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Barriers Faced byYoung People with Disabilities to Access Educational Institutions in Bangladesh

Md Shahnawaz Khan Chandan[1]
Dr. Md. Arizul Islam Khan[2]
Karishma Ahmed[3]

Abstract

Persons with disabilities are some of the most marginalized and vulnerable group in Bangladesh. Violation of their rights and social exclusion starts from the very beginning of their life and right from their own family. However, Bangladesh government has promulgated several policies and laws to ensure their rights and has recognized their equal rights in all walks of life. However, still persons with disabilities are being deprived from one of their fundamental rights guaranteed by the constitution which is right to education. Students with disabilities are denied admission in educational institutions or getting dropped out before completing schools. This research has identified the reasons due to which persons with disabilities are still being excluded from the schools despite such strong legal and policy backup. Through this qualitative study, range of students with disabilities, their support persons and education professionals were interviewed. This research has revealed the stigma, superstitions and negative attitudes that still exist in the society against persons with disabilities which act as some of the key factors behind exclusion of violation of their rights. Students, their caregivers, teachers and other education experts revealed the factors responsible for inaccessible education system and identified the resources required to ensure reasonable accommodation and accessibility. Thus, at the end of this study, the researchers have given a set of recommendations to ensure accessible and quality education for students with disabilities.

Keywords: Disability, Education, Inclusive Education, Inclusion, Discrimination, Stigma, Exclusion, Educational Institutions, Accessibility, Reasonable Accommodation.

[1] Md Shahnawaz Khan Chandan, Assistant Professor, IER, Jagannath University, Dhaka-1100
[2] Dr. Md. Arizul Islam Khan, Deputy Director, NAEM, Ministry of Education, Dhaka-1205
[3] Karishma Ahmed, Director-Program, SEID; karishmavarisha@gmail.com

Introduction:

Bangladesh has a population of 45 million young people (aged 15 - 29), 40% of them are not in school, employment or training. The percentage of Bangladeshis with a disability ranges from 10% [1] to 16% and is higher among lower income brackets (World Bank, 2016). Young people with disabilities are highly marginalized in terms of access to education, training jobs and income, with higher unemployment rates, and lower average incomes than their non-disabled peers; and it is worse for young women with disabilities (BBS, 2015).

The Government of Bangladesh (GoB) is committed to include young people with disabilities in the education sector. Supported by advocacy from the disability movement, the GoB ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), enacted the Disability Rights and Protection Act (2013) and developed the National Strategy for Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Skills Development (2013). The National Plan of Action has been developed in 2015 to implement the Disability Rights and Protection Act, 2013. Furthermore, the government had adopted National Strategic Plan for Neurodevelopmental Disorder 2016-2021.

According to this plan, Neuro-developmental Disability Protection Trust has been formed to implement the strategic plan. Despite this, there has been little progress in improving educational outcomes for young people with disabilities in the last fifteen years. Enforcement of the law and strategic plans is very slow. Budget to implement the laws is highly inadequate. For instance, according to the Disability Rights and Protection Act, 2013 committees were supposed to be formed in every district and upazila to monitor the enforcement of the law.

However, in many districts and upazilas the committees have not been formed yet and where the committees have been formed, these are not at all functional. As a result, persons with disabilities, particularly children are still facing a wide range of discriminations including exclusion and drop out from educational institutions. According to UNICEF, where enrolment rate at primary school is over 97 percent in Bangladesh, only 11 percent children with disability receive any form of education in Bangladesh (UNICEF, 2017).

Therefore, for the long-term improved wellbeing and inclusion of young women and men with disabilities in Bangladesh through increased and equitable access to education and training, it is essential to understand and address the institutional barriers preventing the effective and independent participation of persons with disabilities.

Objective of the study

- Recognizingthe barriers young people with disabilities face in the educational institutions
- Identifying the stigma and discrimination that people with disabilities face in their everyday life accessing education and training
- Providing recommendations for educators to ensure inclusion and accessibility in educational institutions

Literature Review

In 1784 AD Valentin Hauy established a school in Paris for the students with visual impairment where the students were taught in contemporary curriculum (Punani and Rawal, 1993). By establishing this school Hauy opened the door of modern education for persons with disabilities. At present, educational rights of students with disabilities has been recognised globally by the UNCRPD.

In many countries students with disabilities get special protection and stipend from the government to continue their education. For example, in the United Kingdom students with any form of disabilities are protected under the Equality Act, 2010 which compels educational institutions to treat the students with disabilities equally with the students without disability (Khochen, 2013). Moreover, in the UK students with disabilities entering full time or part time higher education also enjoy Disability Students Allowance funded by the government (Khochen, 2013; Barer, 2007).

Although a bit late, Bangladesh government has also established strong policy initiatives to ensure inclusion of persons with disabilities in educational institutions. Bangladesh's constitution, formulated in 1972, guarantees education as a fundamental right for all children regardless of any socio-physic-economic characteristics. Article 17 and 28 of the constitution have made the government solely responsible for ensuring education for all children and making education completely free from any type of discrimination.

Bangladesh government's National Education Policy, 2010 also ensures education for persons with disability. The policy states that the government will take steps to include "handicapped children" into mainstream education and also provide special education to children with disabilities.

However, in terms of practice, Bangladesh is still at an early stage in exercising inclusive education (Malak, Begum, Habib, Banu and Roshid, 2014). One of the reasons behind this is some terminologies and provisions of the aforementioned policies cause conceptual confusion among educational leaders and practitioners (Malak, Begum, Habib, Banu and Rashid, 2014). In many cases, special education is considered as the most effective method for educating persons with disabilities (Malak et.al 2014; Ahmmed, 2015). Even, policymakers and educational leaders still possess that traditional thought that children with disabilities can learn better if segregated from non-disabled children which may cause obstacles in including these children into mainstream schools (Malek et al 2014: Ahmmed 2015). Theoretically teachers are in favour of inclusion of children with disability in mainstream school but they also consider it unrealistic, often consider children with disability as liability and most of them are not fully confident that children with disability can be taught together with non-disabled children (Ahmmed, 2015).

Theoretical Context

The research methodology of this study is qualitative in nature and procedures and techniques from "Stories of Experience and Narrative Enquiry" (Connelly & Clendenin, 1990)

have been adopted to conduct the study. The methodological choice to perform the study was guided by the following assumptions which were obtained from the literature review:

- Education and educational research are the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories (Connelly & Clendenin, 1990).
- Students with disabilities face stigma and discriminations in the society and in the educational institutions (Arulchelvan & Viswanathan, 2006; Macgregor, 2011; Anderson & Boyles, 2012).
- Students with disabilities in the developing countries are facing higher levels of discrimination to access education (Bhambhani, 2011, 2013; Sahu, 2014; Sabbir, 2016; Habib, 2012).
- During literature review concrete statistical data could not be found about the disabled students' access to educational institutions in Bangladesh.
- Enquiry of the narratives i.e. dividual stories of the disabled students and their caregivers would focus on their access to educational institutions and educational materials (Connelly &Clandinin, 1990).
- Enquiry of the narratives i.e. individual stories of the disabled students and their caregivers would focus on the discriminations and negative attitudes they face in the society and how they affect their lives (Connelly & Clendenin, 1990).
- A focus group discussion with the student participants would focus on the concentrated set of observations and recommendations on the existing issue within a short time (Asbury, 1995).
- Based on the narratives of the students and observations from the focus group discussions, an enquiry of the narratives i.e. stories of the education professionals in Bangladesh regarding ensuring access to education for the disabled students would focus on the facts concerning disabled students' access to education and its influence on their lives.
- A focus group discussion with the education participants would highlight the specific issues and recommendations regarding the study topic within a short time.

So, the study consists of mainly two consecutive phases of interviews and focus group discussions; one is with the students with disabilities and their caregivers and another is with the education professionals. The interviews with the students were conducted to know deeply about their access to academic content and educational institutions. And focus group discussion with the students highlighted common experiences from all the students.

On the other hand, individual interviews and focus group discussion with the education professionals focused on the experiences of teachers and education administrators regarding ensuring access to educational services for the visually impaired students and its influence on the educational activities in tertiary level formal education of Bangladesh. Thus, obtained data from these two sets of interviews and focus group discussion were analysed to reach conclusion and recommendation of this qualitative research.

Methodology of the Study:

Sampling Method & Sample Size

Purposeful sampling has been done to identify OPDs, students with disabilities and their parents, NGOs and INGOs working on disability inclusion, and government officials concerned. Potential interviewees were determined through purposeful and in some cases snowball sampling method.

Sampling Unit	Sample size	Method
Students with disabilities (5 to 19 years old)	24 Students 2 students from each of 12 types of disability (Gender parity will be tried to ensure)	Purposive/snowball sampling
Parents/caregivers of disabled children	12 Parents/caregivers	Purposive/snowball sampling
Teachers	6 Teachers (2 from each type of schools)	Purposive
*OPD Leaders	8 Members (each from 8 divisions)	Purposive
Government Officials	**5** Officials (Responsible Officials of the Ministry of Social Welfare, Jatiyo ProtibondhiUnnayan Foundation (JPUF) Neuro-developmental Disability Protection Trust, MoE and MOPME)	Purposive
NGO Officials	5 Persons	Purposive
Policymakers	2 Members (2 members of the standing committees on MoE and Ministry of social welfare)	Purposive
Government Institutions	2 Institutions (One from Dhaka, another from an upazila)	Purposive
Private schools in Dhaka	2Schools (Two Bangla medium schools including one based in Dhaka, and two English medium schools including one based in Dhaka)	Purposive

Table-1: Sampling Method and Sampling Size

Research Instruments

The Interview Questionnaire

The interview questionnaire for the study was formed guided by the assumption that narrative interview for qualitative study is considered as a form of unstructured, in-depth interview with specific context (Lamnek, 1989; Hatch and Wisniewski, 1995; Riesman, 1993; Flick, 1998). Questionnaire for the student was prepared with 5 open ended questions which were designed to motivate interviewees to tell their stories about personal experience and social context on the basis of research questions. The interview questionnaire first started with some introductory questions to trigger the interviewee to open their mind to share their personal stories. The questions were made is such a way that do not compel interviewee to take a particular opinion rather the interview shares his/her spontaneously and if necessary, the interviewee spontaneously comes to a rationalizing opinion or statement.

On the other hand, while interviewing educations professionals, the 5 questions were also open ended but most of the questions centered on the facts shared by the students with disabilities. Questions to extract their stories were also included in the questionnaire.

Thus, the interview questionnaire was the main instrument to extract information from the interviewees in narrative form. Sample questionnaires used during the interview have been attached in the Appendix of the main study.

Focus Group Discussion

The stories shared by the student participants were exhaustive and extensive. Therefore, after summarizing their stories, the commonly shared topics were carefully selected and to initiate a further discussion on these shared topics a focus group discussion was arranged with the visually impaired student participants of the study. During the interviews disabled students have shared their stories of challenges and obstacles to access educational institutions. They also shared their experiences how they felt about the importance of accessing education in their lives. After summarizing these observations, a questionnaire was developed for the focus group discussion with the aim to validate the summary observations from the shared stories. Two questionnaires were developed for the two set of participants that is one for the focus group discussion with the student participants and another for the focus group discussion with the education professionals. In both cases, the questionnaires were developed mostly to validate the specific findings from their stories. However, during both the focus group discussions participants spontaneously recommend various steps that could be taken to ensure barrier free media access to facilitate higher education of visually impaired students.

Personal Information Checklist

To start with the narrative interview, at first some personal information of the participants were collected by the researcher in a form of friendly questionnaire. This personal information was mostly to the condition of their disability, treatment of disability conditions etc. This personal information which is also relevant to understand the current social context of the interviewee has been documented in a self-developed checklist of personal information. This personal information were kept confidential to other participants and not shared during any other part of the research. It was also carefully maintained that this personal information only helped the researcher to understand the social context of the participants and to facilitate the interview process, however, this information in no way influenced the research methodology or the research findings.

Data Analysis

The research chose a story mapping technique for organizing data (Richmond, 1999). In this technique, at first the collected narratives were transcribed carefully. Then, by analyzing the transcription summary of every narrative has been documented and a story-mapping table has been placed under every summary narrative to label the narrative under different conceptual topics. Labelling of the narratives under different conceptual topics with the help of story-mapping table facilitate the researcher to derive findings from the research (Richmond, 1999). Then, by analyzing the social context and experiences of the participants through their narratives categorized under different conceptual topics and studied literature the findings of the research have been documented in this chapter.

So, the data analysis process and formulating the findings using Story-Mapping Table (Richmond, 1999) can be shown as follows:

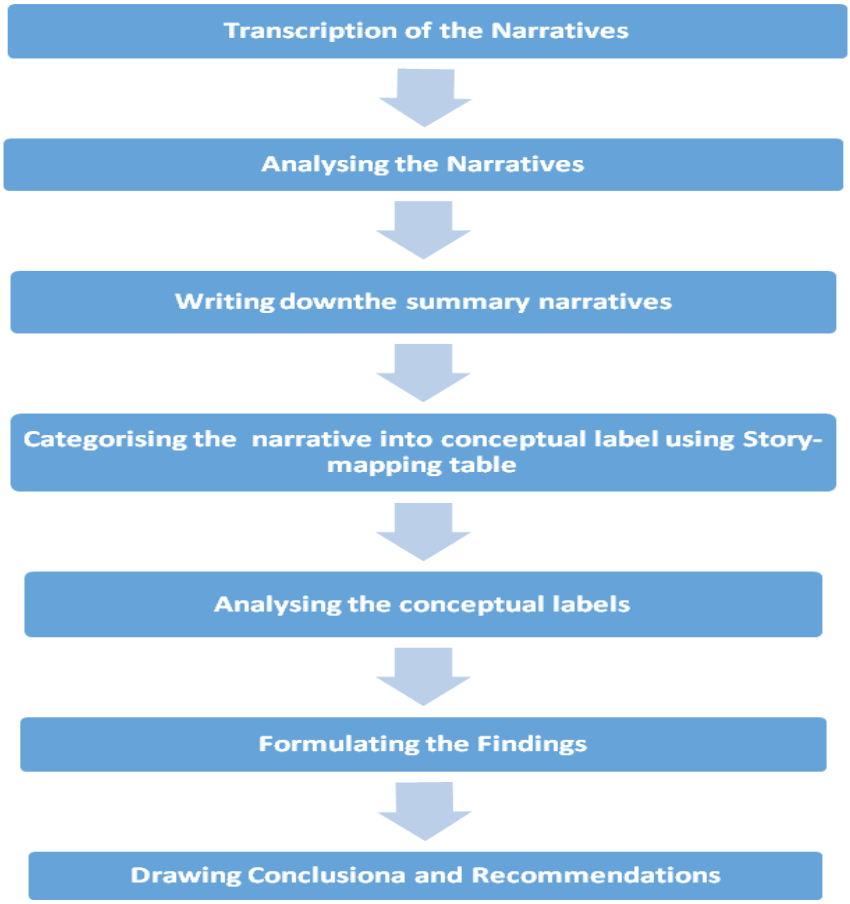


Figure 2: Step by step process of data analysis and deriving findings by Story-mapping table (Richmond, 1999)

To extract relevant data from the FGD's and in-depth interviews, a three-dimensional narrative inquiry table according to Connelly and Clendenin's Three-Dimensional Space Narrative Structure (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000) has been developed for each interview or FGD session. This table will categorize data into three major dimensions and five categories such as: Interaction (Feelings about conditions of persons [specially related to employment] with disabilities from personal and social context), Continuity (Employment rights of persons with disabilities in the past, present situation and future directions), Situation/Place (How the interviewee's current position [personal and social capital] can influence employment of persons with disabilities).

The table for in-depth interview

Interaction (Feelings about conditions of persons [specially related to employment] with disabilities)		**Continuity (Educational rights of persons with disabilities)**			**Situation (Identified Barriers and Proposed Solutions)**	
Personal Context (A child of grade six with visual impairment)	Social Context	Past	Present Situation	Future Directions	Identified Barriers	Proposed Solutions
Being treated as burden in the family Restrictions to play with siblings and peers Restrictions to go to school Mostly stay confined to home Cannot access mass media and entertainment	Cannot participate in prayer in mosques Cannot participate in maqtab to learn Arabic Cannot attend invitation in the social gatherings such as marriage ceremony and feasts	Discrimination in the family Shunned by friends and peers Treated as burden in the community Cannot access any reading material and television programs Staying confined to home	Attending grade six in an inclusive school Often face discriminatory attitudes by the peers Often experience negative attitudes from the teachers and school staffs Very few experiences of positive attitudes	Uncertainty about school completion Fear of joblessness Worried about income and survival May get dropped out and get admitted to a madrasa	Negative attitude in the family Negative attitude by the education professionals Lack of community acceptance Lack of participation in the community	Recognising disability as a part of human diversity Awareness of disability among education professionals Inclusion of disability in the textbook Flexible curriculum and exam system

Table-2: Findings through FGD

Table 3: A sample of narrative inquiry table which extracted information from a student participant

Through this process, an interviewee's personal reflections on disability rights, his/her insights on social recognition or acceptance of these rights, his/her detailed experience about employment rights, specific barriers and solutions can be effectively determined from the obtained narratives.

In fact, it was possible to specify the social factors which have been marginalizing persons with disabilities. These social factors can be divided into four categories which are as follows:

1. Social Stereotypes

Interviewees spoke about a lot of stereotypes which act as one of the key factors behind delimiting their rights and accessibility. Some of the frequently mentioned stereotypes are as follows:

Helplessness: Persons with disabilities are helpless and they always have to rely on others to lead their lives. They will always have to depend on charity to survive in the society.

Dependent: A person with disability always will depend on a family member to perform their daily living activities.

Unemployed: A person with disability will never be employable. They will always have to depend on charity or others' income. So, families do not want to invest on their education and training.

Burden: In low income families, persons with disabilities are often treated as burden as they have to invest hard earned funds for the disabled member's daily living but the member cannot earn for the family. The disabled members are often considered as economic drain.

Cursed: Society often thinks that a person with disability is born as the consequence of sins of the parents. They are often treated as curse from the God.

2. Negative Attitudes of the Society:

Persons with disabilities frequently experience harsh and demoralizing attitudes from the society. In the interviews, students with disabilities frequently mention about the following negative attitudes, they commonly encounter in the society:

Prejudice: One of the biggest reasons which discourage children with disabilities is they become victim of prejudice from their non-disabled peers. Non-disabled children often exclude them and neglect them from their groups. Even, the study found that many parents of non-disabled children discourage their children not to mingle with their disabled peers. This creates a lot of prejudice and exclusion for children with disabilities.

Discrimination: Children with disabilities frequently face discriminatory attitudes from the society and the school authorities. They cannot access the school infrastructure, they do not get reasonable accommodation during academic activities and so on.

Denial of opportunities: Students with disabilities are often denied opportunities on the ground of their disabilities. Many students stated that they could not study science during secondary level education due to their disability as teachers thought that they would not be able to participate in the laboratory classes. Many students also cannot get admitted to schools due to their disability. Persons with intellectual disability are mostly rejected even from the primary level institutions.

Denial of Autonomy: Persons with disabilities cannot take their own decision. The teachers and caregivers who accompany them to schools often take decisions about their academic life and future without even asking them as persons with disabilities are considered less intelligent and less capable in our society.

2. Effects of these factors on students with disabilities:

Effects of stereotypes and negative attitudes make profound impacts on the development of children with disabilities. The outcomes of these factors that were frequently shared by the interviewees are discussed below:

Internalization of Stigma: As children with disabilities face stigma and discrimination from the very beginning of their lives, they start to internalize the stigma. For instance, children often believe that their disability is the result of their parents' sin. Children often start to believe that they will never be able to succeed in life and they are completely helpless and good for nothing in the society.

Low self-esteem: All the student interviewees said that they always suffer from very low self-esteem. Even, their family members never encourage them to do anything. They always feel depressed about their disability. They feel discouraged to continue their education as they think that they will never be able to do a job and earn for their family. They also feel helpless about having a family life. They think that nobody will marry them and they will never be able to have a family life.

Lack of self-advocacy: Self-advocacy is very rare in Bangladesh. Presence of self-help groups is very rare in most of the rural areas and small towns. As a result, persons with disabilities are forced to lead an isolated and excluded life.

Dependency on Charity: Persons with disabilities are often sent to religious schools which are run by communal charity. Families often think that persons with disabilities will never be able to earn for the family, so they feel reluctant to invest on their education. As a result, they are often sent to religious schools where education, food and accommodation is free. Many interviewees informed the researchers that their parents were thinking to stop their schools and send them to religious schools. In this way, persons with disabilities become heavily dependent on charity from the very beginning till the end of their lives.

Intersectionality of deprivation: Persons with disabilities often face double marginalization due to intersectionality of deprivation. The interviews revealed that female children with disabilities face more discrimination than male children with disabilities. Female children with disabilities are more vulnerable to sexual abuse and bullying in the schools and thus are more vulnerable to drop out. Children with disabilities from impoverished families, rural areas and indigenous communities face more barriers than their richer, urban and Bengali counterparts. However, they receive almost no additional services or facilities for their double or triple marginalized conditions.

Synchronization of Data: Data obtained from document analysis (gaps in the policy and legal instruments) and interviews and FGDs (barriers of inclusion in the current educational practices) were synchronized to form a comprehensive report on gaps in policies to ensure decent employment for persons with disabilities and barriers faced by them in this regard.

Findings and Recommendations

According to the research questions and additional questions of interest, the interviews were conducted and focus group discussions were conducted to validate the observations from the interviews. The story-mapping tables of each interview narrative helped to summarize the key findings according to the research questions. According to the research questions, the findings from the narratives have been divided into three parts that is,

- *Barriers to access education: comments from the parents;*
- *Barriers to access education: comments from the students;*
- *Barriers to access education: comments from the teachers;*
- *Barriers to access education: comments from the education professionals*

The findings and their analysis have been described below:

Barriers to Access Education- Comments from Parents

Parents and caregivers in our country play a vital role in ensuring the right to education for their children. Parents and caregivers have become more conscious about their children with disabilities and are exploring different educational opportunities nowadays, but the options are very limited. The barriers for parents not to send their kids to schools that have been prominent during the discussion are given below with some direct quotes of the interviewees:

Negative attitudes

Social stigma, bullying from fellow students and rejection from the school authorities, guardians of students without disabilities often and still detest the parents and caregivers to send them to schools or opt for home-based education. People often blame families, especially the mother, for having children with disabilities as a punishment from the God for any of their ill deeds. Recently, a Bangla drama was made on the theme which portrays the societal stand on disability. Therefore, families, both affluent, educated and non-educated poor, opt for keeping their kids with disabilities at home and hidden.

One of the parents commented, *"The more my daughter gets exposed, the more people humiliate us, blame us. People still carry misconception on disabilities in heart. A guardian once told me that how dare I sent my mad son to school. He is spoiling others. My son has mild autism only."*

1. **High tuition fees and lack of reasonable accommodation**

In private schools, families most of the time have to arrange for reasonable accommodation themselves as the public schools have lengthy procedure. Inclusive infrastructure and building code or accessibility are not incorporated in the inception level. On the other hand, private schools charge from Tk 1 lakh to 2 lakh for a single admission which is hard for many families to afford.

One of the parents commented, *"Private schools charge plenty of donation for admission and other tuition fees. After a few months or years, they again force us to leave schools based on other parent' complaints. On the other hand, public schools are reluctant to admit our children."*

2. Inaccessible infrastructure

Another great factor is inaccessible infrastructure that also contribute to the drop-out rate of children with disabilities. Most of the schools were found to have no lift, no alternative education materials or ramp. All the guardians who send their children to the government schools said they had to arrange for the reasonable accommodation like installing a high-commode. But, still limitations exist, so do scopes for alternative solutions.

A parent asked in desperation, *"How can my son on wheelchair enter his classroom on the third floor?"*

3. Lack of accessible public transport/ Expensive private transports

Students with disabilities are often refused access to public transport. No bus, CNG-run auto-rickshaw, rickshaws can carry wheelchairs. They have to cover long distances to reach schools either by walking or hiring private transports which are very expensive. Guardians of children who needs wheel-chair either have to shift to a house near the schools or have to walk and push the wheelchair to the school due to lack of alternative solutions.

A parent asked during the interview, *"Do anyone ever realize how hard it is to ride the bus or an auto-rickshaw with a teenage girl having cerebral palsy and her wheelchair. It is way harder for a single mother than it seems. Using private car is something that everyone cannot afford."*

4. Lack of cooperation in schools

Teachers often complain and threaten guardians to take their children with disabilities to some other schools or recommend special schools claiming that they are a 'bad influence' for other students. In public schools, the classrooms are already crammed with students and their extra work for attending students with disabilities is 'not recognized'. However, the private school authorities are introducing different methods like 'shadow teachers' which again call for a huge amount of money.

A parent asked in desperation, *"My daughter complains of teachers' lack of attention or rude behavior. If we want to talk to them, they threaten us to leave the schools. What can we do?"*

5. Inaccessible curriculum

Curriculum is already rigid for the students without disabilities, let alone the learners with disabilities. Our study system requires the learners to fit in their system rather than being modified for the learners. Giving just 10 minutes extra to the students with disabilities is not even sometimes enough for children with visual disabilities. It may vary for students to students based on their type and intensity of disabilities. But, the authorities concerned are yet to acknowledge the fact.

A parent shared his experience during the interview, *"My son with down's syndrome often asks me why he can do all the sums at home and not in schools. The school authorities do not understand that he is not yet prepared for three-digit sums. And after a few months, they will*

start pressurizing us to leave the school using this as an excuse".

6. Lack of alternative educational material

School authorities do not provide any alternative educational materials to students with disabilities. School authorities do not allocate any budget to purchase alternative educational materials. Students with disabilities face difficulties to access academic content and have to rely on their support persons or friends to participate in the academic activities. One of the parents of a student said, *"There is no green board at my daughter's school. Braille is available only in schools meant for students with visual impairment."*

7. Safety concerns especially for girls

Parents of female children with disabilities are reluctant to send their children to school fearing sexual abuse and bullying. One of the parents commented, *"We, the parents of girl child have to take extra precautions. Nowadays, the boys are even being physically and sexually abused by their fellow students or teachers, let alone girls. It is better to keep our children safe at home than sending them schools to become more vulnerable and violated."*

Barriers to Access Education-Comments from Students

From interviews of the students with disabilities, diverse range of barriers to access education have come out through this research. These barriers are as follows:

1. Rejection by fellow students

All the students claimed that the unfriendly behaviors of the other students demotivated them. They often get bullied and harassed. The students use the words *"Disabled/ Autistic/ Protibondhi" to abuse each other. One of the student interviewees said, "No one wanted to sit beside me. They called me mad and would yell at me. I did not like school, I like to stay at home."*

2. Lack of cooperation and support of teachers

Students shared that teachers cannot understand their needs and thus they do not provide adequate support in the classroom. For special assistances, the teachers often tell parents of the students to get admitted to coaching centers which are quite expensive for most of the students. Teachers often use harsh and abusive words when students with disabilities cannot perform regular academic activities with non-disabled peers. Again, many teachers have pre-conceived perceptions that students with disabilities will not be able to get good scores, so, they do not provide adequate support for the disabled students. Trust between teachers and students and teachers and guardians is yet to build. Lack of proper training and reasonable accommodation contribute to this factor. Parents/caregivers needs to know all about the classroom system which the teachers take as a challenge or humiliation. One of the student interviewees said, *"My teachers would also yell at me. They often got angry when I asked any question repeatedly."*

3. Inaccessible infrastructure and washrooms

Schools in general do not have accessible washrooms. The toilets could hardly

accommodate a wheel chair inside. No pictorial signage or use of tactile tiles was found in the schools. One of the students said, *"The washrooms are very narrow. I cannot enter with my wheelchair. There was no high-commode either. The support staffs were reluctant to help me. All laughed and got angry when I peed in my pants. I felt so humiliated."*

4. Inaccessible classrooms and labs

Classrooms in most schools are also inaccessible. Benches were placed in several rows in such the ways that students with crutches, white sticks or wheel chairs will face difficulties to move around the classroom. Again, some classrooms and labs were in the upper floors and the building does not have any lift or ramps so students with physical disabilities cannot reach. Most of the schools do not have trained laboratory demonstrator to guide students with disabilities. As a result, in all the schools it was found that students with disabilities are being forced to study business studies or humanities in the secondary level.

One of the students said, *"I wanted to study science in secondary level. However, I was forced to take humanities due to my physical disability. My teachers said that I will not be able to work with chemicals due to problems with my hands and forced me to cancel science and take up humanities for the upcoming SSC exam."*

5. No alternative educational material

Accessible education materials for students with disabilities are not available in inclusive schools or regular schools. These materials can be found only in special schools. As a result, students with disabilities who study in inclusive schools or regular schools face serious obstacles to perform their academic activities. The schools neither have any teachers trained on alternative learning methods nor any alternative educational materials.

One of the student interviewees said, *"I had to leave my previous school as it did not have any teacher to teach me in Braille method."*

6. No scope for recreational activities

Students with disabilities were excluded from recreational activities. During recess when all the non-disabled students get involved in playful activities, students with disabilities were left alone in the classroom. The schools do not have suitable playing equipment or safe space for students with disabilities.

7. No scope for co-curricular activities

Students with disabilities also cannot participate in the co-curricular activities. During cultural activities or sports competition, these students cannot participate at all. Students with disabilities are rarely included in any cultural show. Stigma, misconception and lack of training contribute to this matter. One of the student, interviewees said,

"I never got the chance to sing or participate in any cultural show. But you know I can sing well."

8. Inaccessible or expensive transports

Student with disabilities often get dropped out due to lack of accessible transports to schools. They are often denied access to public transport and have to hire private transport to go to school. When they cannot bear the cost of transportation, they often stop going to school. One of the interviewees said, *"My father took me to school for a month. But decided to stop my schooling as everything became so expensive for him to afford. Now, only my brother goes to school."*

Barriers to Access Education-Comments from Teachers

Teachers, in general, are sympathetic towards children with disabilities. They agree, in theory, that educating children with disabilities is possible but they said that enrolling students with disabilities is not pragmatic under current circumstances. They pointed out many obstacles to ensure accessibility in schools. These are mentioned below:

1. Lack of suitable training for teachers, headmasters, support staffs and caregivers;
2. Lack of partnership/coordination between special schools, mainstream schools and inclusive schools;
3. Insufficient salary and facilities of teachers which discourage them from investing extra hours;
4. Lack of support staff and resource teacher in the schools;
5. No application of Individualized Education Plan (IEP): The school authorities and teachers have no idea about IEP. Only some special schools do practice and prepare it, encouraging segregated education system. Therefore, the education system has become something that need the students to fit into it rather than being modified to fit the learners;
6. Absence of resource teachers: No teacher in mainstream schools, particularly in public schools, are trained to handle and educate students with disabilities. A few private schools do have some trained teachers but they charge a lot but often lack in terms of accountability and transparency with guardians;
7. Absence of sign language interpretation: What we have now in the country is special schools, which means segregated schools, and some integrated schools. However, sign language interpretation which supports multiple disabilities is absence in almost all the schools we interviewed;
8. Shortage of Braille books & mathematical instruments: Likewise, education materials are very hard to find in alternative forms such as braille books and suitable mathematical instruments;
9. Non-allowance of support persons: Already classrooms and schools are mobbed with students way more than its capacity. Therefore, support staffs deem supporting students with disabilities as extra burden as they do not get any extra paid for the additional effort;

10. Negative attitudes of teachers: Teachers get often rude as they are not trained and also because their extra effort is not recognized through payments or other means.

Barriers to Access Education- Comments from Education Professionals (GO/ NGO Leaders)

1. Activating national and district level coordination committees: Every district has a coordination committee formed with government officials concerned. They are assigned to support admission of students with disabilities and their sustainability, and also to probe any discrimination and thereby ensure compensation. Unfortunately, these committees are still inactive.
2. No system/practice for mainstream schools to exchange knowledge: Only a few schools get necessary modern training from the government but do not share it, resulting in lack of resource schools and teachers.
3. Lack of knowledge on potentials of persons with disabilities: Most of the school authorities are unaware of all the types of disabilities. Moreover, neurodevelopmental disabilities are still a myth. So, early detection and early intervention is still absent.
4. Lengthy procedure to make reasonable accommodations especially in public schools: Public school authorities often are reluctant to arrange for any reasonable accommodation and look up to NGOs and individual donations.
5. Lack of advocacy campaigns from OPDs: OPDs still favour segregated or special schools for their own benefit which hampers the advocacy for inclusive education.
6. Unwillingness of families: Families prefer to keep their children with disabilities at home fearing social stigma and security issues.
7. Sustainability issues of foreign funded projects: Foreign funds are available for short-term projects mainly focused on particular activities. Foreign funds on sustainable advocacy and support are rare to get.
8. Inter-ministerial coordination: Lack of coordination among the social welfare ministry, education ministry, primary and mass education ministry, education board, and teachers' training institutes is another big challenge.
9. Lack of employment opportunities: Lack of employment for person with disabilities devalue them in the society, indirectly discouraging families, educational institutes to come forward to establish inclusive education system.

Recommendations

Based on the identified barriers and discussions with the interviewees during interviews and FGDs, a set of recommendations has been developed to remove the barriers and make educational institutions accessible for students with disabilities:

1. Ensuring accessibility in educational services and infrastructure

2. Ensuring reasonable accommodation wherever children with disabilities face barriers. The existing schools need to consult with authorities to find alternative solutions to make the infrastructure accessible while the under-construction buildings need to run accessibility check during planning and incorporate the necessary technology. Many school authorities seem reluctant to adopt accessible features terming it expensive but many public university students are successfully working on making cheap alternatives such as bamboo lift. Therefore, a coordination is needed to promote the technologies.
3. Ensuring suitable training for teachers: To make an inclusive education system, teachers' training needs to be incorporated in the basic training module. For this, coordination is needed among Teachers' Training Institutes, PTI, Institute for Educational Research, and related government institutes.
4. Advocacy with different stakeholders, both public and private, is needed for making the curriculum conducive for children/persons with disabilities
5. Special attention should be given on under-represented groups such as children with neuro-developmental disabilities, children with visual and hearing disabilities and children with severe and multiple disabilities
6. Effective media campaigns & awareness programs are needed to inform the people about disability and the ongoing preparation of government to make the society inclusive to eliminate existing misconceptions

Concluding Remarks

The ultimate goal of this study is to ensure accessibility to children with disabilities so that they can fully utilise their potential and flourish their capacities and contribute to the betterment of the society they live in. This research has endeavored to figure out the challenges these students have been facing to get access to educational institutions, which is one of the most fundamental rights. From the bleak scenario and numerous barriers discussed earlier, we can easily assume how much difficulties our citizens with disabilities have been facing to lead their lives in this society. To improve this bleak condition, persons with disabilities see education as the most effective tool for empowerment. Education can change this situation positively and significantly by raising awareness and by making them employable and economically self-sufficient. Therefore, government, non-government stakeholders, mass media, community workers and persons with disabilities should work together to establish a more inclusive, discrimination and barrier free society where rights of every citizen will be respected in all parts of the society.

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