

Children with disabilities in an all-inclusive education system

Published : Saturday, 11 June, 2022 at 12:00 AM
Dipanwita Ghosh, Sagir Hossain Khan & Zehad-Al-Mehedi

Mamun (pseudonym) contracted polio when he was one and a half years old. He spent the following 10 years seeking treatment in various hospitals. However, thanks to the tireless efforts of his parents and family, he was able to begin his educational journey.

After being admitted to the fifth grade for the first time, he soon received a scholarship in Talent Pool, disproving the long-held notion that "children with disabilities cannot do it."

More often than not, the main constraint faced by children with disabilities is not the impairment but widespread prejudice and discrimination against them. This is particularly true for Bangladesh, where discrimination in both the family and community act as a barrier to education for children with disabilities.

They are denied the opportunity to perform well and progress in education that is otherwise available to children without disabilities.

The Government of Bangladesh has taken a number of legislative and policy actions to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning by 2030. The most notable of these legislations include the National Education Policy formulated in 2010, the Children Policy adopted in 2011, the Children Act 2013, and the Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act 2013.

Though the goal of these legislations was to facilitate the path of education for children with disabilities in the mainstream educational system, decades later, little of this goal has been achieved; even now, a child with disabilities in this country has to hear that "s/he can't do it" every step of the way.

We will attempt to shed light on the main reasons behind this setback and how they can be addressed.

Unfortunately, parents themselves are often one of the impediments to the education of children with disabilities, for whom ensuring the physical and mental development of a child with disabilities is quite challenging.

The first thing that comes to their mind is how and where the child will be treated and whether the child will recover at all. These health-related difficulties frequently overshadow the child's education. Consequently, children with disabilities typically begin their education at a later age and continue to lag behind other students of their age.

On the other hand, when a new student with a disability is brought to a school, instead of being welcomed warmly by teachers and classmates, they are typically perceived as a burden. Teachers and students without disabilities assume that a student with disabilities is an incompetent individual without merit. Teachers are also reluctant to provide extra encouragement to students with disabilities.

Parents and family members need to be aware of the education as well as the health treatment of the children with disabilities. Otherwise, the child will experience a gap in learning while undergoing treatment.

The role of physicians who treat children with disabilities is critical in this situation.

In addition to treating those children, if a physician provides counselling to family members regarding the child's surroundings, their misconceptions about disability will be diminished and they will be able to focus on the child's education.

Second, we need to focus on training mainstream school teachers. Schools will become disability-friendly if they are provided with a clear understanding of the inclusive education system, instruction on how to play a positive role in the mental development of children with disabilities, and the provision of necessary materials.

Third, their education can be ensured by establishing distinct pre-primary and primary education departments in specialized hospitals for children with disabilities.

Fourth, the National Disability Development Foundation, also known as Jatiyo ProtibondhiUnnayan Foundation (JPUF), operates 103 disability service and help centres around the country in 64 districts and 39 upazilas.

In distant corners of the country, the centres offer free therapy, counselling, and referral services, as well as assistive gadgets to people with autism and other disabilities. If the

number of centres is increased to meet the demand and the facilities available at the centres are improved, it will benefit children with disabilities in distant locations and their families in all aspects, including education.

Fifth, in order to keep up with the modern education system, we need to employ an educational psychologist or a paediatrician in each school. It will play a significant role in the overall education of these children and the country.

However, the institutions require a significant amount of time and resources to implement this system. One current simple solution is to use a cluster-centred approach, which means that educational psychologists and children with disabilities or student experts may be employed for a few neighbouring schools.

Sixth, an individualized education plan (IEP) is to be developed for each child with disabilities. In this way, teachers at the individual schools would be able to easily understand the needs of each child with disabilities and arrange education-related activities accordingly.

Finally, at present, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and privately owned schools for children with disabilities can serve as resource centres.

Lack of learning poses a significant barrier to the education of children. If children with disabilities can be taught braille and sign language in the aforementioned schools, their learning gaps will be overcome. Furthermore, with the advent of inclusive education, primary and pre-primary education can be initiated.

The 2013 Integrated Policy on Early Childhood Care and Development aims to ensure the normal growth and development of children with special needs, as well as their integration into the mainstream education system and the prevention of all types of discrimination.

But children with disabilities can only be incorporated into the mainstream if all children with disabilities, including pre-primary, have their learning problems identified by appropriate specialists.

If the strategy is developed and implemented, no child will be left behind by their peers. No children with disabilities will ever hear the words, "They can't do it."

Dipanwita Ghosh, Research Associate, BIGD, Sagir Hossain Khan, Person with physical disability, Research Associate, BIGD Assistant Teacher, Kartikpur Govt. Primary School, Dohar, Dhaka, Zehad-Al-Mehedi, Communications Officer, BIGD