

## **Special Education for the Visually Impaired Children in Bangladesh**

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**ABSTRACT:** *The study aims to explore the effectiveness of special education for the visually impaired children in Bangladesh. Though the concept of inclusion is common throughout the western world, it is still a new concept struggling to cope up with educational system in developing countries like, Bangladesh. The study was conducted in Baptist Mission Integrated School with an open ended semi structured interview schedule and also a FGD on the respondents. Though many other study findings in this field suggest that students with special needs should be included into mainstream schools to increase their educational capabilities and sociability, the present study reflects some difficulties of inclusive education and the efficacy of special education for the visually impaired students. Considering the extracting theme from the opinion of the majority of the respondents, including guardians and institutional head, we can perceive that fulltime inclusive education is not possible for the blind students. Moreover, we need special education with specific and appropriate policies so that can be more effective.*

**Key Words:** *Integrated Education, Inclusive Education, Special needs, Mainstream, Visually impaired.*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Education is an indispensable key to flourish human life. To reduce poverty and improve the quality of life of people the Government of Bangladesh put emphasis on education of the children. Bangladesh is a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. With assistance from different partner the Government of Bangladesh are trying heart and soul to fulfill the children's right to education according to the Education for All Millennium Developments Goals (UNICEF Bangladesh; 2009,[1]). The disabled children as a vulnerable group are excluded from educational opportunities in our country. According to Bangladesh Bureau of the Census, approximately 10% of the children of pre-school and primary-school age (3-10 years) are disabled. Currently 77,488 children with special needs of various types are enrolled in primary schools (UNICEF Bangladesh; 2009). But still a significant number of children with disabilities have not yet been able to access the educational facilities as desired. Mainstream school is not always capable to meet the needs of the disabled children. As a result special education emerges as a separate system all over the world attaching to the mainstream school (Save the Children; 2002, [2]).

Although Bangladesh is a signatory to the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (1994) and the Dakar Framework for Action (2000), and endorsed the Education for All (EFA) Framework (1990) and other international conventions such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the vast majority of children with disabilities and special learning needs in Bangladesh do not have access to an education (Ackerman, Thormann & Huq; 2005, [3]). It is now a great challenge for us to ensure education for them and make them part of our greater society.

### **II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The key objective of the study is to explore the effectiveness of special education for the visually impaired children in Bangladesh.

1. To determine the problems being faced by the visually impaired girls in inclusive education.
2. To verify the functions of special education and lack of facilities within it.
3. To identify the social problems being faced by the visually impaired students in their community.

### **III. RATIONALE OF THE STUDY**

Recently most of the developed countries social policy is to promote integration and participation of the disabled. Inclusion and participation is essential in education sector for the equalization of opportunity and to maintain the dignity of human being. Experience in many countries demonstrates that the integration of children and youth with special educational needs is best achieved within inclusive schools that serve all children within a community. It is within this context that those with special educational needs can achieve the fullest educational progress and social integration (UNESCO; 1994, [4]).

“Critics of current practices propose either a substantial decrease in or elimination of special education altogether so that students with disabilities will be taught in general education classes. This movement is called ‘inclusion,’ and it is controversial because of its emphasis on placement, that is, the classroom to which a student is assigned rather than what happens in that classroom”(Hocutt;1996,[5]).

The vast majority of children with disabilities do not attend school and a large percentage of children who do attend mainstream schools often drop out due to inaccessible and unpleasant school environments (CSID; 2002, [6]).

In mainstream school teacher-student ratio is very high. It sometimes becomes difficult for the teacher to manage the normal students let alone disabled. Moreover, the blind students need special educations of Braille for which teachers need special training.

The study will identify the problems being faced by the visually impaired children in their integrated education and what benefits they get from special education and which difficulties they face in their education and in the community as a whole. All these findings will portray the necessity of proper special education.

### **IV. METHODOLOGY**

The study is qualitative. It was conducted on The Baptist Mission Integrated School. The participants were selected by following purposive sampling. The participants were visually impaired students guardians, visually impaired students and teachers. Qualitative methods were used for the study. The major methodologies followed in the study area are a) In depth interview and b) Focus Group Discussion (FGD). A semi-structured open ended interview schedule was developed and used for in depth interviews on specific issues related to barriers of inclusive education and the problems and the functions of special education of students with disabilities. FGD (Focus Group Discussion) were conducted with visually impaired students. The FGD have covered discussion on the following areas related to the situation of special education of students with visually impaired, the barriers in inclusion of learners with disabilities in mainstream schooling and the possible way to overcome the challenges.

### **V. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Special education was established formally and permanently in the United States in 1818. The complex of institutions that rapidly arose predated education for normally developing students by decades and grew as essentially a dual system, quite separate from the general stream. However, the systems of service delivery produced by special education from 1817 onwards were not short lived or static; they evolved and changed, producing new events and actions (Winzer; 2006, [7]). Special education is an environment where particular types of disabled children enrolled in educational setups. The total structure of such education along with teaching curriculum, methods, teaching and learning materials etc. are focused on addressing the needs and requirements of those particular types of disabled learners. In most cases, the special education is being run with residential setups with total care of learners by the trained professionals (Noman & Anisuzzaman; 2011, [8]).

Inclusion or integration is an important part of equal opportunity in education. Demands for inclusive education have increased major changes to schooling and education. Students with disabilities are educated alongside with their peers within the local community therefore mainstream schools are required to adopt to accommodate a diverse group of students with a variety of needs (O’ Gorman;2005,[9]).

The terms ‘integrated’ and ‘inclusive’ are often used interchangeably, as if they mean the same thing. However, they represent major differences in philosophy. It is helpful to clarify their different meanings and for practitioners to use the same language. We recognize that, in some language, it is not always possible to make the distinction between integration and inclusion. However we feel that an understanding of the distinction in English is helpful, and is important in promoting more inclusive practice. A simple distinction is:

“Integrated education is about disabled children going to mainstream schools (i.e. the focus is on attendance rates). Inclusive education is about disabled children learning effectively once they are in mainstream schools. (i.e. the focus is on quality of learning). Integrated education is often accepted as a stepping-stone to inclusive education” (Save the children; 2002).

“Full inclusion” means that all children with disabilities, regardless of the nature or severity of the disability, will be educated in general education: in a full inclusion system, separate special education

placements would no longer exist. Both, inclusion and full inclusion imply that other placement options would be severely curtailed or abolished (Hocutt; 1996).

With few exceptions, students with disabilities have not achieved commensurately with their nondisabled peers; even students with learning disabilities as a group have not been able to achieve at the level of low-achieving nondisabled students (Hocutt;1996).

Four schools for the blind, with a capacity to serve, residential facilities are provided for only 180 blind children. The government of Bangladesh operates a national Braille press, through the Social Services Department. It has not been functional, however. Some NGOs have also initiated computerized Braille printing services, but these are limited in scope. With private funding from the Baptist SANGHO, a school for blind girls (study field), a Braille computer system has been set up with capacity to print books, but not on a large scale. A Braille printing press would help increase access to the general curriculum. It is not known how many blind persons in Bangladesh could utilize the output of a Braille press.

With support of Sight Savers International, a low vision laboratory has been established in the Department of Special Education to help prepare teachers to serve children with low vision. The facility allows students to gain experience in low vision aids and conduct research using large print formats (television and computer based), assessment materials ('assessment kits' for low vision), and other teaching aids such as Braille writing machines. Capacity to produce books in Braille requires a special printing press (Ackerman, Thormann & Huq; 2005).

## **VI. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Baptist Sangha School for Blind Girls began in 1977 with five blind girls at rented house in Mirpur in Dhaka city, Bangladesh. Christofel Blinden Mission (CBM)-Germany purchased a plot of land and established the school along with a hostel of 100 students' capacity and a Braille press in 1983. From January 2007, an inclusive education for both blind and sighted children started and the name of the school has been changed to its present name, Baptist Mission Integrated School (BMIS).

Baptist Mission Integrated School is providing inclusive education both to the blind girls as well as normal sighted children. The normal sighted children receive education from grade I to V, whereas the special education for the blind students is up to grade VIII. After passing out they are admitted to grade IX at the nearest girl's schools under BMIS integrated education programme. The girls receive specialized practical training which covers orientation, mobility, Braille, daily living skills, hygiene, music, drama, physical exercise, outings and picnics.

Blind girls attend in integrated class with sighted students. During interview we found very few sighted students in integrated class room. May be in urban area there are many schools and their guardians do not agree to accept their children studying with the visually impaired. Interviewing the guardian of blind girls we came to know that at first they felt embarrassed in answering the questions of normal student's guardian. Some guardians of sighted students look at them with neglecting attitude and some with sympathetic attitude. They also express their mental agony and depression. From the interview with teachers we came to know that through integrated education they link the guardian of general section with the blind. It works as awareness building. In guardian meeting they tell them that every child is vulnerable. As a result the guardians become sympathetic to the blind and the sighted students are also become helpful for their blind peer. There are also counseling section for the parents of blind in the school. As the school has no permission after class VIII the blind students go to Ideal School there they adopt with the normal and sighted students in wider premises. Every year 5-9 blind students sit for S.S.C examination and the percentage of passing is 100. The percentage of dropout is 5-6 and this dropout is up to class eight. The ratio of dropout is less in higher level. The main causes of dropout are financial and distance of the school from their native village. The class size is 15-20. The teachers informed, if the class size is more than that, it would be difficult for them to manage the class. The teachers of special classes informed that it takes more time to teach them mathematical calculations in comparison to sighted students. According to the guardian of blind students in comparison to the autistic, blind students are getting no government facilities. But it is a matter of immense pleasure that in 2015 for the first time they got Braille book from government. But these books are not sufficient. Only the students in hostel get the Braille books for group study. Those who comes from outside do not get the benefit. By interviewing the students who reside in hostel we came to know that they did not get the Braille book in full set. These books are expensive and the price of a full set book is about 12000TK. Moreover, for geometry they need special pages which are very expensive. That can afford only the rich family. This expresses the inequality in education. According to their teacher they are very sincere in study and polite in behavior. But they are poor in Mathematics and Science.

There is a computer training program for the blind. Expert from Japan Embassy came and trained them. Audio can help them in education. But class rooms are not equipped with audio. The students of hostel informed that they feel comfort to stay in the hostel. Their house mother takes care of them and they also love their house mother. A house tutor helps them in study. Their parents can communicate with them every Friday.

From the FGD with the blind students we came to know, they want that the school should be up to class X. They want to sit for S.S.C board exam from the school. After SSC they generally get admission to Badrunessa College for H.S.C and for higher education they get admission in different public universities under quota system. In higher study they normally get admission in humanities subjects. Many blind students cannot go to higher education because of economic vulnerability of the parents. They want a special college and a hostel with full government facilities and social safety. Normally the blind girls want to be teacher, banker, lawyer, singer and musician. In integrated classroom they face problems when teacher write important theme and draw chart on the board.

As the Baptist Mission Integrated School is the only school for the blind girls in Bangladesh, it is difficult for them to attend the school from different parts of the country and different locations of Dhaka city. So they suggested for increasing the number of schools. In board examination the process of determining writer for the blind examinee should be easier and their questions should be short and viva based. In a word examination process should be easier.

From the study we came to know, among the visually impaired children some were dropped out and some were not enrolled in the mainstream schools due to negligence of the family member, unfriendly school atmosphere and unwillingness of the school teachers to manage them.

The disabled are facing many problems in the community when they go to the village during vacation. They get vacation 3 times in a year. The guardians who reside in remote areas become angry when they are informed about the vacation. It is expensive for them to take their child at home and then return to hostel. Moreover, the blind girls feel discomfort when they stay at home because the inaccessible home environment require them an assistant. When they go to village they feel very uneasy because the community people harass them in many ways. They tell that it is the sin of parents. They tease them by calling 'Kana'. They ask what is the value of their education? According to the community people they are only spoiling the money and causing sufferings for their parents. Marriage is impossible for them. They told that even the educated people also devalue their education. The attitude of the educated people upset them. They wanted to know when the society's attitude towards them will be changed. As a result they feel distress when stay at home. But sometimes the guardian takes them to the hostel 15-20 days later after opening the school due to financial crisis. They shared their grief that they went to study tour there some people tease them by saying, 'Kana, came to visit'. They express their feeling that if the people of our country are aware they would feel free and happy.

The provision of appropriate educational needs for children with special disabilities has long been a common issue in education. Arguments and debates have been raised in line with the right policies on how to educate children with special educational needs (SEN). According to Jenkinson (1997, [10]), children with disabilities are traditionally educated in segregated classrooms, specifically designed to cater to the students' certain incapacities. Educators find this segregated system beneficial, as they are able to apply curriculum formulated specially for special education. Likewise, children with disabilities benefit from this system not only because of the appropriate curriculum, but also the thought of attending classes with classmates having the same disabilities enhances their confidence or self-esteem as well. Furthermore, being segregated assures the security and sufficient support for special children need (Wang; 2009, [11]).

Among the respondent's guardians of the blind girls strongly opposed inclusive education. In Bangladesh in a classroom teacher students' ratio is very bad and we do not have enough facilities for the blind students in the same classroom. If special education is provided then it would be better for the visually impaired children to have special environment with special Braille trained teacher because there is not only physical difference but also a psychological difference among the students of sighted and visually impaired students.

While most of the research advocate for inclusive education and gradual elimination of special education. Some other studies and educators find special education as beneficial. From the study we finally realize that full time inclusive education is not possible for visually impaired. It appears that there is a clear need of special education. Appropriate and affordable technology should be used in the class room to make special education more functional. They should be provided with free education at least till the secondary level and higher education should be easier for them by increasing the number of quota. We should change our perception and should not stigmatize them for their impairment.

## **VII. CONCLUSION**

The study will be beneficial for the policy maker to ensure education for the children with disabilities. Based on the study and discussion of inclusive and special education we can also perceive that there are certain difficulties when disabled students attend in integrated classroom. When students with severe disability are lack of academic progress, social ability to match in integrated classroom, it is unnecessary to insist them in to the integrated classes. In these cases, teacher has to identify the real needs of their pupils and specialist should identify who need real special education. Educational technology and information technology can play an important role in creating more favorable atmosphere in the special needs class room.

World history shows the success of many disabled. In Bangladesh we should design special education in such a way that we can identify correctly for whom special education is needed and bring them at school and ensure a fully supportive environment for their education.

We all should try our best to overcome the problem lies with visually impaired children education and our government should be more attentive about special education by putting appropriate special education policies with special emphasis on blind students' education.

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