

Accessibility of Government Primary Schools for Children with Disabilities -- An Assessment and Policy Needs

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Abstract

This article reports a survey undertaken in May 2014 aimed at investigating to what extent schools were equipped and prepared to accommodate children with special needs. The survey was conducted in 119 government primary schools in 19 sub-districts. The survey revealed that only 0.8% of the students enrolled in these schools had disabilities and only 3% of the teachers had special training to deal with students with disabilities. Only 26% of schools had ramp for the wheel chair users. Though numerous initiatives on the part of both non-government and government organisations have been taken to bring students with disabilities into the regular school, the picture is not optimistic yet in the case of government primary schools. Some policy suggestions are made at the end which, it is hoped, would be useful for policy development and bringing about effective change.

Key words: Disabilities, Accessibility in Primary School, Inclusive Education Policy

I. Introduction

Children living in poverty are less likely to attend their local school but those who live in poverty and also have a disability are even less likely to do so. Currently, there are 23 million¹ people in Bangladesh who are living with some form of disability; among them 6% or around 1.6² millions are 15 years old or younger. For these children attaining education is a major challenge. There is a lack of institutional support at grassroots level for them. At the same time there are social stigma, cultural barriers and lack of awareness of the parents that limit opportunities for them to flourish as productive individuals. There is a positive trend of

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¹ According to WHO's estimate of 15% disability rate of the total population of 160 million (Link: http://www.who.int/disabilities/world_report/2011/report/en/)

² Children with disability in Bangladesh- CAMPE
(file:///C:/Users/tonny.nowshin/Downloads/16032014020857pmChildren_with_Disability_in_Bangladesh%20(1).pdf)

Note: The writers conducted the survey on behalf of ActionAid Bangladesh on accessibility of Government Primary Schools for children with disabilities in May 2014 as part of Global Action Week observance on the theme – “equal rights equal opportunity.” The initiative was coordinated by the field level youth groups of ActionAid Bangladesh. The writers acknowledge advice and encouragement from Khandaker Lutful Khaled, former education Manager of ActionAid Bangladesh.

transforming our education system into a more inclusive one that serves all regardless of learners' background. Inclusive education is, of course, not just enrolling the children with disabilities; rather the regular schools should be equipped with infrastructural facility and trained teachers to accommodate these children.

Unless the mainstream classrooms can accommodate all the learners from diverse backgrounds the objective of ensuring education for all cannot be achieved. Bringing together learners from different backgrounds, with diverse cultural and individual characteristics, into a single classroom helps promote right to education for the marginalised children. This also helps everyone to develop a better sense of coexisting, respecting differences and interacting in a sensitive way. It is the first step in building a more just society by creating better future citizens. Government is the core duty-bearer in fulfilling the commitment of education for all. This duty calls for making the government primary schools inclusive for all. Making the schools disability-friendly is an important part of it.

Making the school welcoming to those with disability has many aspects -- it requires supporting infrastructure including disability-friendly school buildings, classrooms, and most importantly appropriate toilets. It also requires suitable education and co-curricular materials, and human resources such as trained teachers, nurses (if needed). Moreover, there must be special policy provisions such as allotting extra time during examination, and introducing inclusive sports competition. While some of these facilities require resource allocation and policy level changes, some can be attained without extra funds. For example, a few small changes or addition in the original school building plan can make the whole infrastructure a lot more disability- friendly and make attending school for children with disability a reality.

To determine if a school is disability-friendly one would have to look at its infrastructure including building entrance, classroom size, positioning of the blackboard and toilet facility. School infrastructure built in a way so that a person with wheelchair can easily enter the school premises, attend classes and freely move about is an important measure of the school's disability friendliness. Teachers with adequate training and person with disability employed in the school as teaching or administrative staff are also indicators of disability friendliness of a school.

II. Rationale and Objectives of the survey

According to World Health Organization (WHO, 2014)³ over a billion people, about 15% of the world's population, have some form of disability. Despite having significant global commitments and momentum around inclusive education, bringing all children in regular school regardless of their economic, social and cultural background and capability in terms of physical, intellectual and/or behavioural characteristics --- is still one of the major

³ <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs352/en/>

challenges in education. Children with disabilities and many others who have difficulties in learning are often marginalized within the education system and in society in general. They are placed in separate special schools to pursue their education, when they are fortunate enough to have access to school. The number of segregated special schools is far smaller than the number required for accommodating all children with disabilities (UNESCO, 2003).

Various international conventions, covenants and declaration like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the Convention against discrimination in education (1960), the Convention on the Rights of Children (1989) and the Salamanca Declaration (1994) are the prime sources of legal and policy support to promote inclusive education. Inclusive education has become a focus in policies of governments across many parts of the world.

Education reform is seen as a key driver for achieving social integration and cohesion. These ideas are to be found not just in the developed countries of North America, Europe and Australasia. In the developing world too, considerable interest has been shown in the idea of 'inclusive education' and Bangladesh is paying ample attention to it. International agencies including the United Nations (UN), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the World Bank and bilateral agencies such as the United Kingdom's Department for International Development have been strong advocates of 'inclusion' as a core principle of schooling and the education system.

Educational research literature shows that the growth of 'inclusive education' in the developing world in part reflects the export of first-world thinking to developing countries which may have reinforced dependency (Armstrong, Armstrong, Spandagou, 2011). In Bangladesh also research on inclusive education, such as, correlation between disability and trained teachers, and teachers' and peers' perception about including children in regular classroom, is influenced by theories and policies in the developed countries, though the circumstances are quite different.

Lack of accessibility continues to be a major barrier to full realization of the rights of children and adolescents with disabilities in Bangladesh, but there is very limited primary research on assessing school preparedness for children with disabilities in the specific circumstances of Bangladesh. This study aims to explore the prevailing situation of accessibility in government primary schools in terms of infrastructure and trained teachers. Despite a number of limitations, this study is intended to be an exploration of ways of removing infrastructural barriers and making the public educational institutions accessible for children with disabilities.

This survey, therefore, aims to analyse the extent to which the government primary schools are prepared to accommodate disabled children in the classrooms, to examine the existing policies and to suggest appropriate policy changes.

Literature review

Bangladesh was among the first countries to ratify and bring into force the two most significant global treaties that protect the rights of children with disabilities: the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), in 1990, and UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), in 2007. Both of these treaties are about equal opportunity of children regardless of their gender, race, capacity, religion, caste, social status and physical or intellectual ability.

The CRC elaborates specific rights for children with disabilities in article 23:

Recognizing the special needs of a disabled child, assistance . . . shall be provided free of charge, whenever possible, taking into account the financial resources of the parents or others caring for the child, and shall be designed to ensure that the disabled child has effective access to and receives education, training, health care services, rehabilitation services, preparation for employment and recreation opportunities in a manner conducive to the child's achieving the fullest possible social integration and individual development, including his or her cultural and spiritual development.

In article 5, titled 'Equality and nondiscrimination', the CRPD pledges: "In order to promote equality and eliminate discrimination, State Parties shall take all appropriate steps to ensure that reasonable accommodation is provided."

A situation analysis of children with disabilities in Bangladesh by UNICEF (2014) revealed that government institutions are not yet adequately equipped with skills and knowledge to include children with disabilities. There is a mindset, according to this study, that it is necessary for most children with disabilities to be cared for in special institutions. This report also states that many schools are not accessible to children with disabilities, especially physical disabilities, preventing them from attending or causing them to drop out. While most primary schools are on the ground floor, secondary schools tend to be multi-storied. Lack of accessible toilets also forces many children to drop out, especially girls

Bangladesh National Building Code, 1993 (which was updated in 2010) that aims to safeguard life, limb, health, property and public welfare covers all citizens in Bangladesh. Surprisingly it does not include educational institutions with regard to requirements for accessible classroom, toilet facilities and drinking water. Also it has no specific direction for how to make school buildings accessible for children with disabilities. However, Disability Rights and Protection Act, 2014 pledges to make all public institutions accessible for persons with disabilities. So, in principle, there is no option to overlook the issue, but the major challenge is that there is no "rule of business" for this Act which hinders the proper implementation of its provisions.

Education Policy 2010 proposed that one of the aims of teacher training programs is to ensure equal access of children to education irrespective of social class, gender, religion, and ethnicity. It also called for developing strategies to meet in the same classroom the learning needs of all children with their diverse background and circumstances (MOE, 2010).

Teachers' training is a crucial factor in making school accessible for children with disabilities. A study on pre-service teacher education institutional heads' perception regarding inclusive education reveals deficiencies in this respect. The heads were concerned that the existing pre-service teacher training programs did not prepare teachers effectively for inclusive education, especially in challenging and re-examining their beliefs in a positive manner. This study also noted lack of clarity and absence of consideration of the implications for inclusive classroom practices in the teacher preparation curricula, program content and their implementation (Ahsan et al., 2011). Cardona (2009) stated that teacher preparation can play a significant role in achieving the desired outcomes for inclusion. Reviewing a number of studies on impact of teacher education on inclusion it is affirmed in this study that improving and increasing training provision in the pre-service phase of teacher education would be the most effective method of promoting better attitudes and competence in respect of inclusion.

A review of teacher education for inclusion (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2010) mentioned that teacher issues are high on policy agenda in many countries and increasing attention is being given to teacher education for inclusion in particular. A survey of primary school teacher training in Germany (Franzkowiak, 2009) recommended that introductory courses on inclusive education should be mandatory for all teacher education students, that bachelor and masters courses should include inclusive education and combined degree programmes for primary and special education should be promoted. Also an international policy paper (Lewis and Bagree, 2013) urges government support for improved teacher training systems that deliver an effective balance of theory-based learning and hands-on practice, with a particular focus on teachers learning how to be child-centred and inclusive, and attention to teaching children and adults with disabilities

III. Survey Design and Methodology

The study collected data directly from the participants. The findings are presented in a qualitative manner comparing these with relevant policy, acts and secondary literature. The survey was conducted in 119 government primary schools of 17 districts of Bangladesh with a simple questionnaire consisting of 13 questions. The schools were selected from 19 sub-districts which are specially hard-to-reach⁴ or marginalised areas with a degree of social exclusion.⁵ The schools in sub-districts were opportunistically selected where ActionAid programme intervention was being implemented.

Researchers wanted to explore the situation of the schools where children from marginalized communities attended. These communities already are subject to several types of rights

⁴ Due to geographical position people in certain areas (e.g., char and haor areas, and hill tracts) face special difficulties in accessing basic services and economic opportunities, such as education, health and employment.

⁵ It is the outcome of multiple human rights violations a social group experiences. Exclusion takes place on the basis of gender, race, class, caste, ethnicity, age, religion and sexual orientation, as well as due to many other factors. Exclusion is often most acute when people suffer multiple layers of discrimination. People with disabilities face some of the most systematic exclusion in almost every society (ActionAid, 2012)

violation due to their economic status or social exclusion. Educational support for children with disabilities is mostly limited to children with disabilities from well-off families. The researchers intended to look into the situation of the government primary schools, especially those located in hard -to -reach or marginalized areas. The study was conducted in the districts of Dhaka, Gazipur, Jamalpur, Nilphamari, Kurigram, Gaibandha, Naogaon, Pabna, Sirajganj, Sunamganj, Kushtia, Jhinadah, Satkhira, Khulna, Patuakhali, Chittagong and Bandarban.

Researchers developed the questionnaire of the survey which contains 13 items. Among these, seven questions addressed infrastructural preparedness of the school such as presence of ramp, disability-friendly toilet, class room setup etc. Three questions were on staff distribution and staff capacity and others were targeted to gather information on students (Annex 1).

Total no. of schools	119
No. of Schools with students with disability	93
Total no. of students in schools	42,748
No. of students with disability in schools	334
Percentage of students with disabilities	0.8%

The information was collected using the questionnaire through community activists at field level. Youth groups amiliar with the community and the school were mobilized for collecting the information.

The data collectors were provided short briefing regarding how the data would be collected; a written instruction of data collection process was provided with the questionnaire.. Besides these steps, during data collection the education team and youth team of ActionAid Bangladesh provided technical support to the data collectors. After collecting data, the compiled report at the sub-district level was validated by sharing among the school authorities, students and parents through sharing meeting in sub-districts. In the nineteen sub-district sharing meetings, government officials and local media were also present. Researchers and representatives from ActionAid Bangladesh were present in these meetings and heard participants' feedbacks. The researchers then prepared the report which was presented at the Asian Centre for Inclusive Education Conference, 2015. A final review and revision were undertaken on the basis of feedback from participants at this conference.

Limitations

The survey was conducted with a small sample size of only 119 schools. The distribution of the school in a more marginalised or remote area might have depicted a poorer condition than the average situation in government primary schools. However, as most of the government primary schools are situated in rural areas the scenario found in the study may not vary largely from the overall situation.

The survey mostly focused on infrastructural information related to physical disability. The issue of accessibility of children with other forms of disabilities were not considered in

assessing school preparedness for serving children with disabilities. Neither did the study focus in detail on teachers' training or curriculum in relation to pedagogy for children with special needs. The schools were selected through purposive and opportunistic sampling and did not follow methodical steps of sample selection from a general universe of schools. The schools were selected from the working areas of ActionAid Bangladesh (AAB); in particular, where AAB education intervention is taking place. The findings of the study should be treated with caution in considering the general situation of government primary schools.

Data Analysis

The study covered 42,748 students and 803 teachers in 119 schools. Around 80% of the schools have students with disability in their classrooms. This shows that the government primary schools are reaching out to children with disability at some scale. However, the percentage of students with disability attending schools is found to be around 0.7% whereas percentage of disabled person under 18 years is around 6%⁶

The percentage of girl students with disabilities is significantly lower compared to overall gender ratio of students. It was found that in the 119 schools percentage of girl students is 52% whereas the percentage of girls among students with disability is 42%. This findings is quiet similar with the research findings of the report titled *Educating Children in Difficult Circumstances: Children With Disabilities* (CSID, 2002) which states that there is difference in terms of enrollment in education between boys (56%) and girls (44%)⁷ with disabilities in regular schools. This draws our attention to the fact that girl children with disabilities are more likely to stay out of school than boys.

The data involving school infrastructure show that the schools are not prepared enough for the disabled children. The study found that only 26% of the schools have a ramp for entering the school premise whilst 31% have accessible roads toward schools. Besides entrance ramp and road to school another major factor is availability of disability-friendly toilet. The data show that among 119 schools only 8 schools, or only 6% of the schools have disability-friendly toilets (Figure1). Besides accessibility, lack of proper toilets has adverse health and security implications for children with disabilities.

It was found that the blackboard, one vital element for classroom teaching learning process, is suitably positioned in most schools for teachers or students with disabilities for easy use. The teaching materials in the teachers' room are also kept in easily reachable places. Among 119 schools 63 schools have enough door space for a wheel chair for easy mobility.

The data show only 8% of the schools have teachers with training on inclusive education, but only 3% of the teachers in these schools have training on inclusive education. It was found

⁶ <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/DISABILITY/Resources/Regions/South%20Asia/DisabilityinBangladesh.pdf>

⁷ http://www.disabilityrightsfund.org/files/educating_children_with_disabilities_in_bangladesh.pdf

that there is only 0.6% or 5 teachers with disabilities out of 803 teachers from 119 schools. Moreover, no school was found to have special facilities for the children with hearing/visual or speech impairment, as there was no staff found who knew sign language or skills to handle visual impairment such as using oral instruction while writing anything in board or providing questionnaire in large fonts.

IV. Policy Suggestions

Government of Bangladesh has made a commitment in National Education Policy 2010 to adopt necessary measures to make education institutions more accessible for persons with disability. The national action plan for people with disability based on Persons with Disabilities Rights and Protection Act (PDRPA), adopted in 2013 requires actions to be taken to make all government and non-government buildings and public space infrastructure disability friendly. However, there is need to have specific instructions to make the change in school infrastructures inline with the Act. Rules of business for concerned official agencies also should be in place with detailed guideline.

The National Action Plan on Disability (2006) also stresses teachers training on inclusive education. It asks for inclusion of disability in the syllabuses of Primary Teachers Training Institute, Bachelor of Education and Master of Education courses for teachers, and introduces classroom teaching and examination methods in the general system for students with disability. However, the reality from the survey is that only 3% of teachers have such training. Other teachers said that they did not have any orientation on inclusive education or on teaching students with disabilities. It was also seen that only in 5 schools teachers organised special seating arrangement for the students with disabilities. The presence of a teacher with disability in school can improve the school environment for children with disability in a tangible way. It can improve their feeling of inclusion and inspire them in their study. However, there were few such teachers in the schools surveyed.

There is no good alternative to ensuring integrated education in the government primary schools. A lot can be achieved by implementing existing policies and the action plan of the government. However, still there are gaps in policies which need to be improved and specific issues need to be prioritized to achieve desired time-bound change. These possibilities are indicated below.

- Civil society role: Civil society involvement can improve monitoring and implementation of government plans for person with disability. Besides national level consultation and monitoring, involvement of parents and community can also improve the scenario at local and grassroots level. Disability is a cross-cutting issue and it is important to introduce strategic thinking regarding disability to attain optimum outcome. School SMC committees need to receive orientation on disability so that they can plan and execute school level budget and administration in a disability-friendly way.

- Specific school building code for Government Primary Schools: The original school building plan should be improved, so that whenever a new school is being built it includes ramps, minimum door sizes, blackboard positions and at least one disabled-friendly toilet. It should be a priority for the SMCs to upgrade their old school building gradually to a disabled-friendly one within the school budget allocation.
- Teacher training: It is important to integrate training on inclusive education for the teacher in the general training curriculum and programme to integrate children with disability in the mainstream education. Government is committed to improving teachers' training syllabus as well as introducing specific training on the issue. Steps have to be taken to implement these plans.
- Special attention on girl child: Community and parents need to be sensitized and focus on the education of children with disability, especially the girl child. Besides regular stipend, special stipend for children with disability would be justified because of extra costs that may be incurred by families.
- Allocation in national budget: Budget allocation for education as share of government budget was 11% last year and in 2015 it was further reduced to 10%. Lack of adequate resources is a big challenge in ensuring education for all and making the system inclusive; it hinders making resources necessary for children with disability available in primary schools. It is essential that government makes ear-marked allocations for children with disability.

Education that is inclusive and responsive is a formidable challenge anywhere, not just in Bangladesh. The survey indicates specific obstacles for one aspect of achieving inclusive participation in education. Pursuing the recommendations made will help progress towards overcoming the obstacles.

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Annex 1

Survey questionnaire

Question no	Questions
Q1	How many students with disability are enrolled in your school (how many girls/boys?)
Q2	Is there a ramp at the school for the wheel chair users?
Q3	Is the door of the teachers' room large enough to fit the average width wheelchair?
Q4	How many classroom doors can a person with disability actually get through at the different levels of the school?
Q5	Is the board suitably positioned so that the student or teacher could actually use it?
Q6	In the staffroom, is the material for the teacher at an accessible height so that they do not feel reliant on others to do their job?
Q7	Is there at least one restroom that could be accessible for the disabled persons?
Q8	Does your school have teacher/staff with disability?
Q9	Do you have a classroom in which the wheelchair-bound teachers can make themselves available to the students by being able to freely get up and down the aisle?
Q10	Are your teachers trained to take care of children with special needs?
Q11	Is the road towards school is usable for the wheel chair users?
Q12	Does your school practice inclusive education with facilities for students who have visual, hearing or speaking impairment?
Q13	Does your school have special seating arrangement in classroom for the student with disability?

Annex 2

Partner organization who helped in different locations in conducting the survey

Sl	Partner org.	District	No. of schools
1	YPSA	Chittagong	5
2	PUAMDO	Joypurhat	5
3	USS	Jhinaidaha	5
4	PSTC	Gazipur	5
5	SKS	Gaibandha	5
6	SAP BD	Sirajgonj	5
7	SHARP	Pabna	5
8	BNKS	Bandarban	5
9	USS	Nilphamari	5
10	Bhumija	Satkhira	5
11	USS	Dakope	13
12	Mukti Nari	Kushtia	5
13	SAP BD	Potukhali	11
14	BITA	Chittagong	9
15	Dalit	Jessore	5
16	DRRA	Satkheera	5
17	VARD	Sunamgonj	5
18	Narimoitri	Dhaka	5
19	BACE	Jamalpur	5
	Total		119

Annex 3

Some pertinent statistics from the survey	
Total number of students	42,748
Total number of teachers	803
Total number of students with disabilities	334
Percentage of students with disabilities	0.78
Total number of teachers with disabilities	5
Percentage of teachers with disabilities	0.62
Total number of teachers with special training	24
Percentage of teachers with special training	2.99
Total number of schools with ramp	31
Percentage of schools having ramp	26.05
Number of teachers' rooms with accessible door	66
Percentage of teachers room with accessible door	55.5
Total number of school having accessible toilet	8
Percentage of schools having accessible toilet	6.7
Schools having accessible roads towards school	37
Percentage of schools having accessible road	31.1

