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Head Teachers' Attitudes towards Mainstreaming of Autistic Children

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Abstract

In Bangladesh mainstreaming of autistic children has gained importance as like other countries in last two decades. Recently the mainstreaming of children with ASD has increased rapidly with positive attitudes of head teachers seen as playing a key element in the successful inclusion of this population. This paper sought to gain critical review regarding head teachers' attitudes towards mainstreaming of children with ASD in systematic manner. Number of papers have been reviewed in order to find out existing knowledge, to fill up gap of knowledge and finally to build up wisdom of knowledge.

Introduction

Literatures relevant to the topics of head teachers' attitudes towards mainstreaming of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and the equitable access and participation in quality schooling of all children, more commonly known as inclusive education (IE) were reviewed critically. Research indicates that ASD has a prevalence globally of 0.62 percent [1] with recent prevalence estimates in the United States running as high as 1.4 percent [2]. This means that numbers of autistic children who are eligible to go to school are increasing exponentially. It was found from different studies that children with ASD are increasing chronologically in the mainstreaming system of education all over the world [3]. This raises the question whether educational settings are able to provide quality education for this population? Educational principles in relation to support for children with special needs and disabilities has changed dramatically over the last two decades and many countries are implementing policies which foster the integration and, more recently, inclusion of these students into the mainstream environment [4].

Critical Review

The role of head teachers is now seen as an essential component in the success of inclusive education practice in mainstream schools [5]. Teachers vary in their beliefs, understandings and attitudes towards IE [6,7] and a significant number of studies in recent years have focused on head teachers' or teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education. The aim of the current study is to investigate head teachers' attitudes towards inclusion of children with ASD in mainstream schools in Bangladesh. Two important concepts, 'inclusion' and 'attitudes', are discussed with reference to empirical evidence about their significance. The chapter will critically examine the empirical

evidence illustrating attitudes towards inclusive education (IE). In the concluding part of the chapter, head teachers' attitudes towards IE and influencing factors will be discussed in relation to relevant literature.

In the last decade, the term inclusive education (IE) has become an important one in the educational sector, though it could be said to be highly contested as an educational term [8]. Educational experts and researchers have defined inclusive education from different perspectives leading to extensive confusion about what inclusive education actually means [9-11]. Most recently, educationalists and experts philosophically describe inclusive education as ensuring quality of education for all children, reflecting the idea that inclusive education is a social movement against exclusion [12]. However, IE remains something that cannot be easily defined [13,14].

The chief features of inclusive education are described as ensuring availability of high quality education that is accessible to everyone irrespective of needs and abilities, social status, race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, religion, political views and health condition [15]. Another view is that inclusion in the educational sector is a reform system that aims to address diversity amongst school children [16]. That means pupils should be grouped in classrooms irrespective of their ethnicity or national origins, religion, social status, gender, and abilities, thereby counteracting the problem of social exclusion [17-20]. It seems that the development of teaching methods for academic learning as well as social integration are both important activities within inclusive classroom settings. Regarding social interaction, this signifies a change in attitudes towards diversity and a reduction in discrimination [21].

Regarding inclusive education and diversity, Deppeler [22] mentions that "collaboration" and "representation" are

important factors to understand diversity and to generate innovative solutions to the challenges of inclusive schooling [22]. She highlights the need for collaboration amongst teachers who have diverse experience and expertise in working with diverse pupil populations, not only to work together but to share decision making to identify and address the challenges of their schools. We can see from this that the main aim of inclusive education is to reduce social barriers and eliminate discrimination. The Salamanca Statement of 1994, referred to inclusive education in light of principles of social justice and providing everyone with equal access and equity to education. Similarly, the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2009) developed principles for ensuring quality in inclusive education, with a core principle that inclusive education originates in equal treatment for pupils with diversity of special needs in all aspects of their lives (education, professional training, employment and social life).

This means that inclusive education is about reducing the exclusion of children from the general education system based on their race, ethnicity, social status, religion, gender or ability [23]. Ryndak [24] derived five themes within expert definitions of inclusive education of which 'placement in natural typical settings,' 'all students together for instruction and learning,' and 'supports and modifications within general education to meet appropriate learner outcomes' formed the core definitions.

Recently, educational experts have emphasised the need to remove obstacles to participation in education as a key conceptual framework for inclusive education [25]. For instance, Ainscow, Dyson, Goldrick, & West and Mittler conceptualised the task of inclusive education as being that which indicates and eliminates barriers to access or participation in education. Forlin and colleagues quoted other researchers to suggest that "the special school-regular school dichotomy is not any longer a useful way of structuring education" (p. 8). They argue that the barriers that exist either in special school or in the mainstream school sector need to be eliminated so as to produce what is not like either of the two. They suggest the "irregular school" which is neither a special school nor a regular school [26].

It may be concluded that the goal of inclusive education is to solve a global problem of ensuring the participation to education of each and every learner, especially those at risk of being excluded, and facilitate them to develop their skills to lessen the risk of social discrimination. Here it should be mentioned that children with ASD do not perform as well as their counterparts in mainstream schools. When comparing the results of children with ASD attending mainstream schools with the results of children with ASD attending special schools, the former group displays higher academic achievement and better social competence [27-29]. Ainscow argues that in order to promote the significant quality of inclusive education, it is necessary to understand that:

- a. Inclusion is needed for all learners who are at risk of being excluded from the learning process, not only those children with special needs;
- b. Inclusion applies to all learners who are enrolled in a given school;
- c. Each and every child is special and unique;
- d. Parental or guardian involvement and active participation is an important factor;

- e. Parent and teacher attitudes towards inclusive education depends on their personal experience and;
- f. Positive attitude towards inclusion helps with pupil learning of study material.

Though researchers have attempted to explain the concept of inclusive education clearly over the last decade, nevertheless many misinterpretations and myths about inclusion still remain for different stakeholders. Research shows that at times inclusive education is conceptualized as enrolling some children with special needs only, or as enrolling all marginalized children, or as enrolling children at risk of dropping out of school [30]. For Bangladesh, which is the context for the current study, inclusive education is still at an initial stage of development [31]. Despite the government and policymakers demonstrating a strong commitment to achieving 'Education for All' (EFA), the reality of understanding inclusive education (IE) still remains a challenge.

It has been found that there is still much confusion about the broader concept of inclusive education [32] so that implementing IE in primary schools must be viewed as distinct to the goals outlined in policy papers related to IE [33]. Very recently, Azam [30] has produced very interesting findings about the implementation of IE and attitudes of head teachers in Bangladesh towards inclusion. He found that the majority of head teachers in his study expressed strong concerns about the exclusion of children with severe disabilities and suggested a special system of separate schools, separate classrooms and even differently trained teachers as appropriate strategies for supporting the learning of children with disabilities, which shows a level of misconception within this group about inclusive education.

In the recent year many studies have been carried out to investigate teachers' attitudes towards inclusion of children with disabilities. These have found that attitudes of teachers or head teachers vary from teacher to teacher and from institution to institution. From some studies it was found that the attitudes of head teachers towards inclusion of children with disabilities are strongly influenced by the nature of the child's disabilities [34-36]. Though the movement of inclusive education has gained impetus recently, a key element in the successful implementation of the policy has been found to be the views of personnel who have responsibility for implementation that is teachers.

This means that positive attitudes of teachers, especially head teachers, plays a vital role in the mainstreaming of children with disability, including children with ASD. It is argued that teachers' beliefs and attitudes are critical in ensuring the success of inclusive practices since teachers' acceptance of the policy of inclusion is likely to affect their commitment to implementing it. This area of research, therefore, has generated important findings about the practical implications for policy-makers endeavoring to promote inclusion. Again studies show that teachers' attitudes toward mainstreaming the children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are important and associated with variables including teachers' perceptions, experiences and institutional capacity. In many cases, teachers' experiences of autism spectrum disorder influences learning and teaching in mainstream education. Research shows that some mainstream teachers who have no experience of autism believe children with autism spectrum disorder should be integrated only where possible, whilst mainstream teachers

with experience of ASD have more confidence to deal with the children [37].

Research undertaken in Australia, Canada, and the United States about professionals or head teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education or special education has provided a range of valid information about this topic. In Australia, studies conducted between 1985 and 1989 covered the attitudes of head teachers (Center, Ward, Parmenter and Nash, 1985) and demonstrated that professional groups vary considerably in their perceptions of which types of children are most likely to be successfully integrated (summary data from these studies were presented by Ward, Center and Bochner, 1994). From these studies it was found that attitudes towards inclusion were strongly influenced by the nature of the special needs or disabilities being presented and, to a lesser extent, by the professional background of the practitioner. Pre-primary teachers were the most enthusiastic group, whilst classroom teachers with head teachers were the most cautious group. The researchers concluded that there was no evidence of a consensus in favour of either total inclusion or 'zero reject approach' to special educational provision. Other attitude studies have indicated that general educators have not developed an empathetic understanding of disabling conditions [38], nor do they appear to be ready to accept students with special needs [39].

Recently many studies of teachers' attitudes towards inclusion have been reported. From the many studies on mainstreaming the children with special needs it is found that the majority of American teachers are in favour of current special education system rather than full inclusion. A similar finding has been gained from head teachers in Canada. In relation to head teachers' attitudes towards children with ASD, the most significant factor in predicting both a positive attitude toward inclusion and higher recommendations of placements has been found to be the principal's belief that children with autism could be included in a regular education classroom [40]. In the UK, it has been found that teachers who have professional experience of inclusion have more positive attitudes, with professional development being an important variable here too. In particular, teachers with university based professional development hold more positive attitudes towards inclusion of the children with special needs.

Several studies suggest that head teachers and teachers are more positive to mainstreaming those children who are least likely to need extra instructional or management skill on the part of the teachers [41-43]. More recently Scruggs and Mastopieri [44] through their meta-analysis of American attitude studies from 1958-95 found that no significant correlation exists between positive attitudes towards inclusion across publications, suggesting teachers' attitudes have not substantially changed over time. Research shows that sometimes attitudes of head teachers towards inclusion were more positive and sometimes they were more negative.

Attitudes, beliefs and understanding are important to consider in the light of ideas underpinning pedagogy, such as the idea of 'learning without limit' [45]. Attitudes, beliefs and behavior are inter-linked depend essentially too on identifiable aspects of the environment and the emotional, behavioral and social influences that exist for individuals [46].

Some studies emphasise teaching experience and professional commitment as important influences on attitudes towards

inclusion [47,48]. A study undertaken in Malaysia reported that teachers' attitudes towards inclusion were positive, though can be seriously hampered by factors such as training, resources and collaboration with others stakeholders [49]. On the other hand, Loreman, Sharma and Forlin [50] state that negative attitudes towards student with special needs, such as the belief that children with disabilities should be educated in more segregated settings, can lead to low expectations in relation to this group of learners [50]. Again Starczewska & Glazzard [51,52] derived from their research findings that head teachers and teachers do not believe all children should attend mainstream schools and that children with intellectual difficulties are especially prone to negative attitudes from teachers. Similar results have been found from other studies, namely that the amount of disability is a key factor in head teachers' or teachers' approaches to inclusion [53,54].

Avramidis and colleagues found that, in spite of the majority of teachers holding positive attitudes towards the general concept of integration, some of these believed they needed more supportive resources such as time and adequate training and supportive. In addition, they found that head teachers experienced more concern and stress in relation to children with emotional and behavioural difficulties compared to other disabilities. From the above two findings, it is clear that administrators, head teachers and teachers are more positive towards the inclusion of children with physical disabilities than those with behavioural or intellectual disabilities. Moreover, more positive attitudes were observed among head teachers towards the inclusion of children with mild and moderate disabilities and more negative attitudes regarding those with severe disabilities.

Interestingly, there is some evidence that school principals do not have significant influence on their teaching staff in terms of attitudes towards inclusion of children with disabilities (Urton, Wilbert and Hennemann, 2014). However, an interesting finding from Korea is that there is correlation between the willingness of head teachers to include students with disabilities, their thinking about the positive and negative effects on inclusion, and the practical problems experienced by teachers attempting to mainstream students with disabilities. In this case it was seen that teachers with positive attitudes towards inclusion can be reluctant to teach children with disabilities in their regular classes (Hwang and Evans, 2011). In relation to ASD, evidence suggests that head teachers who believe that children with ASD can be mainstreamed in regular education classrooms are more likely to recommend higher levels of inclusion.

Findings indicate that attitudes towards inclusion of children with ASD were on average fairly neutral or slightly positive with no strong comments expressed about the placement of children with ASD in mainstream schooling environment or about the presence of parents of children with ASD in the classroom.

It is reported that head teachers' attitudes and perception towards inclusive education (IE) depends on different factors, such as experience, training, educational qualification, and the level of a child's disability. Environmental factors are also an influence, including the physical environment, but also the availability of material and human learning-teaching resources. These include special educational needs (SEN) teachers, teaching assistants and other professional support within the school [55]. Bradshaw and Munda interestingly describe three types of variables which seem to be influencing factors in inclusion.

The mention child-related variables, teacher-related variables and educational environmental related variables. For child-related variables, they state that the nature and degree of disability affect teachers' acceptance, with behavioral disabilities and severe disabilities seen as the most difficult for teachers to include in their schools [30]. Teacher-related variables concern teachers experience in-service training, their experience and beliefs about students, with this last factor seen as the most influential. Environmental-related variables include the availability of learning-teaching materials and support services. Attitudes also depend on factors such as the exchange or sharing of ideas and experiences with other teachers who have practiced inclusion, as well as collaboration with parents.

Eldar, Talmor and Wolf-Zukerman [56] note that factors affecting attitudes towards inclusion of children with ASD involve 'inside' pupil factors, such as social skills, communication and language skills, stereotypical behaviour and other individual abilities. They emphasize three important factors which can lead to inclusion of children with ASD in the mainstream, namely teacher attitudes, training and environmental support, including sound school management and effective collaboration with the family. Gavalda and Qinvi [57] identified four educational factors affecting the mainstreaming of children with ASD including class size (student to teacher ratio), teacher estimation of student's innate ability, a pupil's achievement, and the incorrect functional form of teaching [57]. Appropriate training on learning-teaching methods can transform attitudes of school administrators and head teachers towards positive thinking and beliefs about inclusion [58]. Raising awareness towards disability, especially children with ASD, can lead to change in teachers' attitudes towards inclusion too [59].

Recent research shows that teachers' attitudes towards inclusion of children with ASD crucially depends on their knowledge about autism and the characteristics of children with ASD within teaching and learning processes. Knowledge about ASD is highly associated with other variables such as length of teaching experience, educational qualifications of head teachers and additional specialized training. A very interesting and positive finding is that head teachers feel including children with ASD in regular classrooms is advantageous for the learning achievements of all students [60]. A study carried out by Segall and Campbell, [61] illustrates that there are a number of positive correlations with positive attitudes towards mainstreaming children with ASD, such as knowledge, experience, and awareness of practices with appropriate teaching strategies. Many other studies also emphasize the importance of training, technical knowledge and use of specialized teaching strategies. For example, it was found that significant effective trainings, technical knowledge of ASD with evidence based practices used in teaching and implementation of effective teaching strategies increase the positive attitudes and perceptions of head teachers' towards inclusion of children with ASD [62-64].

Conclusion

From the above review, it is clear that school administrator, head teacher and teacher attitudes play a vital and crucial role in the mainstreaming of children with autism spectrum disorder. Specifically, positive attitudes towards mainstreaming of the children with ASD make for greater commitment and more complete implementation. It could be concluded that the

research undertaken will enhance the implementation process and ensure quality primary education for all children, including children with ASD.

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