

Exploring the Challenges of Achieving Equity through Inclusion in the Bangladeshi Education Context

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Abstract: *This paper explores the challenges in achieving equity by means of promoting inclusive education in Bangladesh. The focus is to identify the key challenges in education for children with disability, ethnic minority children's education and education for other major excluded groups. Through document analysis, this essay suggests that weak coordination among different government agencies, lack of teachers' professional development opportunities are among the major challenges to promote education for disabled children. It also explores controversial multilingual issues in promoting first language based multilingual education in Bangladesh. Furthermore, it is argued that poor attention to the education of children affected by natural disasters and increasing notion of commercialization in education are also working as barriers in achieving equity.*

Key words: *Equity; Inclusion; Disability; ethnic-minority; Emergency; Commercialization; Bangladesh.*

Introduction

Equity in education is a much-discussed issue both in developed and developing countries. To promote equity, the importance of inclusive education has been reflected on a range of international educational policies and frameworks such as Education for All (EFA) (Directorate of Primary Education [DPE] and Centre for Services and Information on Disability [CSID], 2002); The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994); Millennium Development Goals (United Nations, 2008); and the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006).

Bangladesh, economically one of the poorest countries of the world with high population, is also facing challenges in bringing equity in education. Inclusive education as a key approach

to address the equity issue has been taken seriously into state's initiatives both in policies and practices. Showing strong commitment to meet EFA goals for inclusive education, Bangladesh enacted a number of policies like the Bangladesh Persons with Disabilities Welfare Act 2001 (Ministry of Social Welfare 2001) and the Draft National Child Policy 2010 (Ministry of Women & Children Affairs 2010) where education has been recognized as a fundamental right for all children regardless of their ability, gender, ethnicity or emergencies. The latest education policy (The National Education Policy 2010) strongly emphasized on the necessity for inclusion of diverse children, such as children with special needs, girls, children from ethnic and tribal communities, and children who are disadvantaged due to socio-economic reasons (Ministry of Education 2010).

Though concept of equal opportunity is deeply embedded in educational and other policy documents, the journey towards achieving equity through inclusion is not a smooth one. Millions of children are still out of school every year in Bangladesh. Dropout rate in primary education is still high. The gap between the quality of public and private funded education is huge and hence children's educational attainment is still notably dependent on parents' capacity of investing in their kids' education.

The objective of this paper is to explore the challenging journey of inclusive education to promote equity. We will focus on the challenges in education for disabled children, education for ethnic minority children and for other vulnerable groups such as children affected by natural disasters. To understand the current situation, we have analysed a range of documents related to these issues. We have focused on government's policies and initiatives relevant with promoting equity in education and have discussed a number of different research reports and articles. First we are going to discuss the *educational context of Bangladesh* and the concepts of *equity and inclusive education* to give a better understanding of the issue in discussion.

The Context of Bangladesh

Bangladesh, one of the most densely populated countries of the world, is situated in South Asia. The current population of the country is over 164 million, 15%-18% of them are extremely poor (Sen & Hulme 2006). Majority of the population are Muslim with small representations of Hindus, Buddhists and Christians. There are also some small clusters of ethnic minorities (approximately 2% of the total population) in different parts of Bangladesh, particularly in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHTs), Sylhet and Rajshahi divisions. These ethnic groups have their own languages and culture which are different from the language and culture of the mainstream populace.

Over the last few decades, Bangladesh has often been in news highlights all over the world for appalling natural disasters. Too many rivers and other environmental factors including the impact of global warming cause calamities like frequent floods and cyclones in this delta.

The constitution of Bangladesh states about the provision of basic necessities which includes adoption of uniform, mass-oriented, free and compulsory education by which an equitable state can be formed so that all kinds of exploitation can be removed (Government of Bangladesh, 1998). After securing independence in 1971, the government emphasised on the basic set up and expansion of primary education in the country by taking charge of all existing primary schools with an ordinance (GoB, 1973). Bangladesh enacted Compulsory Primary Education Act 1990, just after signing Education for All (EFA) earlier that year, which was officially implemented in 1992 (DPE & CSID, 2006). This country has done impressively well in the last 10 years achieving gender parity to meet EFA goals (World Bank, 2008a). However, despite different initiatives from the government and non-government organizations (NGOs), Bangladesh is struggling to reach the second aim of Millennium Development Goal (MDG) which is about achieving Universal Primary Education (UPE) by 2015. According to UNICEF (2010), current primary school enrolment rate is 81% which reflects some improvement. But, this slow progress also indicates the existing hurdles towards access to education.

Equity in education is a well-discussed issue worldwide. But it is not easy to achieve in a country like Bangladesh where equity is absent in many other socio-economic aspects. Studies have found that over 40% of the national income is being mobilized within 15% of the total population (Disability Rights Watch Group Bangladesh, 2009), which suggests wealth is often accumulated within certain groups. This in turn creates significant socio-economic difference between rich and poor. Connections with political parties also determine the power relationship within the society and influences access to social benefits.

Poverty is not the only reason that challenges equity in education in Bangladesh. Like kids from poverty stricken families children with disability face difficulty in accessing mainstream education. According to Disability Rights Watch Group Bangladesh (2009), approximately 1.6 million children with disability are at great risk in terms of their educational access and opportunities.

Research suggests that education in a multicultural environment is a difficult set up to achieve equity in terms of access and achievement (Boyle and Charles, 2011). Though Bangladesh is mostly homogeneous in terms of ethnic distribution, the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and parts of Rajshahi and Sylhet, where many ethnic minority groups live, are no different regarding Boyle and Charles's (2011) claim where equity is a big challenge in education in terms of educational access and continuity.

Though not multicultural, children living on the coastal areas or islands are a challenge for the government because of their remote location. They are subject to lose their homes to natural disasters such as cyclones and floods (UNICEF, 2009). As such, ensuring educational access for these children can be troublesome.

Equity and Inclusive Education

The term 'Equity' in education is not very straightforward to define. Ainscow et al. (1991) explained equity as a notion of fairness, not only in respect to social justice, children's rights, inclusion, gender equality, or multiculturalism but also with an attention to the inter-relationship of these complicated factors interacting within the education system. Generally, 'Equity' in education is concerned with equal access and opportunity irrespective of children's gender, social class, physical or mental ability, culture and language or any emergency situation.

To promote equity, recent policies have emphasized on inclusion of all children in formal education. The Draft National Child Policy 2010 (Ministry of Women & Children Affairs, 2010) emphasize on non-discrimination of children, especially girls, children with disabilities, and children from disadvantaged backgrounds, which include their access to education. By enacting the Bangladesh Persons with Disabilities Welfare Act 2001, the government has tried to ensure the legal right of children with disabilities to education (Ministry of Social Welfare, 2001).

'Inclusive' approach of education is considered as one of the most effective processes to ensure equity. Inclusive education (IE) is an evolving concept which involves identifying and addressing the sources and consequences of exclusion in education adopting a holistic framework of EFA goals (UNESCO, 2005). 'Inclusion', according to UNESCO (2005), "...is a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of the needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, culture and communities, and reducing exclusion with and from education." Miles et al. (2012) viewed inclusive education as a process of educational transformation which is much broader than providing a simplistic solution to a particular marginalized group of learners.

Despite legislative mandates and government's commitment towards different national and international policy frameworks, there still remain many challenges in progress of inclusive education in Bangladesh.

Methodology

This research adopts document analysis as its primary method for exploring the challenges of achieving equity through inclusion in Bangladesh. Document analysis is a form of qualitative research where researchers interpret documents to give voice and meaning around a given topic. Bowen (2009) defines document analysis as a systematic procedure for reviewing both printed and electronic materials (computer-based and internet-transmitted). He further suggests that document analysis requires data to be examined and interpreted for eliciting meanings, gaining understanding, and developing empirical knowledge. Echoing Bowen's description, Wharton (2006) articulates document analysis as the detailed examination of documents from a wide range of sources which could be in a wide variety of forms from the written words to the visual image. Documents that are used for systematic evaluation as part of a study take a variety of forms. They can include advertisements; agendas, attendance registers, and minutes of meetings; manuals, background papers; books and brochures; diaries and journals; event programs (i.e., printed outlines); letters and memoranda; maps and charts; newspapers (clippings/articles); press releases; program proposals, application forms, and summaries; radio and television program scripts; organizational or institutional reports; survey data; and various public records (Bowen, 2009).

For this study the documents analysed include government reports and policy documents; relevant reports published by donor agencies and development organizations; books, research reports and journal articles; and few online resources. Overall, more than 35 documents were reviewed and themes relevant to the core focus of this study identified. The findings are discussed here under the four major areas mentioned earlier: i) education for children with disability, ii) education for ethnic-minority children, iii) education for other major excluded groups, and iv) commercialization of education.

Findings

The primary school enrolment rate, as reported by UNICEF (2010), is 81% in Bangladesh, which indicates that still many children of primary school going age are out of formal education's reach. To identify and address the educational needs of these children is one of the biggest challenges in the process of inclusion. We are going to discuss some of the challenging issues which are evident in available literature.

i) Education for children with disability

Including children with disability in education is a big challenge in Bangladesh. Disability Rights Watch Group Bangladesh (2009) reported only 4% of an estimated 1.6 million children with disability attend in a range of schools including special, integrated, non-formal and casual inclusive setting. UNICEF (2009) reported that very few children with disability attend

mainstream schools. A large majority of those children who attend primary school complete the primary cycle (Ahsan et al. 2012). However, the challenges of including children with disability in education are not very simple.

At present, different government agencies are working on education for disabled children. Both Ministry of Education (MoE) and Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (MoPME) are working on educational issues where Education for All (EFA) is an important mandate but the education of children with disability is under the authority of Ministry of Social Welfare. Miles et al. (2012) discussed another ministerial overlapping by raising the issue that both Ministry of Primary and Mass Education and Ministry of Social Welfare have separate schooling provisions for children with disability. This overlap between two ministries has led to a serious issue for the 'recognition' (Munir & Zaman 2009) of education for disabled children. It is unclear whether this is an issue of human rights or an issue about charity from a social welfare perspective. Engaging different agencies to promote the education of children with disability might reflect the government's positive attitude towards this matter. But Akter and Kuntoro (2011) felt the need of a better coordination among Ministry of Primary and Mass Education, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Social Welfare, Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, Ministry of Health and Ministry of Finance as all these ministries are linked with each other to promote inclusive education and serve the children with special needs.

The children with special needs and those with disability were included in mainstream government primary schools in 2002 through the first Primary Education Development Programme (PEDP) (Ahsan & Burnip 2007). This programme involved various components including revising the teacher-training curriculum. Effective inclusive classrooms are dependent on highly trained teachers. Munir and Islam (2005) reviewed the primary level pre-service teacher-training curriculum and reported that the curriculum lacks inclusive education related material. Similarly, another evaluative study on the state of inclusive education in Bangladesh conducted by Ahuja and Ibrahim (2006), reported that the pre-service teacher-training program was not supportive enough for the primary school teachers to be confident and competent for inclusive classrooms.

It is obvious that teachers' high sense of efficacy and positive attitude are essential requirements for successful inclusive classrooms (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Lancaster & Bain, 2010). But researchers have reported that leading and influential educational institute heads in Bangladesh seem to have a negative and not-so-confident perspective about inclusive education (Ahsan et al., 2012). This finding is supported by a number of other studies (e.g. Ahsan 2006; Anam & Ahsan 2002; DPE & CSID 2002).

Overall, the available literature (Ahsan 2005, 2006; Anam & Ahsan, 2002; Ahsan & Burnip 2007; DPE & CSID 2002; USAID Bangladesh 2005) on inclusive education in Bangladesh

have identified inaccessible environment in schools, lack of proper teacher training, lack of resources and materials, lack of confidence in teachers, teachers' and school staffs' negative attitudes, gender discrimination, prejudice, rigid teaching-learning and assessment systems as some common barriers to include children with diverse needs in mainstream education in Bangladesh.

ii) Education for ethnic minority children

Including children from ethnic minorities in education is a key concern of inclusive education in Bangladesh. Around 45 different ethnic minority groups comprise approximately 2 million people which represent almost 1.22% of the total population (World Bank, 2008b). There is hardly any data available revealing true figure of what percentage of ethnic minority children enrolls to primary schools. However, a study conducted in Rajshahi by Sarker and Davey (2009) reported that only 22% ethnic minority children completed one full schooling year of primary cycle. The study also reported a high dropout rate of 18%. Data from this study clearly indicates an alarming scenario of education for these children. The available literature on ethnic minority education in Bangladesh context has identified some major challenges to promote education for these groups.

According to Sarker and Davey (2009), poverty is one of the main reasons that cause exclusion of ethnic minority children from education. For many families, children's education is not the first priority. The parents rather like their children to be engaged in income generating activities or in taking care of their siblings at home.

One of the major reasons for low literacy rate among ethnic minority children is the lack of mother tongue based primary education. Banglapedia: National Encyclopaedia of Bangladesh (2006) mentioned the existence of more than 30 ethnic languages in Bangladesh used by 45 different minority groups. These groups live in a truly multilingual environment here, some using their own language at home in addition to another ethnic language and Bangla in schools (Kim & Kim, 2008; Rafi, 2006). National Educational Policy (MoE 2010) responded to the long awaited demand for policy reform to support education through mother language campaign by recommending first-language based multilingual education for the ethnic minority children. But implementing this policy is also a challenge. Among the ethnic minority groups, only few such as Chakma, Santali, Meitei have their own scripts whereas most of the other ethnic languages only exist in verbal form (Rahman, 2010). It is difficult to implement first-language based multilingual education for any group that does not have their own language with written scripts. Issues for those who have their own written scripts are not simple either. Lewis (2009) found that the writing system of the ethnic languages in Bangladesh mostly follows the Bengali, Devanagari, or Latin scripts. Rahman (2010) has discussed the complexities that ethnic minority groups having their own scripts besides

Bengali or Latin scripts are divided on whether Bangla/Latin or their own scripts will be their preferred scripts to be used in education. This often becomes more of a political decision than a linguistic one. All these controversies related to standardization make it very difficult to implement first-language based multilingual education.

iii) Education for other major excluded groups

Regular natural calamities like flood and cyclone have specific adverse effects on education. USAID (2007) reported that after securing independence in 1971 six devastating floods have stricken Bangladesh. The coastal districts of Bangladesh are considered as one of the most cyclone prone areas of the world (USAID, 2007). Natural disasters like cyclones and floods make thousands of families homeless, more vulnerable and even poorer. During and after the disaster, many schools stop functioning because of infrastructural damage to schools, roads and highways. In some areas of the country, schools remain under water for more than half a year because of heavy rain and flood. All these issues challenge the educational opportunities of millions of children. To identify and include this disaster affected children in mainstream education often becomes very difficult within the existing capacity of public schooling provisions.

iv) Commercialization of education:

Including all children in education is not the only concern of inclusive education. It is also concerned with equal educational opportunities to all children by paying attention to the diverse needs of different groups. In Bangladesh, there are 10 different types of primary schools which ranges from formal to non-formal, public to private, Bangla medium to English medium (Education Watch, 2008). The provision of running different types of schools actually is promoting commercialization in education which results in uneven completion between different types of schools. Like any other open market, anybody who can afford spending more on education here will get the better educational opportunities for their children. This market oriented education system makes choices available to parents but in reality only few having sufficient social and cultural capital can enjoy freedom of choice (Ball, 1993). As a result, education is rejuvenating the differences among different social classes instead of reducing the gap. In evidence, Hossain and Tollefson (2007) described 'social division' whereas Imam (2005) found 'social polarization' between those who can and cannot afford English medium schools. Same polarization is common between public and private education. In both primary and secondary level, educational attainments of children from private schools are better than that of public schools. As private education is significantly more expensive than public education, better educational attainment is very much dependent on parents' capacity of investing in children's education. Even within the same education system, existing provisions or practice sometimes reincarnates the socio-economic inequality and inhibits the utilization of

education to be a vehicle of social equity. Take the case of School Based Assessment (SBA) in public schools for example. This assessment practice is working as a barrier for economically disadvantaged children as those who can afford getting private lessons from the school teachers (who are also the scorers in SBA) are getting better results (Tanzeen, 2011). Furthermore, introduction of coursework that contribute to the final result of student disadvantages some students. For example, Maleque (2010) found that guardians in rural areas cannot help their children in preparing coursework but children of urban area are given more support by guardians in preparation of their coursework like homework and assignment.

Concluding Remarks

Equity in education is a complex phenomena and it is difficult to achieve in a short period of time. It is even more difficult to achieve when society is inequitable in many other aspects. Positive attitude towards the existing diversity, mutual respect and sharing are important for reducing the gap among different groups. As noble winner Bengali poet Tagore (1967, p. 146) expressed his apprehension a century ago,

“the world-wide problem today is not how to unite by wiping out all differences, but how to unite with all the differences intact; a difficult task, for it permits of no trickery and calls for mutual give-and-take”.

Though our discussion on the existing challenges may have portrayed a dismal picture of Bangladesh’s journey in promoting equity in education, some positive steps from the government such as policies supportive for equity can be considered as a glow on this rather dark picture. Consistent attention and more investment are required to implement these policies into practices. Achieving equity in education needs strong efforts and we all need to share the responsibility of carrying out this challenging journey until the next generation come forward.

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