Challenges in Primary Level Inclusive Education in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Bangladesh's step towards inclusive education was given incentive by its involvement in major international declarations. Bangladesh agreed with the declaration of Education for All, in which education is to be provided to all children with an inclusive approach. In addition, Bangladesh is also committed to achieve Millennium Development Goals, which articulated the rights of all children into education through uniform system. It is important to note that the trend of enacting inclusive education policy and legislation in Bangladesh is mainly based upon the international treaties. The purpose of this paper is to highlight challenges in inclusive education for the policy formulators, implementers, and future researchers to take measures accordingly to universalize inclusive education in the country. The challenges identified in inclusive education concerned unfulfilled requirements of children with special needs, unfriendly situation, inadequate material and non-conforming curriculum, misinterpretation and mismanagement by stakeholders, restricted political and social backing, and adverse physiography. Pre-service training of teachers, along with continued assessment, collaboration and coordination to overcome challenges of inclusive schooling is recommended.

Keywords: Education for all, Inclusive, Challenges, Bangladesh

1. Introduction

It is mentionable that Education for All, Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education, the Dakar Framework for Action, and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities succeeded in creating an appeal on educational reform strategy for many developed and developing countries [1,2,3,4]. In that context, over the past two decades Bangladesh has endorsed policies and laws pertaining to Education for All (EFA) through the successful implementation of inclusive

education (IE) in mainstream schools [5]. Inclusive education is a global reform strategy aimed at enrolling students with different abilities in mainstream regular schools.

Contemporary literature on policies and practice of IE reflects that having valid guidelines does not always guarantee that practices are aligned with the principles of IE. Furthermore, over the last seven years, IE has been implemented through two major projects, one each in primary and secondary education in Bangladesh [6]. Undoubtedly teachers' support is essential to successfully implement inclusive classroom learning. International research found that teachers in inclusive schools need adequate support from the school management, which includes appropriate training, educational resources, and supportive environment which influence attitude and interest of teachers in IE [7]. Effective education is based on uniform education structure, governance, and curriculum. In addition, manpower retention, training, and participation to facilitate transition to general education are essential [8]. The purpose of this paper is to examine the challenges in IE in Bangladesh context through documents review, and thereof interpretation of challenges for way forward to act upon.

1.1 Background

Though the constitution of Bangladesh calls for a unified curriculum, there is great disparity in the curricula and standards of the schools in Bangladesh. There are currently 13 types of primary schools: government school, registered non-government school, high school attached school, experimental school, teachers' training institute school, community school, non-registered non-governmental school, kindergarten school, non-governmental organization (NGO) school, primary sections of secondary school, *ebtedayee* madrasah, primary section of other madrasah, English medium school, and English versions school [9].

International declarations signed in the last few decades are helping to promote EFA by eliminating inequalities in both society and the education system. Review of policy documents and reform initiatives by the Government of Bangladesh in response to the global affirmations centering on areas that support education system is reflected to some extent in the challenges faced in the field level inclusive education [10]. Lessons from the review ought to facilitate alternate initiatives promoting further functional collaboration between Government and other agencies [10].   The National Education Policy 2010 clearly focused on the right of EFA and comprehensive supportive environment for education in schools ensuring accessibility for all, including children with disability (CWD) in Bangladesh [11, 12].

1.2 Problem Statement

Since 1972, following independence of Bangladesh, the Government has implemented programs and policies to support education system in the country with various degrees of success. However, despite huge investment and effort by both the government and the private sectors, desired level of success has been elusive [9]. In the context of implementing IE in primary schools in Bangladesh, several factors like teachers' personal belief and attitude have a great impact in the inclusive teaching [13]. Furthermore, the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) targets to ensure inclusive and equitable quality EFA by 2030, to which Bangladesh is also committed [14]. The practical implementation of the concept still faces enormous hurdles in the country which is reflected by the statistics that shows 89.0 percent of CWDs are unable to access even primary education in Bangladesh [8, 15].

1.3 Rationale

Children with special needs face problem in mainstream school, and on the other hand the special needs schools are costly, which results in high dropout from the primary education. Implementing the policy to modifying the mainstream schools into inclusive schools, have to focus on the gap between the policy and practice.

1.4 Objective

This content analysis attempts an in-depth understanding of IE in Bangladesh to highlight its challenges for the policy formulators and implementers, and future researchers to take measures accordingly to universalize IE in the country.

2. Method

Consultation of web-based recorded communications using Google Scholar search engine was done to generate data on challenges for functional institutionalization of inclusive education in the mainstream education system of Bangladesh. The data was analyzed as information. Etic interpretation was done on the information to draw conclusion. Attention was given to relevant ethical issues, and plagiarism was avoided.

3. Results

Meta-analysis of data extracted from several studies is presented as a matrix below. Study finding showed that the unmet needs of student with physical disabilities in the face of uncongenial environmental situations mostly when the teachers are unable to understand their special mental and emotional needs of CWD apart from the normal children in schools [16]. Further, in the context of the challenges of teachers' training for IE, studies highlighted some important constituents: poor professional knowledge for novice teachers, non-specific disability tolerant training content, non-inclusive academic environment, teachers' malpractice due to their attitudinal problems and deficit mental preparedness to work in a joint force with the students, guardians, formal and informal local leaders, and political elites as leverage to improve education [17, 18].

Matrix 1. Challenges faced in inclusive schooling

Main challenge faced by CWD	Sub-category of challenge
Unmet needs of special children	Unawareness regarding disability of teachers and students
	Unable to support CWD in schools
Uncongenial environment	Inaccessible classrooms, and other infrastructure facilities
	Inadequate number of specially trained teachers
	Low-leverage of teachers, and school management
	Unavailable rehabilitation and health facilities in schools

	Integration instead of inclusion of CWDs
Material and curriculum problem	Inflexible traditional learner-based curriculum
	Scarcity of teaching materials for CWDs
Misunderstanding and malpractice	Social stigma regarding inclusive education
	Deficit of evidence-based practice of inclusive education
Limited political and social support	Restricted political and societal commitment
	No adherence to execution of SDG 4
Physiographic hurdle	Unavailability of schools in hard-to-reach areas
	Long distance hindering physical presence at educational facilities

Limited training opportunities, with inadequate teaching materials for teachers on inclusive schooling, and personal attitude of teachers are recognized as major stumbling blocks to reorganize mainstream schools as inclusive schools. Studies foresee ominous signs of not being able to achieve the EFA targets set by international bodies and agreed by Bangladesh [5]. Inappropriate traditional learner-based curriculum for teachers and students, resource constraints, and few trained teachers to handle CWDs have a major negative effect on implementing inclusive schooling [18].

Studies also showed that teachers having past experience of teaching CWDs have more positive attitude on inclusive schooling [19]. Studies on the extent of IE in Bangladesh found that geographically it were more urban centered. On the other hand, inadequate infrastructure is a major threat to reaching IE in hard-to-reach areas [20, 21].

4. Discussion

The unmet mental and emotional demands of children with disability highlights the case of promoting open discussion and awareness raising programs to help mainstream schools, families and communities to understand their needs and necessities [16]. In other words, collaboration and coordination among all concerned stakeholders of inclusive schooling cannot be over emphasized. Professional knowledge, tolerance, attitude, and ability to leverage the cause of CWDs among teachers can probably be enhanced through appropriate instructional reform in professional training that encourages attitudinal change while promoting equity and inclusion, and social mobilization to bring about visible change in the overall management of CWDs [17, 18, 19, 22, 23]. Pre-service training of teachers on inclusive schooling to overcome the existing challenges is called for.

Limited training opportunities and personal attitude of teachers are also seen as hindrance in the path to reorganize mainstream schools and convert them to inclusive schools to achieve EFA. This suggests that further extensive empirical studies in classroom settings need to be undertaken. Negative influence of non-inclusive education-based curriculum and resource constraints may be overcome through strategies to strengthen implementation of inclusive education, which may be achieved by appropriate manpower development, introduction of more practical oriented curriculum, and disability friendly school resources for a congenial environment [18, 20, 24, 25]. As the society is dynamic, so is the challenges in inclusive schooling. One-time assessment of challenges may not be able to identify all of it, rather continuous

monitoring and supervision of the inclusive education system may go a long way.

Taking into consideration the existing situation of IE in Bangladesh, studies suggest contextualizing the international guidelines to make it more implementable and within the grasp of all concerned [20, 21]. The floating schools, an innovative approach adopted by some NGOs to reach primary education to the doorstep of people living in hard-to-reach areas, may be utilized to impart education incorporating inclusive approach specially for those living in wetland (*haor*), and pockets of culturally ethnic groups [24, 25]. Overall, studies emphasize on the role of Government of Bangladesh to supervise implementation of all issues related to EFA and IE to ensure achievement of SDG 4, that is, 'Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' [24].

5. Conclusion

Challenges in inclusive schooling at primary level are multidimensional, which may involve issues in input, process, output, and outcome of educational system. The recommendations arrived from this study are directed towards continued assessment of challenges in inclusive education; collaboration and coordination among all concerned stakeholders of inclusive schooling to overcome the challenges; and pre-service training of teachers on inclusive schooling, all of which may go a long way to ensure EFA and IE.

6. Acknowledgements

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