

Bridging the Gaps between Special School and Mainstream school Through Early Childhood Development Programme (ECDP), Proyash- A Specialized Institute for Children with Disabilities

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Abstract

The recent global trend of education for the children with special needs are educating them in the regular school system termed as Inclusive Education, the importance of which was based on MGD, one goal Education for All (EFA). In Bangladesh the new education policy focuses on reaching EFA children including disabled. Yet there are gaps in practice. Reasons are lack of knowledge regarding abilities of children with disabilities, lack of early intervention services, effective teaching learning process and the approaches to involve parents as partners to receive maximum benefit.

The Early Childhood Development Programme set up in Proyash (a specialized institute for the children with special needs) in Bangladesh is one of the first such programme for the children with all types of developmental disabilities and for at risk children. The programme aims to provide stimulation for the children in all areas of development to maximize their potential and to teach parents how they can help and train their children. Thirty children aged from 2 to 5 years is accompanied either a parent or a caregiver to the class for five days a week. The components of the programme include: a) training parents to be partners in the process of teaching their children, b) Home visitation, c) operates a toy library- a system of loaning parents' toys, equipment and education materials d) Mainstreaming of some 5 years old into local regular school.

The aim of this paper is to examine aspects of the programme which have proven successful. A description of the programme will be made on the method of including parents in the training of their children through home visit and toy library. Finally, attention will be drawn to mainstream of children into local regular school.

1. Introduction

In the heart of transformation and empowerment, the Early Childhood Development program at Proyash Institute of Special Education shines as a beacon of hope, tirelessly working to bridge the developmental gaps for children with special needs, fostering an inclusive journey from their earliest years. Bangladesh, an agrarian nation with a rapidly growing population of over 173 million, faces significant developmental challenges, particularly among its young population. Nearly half of its populace is under 18 years, with about 15% aged between 0 and 4 years (Worldometer) (World Population Review). Despite

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substantial strides in reducing infant mortality to below 20 per 1,000 live births and increasing life expectancy to approximately 73 years, malnutrition and the risk of disabilities remain prevalent issues impacting the country's youth (Statistics Times). These challenges are exacerbated by the fact that around 40% of the population lives below the poverty line, emphasizing the urgent need for comprehensive early intervention and educational programs to address the vulnerabilities of children at risk of developmental disabilities (DRWGB, 2009). Though Bangladesh is a poor country and has achieved remarkable improvements in terms of school enrollment, reduced significantly in infant mortality rate (it has decreased to below 20%) and increased in life expectancy. However, malnutrition and children who are at risk for disability remains a major area of concern among young children. Poverty, lack of education and poor nutrition continue to be the major risk factors for childhood disability.

The World Report on Disability (WHO, 2011) highlights the global shift towards inclusive education, underscoring the importance of early identification and support for children with disabilities. This aligns with the principles laid out in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), emphasizing the need for inclusive education from an early age.

In Bangladesh, despite policy frameworks aimed at achieving Education for All (EFA), significant gaps remain, particularly for children with disabilities. Studies by the Disability Rights Watch Group Bangladesh (DRWGB, 2009) and Khan et al. (2006) point to systemic barriers that prevent effective implementation of inclusive practices.

The limited availability of early intervention services, as outlined by JICA (2002) and reflected in the Proyash model, highlights the critical need for accessible educational and developmental services for young children.

Effective parental involvement in ECD programs is crucial for enhancing child development outcomes. The Proyash model's use of a toy library and home visits as engagement tools aligns with global best practices that advocate for parental training and involvement in early learning (Portage Guide to Early Education).

Research by ActionAid Bangladesh (1996) supports the premise that parents who are actively engaged in their children's education can significantly influence their developmental paths, a key aspect of the ECD program at Proyash.

The success of ECD programs in facilitating the transition of children with disabilities into mainstream education is documented in various studies. The early stimulation programs at Proyash, which aim to bridge the gap to regular schooling, demonstrate potential benefits highlighted in the literature on early intervention (Khan et al., 2006).

1.1 The scenario of disabilities in Bangladesh

Recent studies, including those by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2018) and the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics in their latest census (BBS, 2021), indicate a significant underestimation in previous surveys regarding the prevalence of disabilities in Bangladesh,

now estimated to be about 16% of the population. This adjustment reflects factors such as aging, chronic health issues, and enhanced diagnostic practices. Research trends show a shift towards recognizing neurodevelopmental disorders like autism spectrum disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) among children, along with traditional cognitive and speech disabilities (Islam and Biswas, 2020). The link between disability and socioeconomic factors such as poverty, malnutrition, and limited healthcare access is well-documented, with UNICEF (2019) emphasizing that children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are disproportionately impacted, a situation worsened by inadequate health services. Moreover, local NGOs and educational experts (e.g., Ahmed et al., 2022) highlight ongoing challenges in inclusive education, citing issues like insufficient infrastructure, a shortage of trained personnel, and societal stigma that obstruct the effective integration of children with disabilities into mainstream schools. Nevertheless, NGOs, in partnership with international bodies, are making strides in promoting disability rights and services. Notable initiatives by organizations such as BRAC and Handicap International are focusing on community-based rehabilitation and inclusive education to enhance their reach and impact in the region (BRAC, 2021).

1.2 Pre- and Primary Education of the children with disabilities (CWD's)

Primary education of children starts from the age of six (The National Education Policy 2010). Children begin to learn where they enter formal schooling. Experts agree that young children learn at a rapid pace during the first five years their lives. They need continuous and intense learning from the moment of birth.

It has been estimated 1.6 million children with disabilities within the primary school going age, among them a vast majority of CWD's never attend school, a few get opportunities to enroll in Special and integrated education program, only 4% of CWD's Who do attend mainstream schools soon drop out because of unfriendly attitude, environment and traditional method of teaching and learning strategies. To address the diverse the learning needs of CWD's, lack of ideas acts as a barrier to include them in mainstream classroom.

1.3 Current scenario of the Pre- school age children

Govt. of Bangladesh has taken initiatives in Education policy 2010 to start pre-school program for children in the early years of age starting from 4 to 5 years and 5 to 6 years. Govt. has parenting a program at a small scale from 2011. Bangladesh has been targeting "Education for All" by the year 2015 and a large number of organizations working in the field of education to promote enrollment, literacy and primary education, but yet the ECD is limited in the formal public education. There are few Govt. and non Govt. organizations who are working for children under 5 years of age which is termed as **pre-school** but still the diverse populations of children with disabilities are excluded from education denying their rights of education.

ECD is most important needs of the country in the current age and one of the most valuable investments for the children with disabilities also that are rarely viewed in economic development.

1.4 Existing law and Policies

The education of CWD's is under purview of Ministry of Social Welfare, which does not take part to achieve the universal goal. Now, the seven ministries are working collaboratively to ensure education and provide health and additional support service to all the people with disabilities. As the Govt. of Bangladesh has signed and has ratified the UNCRPD and convention on the right of the child to create a barrier free learning environment for CWD's. Bangladesh is in process of drafting a law in light of UNCRPD.

1.5 Early Diagnosis, awareness and Gaps between Health and Schooling

National health policy has added the component of early detection and early intervention of young children for preventing disability. At the Govt. level a limited number of hospitals and organizations are involved in early detection, But there are no or limited early intervention services available for children with disabilities below five years. These children are deprived of any sort of stimulation at the early age, so that, when they go to school at six; they lag behind in the cognitive and moral development and develop some atypical behavior from their family and environment. ECD project research has proven that, children who participated in well-conceived ECD programmes tend to be more successful in later school and that is same for CWD's.

1.6 Introducing ECD by Proyash

The time before starting school is a key formative period in the life of a young disable child. Reducing the barriers and bridging the gaps from early detection to regular school for preventing disabilities, "Proyash" has established early stimulation program for young children below 5 years of age since 2010. Within a very short period of initiating ECD, Proyash has realized the necessity of early intervention. Early assistance is required for nurturing, caring and training for children with delayed development and disability and who are nurtured and stimulated during these years are substantially well prepared for formal learning with the passage of growth.

1.7 Rationale for the Study

This study focuses on the Early Childhood Development Programme (ECDP) at Proyash, a significant initiative for children with disabilities in Bangladesh. The need for such a study is critical due to several reasons:

Despite efforts, children with disabilities often face barriers in accessing inclusive education. This study explores how Proyash's ECDP addresses these challenges by integrating these children into mainstream schools.

Parents play a crucial role in the development and education of their children, especially those with special needs. This research examines the impact of involving parents directly in the educational process, which is a core component of the Proyash program.

Early intervention is vital for children with developmental disabilities to achieve their full potential. The program's effectiveness in providing early support through structured

activities, home visits, and a toy library is assessed to understand how these interventions contribute to the children's development.

Understanding the outcomes of such programs can influence policy and practice, promoting more effective strategies for supporting children with disabilities across the country.

1.8 Aim of the paper

The aim of this paper is to find out the effectiveness and success of the program with the participation of parents in teaching process and home visit therefore, mainstreaming is possible for children with special needs into regular school.

1.9 Research Objectives

- To evaluate parental participation in the teaching-learning process.
- To assess the effect of home visits on training children with disabilities.
- To investigate the enrollment process of students with special needs into mainstream schools

1.10 Research Questions

- How Parent's participated in teaching- learning process?
- How home visit worked successful to train children with disabilities at home?
- How it was possible to enroll the special need students into local mainstreaming school?

2. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the effectiveness of the Early Childhood Development Programme at Proyash. The research aimed to evaluate specific aspects of the program, such as parent involvement, home visitation, and mainstreaming of children with disabilities into local regular schools. The study involved 38 children aged 2 to 5 years, who have various developmental disabilities and are considered at risk. Each child participated along with a parent or caregiver. Structured observations were conducted during the program sessions to assess the interaction between children, parents, and teachers, as well as the effectiveness of the activities in promoting development. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents and teachers to gather detailed information about their experiences and perceptions of the program's impact on the children's development. Program documentation, including planning materials, session notes, and progress reports, were reviewed to understand the structure and content of the ECDP.

3. Program description and study of program success

The programme for everyday session

Type of programmes Areas of Development worked on

Table Activities, Individual work incorporating language activities e. g. play with puzzles, shape sorters, number games, letter games, writing practice, pre-reading and reading exercises. Eye hand co-ordination, Cognitive Skills, Speech Development

Break Time- Drink and Toilet Social Development and Self-help Skills

Gross Motor Activities-e.g. running, jumping, walking games, throwing balls, catching, kicking balls etc. Physical Development and Social Development

Art & Craft

Painting, crayoning, cutting, gluing, play with play dough, sand & water play. Eye hand co-ordination, Social Development and Concept Development.

Singing Social Development and Speech Development

Child's developmental assessment is completed with the parents assistance. This provides information about the current level of child's present skills and helps to plan a teaching programme to consolidate existing skills and develop new skills.

Grouping Children

Children are grouped by age and ability which is beneficial for the children and also for teacher in conducting group activities. Specifically successful component of the programme include:

- Parents are involved as a partners in the process of teaching
- Home Visitation
- Integration of some four and five years olds into local Kindergartens

Classroom training

ECDP has five hours session for five days a week with 38 students. During this time the children participated in a variety of activities designed to stimulate each area of the development.

The curriculum of this group of children includes self-help activities, gross motor activities, communication, socialization and cognitive skills. For each individual child a programme is set for a term of four months, divided in parts. To make the training effective parents are included as a team member.

Parents as Partners

Each child is accompanied to the class by either a parent or a caregiver. Class sizes are restricted to 6 children so that, the teacher is able to give each child some individual attention as well as working with them in a group.

Parents' participation in the training of their children

The Teachers take the lead and demonstrate what to do and give ideas, but opportunities are then given for parents to continue and extend teaching aims with their child. Practice their

teaching skills, parents can learn under the teacher's supervision and become more confident and knowledgeable for when they teach their child at home.

Parents are involved for doing homework assignment. The idea is that each day one of the parents will spend at least 10 – 15 minutes working on the homework task with the child. Generally the task is the continuation and extension of skills that the child has started to learn in the classroom.

Using instruction booklet for parents training

The instruction booklist has been developed for training different skills like – motor, speech and language, cognitive and socialization like daily living activities of feeding, dressing, toileting, household, as well as community living activities. The ideas and pictures have been taken from “WHO, training manual” and from “Portage Guide to Early Education”.

Toy Library

Early Intervention class operates a Toy Library system, whereby parents are loaned one toy or piece of educational equipment each week. Some of parents do not have resources to purchase the necessary education equipment to teach their child particular skills. It gives parents ideas of what toys are needed and useful for their child. Parents also share toys to other students who come from poor families as they do not have stimulating materials.

The children of those parents, who take the homework assignment seriously, show significantly positive changes in their development. When a parent is conscientiously working with their child on a regular basis at home, the changes in the child are obvious.

Home visitation

A home visit can often highlight problems in the home teaching program, that the teacher may not have fully appreciated before. Once a week on Wednesday one teacher visit 2/3 students home to support parents for making home plan. There is not sufficient time to make regular visit to all the children so it is done by priority basis:

- Children whose parents are having a difficult time
- Children whose progress appear to have plateaued
- Children whose attendance is irregular

Experience confirms that, parents gain a stronger feeling that they are not alone in training their child. Teachers also get benefited, because teacher gain a better understanding of the child and his family background, which enables him/her to be more sensitive when tailoring teaching programs or expectation of the child and his parents.

Mainstreaming the children into local regular school

Parents are encouraged by the teachers to enroll their child into local Kindergartens. A small minority of parents had already taken this step, but the reaction of the majority of parents was “how it can be possible”. The teachers encourage parents to see those 6

children who are already enrolled in regular school as they have received extra educational stimulation by mixing with their non-disabled peers.

The process of mainstreaming was, sending children with disabilities to regular kindergarten once a week for 2 hours, then gradually twice and thrice a week and spend time longer period to adapt the situation in regular schools. **At present,** four and five years olds who attend the ECD programme attending local kindergarten 3 – 4 days week through trial basis.

4. Outcome and Recommendation

This paper gives an account of the early intervention program that is being successfully implemented at ECD program. The toy library system is useful to assist parents in teaching their children at home and home visit is highlighted to adapt their child in family environment.

The model of ECD has proven their effectiveness and three critical areas are identified that need to be developed

1. Implementing parents involvement in teaching-learning process.
2. Linking between ECD programme (Special school) and regular school, so children with disabilities can move into regular school.
3. Starting early intervention programme as early as possible.

5. Scope for Further Research

For further research, there are several promising avenues to explore within the framework of the Early Childhood Development (ECD) program.

Future studies could focus on quantifying the success rate of including children with disabilities from the ECDP into mainstream schools over a defined period. This would involve tracking the transition of these children and the sustainability of their placement in regular classrooms.

A longitudinal study could be conducted to assess the long-term academic and social outcomes of children with disabilities who have been mainstreamed from the ECDP into regular schools. This research could help identify factors that contribute to sustained success or recurring challenges within mainstream settings.

Another area for further research could involve a detailed analysis of the impact of parental involvement on the developmental outcomes of children in the ECDP. This could include measuring the effectiveness of different types of parental support activities, such as home visits and the use of the toy library.

Investigating the barriers faced by children with disabilities in transitioning to mainstream schools could provide critical insights. This research could focus on both systemic barriers (like policy or infrastructure limitations) and interpersonal challenges (such as peer relationships and teacher preparedness).

6. Conclusion

The Early Childhood Development Program (ECDP) at Proyash has shown great promise in helping children with disabilities in Bangladesh. The program uses methods like involving parents, home visits, and a toy library to improve children's development and get them ready for regular school. It helps children with disabilities join regular schools early, which can be a model for other places too. However, the program still needs to improve in areas like training for parents, connecting special and regular schools better, and making early help more available. By keeping up the involvement of parents and making these improvements, ECDP can lead the way in making education fairer for all children with disabilities in Bangladesh and beyond. ECD was the inaugural program in the field of Early Childhood Development (ECD) for children with special needs. Currently, this program at Proyash is successful, serving over a hundred students across three shifts. Additionally, many students have successfully transitioned into mainstream schools, which is a highly regarded aspect of this program.

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Biography

Qazi Afroza Sultana is a distinguished expert in special and inclusive education, currently serving as Deputy Director and Vice Principal at Proyash Institute of Special Education in Dhaka. With over three decades of experience, she has been instrumental in developing innovative curricula, leading teacher training programs, and creating inclusive learning environments for children with disabilities. She holds a Master of Science in Psychology and Special Education from Dhaka University, and her extensive training includes the “Model of Intervention for Children and Youth with Autism” at the University of North Carolina, USA. Ms. Sultana has published research co-author in prestigious journals like the *Journal of Tropical Pediatrics* and the *Asia and Pacific Journal on Disability*, cementing her role as a thought leader in her field. Additionally, she has collaborated with the OECD and the World Bank to train psychologists and professionals in Ethiopia, and has significantly contributed to shaping national policies on autism and neurodevelopmental disorders through partnerships with government agencies and educational institutions in Bangladesh.