

Strengthening Integrated Education Programs for Blind and Visually Impaired Children in Bangladesh

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Introduction:

Childhood blindness and low vision are serious problems in Bangladesh. There are an estimated 40,000 blind children (0-15 years of age) and approximately 90,000 to 120,000 children with low vision. Most of these children are living in rural areas where access to education and particularly access to schools that have the capacity to deal with blind and /or visually impaired children are limited. Helen Keller International/Bangladesh conducted an assessment of educational opportunities for children with visual impairments in Bangladesh and found that only 602 visually impaired children are enrolled in grades 1-10 in formal government and non-government schools - approximately 0.8% enrollment- and these two thirds are boys. The gap is large, with approximately 85,000 visually impaired children not having access to or enrolled in formal education. There is an urgent need to create equal educational opportunities for children with visual impaired boys and girls.

Education is a human right. According to the “Convention on the Rights of the Child”, States Parties recognize the right of the child to education, and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity, and that they recognize that a mentally or physically disabled child should enjoy a full and decent life. Educational attainment is closely associated with poverty and with poor health and life expectancy. Education for girls is particularly important as female education is closely correlated with the use of contraceptives, reduced fertility, women in the workforce, improved child health, and reduced infant and maternal mortality. Furthermore, educational attainment is associated with average democracy and social progress - and, by extension, international peace and security. Thus, improving access to education will have far-reaching impacts on the individual and on society as a whole.

In Bangladesh, some initiatives have already begun to address integrating blind and/or visually impaired school children into regular government and non-government schools. Currently there are 64 government integrated education programs and six non-government integrated programs. The government programs are run by the Department

of Social Services, Ministry of social welfare, Government of Bangladesh. However, based on Helen Keller International/Bangladesh findings, there are only 35 government integrated education programs that are functionally active, where 299 visually impaired children are in regular attendance, and 23 do not have a permanent resource teacher. The remaining schools share teachers. There are only 80 visually impaired children regularly attending primary schools, in 52 government integrated programs. Twenty eight government integrated education programs have hostel facilities; but, these are only for boys. And in these, 22 girls out of 299 students are accepted in the program as day scholars.

The Barriers and limitation for Education of Visually Impaired Children:

The problems associated with the education of children with visual impairment are large, for example inappropriate environment for the children with visual impairment, in terms of classroom setups, learning materials, teaching methods, etc. Besides there is very little orientation among the school authorities that it is possible to mainstream children with visual impairment.

Attitude of peer students, their parents and other associated with schools are not that open to the idea of children with visual impairment studying along other children. Parents of children with visual impairment, especially in the poor and rural communities, are not always aware about where they can send their children. Accessibility to schools is another severe problem.

The visual impaired children are found to be behind in education mainly due to dependency in mobility. For most of them, someone has to take them to educational institutions. It is difficult for a family member to regularly manage time for accompanying the visual impaired children to and from school. Sometimes the attitudes are also not positive. It is also difficult, as they need to use Braille.

Braille books are not available, even though the Government has a Braille press and a policy to provide free primary level books to children with visual impairments. Besides, teachers in a regular school are not trained on Braille. As such it is difficult for them to oversee the performance and progress of visual impaired children. The school structure is also not mobility friendly for the visually impaired. The primary schools, with their limited budgets, cannot afford to bring about major changes.

Children with low vision face many barriers in education sector. People living in the rural areas are not acknowledged with the idea of low vision. As a result, low vision students are sometimes treated as blind and or having other disabilities. Sometimes students with low vision are considered as intellectually disabled for his/her slow response

A lack of assistive devices for both mobility and communication, and also a lack of classroom adaptations were acting as major barriers for children with disabilities.

The misconception of associating disability to inactiveness is to still strong in the communities. The lack of social awareness and positive attitude is keeping many of the disabled learners away from primary education in Bangladesh. Gender still plays a part

in the education of children. The boys are still preferred than girls in sending to schools for education by the parents. This is more dominant for disabled learners.

The income of the family has a direct relevance with regard to children with disabilities and their education. Poverty refrained many families to seek for the essential therapeutic and assistive device services required by children with disabilities are also not always at accessible distance. The parents are at times unable to bear that extra transport cost for the children with disabilities to continue education at integrated or special schools.

It is not been very easy for the children with disabilities to get enrolled into mainstream schools. The parents had to convince in most cases the school authorities for allowing scopes to enroll their children. For most of them it was mainly due to ignorance, negative attitude of the school authorities and fear of not being able to handle them rather than the limitation of abilities among the children with disabilities. At the same time there is a common belief that children with disabilities, especially the children with visual impairment can only be educated at a special educational institute.

Different Educational Set-ups; Its Advantages and Disadvantages

There are different types of educational setups exist in Bangladesh for visually impaired children.

These include mainly;

- Special Education
- Integrated Education
- Mainstream Education

Beside all these setups, home-based education is largely seen when other options are not accessible. Home -based education is mainly depending on parents and family members to provide education for their disabled children at home.

Advantages of Special Education:

- The learners are guided by professional teachers and care givers, which allow having access to optimum level of environmental support for their education.
- The number of enrolled students are limited that allow intensive care for each of the learners for both of their limitations and development,
- The learners can get access to an appropriate teaching and learning materials which allow them to a better learning.
- Staying together along with similar types of disabilities allow open sharing their problems and solutions, etc.

Disadvantage of special Education:

- It deprives the children stay away of their family and affections because of their disabilities,

- It segregates disabled learners from non disabled person which create isolation from social learning,
- Special Education is expensive compare to other educational setups which is beyond economic capacity of many facilities,
- Parents are not caring their visual impaired children and not taking any responsibilities financially and socially.
- Since there is less opportunity of interaction with other non-disabled children, create isolation from mainstream society and develop a tendency of creating informal group within own community.

Advantage of Integrated School:

- This gives an opportunity to interact disabled learners with other non-disabled learners in a wider social and educational environment.
- Special needs services for the disabled learners are provided which help minimize the barriers for better learning.
- Integrated school education helps disabled learners in order to prepare them to cope with mainstream higher educational setups.

Disadvantage of Integrated School:

- Teachers are not adequately trained on dealing with learners with disabilities rather they depend on resource teachers for special care.
- The general teaching and learning methods and materials used in the mainstream education are not supportive for the disabled learners. The system depends on the resource teachers for special care.
- The numbers of integrated school setups are nominal which do not allow enrollment of required number of disabled learners.

Advantage of mainstream education:

- A larger number of disabled learners can get access to education as the education setups are near to their own locality.
- Allow open access and interaction to wider group learners including disabled and non-disabled.
- Family can contribute to the process of development of their disabled children as they belong to their own family.
- Community and relatives can have greater contribution toward of disabled children into community and social life.

Disadvantage of mainstream education:

- Difficult to obtain need based support to overcome the learning barriers as teachers do not have adequate level of knowledge on disability issues while comparing to resource teachers of special and integrated setups.
- School facilities do not adequately cover the needs of disabled learners as it is possible in special and integrated setups.
- The approach does not allow severe level of disability as the support facilities are limited.
- There is no such policy guideline yet to address the varies needs of disabled children in mainstream education which results lacking in proper care services.

Proposed Activities for Improvement of Integrated Education Program In Bangladesh:**1. Training:**

- Ensure development of resource teachers in every Integrated education program.
- Evaluate available curriculum in the Integrated education program.
- Training of Trainers for the resource teachers
- Training for the resource teachers in computer related software.
- Technology development to respond to required demand related with Integrated education programs teaching activities.

2. Materials and assistive devices

- Pilot the possibility of providing computers with Braille software in four integrated program.
- Establish resources for producing Braille books required for the Integrated education program.

3. Supervision and Monitoring

- Establish a system to assess the effectiveness of the program monitoring and surveys/surveillance
- Report on key indicators

4. Inclusion and Advocacy

- Increase public awareness through campaigns, community-based rehabilitation.
- Social inclusion through 'Orientation and Mobility' training in 'Daily Living Skills'
- Economic inclusion through vocational training
- Advocacy by providing information or collaboration with related policy makers, and program players in Bangladesh.

Conclusion:

Worldwide interventions on disability issue have been expanding at a rapid pace in recent years. But in comparison, the situation in developing countries is much behind. The country situation is much worse, but over the last few years, a platform has been created in Bangladesh with the collaborative efforts and resource generation among the Government and the NGO sectors to address the issues of disability. Under this drive the issues concerning the visual impaired people have also been touched. There had been some progress undoubtedly, but its extent is still far too inadequate in comparison to the population of people with disabilities and the magnitude of the needs and demands on these issues.

Especially in the field of education for visually impaired people, interventions need to be comprehensive and combined with mainstream education and eye care activities. General sensitization on the barriers and potentialities of visual impaired people require to be accelerated more. Educational setups are very much essential to be reformed with adequate accessibility features, skilled professional and curriculums to facilitate further inclusion of people with visual impairment.

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