

# Barriers for the Students with Special Needs: A Study on Selected Primary Schools in Bangladesh

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**[Abstract]** This paper aims to identify barriers to inclusive education for children with special needs in Bangladesh, focusing on policies, infrastructure, and implementation challenges. Bangladesh has made significant progress in policy development, including the National Education Policy (2010) and the Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act (2013) which emphasize equitable access to education, inclusive teaching methods, and the development of accessible infrastructure. Despite significant advancements, the inclusion of students with special needs in mainstream classrooms remains limited due to a lack of trained teachers and classroom environments. Infrastructure, i.e. ramps, accessible toilets, and tactile paving, in many schools, is inadequate. Further to it, the study seeks to analyze the key barriers to inclusive education while offering policy recommendations to enhance its effectiveness and promote more inclusive practices.

**Key words :** Special Needs Education, Disability, Social Inclusion, SDGs

## I. Introduction

Inclusive education refers to an educational system where every child can learn in the same classroom regardless of their abilities, needs, social backgrounds, or other conditions <sup>\*1)</sup>. Globally, inclusive education is closely linked with equality, human rights, and sustainable development <sup>\*2)</sup>. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 4, emphasized inclusive and equitable education systems. International frameworks have been developed to achieve this goal, and various countries have

undertaken initiatives to promote inclusive education in their specific contexts <sup>\*3)</sup>. The Bangladesh government and some NGOs are actively working to promote inclusive education: in particular, improving school environments, and classroom facilities, upgrading curricula, and conducting teacher training programs for children with special needs. However, there are still notable challenges in implementation. In this context, this paper attempts to find out the existing challenges in implementing and applying the policies and programs of inclusive education in selected 10 schools in Bangladesh. It examines the

curricula, teaching methods, infrastructure, and overall school environment to evaluate their adequacy for supporting students with special needs.

## II. Policy Framework

Inclusion is a fundamental human right, enshrined in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and reinforced by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Article 24 states that access to quality, inclusive education for persons with disabilities should be ensured. As a signatory to the CRPD, the Bangladesh government has aligned its national policies with global commitments. Upholding the National Education Policy (NPC)-2010, aimed at ensuring the education of physically and mentally challenged learners, the government has taken policies and initiatives to provide access to quality education for all children, including those with special needs <sup>\*4)</sup>. Meanwhile the government has focused on removing barriers for children with disabilities by integrating them into mainstream classrooms, employing inclusive teaching strategies, and ensuring accessible infrastructure such as ramps and assistive technologies. For children with severe disabilities, the policy advocates for specialized schools while encouraging their gradual inclusion in general education settings. These measures aim to bridge the gap between policy and practice, fostering an inclusive education system that meets global standards and fulfills the promise of SDGs-4 <sup>\*5)</sup>.

Following the National Education Policy in 2010, the Government of Bangladesh has signed major international declarations and implemented supportive policies and legislation over the past two decades. Before and after the National Education Policy in 2010, there are major international declarations signed by

the government of Bangladesh, and supportive policies and legislation implemented along with them. During the first Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) Decade on Disability (1993–2002), the Bangladesh parliament enacted the National Policy on Disability (1995) and the Disability Welfare Act (2001). In alignment with the Biwako Millennium Framework (2003–2012) during the second ESCAP Decade, a high-level Bangladeshi delegation participated in its formulation in Bangkok in 2002. Subsequently, Bangladesh developed its first National Action Plan on Disability (2006), assigning specific responsibilities to 18 ministries. While drafting the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the Bangladesh government emphasized its societal stance that living within the family, even in adulthood, is a fundamental right for persons with disabilities. This perspective was incorporated into the CRPD, which Bangladesh ratified along with its Optional Protocol, making it one of the early adopters. During the third ESCAP Decade, the Incheon Strategy (2013–2022) was adopted, with Bangladesh actively participating. Significant legislative progress was made during this period, including the enactment of the Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2013, the Persons with Neurodevelopmental Disabilities Protection Trust Act, 2013, and the Rehabilitation Council Act, 2018. Additionally, the Integrated Special Education Policy (2019), National Action Plan on Disability (2019), and National Strategy on Neuro-developmental Disabilities (2016–2021) were also adopted by the government. These policies expanded the responsibilities of 35 ministries to address disability-related issues comprehensively <sup>\*6)</sup>. The acts, policies, and initiatives significantly complement the National Education Policy (2010) by establishing robust legal and structural frameworks to promote inclusive education for

children with special needs. Moreover, these policy initiatives acknowledge the critical need for accessible infrastructure, including ramps, tactile paving, and assistive technologies, to create a learning environment that supports all students.

### III. Special Education Schools

Since the implementation of the Education Policy and the Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act in 2013, the Bangladesh government has introduced several initiatives to address the challenges faced by students with disabilities. Despite the government efforts, there are significant challenges. Nonetheless, the National Survey on Persons with Disabilities (NSPD) 2021, conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), reveals that Only 65% of children with disabilities aged 5-17 are enrolled in primary school and 35% in secondary school. The survey also reveals that children with disabilities who are enrolled in formal education tend to fall behind academically, with an average delay of more than two years compared to their peers <sup>\*7)</sup>.

Under the Integrated Special Education Policy for Disabilities 2019, the government provides support to 74 special schools through the National Disability Development Foundation. These schools currently have 1,103 teachers/staff and 10,889 students enrolled. It is worth mentioning that the Bangladesh Army established nine special needs schools in different cantonments, initially for children of defense personnel, but since April 2010, these schools have been open to all children, regardless of their background. The Bangladesh Army-run special needs schools offer a range of services such as counseling, assessment, and therapy.

### IV. Methods of Data Collection

Access to education for children with disabilities in Bangladesh remains a critical issue despite the progress made in policy development and legislative support. This study adopts a qualitative approach to explore the challenges and barriers faced by students with special needs. The study purposively selected nine inclusive elementary schools from semi-urban areas and one specialized school (*Proyash School*) operated by the Bangladesh Army in Dhaka Metropolitan City. The questionnaire survey was conducted between May and August 2023. The observation of school classes spanned 30 days (3 days per school) and took place from September to November 2023.

The survey participants included School Head/Principles, assistant teachers, school administrators, special needs students, and parents of children with special needs (Table 1).

**Table 1: Respondents' Profile**

Category	No. of Respondents	Male	Female	Age
Education officer	12	9	3	35-45
School Head	10	9	1	45-55
Assistants Teachers	40	23	17	35-45
Gurdian	50	00	50	25-40
Students	50	28	22	6-12

### V. Findings and Analysis

#### A. Infrastructure Barriers

One of the primary obstacles is the physical inaccessibility of schools. According to the National Building Code, in every room, corridor, passage, etc. a minimum free space (1500 mm x 1500 mm) is required for maneuvering a wheelchair. Minimum unobstructed width of public access roads and corridors is also required (minimum 1200mm) and this should be balanced and sufficiently lit. At least one toilet per floor or 5% (whichever is more) of the total number

of toilets should be made accessible for the disabled. A certain number of seats should be reserved for wheelchair users in the assembly area. It should be evenly distributed, easily visible, and accessible from the entrance.

The government schools for intellectual disabilities, visual impairments, and speech and hearing impairments have been declared inclusive by the government. However, they have not yet commenced classes as inclusive schools because the construction of the buildings intended for this purpose has not been completed. These schools were initially not designed to support children with mobility impairments or other special needs. After the adoption of the policy, ramps were installed according to government directives. However, these ramps do not meet the required minimum slope ratio of 1:8, which is necessary for safe maneuvering.

Moreover, there is still a lack of accessible toilets and drinking water facilities to support children with mobility impairments or other special needs. The school premises are not designed to comply with the essential minimum infrastructural requirements. For

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*The Khilgaon Government Colony Primary School is an inclusive school. To accommodate students with special needs, particularly those using wheelchairs, ramps have been installed. However, as the school is a four-story building without an elevator, students with special needs can only attend classes on the ground floor. The school lacks open spaces, and while separate toilets are available for students, no special facilities have been provided specifically for children with special needs.*

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example, handrails on both sides of the stairs and TAC tiles in the walk ways are absent in the schools.

## B. Curricula and Classroom Environment

The curricula of inclusive government primary schools are the same as those of other schools, with no flexibility in teaching methods or syllabi for students with special needs. However, efforts have been made to make the syllabi more adaptable, in consideration of the needs of children with special requirements. For example, nursery-level classrooms were found to be thoughtfully designed to create an engaging and child-friendly learning environment. In contrast, the curricula of specialized schools for students with intellectual disabilities, visual impairments, and speech and hearing impairments are more flexible and tailored to meet the specific needs of these students.

The school for intellectual disabilities including autism has caregivers assigned to monitor daily activities like handwashing, eating, and learning. The teachers guide students in practicing social skills such as greeting others, interacting with peers, expressing needs, maintaining personal hygiene, dressing, organizing personal belongings, and developing household skills like cooking and cleaning.

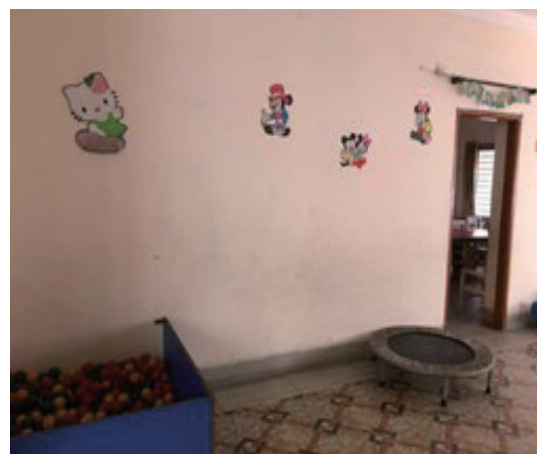


Figure 1 An inclusive School Classroom

The government has issued guidelines, such as providing extra time during exams and seating students in the front row, which inclusive schools in the study district should follow. Both in inclusive and specialized schools, the focus remains on developing a supportive and adaptable environment that encourages students to thrive academically and socially.

### C. Lack of Assistive Devices

Like other government schools, inclusive schools are publicly given laptops, printers, multimedia projectors, and water purifiers as educational support. Additionally, assistive devices such as wheelchairs, dark glasses, and hearing aids are provided for children with special needs. After students are enrolled, the schools assess their requirements and prepare a requisition for assistive tools, which is sent to Upazila Education Officer. These tools are then supplied based on their recommendations.

### D. Cultural Barriers

In addition to physical barriers, social stigma and discrimination pose significant challenges for children with disabilities in Bangladesh. Deep-seated societal beliefs about disability, associated with incapability, often lead to the children's exclusion, with children being seen as incapable of learning. This stigma affects the children and discourages families from enrolling their children in schools. In our study, the majority of parents expressed fear and concern about their children encountering bullying or discrimination in schools. Most of the special needs students (72%) reported about the lack of cooperation from their fellow students. However, the majority of students (80%) actively engaged in play with children with special needs. The contrast indicates that while play-time interactions are common, deeper levels of academic support, emotional interaction, and support in

other areas remain limited.

### E. Lack of Trained Teachers

Teachers in schools for hearing impairments receive training in sign language, which is mandatory for effective communication and teaching. Similarly, teachers in specialized schools for intellectual, speech, hearing, and visual impairments are required to undergo a year of training. In contrast, inclusive school teachers receive only seven days of training, which is inadequate. For instance, among 40 teachers in the study district, only 10 had the opportunity to attend the seven-day training. Consequently, these schools face significant challenges in meeting the diverse needs of children with special needs.

## VI. Conclusion

In conclusion, while efforts have been made to improve inclusive education for children with disabilities in Bangladesh, challenges remain. The government has focused on raising awareness, improving infrastructure, and integrating children with special needs into regular schools. However, there is still a gap between policy and practice due to issues like lack of resources, trained teachers, physical barriers, and social stigma. As a result, many children with disabilities still face difficulties accessing quality education, which highlights the need for better implementation of policies and quality support.

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## スペシャル・ニーズを持つ生徒に対する障壁： バングラデシュの小学校を対象とした調査

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**[要約]** 本稿では、バングラデシュにおけるスペシャル・ニーズを持つ児童のためのインクルーシブ教育の障壁を特定することを目的とし、政策、インフラ、実施上の課題に焦点を当てる。バングラデシュでは、教育への公平なアクセス、インクルーシブな指導方法、アクセシブルなインフラの開発を重視する国家教育政策（2010年）や障害者の権利と保護に関する法律（2013年）など、政策開発において著しい進歩を遂げている。大きな進歩があったにもかかわらず、訓練を受けた教師や教室環境の不足により、スペシャル・ニーズを持つ生徒の通常学級への受け入れは依然として限られています。多くの学校では、スロープ、バリアフリーのトイレ、点字ブロックなどのインフラが不十分です。さらに、この研究では、インクルーシブ教育の主な障壁を分析し、その有効性を高め、よりインクルーシブな実践を促進するための政策提言を行っています。

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