple Disabilities	828.00	734.00	1,562.00
Total	14,143.00	10,775.00	24,918.00

[Source: Annual Primary School Census (APSC) Report -2020]

Accountability in promoting inclusive education relies on school census data tracking the enrollment of children with special needs across seven disability categories: physical impairments, visual disabilities, hearing/speech impairments, mental illness, cerebral palsy, autism spectrum disorder, and multiple disabilities. The Action Plan's estimates significantly exceed those from the PEDP-II Baseline Study.

Percentage of Children with disabilities



Created with Datawrapper

Figure-3 : Percentage of children with disabilities.

According to Figure-3, around 42% of children encounter difficulties because of physical disabilities, impeding their educational access and learning opportunities. Table 3 depicts the prevailing pattern of higher enrollment of girls in schools compared to boys. Nevertheless, the APSC report for 2020 indicates that the enrollment of girls with disabilities is lower than that of boys in both GPS and NNPS. Interestingly, it is observed that children with physical disabilities are enrolling more in both GPS and NNPS compared to those with other types of disabilities.

Table-4 illustrates a notable decline in primary school enrollment for both boys and girls since 2018. In 2018, a total of 62,416 children were enrolled, whereas only 50,182 children were enrolled in 2020, indicating a significant decrease. This downward trend is consistent for both boys and girls attending school over the specified period.

Table 3: Enrolment of Special Need Children in GPS and NNPS

Types	GPS			NNPS			Total
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	
Physical Handicap	7396	5,241	12637	2359	1553	3912	16549
Poor Eyesight	2495	2120	4615	725	576	1301	5916

Hearing Impairment	627	548	1175	195	183	378	1553
Speech Impairment	3056	2858	5914	1252	1121	2373	8287
Mental Illness	5765	5208	10973	1427	1312	2739	13712
Autistics	589	440	1029	173	115	288	1317
Others	516	481	997	232	229	461	1458
Total	20444	16896	37340	6363	5089	11452	48792

[Source: Annual Primary School Census (APSC) Report -2020]

Table 4 : Students with disability attending School (Survey data)

Types of Schools	Survey in 2018			Survey in 2019			Survey in 2020		
	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
GPS	25175	20802	45977	23692	19265	42957	20444	16896	37340
NNPS	8483	6887	15370	7472	6043	13515	6363	5089	11452
NRNGPS	645	424	1069	703	529	1232	778	612	1390
Total	34303	28113	62416	31867	25837	57704	27585	22597	50182

[Source: Annual Primary School Census (APSC) Report -2020]

CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING INCLUSIVE PRIMARY EDUCATION

Challenges faced by the teacher in the classroom management

a. Evaluation of a task of special learner: Based on the responses, it was observed that evaluating tasks completed by special learners is not considered overly challenging by teachers. A significant portion (48%) expressed that assessing such tasks in school is not difficult. However, a portion of teachers (36%) believe that evaluating tasks poses a challenge due to variations in students' learning levels, necessitating differentiated evaluation methods.

b. Supervising a child with special needs alongside their peers: When asked about the challenge of monitoring both special needs children and regular students simultaneously, teachers responded that they find it difficult to focus on each special learner individually compared to the regular learners. As a result, they find it very challenging to monitor every student in the class at once, with 49.3% expressing this sentiment.

c. Planning task for a special child: In response to this question, the majority of teachers (38.70%) indicated that planning tasks for special needs children is mildly challenging because they struggle to gauge how much a student can comprehend compared to regular students. Additionally, approximately 26% of teachers expressed feeling that planning tasks for special needs children is both challenging and not challenging at all.

d. Making different co-curricular materials for children: The teachers believe that planning tasks for special learners is not overly challenging for them. However, they find it highly challenging to create various types of co-curricular materials simultaneously for both normal and special needs children (44%). This task becomes especially daunting as it falls solely on the teacher, regardless of their regular teaching responsibilities. Consequently, each participant perceives these duties as challenging for a regular teacher.

Challenges related to special children

According to respondents, four types of challenges were identified: low comprehension levels, disinterest in subjects and tasks, disruptive behavior towards teachers or peers, and a lack of enthusiasm for teamwork and professional development.

a. Low Understandings Level of the Special Learner: In addressing this aspect, all participants view it as a significant challenge within an inclusive classroom. The majority believe that special learners often struggle to comprehend class lectures or activities compared to their peers without disabilities.

b. Absence of engagement in a subject or activity: Teachers are required to involve special learners in the majority of classes to foster inclusivity. However, many special learners lack interest in certain subjects taught in class, leading them to avoid participating in those subjects. Consequently, this reluctance poses a challenge for teachers striving to effectively implement inclusive teaching practices.

c. Aggressive conduct exhibited by learners with special needs: In some instances, special learners display violent behavior in the classroom, which may involve attacking teachers or other students. Approximately 26% of the participants perceive this as a significant challenge. Interestingly, the majority of participants, accounting for 74%, view it as a common challenge. They attribute such behavior to physical or mental imbalances, the side effects of medication, or provocative behavior by normal learners during classes.

d. Disinterest in engaging in group activities: Based on the teachers' responses, it appears that many special learners are reluctant to communicate or engage with other students in the classroom. This is considered a significant challenge by 55% of the participants, indicating that they perceive it as a hindrance to their work. Conversely, 10% of participants mentioned that this aspect is not a challenge in inclusive classrooms at all.

Difficulties of teacher in getting proper training

According to the respondents, a significant portion of teachers in their district lack appropriate training to educate special learners (40%). Moreover, instructors often fail to ascertain whether they are adequately equipped to effectively teach students with special needs, even after receiving limited training.

Other Potential Problems and Difficulties

Towards the end of the questionnaire, this study aimed to gather insights through open-ended questions regarding the challenges faced by teachers in real classroom settings. The responses revealed several difficulties, including:

- a. Insufficient social awareness and parental understanding.
- b. Lack of responsiveness towards children with disabilities.
- c. Insufficient awareness of the needs of children with disabilities.
- d. Inadequate teacher training.
- e. Decreased interest in mainstream schooling.
- f. Inflexible curriculum.
- g. Shortage of teaching materials and resources.
- h. Limited cooperation from parents of special learners.
- i. Scarce resources.

Barriers related to Inclusive Education

Despite Bangladesh's laws supporting inclusive education, resource scarcity remains a major barrier. Unlike developed countries where most children with disabilities attend school, 89% in Bangladesh do not. Challenges include negative attitudes, untrained educators, large class sizes, inaccessible infrastructure, and low parental involvement, hindering effective implementation.

DISCUSSION

The study found that while most teachers view inclusion positively, they face significant barriers to creating inclusive classrooms, including insufficient social awareness, inadequate training, an inflexible curriculum, and a lack of responsiveness. To effectively implement inclusive education in Bangladesh, enhanced training and support are essential. Previous research indicates that kindergarten teachers often struggle with severe intellectual disabilities and behavioral issues due to insufficient resources and classroom support (Crispel & Kasperski, 2021). Teachers also highlighted a lack of professional development opportunities, emphasizing the need for structured training to better manage students with disabilities and implement effective teaching practices. Additionally, barriers include students' disinterest in group activities and low awareness among both parents and peers, which hinders collaboration. Findings from Aalatawi & Research (2023) further emphasize the critical role of awareness and cooperation in successfully adopting inclusive education.

CONCLUSION

The education of students with disabilities is often seen as charity rather than a right. Despite challenges, integrated education is achievable, supported by initiatives like the Salamanca Declaration. Inclusive education is shaped by local socio-economic and cultural factors. While progress has been made, obstacles remain, such as inadequate infrastructure, lack of skills, low involvement from students and teachers, and negative attitudes. Addressing these challenges requires reforms at both school and national levels in education and teacher training.

To help new teachers implement inclusive education, several suggestions have emerged. First, teachers should receive thorough training to recognize various special educational needs, enabling them to better support all learners. The government should also improve

school facilities to accommodate diverse learners, with help from parents, NGOs, and other stakeholders. Providing necessary resources for students with mobility, communication, and sensory impairments is essential. Additionally, educating and counseling parents can foster their involvement in their children's education. Lastly, offering professional development courses on inclusive practices can enhance teachers' understanding, showing that students with special needs can thrive alongside their peers.

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