

Special Schools in Rajshahi: Review of Study Content for Children with Intellectual Impairment

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Abstract

The present study is an empirical investigation of study contents for children with intellectual impairment used in different schools of Rajshahi. Three schools of Rajshahi were selected purposively and two interview schedules and two FGD guides were used as data collection tools. The study was qualitative in nature. The study found that there is no common curriculum for special education; different schools followed contents developed by themselves. The study supports the argument that a unified special education curriculum should be developed, bringing appropriate changes in the teaching techniques to ensure quality learning for intellectually impaired students. The study analyzed the taught skills included in the study content and suggested a new hierarchy and chronology of skills to be taught for old and new students at the schools.

1. Introduction

The history of people with a disability is a history of exclusion. In most societies people with a disability have been met with rejection out of fear and ignorance. Once they were even killed deliberately, since they were believed to be possessed by evil force and witchcraft (Jonseen, 1992) In course of time, people started to look with sympathy at children with disability for religious and humanitarian reasons. They were kept in separate institutions outside cities. Gradually people started to realize that people with different abilities could also do something useful, if they got an opportunity. People with disability were then allowed to integrate with the mainstream in society. But to ensure full equity and participation only integration is not enough; it demands full inclusion. Special schools for children with intellectual impairment are a step in that direction.

In Bangladesh, the educational history of the intellectually impaired is not very old. In 1977 the “Society for the Welfare of the Intellectually Disabled - Bangladesh” or SWID-

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Bangladesh was established. It was a joint initiative of parents of the intellectually impaired (II) children and professionals (Haider, 2010). The Government of Bangladesh provided grants to SWID-Bangladesh under which 44 non-government organizations have been working in institutions serving children with intellectual disability in different districts of the country (Hossain, 2010).

The constitution of Bangladesh stated in article 28 (3) that every citizen is entitled to access to education without discrimination. The National Policy on Disability 1995 and Bangladesh Disabled Welfare Act 2001 guarantee equal rights and dignity of persons with intellectual impairment. The law also ensures their full participation in social and state activities. Since all children with intellectual impairment, especially those with severe impairment, are not able to benefit from mainstream education, special education is their only alternative.

Intellectual disability means significantly sub-average general intellectual functioning, existing concurrently with deficits in adaptive behavior, manifested during the developmental period, that adversely affects a child's educational performance (IDEA, 2010 as cited in Sultana, 2013).

Society for the Welfare of the Intellectually Disabled, Bangladesh (SWID); Physically Handicraft Training Centre (PHTC); Foundation for Women and Child Assistance (FWCA); and School for Gifted Children (Tauri foundation) are the four special schools situated in Rajshahi city corporation. SWID Bangladesh, FWCA and School for Gifted children are working for intellectually impaired and autistic children whereas PHTC works for visual and hearing impaired children. Among the four, SWID Bangladesh and PHTC are the two government organizations and FWCA and School for Gifted Children are private organizations. Approximately two hundred students are receiving special education from these schools. Student with special needs can take admission in these schools beginning at the age of 3 years and may seek admission up to 18 years. Schools teach different skills like literacy, behavioral and communicative skills, self-help, social skills, gross and fine motor skills and vocational skills. The schools also provide different therapies, such as, speech, occupational, psycho-, and physiotherapy. Art and music are also taught in the schools.

Intellectually impaired children learn more slowly and at maturity his/her capacity to understand is less than normal. They find difficulty in learning, social adjustment and economic productivity (Sen and Dutta, 1985, pg. 24-25). So their learning needs are different. They need more attention, support and specially designed curricula. Bangladesh does not have any national curriculum or a framework for such a curriculum for special education. As a result, every special school in Bangladesh follows a curriculum with its own chosen contents. The special schools of Rajshahi are not an exception. This study attempts to explore the contents used for teaching and their effectiveness in selected special schools for children with intellectual impairment in the city of Rajshahi.

2. Study objective

There are differences between general and special education curriculum as the intellectually impaired students have different learning needs from those for others. As noted, in the absence of a unified curriculum for special education or intellectually impaired students, different special schools follow their own curriculum and teaching contents. The study aims to review the study contents used in selected special schools and analyze the effectiveness of the contents to meet special learning needs of their students. It also examines the diagnosis and admission procedures for intellectually impaired students.

3. Methodology

The study is based on both primary and secondary data. Primary data have been collected from three special schools X, Y and Z (names of the special schools are not used in the paper to maintain confidentiality) of Rajshahi City Corporation. These three schools were selected purposively to represent education services available to children with intellectual impairment in Rajshahi, one of the large cities located in the western part of the country. All the teachers and the guardians of intellectually impaired students of those three schools were the respondents. Three focus group discussion (FGD) sessions were organized in the schools with the teachers. A group of 4-6 teachers attended the FGD session in each school. In the FGD session, the teachers discussed the study contents in the school curriculum and how they taught them. Class room observation was also done. A checklist for classroom observation was used in the week long observation process of each school (See Table: 3). The researchers observed the classes of each school focusing on the content and teaching technique of the schools.

The researchers also contacted 10 guardians and arranged interview sessions with them. These parents were also selected purposively. At the time of selecting the guardians for interview, some criteria were considered, such as, degree of their interest and concern about education of their children, male-female distribution, length of their child's attendance in school, and their availability for interview. Following table shows the demographic information of the selected guardians.

Table 1: Selection criteria of the guardians

Selection criteria	X school	Y school	Z school
Concerned School	4	3	3
Male-Female	2-2	1-2	1-2
Year of Childs' schooling	3-5	3-5	3-5

The interviews focused on parents' understanding and views about the study contents of intellectually impaired students, the selection of the taught skills, ways of teaching learning at school and progress of their children. The data collected separately from the teachers and

parents helped to complement and cross-check information. Written syllabus of School Y was used as a document; other schools informed that they didn't want to share their study content.

The study was qualitative in nature. Both the interview schedule and FGD questionnaire were descriptive and had open ended items. The researchers recorded the responses, calculated the percentages of the items mentioned by respondents on different developmental areas used in the study content and made an inventory of the skills taught and the pedagogic techniques used. This material was reviewed and analyzed to draw inferences on educational services provided to children including teaching content and teaching practices in the three schools.

4. Diagnosis of intellectual impairment and school admission

It is found that parents brought their children to pediatricians when they noticed that their children had delayed growth and development and suspected them to have problems. The pediatricians diagnosed the problem as intellectual impairment and suggested that the children should get admitted in a special school. About half of the parents claimed that they came to know about the school from doctors and pediatricians. Another 30% said they had the information from other parents and the rest mentioned other various sources, such as, neighbors, relatives, friends etc. The parents analyzed the information and considered distance, cost and reputation of school in making their choice.

It was found that none of the three schools had any standardized screening system for determining intellectual impairment or assessing learning needs of students. They relied on the judgment of parents and doctors. The researchers were informed in the course of their study that the organization *Persons With Disability (PWD)* was working with *National Forum of Organizations Working with the Disabled (NFOWD)* to develop a standard screening scale for students interested to attend the special school.

Appropriate schooling can benefit students with intellectual impairment. It can improve their condition and reduce degrees of severity in impairment. (Banerjee, 2013). Generally there is no fixed age requirement for admission and the schools do not have specific numbers of seats. Students can take admission throughout the year if the school can provide the space. One of the three schools reported that they occasionally kept applicants in the waiting list, if a child could not be admitted immediately. The age range of the students was found to be from 3 to 18 years.

Though the schools do not have a standardized system for determining severity of impairment and intelligence level of children, they kept the child under observation for two weeks. The teachers try to identify their capabilities, strengths and weakness. Considering their capabilities and also talking with parents, teachers prepare an individualized education plan (IEP) for each child for a period of 4-6 months. Teachers fix some learning outcomes in the IEPs which they try to attain in this time period, before a new IEP is prepared.

5. Life of students in the special schools

Schooling is one of the most valuable parts of human life cycle; intellectually impaired people are not an exception. It is found in the study that school is a favorite place for the children with intellectual impairment. Most of them appeared to be interested to come and stay at school. Basic information about the three schools observed in the city of Rajshahi is given in Table 2.

Table 2: Basic Information about 3 Schools for Intellectually Impaired Children in Rajshahi

Items	School X	School Y	School Z
1. Ownership Government – a Private non-profit – b Private for profit – c	c	a	c
2. Number of Students	20	15	10
3. Number of Teaching Staff	6	4	6
4. Teaching staff qualifications - Number of teachers with following qualifications: a. Graduate or post graduate degree + professional education training b. Graduate/post graduate degree only c. Special education training (short course or degree/diploma) d. Others without the above	a- 3 b- 1 c- 2	a- 2 b- 1 c- 1	a- 3 b- 2 c- 1
5. Number of other staff	6	4	3
6. Number of Classrooms	12	4	3
7. Other rooms (office, storage etc.)	2	1	1
8. Playground (size in square feet)	25 square feet	10 square feet	10 square feet
9. General condition of building (Safe and secure – yes or no)	Yes	Yes	Yes
10. Adequate toilet, sanitation and water (yes or no)	Yes	Yes	Yes
11. Electricity with fan in classrooms (yes or no)	Yes	Yes	Yes

The main characteristics of the classrooms in the observed schools are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Characteristics of Classrooms in 3 Schools for the Intellectually Impaired in Rajshahi (according to the observation checklist)

Items	Characteristics	Frequency
Classroom decoration	Well decorated	2
	Not decorated	1
Seating arrangement	U shape	2
	V shape	
	Circle	3
	Rectangle	
	Column	
Others		
Teacher-student ratio	≥ 1:10	1
	≥ 1:15	1
	≥ 1:20	1
Teacher –student interaction	Friendly	3
	Not friendly	
Curriculum followed	NCTB primary curriculum	3
	School's own curriculum	
	Both NCTB and own curriculum	
	Others	
Textbooks used	NCTB Textbook	3
	Other textbook	
	NCTB and other Textbook	
Teaching method	Lecture	3
	Behavioral modification	
	Applied Behavior Analysis	3
	Activity based	3
Individualised Educational Plan (IEP)	Yes	3
	No	
Lesson plan	Yes	3
	No	
Teaching aids	Pictorial	3
	Real object	
	Both real object and pictorial	
	None	

Items	Characteristics	Frequency
Skill development areas	Academic skills	3
	Behavior and Communication skills	3
	Self-help skills	3
	Social skills	3
	Gross and Fine motor skills	3
	Vocational skills	3
Yearly evaluation	Own format	3
	According to IEP	
	No specific method	
Classroom evaluation	Daily	3
	Weekly	

School X and Y were found with decorated classrooms; these classrooms were decorated with colorful charts, pictures and posters. Another classroom was not decorated with these types of teaching aids. Every school has two to three classrooms. One room from every school was covered with mats; these rooms were used for vocational training. (See discussion later).

Besides a room with mat floor, two other rooms of X school were furnished with desks; these desks were arranged in circle. Teachers informed that sometimes they arranged the desks in rectangular shape to bring variation. Classrooms of school Y and Z were furnished with big tables surrounded by chairs.

Schools differ in teacher-student ratio; the ratio of school X was $\geq 1:5$, Z was $\geq 1:10$ and Y was $\geq 1:15$. Friendly interaction was found in every school; and the schools showed similarity in teaching technique. They used the behavior modification approach to reduce negative behaviors; besides school X and Z used Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) techniques to guide their teaching-learning activities.

All of the three schools used NCTB provided textbooks. They also use other supportive books. Every school prepares IEP for every child; but the researchers were not able to judge the quality, appropriateness and proper use of these IEPs. None of the schools prepared any lesson plan.

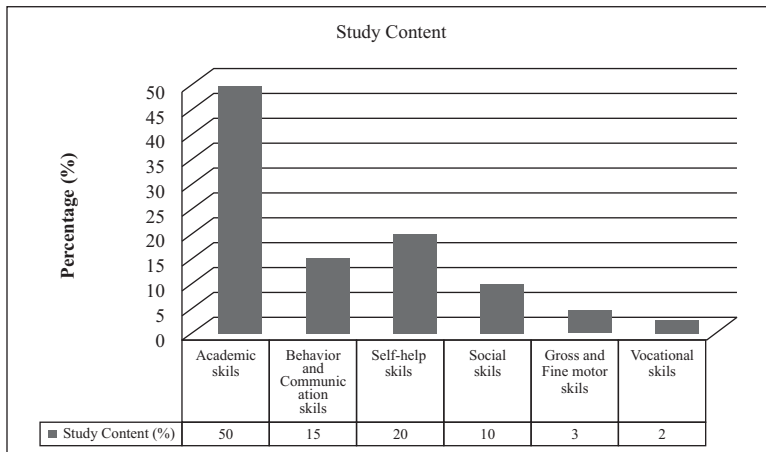
Without a unified national curriculum guideline for special education of II students, every school prepared its own study contents and included different skills in them. The study found that school X, Y and Z mainly include six types of skills in the study content, viz., academic, behavioral and communication, self-help, social, gross and fine motor and vocational skills. Daily and yearly classroom evaluations were made on the basis of IEPs.

6. The study contents

The three special schools do not differ much in the taught developmental and academic skills. All emphasized on academic skills like reading, writing and arithmetic. Some behavior and self-help skills are also taught in every school. The study content also covers some social and vocational skills. According to the class routine duration of the classes varies from 40 minutes to 1 hour. The duration of academic and vocational skill class are 1 hour, and other class' duration is 40minutes. Schools sit for 6 days in a week. Six classes held in first five days of the week starting from Saturday to Wednesday; on Thursday four classes are held.

It was found that on average 50% the teaching time as indicated by class routines were devoted to teach academic skills, 15% classes covered on behavior and communication skills, 20% stressed self-help skills and 10% of the classes were on social skills. Only about 3% of the classes were held on gross and fine motor skills and the remaining 2% of class time covered rudimentary vocational skills. (See Figure 1).

Figure 1: Average Time Distribution for Curriculum Content in 3 Schools for Children with Intellectual Impairment



Although Bangladesh does not have a unified special education curriculum, the three schools, focusing on intellectual impairment, appears to have developed a very similar pattern of curriculum for their students. They have emphasized six content areas as noted above. The proportions of time spent in these areas in the three schools also appear to be similar.

In respect of academic skills, the students are first taught the alphabet, then small and simple words. Besides, they are also taught counting, easy and simple subtraction, addition, multiplication and division. As intellectually impaired students cannot remember much and forget without regular practice, generally it is not possible to teach them big and complex

words and sentences and more complex numeracy skills. Their learning is concentrated on limited learning areas. Parents generally demand attention to academic skills; as a result schools give emphasis on teaching academic skills and design class routine focusing on these. One of the teachers described parents' demand in these words:

As students generally go to school for academic education, parents wish to see special schools in that style. They consider this a matter of prestige. Moreover, they believe academic education will bring more benefits, which is a misconception, since most of these students cannot do well in academic areas and other areas are important for their own well-being.

Although, schools held only 15% of classes on behavior and communication skills, teachers and guardians gave a high rating to success in these areas in reducing negative behavior, i.e., hitting and beating other children, shouting, throwing things, engaging in repetitive activities. Some estimated that 70 percent of the desired results were achieved in these areas. The study also found that School X and Z used Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) technique for correcting negative behavior. Previously it was known as behavior modification. It is the application of the classical conditioning to modify human behaviors as part of a learning or treatment process. It is simply the application of the behavioral principles that positive or negative stimulation served over time as incentive or disincentive to engage in certain behaviors. School Y emphasized observation of students and tried to reduce repetitive behavior by diverting children to different activities.

Another area of concentration is self-help skills. This area covers doing things necessary for personal self-sufficiency without taking help of others in such activities as eating, dressing, using the toilet, sleeping, walking, brushing teeth, combing, washing hands, bathing, etc. Though the progress in some cases is very slow and dependent on the level of severity of impairment of the particular student, schools claim their average success rate as 60% in teaching self-help skills. Parents also agree with teachers. "My child has become more independent after starting school," as one of the parents interviewed commented.

Schools include different types of games in the class routine to increase interaction among the students, which is helpful to develop social skills. Both teachers and parents agree that participation in various social activities and programs help children to socialize among themselves; but outside the school II students do not get that opportunity. Most of the students can play with others and can exchange his or her views with their play-mates. They learn to play football, cricket, and badminton; they also play with dolls, lego, puzzle, ludu and computer games. But they mostly lack the ability of solving puzzles, suduko and other types of thought related games. Students also participate in drawing, reciting, singing, dancing, skateboarding, and gardening; but some find these tasks difficult.

One of the teachers explained:

We teach sketching and drawing, writing with chalk and pencil, drawing a particular shape, cutting paper with scissors, walking along a set course, and easy sewing etc...but progress for some is very slow. Without regular practice they forget what they learn. So practice is essential for them.

Schools teach these things to improve fine motor skills of the students. For improving gross motor skills, schools give therapeutic services, but this service is very limited. Only 3% of the school time is spent for gross and fine motor skills.

Vocational skills are essential for intellectually impaired people to live independently. It creates an opportunity for engaging in work that may also be income-earning. The study found that only 2% of the school time is spent for vocational education. Schools informed that they teach the students making envelopes, simple handicrafts, packaging, making things with wood and wax, ironing clothes, sewing and embroidery, block and batik printing, making mosquito coils, etc.

The researchers' observation is that vocational skills are given only cursory attention as indicated by the total time spent on it. Parents also expressed a similar view. Teachers also thought that the children were not capable of making objects of acceptable quality. As a result sellable products could not be prepared.

7. Classroom practices and student evaluation

Students are taught in a multi-grade arrangement, rather than in separate classes. All students are taught the same topic in the same classroom. The students have different types of problems in respect of self-help, inter-personal behavior, communication and social areas in contrast to general students who can learn these skills naturally, without any special help in school. The class routine did not take these differences sufficiently into account, though IEP is an attempt to do so.

There is no final or terminal examination in the special schools. As explained by a teacher, "Each student has different learning needs and differs in learning speed, it is not possible for schools to arrange a combined examination for them." Children are evaluated according to the IEP and each child's progress is assessed before the next IEP is prepared.

8. Researcher's observations

It is obvious that intellectually impaired students need special attention and teaching strategies to learn various essential skills. It is very difficult to do well in academic and vocational areas without improving self-help, communication skills and social skills. To mitigate this challenge, it is necessary to individualise instruction even if the students are placed in the same class. A reasonable approach would be to divide the students in groups at least in terms of older and newer students in the school. Those who have been longer in the school have presumably acquired some of the skills whereas the new ones have not done so. Class activities and routines could be varied accordingly.

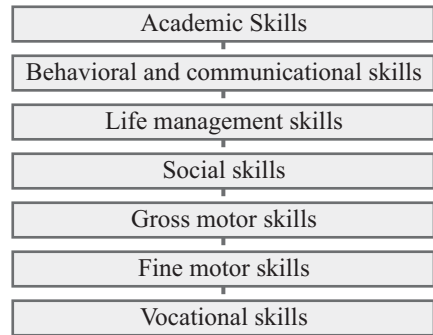
Greater attention would be needed for new students in self-help skills. They may also need different activities and kinds of assistance in behavioral and communication skills. When students develop their self-help and self-efficacy skills, they would be better prepared for

learning academic and vocational skills. Gross and fine motor skills also may have to be given greater attention at an early stage for some students.

It appears that a common routine of activities for all students are followed giving greater importance and devoting more time to areas which are given priority by parents. This hierarchy of preferences is shown in Figure 2. This order of priority does not necessarily reflect the developmental needs and sequence of the intellectually impaired children or what may be necessary for their own self-sufficiency, well-being and self-efficacy.

Figure 2: Hierarchy of skills areas as practiced in 3 Special Schools for Intellectually Impaired Children

It is reasonable to assume that self-help and self-efficacy skills are necessary precondition for success in academic and vocational skills. The researchers suggest grouping of students on this basis and organizing IEPs and class routines accordingly for the students. This would generally imply that for new students a greater emphasis would be given to self-help and self-sufficiency skills and greater time and effort would be devoted for those enrolled longer in school to academic and vocational learning objectives. Based on this premise, two different



routines for the teaching learning program is proposed as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Suggested Hierarchy in Curriculum and Class Routines for Newer and Older Students



The two patterns suggested above should be taken as a general guide for preparing IEPs for each student and assigning students in group activities within a multi-grade setting in the classroom. These are not meant to be taken rigidly, because the aim in a special school should be to individualize instruction and teacher-student interaction as much as possible and allow as much flexibility as possible to make this happen.

9. Conclusion

Intellectually impaired people in any population group are not few in numbers. They are often neglected, oppressed and suppressed in almost every society. It cannot be denied that they are an inseparable part of our society and society as a whole is poorer by discrimination against them. It is society's obligation to extend empathy and friendship to them and help them live with their rights and dignity. Appropriate educational opportunities for the intellectually impaired are the best means to this end. A national curricular framework for special education, and within this framework, provisions for the intellectually impaired, is a critical step in that direction. The special schools for children with intellectual impairment then can design standard programs and can be held accountable for their performance.

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