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# Exploring Teachers' Experience of Professional Development on Inclusive Education in Mainstream Schools in Dhaka City

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**ABSTRACT:** This qualitative study explores the experiences of mainstream school teachers in Dhaka City who have participated in professional development (PD) programs on inclusive education (IE). The aim of the research is to understand how such training influences their teaching practices, perceptions, and ability to address the diverse needs of students, particularly those with disabilities. Using a case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with twelve teachers purposively selected from different mainstream schools. Thematic analysis was employed to examine their narratives. The findings reveal that while teachers generally value inclusive education and show motivation to support diverse learners, the relevance and effectiveness of the PD programs vary significantly. Key themes identified include increased awareness and empathy, improved classroom strategies, institutional and resource-related challenges, and inconsistent administrative support. Participants also highlighted the need for more context-specific, continuous, and practical training, as well as stronger collaboration among stakeholders. This research underscores the importance of ongoing, practice-oriented PD, leadership involvement, and systemic reforms in promoting inclusive education. The study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on inclusive education in South Asia and provides practical recommendations for policymakers, educators, and NGOs to enhance the inclusivity of the mainstream education system in urban Bangladesh.

**KEYWORDS:** Inclusive Education, Professional Development, Mainstream Schools, Teacher Experience, Dhaka City, Case Study, Qualitative Research

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is vital for fostering an equitable learning environment, especially in a diverse and dynamic context like Dhaka City. However, mainstream schools face challenges in implementing inclusive practices, as teachers often lack adequate training and support. This study aims to explore the experiences of teachers in mainstream schools in Dhaka City regarding professional development programs on inclusive education, with a particular focus on the effectiveness, challenges, and teachers' perceptions of these programs. The implement of inclusive education is yet at an early stage in Bangladesh. However, it can be claimed that Bangladesh has undertaken a good number of policy initiatives to provide equity and access of all children to education. The need for universal education for all children, regardless of any special circumstances, has been echoed from the birth of this country through its constitution in 1972. Article 17 and 28 of the constitution clearly utters how the state should provide education to all children without making any discrimination. To practice IE in accordance with the policy initiatives, Bangladesh government has been running two influential programs named as Primary Education Development Programs (PEDPs) and Teaching Quality Improvement in Secondary Education Program (TQI-SEP). In the government document, PEDP and TQI-SEP have been recognized as the means through which inclusive education is to be practiced in classrooms. The first one has been running for more than a decade and second one for 8 years. However, limited study has scrutinized the impact of these two major programs on IE practice in classroom level. Our analysis, therefore, included these two major programs with an aim to see how IE practice is aligned with the IE policies endorsed by the government of Bangladesh.

## 2. RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

Research indicates that teachers play a pivotal role in promoting inclusive education, yet many lack training on strategies and methods to effectively support students with diverse learning needs. Studies suggest that effective PD programs should include both theoretical knowledge and practical application. Inclusive education has become a global priority to ensure equitable learning opportunities for all students, regardless of their abilities. In Bangladesh, mainstream schools in Dhaka are increasingly expected to accommodate diverse learners, including those with special needs. However, successful inclusion largely depends on teachers'

competencies, attitudes, and preparedness. Professional development (PD) plays a critical role in equipping teachers with the necessary skills and mindset. Despite policy efforts, there is limited empirical understanding of how PD impacts teachers' inclusive practices in Dhaka's urban context. Teachers' voices and lived experiences remain underexplored in current literature. This study aims to bridge that gap by examining their perceptions, challenges, and transformations through PD. Findings will help inform more effective training strategies and educational reforms. The study is timely as inclusive education is being mainstreamed in national education policy. Insights can contribute to building a more inclusive and responsive school environment in urban Bangladesh.

## 3. OPERATIONAL DEFINITION

### 3.1 Professional Development (PD)

In this study, *Professional Development* refers to structured training programs, workshops, or educational sessions provided to mainstream school teachers with the aim of enhancing their knowledge, skills, and attitudes toward inclusive teaching practices. PD includes both formal (e.g., government-led training, NGO workshops) and informal (e.g., peer learning, online modules) initiatives directly related to inclusive education strategies.

### 3.2 Inclusive Education (IE):

*Inclusive Education* in this research denotes an educational approach that seeks to accommodate all learners, regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic, or other conditions, within mainstream classrooms. It involves designing learning environments and instructional methods that support diverse student needs, with a particular focus on children with disabilities and special educational needs.

### 3.3 Mainstream School:

For the purposes of this study, a *Mainstream School* is defined as a general education institution in Dhaka City that follows the national curriculum and serves a broad student population, including both typically developing children and those with special educational needs, without being categorized as a special or segregated school.

### 3.4 Dhaka City

In the context of this research, *Dhaka City* refers to the geographical boundaries under the jurisdiction Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC), where the selected mainstream schools are located. It represents the urban setting in which this study's participants teach and where inclusive education practices are examined.

### 3.5 Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)

In this study, *Non-Governmental Organizations* (NGOs) refer to non-profit, independent organizations that operate in the education sector within Dhaka City, providing training, advocacy, resources, and support services for inclusive education. These organizations often conduct professional development programs for teachers, offer technical assistance to schools, and work to build awareness about the rights and needs of children with disabilities.

### 3.6 Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

*Universal Design for Learning (UDL)* is defined in this research as a flexible educational framework used in inclusive classrooms that aims to improve and optimize teaching and learning for all students. UDL provides multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression to accommodate learners with diverse abilities, learning preferences, and backgrounds. It emphasizes proactive planning and the removal of learning barriers before they arise.

## 4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The principal objectives of this research are:

- To understand teachers' perceptions of professional development programs on inclusive education in mainstream schools.
- To identify the challenges teachers' face in implementing inclusive practices in classroom.
- To identify the ways of overcoming these challenges.

## 5. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

### 5.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design, which is suitable for exploring the lived experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of individuals. Specifically, it will adopt a phenomenological approach to understand the essence of teachers' experiences with professional development on inclusive education. This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of how teachers perceive and make meaning of the training they have received, and how it influences their classroom practices.

### 5.2 Sampling Procedure

The study used purposive sampling to select participants who are most likely to provide rich, relevant, and diverse insights. A total

of 12 teachers will be selected from various mainstream schools in Dhaka City. These teachers will have prior experience participating in professional development programs on inclusive education. Efforts will be made to ensure variation in school type (government, private, NGO-run), teaching level (primary/secondary), and years of experience to capture a broad spectrum of perspectives.

Samples Selected from the following schools in Dhaka City-

1. Azimpur Government Girls School
2. Udayan Higher Secondary School
3. Rayhan School and College
4. West End High School

### 5.3 Data Collection Methods

Data collected using semi-structured interviews, which offer flexibility while maintaining focus on key research areas. An interview guide developed, including open-ended questions centered around:

- Teachers' experiences of professional development related to inclusive education
- Perceived effectiveness and relevance of the training
- Challenges faced in implementing inclusive practices in the classroom
- Support mechanisms available and required
- Recommendations for future training improvement

Each interview lasted between 30 to 40 minutes and conducted in either Bangla or English, depending on the preference of the participant. Interviews will be audio-recorded with consent and transcribed for analysis but there name and others privacy related information not disclosed in the report.

### 5.4 Data Analysis

Data analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's six-step framework:

- Familiarization with the data
- Generating initial codes
- Searching for themes
- Reviewing themes
- Defining and naming themes
- Producing the report

### 5.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval sought from the appropriate institutional authority. Participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study, and informed consent duly obtained. All data treated confidentially, and pseudonyms used to ensure anonymity.

## 6. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

**Sampling Bias**: The study will involve a limited number of participants, which may not fully represent the diverse teacher population in Dhaka City.

**Self-Reported Data**: Relying on teachers' self-reported experiences may introduce bias, as participants might provide socially desirable responses.

## 7. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

### 7.1 Introduction

This chapter presents an in-depth analysis and interpretation of the research findings concerning teachers' experiences of professional development (PD) on inclusive education in mainstream specialized schools within Dhaka City. The study addresses three principal objectives: (1) to understand teachers' perceptions of PD on inclusive education, (2) to identify the challenges teachers face while implementing inclusive practices in classrooms, and (3) to explore strategies teachers adopt to overcome these challenges. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 12 teachers from various mainstream schools. Thematic analysis was applied to identify common patterns and overarching themes within the qualitative responses.

Ethical considerations were maintained through the use of pseudonyms (R1 to R12) to ensure the anonymity of the respondents. This chapter presents findings under 12 key thematic areas supported by direct quotes from participants and relevant secondary literature. The findings are not only descriptive but also reflective, offering critical insights into the context of inclusive education in urban Bangladesh.

For effective analysis, the finding of the study has been categorized according to the following themes.

1. Teachers' Motivation for Attending PD Programs
2. Relevance and Structure of PD Programs
3. Skills Acquired through PD
4. Application in the Classroom
5. Barriers to Implementing Inclusive Practices
6. Institutional and Peer Support
7. Societal Attitudes and Parental Resistance
8. Assessing Diverse Learners
9. Confidence in Inclusive Teaching
10. Strategies for Overcoming Challenges
11. Recommendations for Future PD
12. Systemic Improvements for Inclusive Education

### 7.2 Findings of the Study

#### 7.2.1 Teachers' Motivation for Attending PD Programs

Respondents revealed that a combination of internal drive and external responsibilities motivated them to participate in professional development. While some were assigned by school authorities, others voluntarily enrolled due to a growing awareness of classroom diversity and the pressing need for inclusive practices.

*"I joined the program because I noticed that some of my students were struggling to keep up… I wanted to understand how I could help."–R1*

*"I genuinely wanted to participate because I had students in my class who were facing learning difficulties." – R2 "My school enrolled children with disabilities, and I had no idea how to support them." – R7*

Sharma and Sokal (2016) argue that teachers' participation in inclusive PD is often influenced by their own perception of inadequacy in handling special needs students. Voluntary participation, particularly, is linked to positive attitude shifts post-training.

Some teachers mentioned personal experiences with disability either through relatives or previous students which increased their empathy and motivation. The data suggest that such personal connections can act as strong catalysts for participation in PD. However, in some government schools, participation was mandatory but still perceived as useful.

#### 7.2.2 Relevance and Structure of PD Programs

The structure and content of PD programs varied widely ranging from NGO-led workshops and district-level government training to online modules and hybrid formats. Respondents appreciated sessions that focused on practical strategies rather than policy and theory.

*"The content was quite relevant… especially the parts on differentiated instruction." – R1 "Theories were okay, but I needed more demonstration-based learning." – R4*

*"The module on Universal Design for Learning was new and very eye-opening for me." – R3*

Desimone (2009) emphasizes that effective PD must be content-focused, incorporate active learning, and include follow-up support. These criteria were met only partially in most cases according to participants. Online training was reported as accessible but often lacked personalization. NGO programs, while rich in interaction, sometimes failed to address the rigid curriculum demands of public schools. There was also a noticeable gap in addressing culturally relevant examples and inclusive strategies tailored to Bangladeshi classrooms.

#### 7.2.3 Skills Acquired through PD

Teachers acquired a range of skills from PD sessions including classroom adaptation, behavioral management, and inclusive communication techniques.

*"I learned to use visual tools and gestures for non-verbal students." – R5*

*"The section on differentiated lesson plans really helped me organize my class better." – R6*

It is noted that professional development programs that promote inclusive pedagogy empower teachers to adapt instruction according to the needs of all learners.

Specific skills mentioned by participants included use of flashcards, picture storyboards, group activities, student portfolios, and modified assessments. Teachers also reported improvements in their ability to recognize and respond to signs of autism, ADHD, and sensory processing issues. Despite the gains, some admitted to needing more hands-on practice to build confidence.

#### 7.2.4 Application in the Classroom

Respondents provided examples of how they had applied PD learnings in real-life teaching situations. Applications ranged from visual aids to flexible grouping and behavioral scaffolding.

*"I allowed my student to respond through drawings instead of writing." – R3 "Peer-assisted learning has been very effective for my slow learners." – R8*

Teachers adopted a range of adaptive strategies: simplifying instructions, allowing students to sit or stand based on comfort, using props for storytelling, and offering alternative assessment methods. However, sustainability of these methods was questioned in schools with 40+ students per class. In such settings, individual attention becomes difficult despite the best intentions.

**7.2.5 Barriers to Implementing Inclusive Practices**

Across almost all interviews, teachers cited structural, cultural, and institutional barriers that hindered the implementation of inclusive strategies they learned through PD.

*"Lack of appropriate teaching aids and the pressure to finish the syllabus are major obstacles." – R1 "There is no budget allocation in our school for implementing what we learn." – R4*

*"Our classrooms are too crowded sometimes with more than 50 students. Inclusion becomes almost impossible." – R5*

Implementation of inclusive education often fails not due to lack of teacher will, but because of systemic barriers such as lack of resources, rigid curricula, and absence of ongoing support.

In both government and private schools, infrastructural and administrative support is lacking. Many teachers expressed frustration over having to 'innovate' from personal resources. Overcrowded classrooms and lack of specialized staff (e.g., special educators, aides) significantly limit individual attention. Some teachers also noted that school heads or managers viewed inclusion as a 'burden', especially when exam results might be impacted.

**7.2.6 Institutional and Peer Support**

Institutional follow-up and peer collaboration were inconsistent. Some schools fostered a culture of shared learning post-PD, while others showed passive or no support at all.

*"I was allowed to share what I learned with my colleagues, but there was no concrete support." – R6 "We created a small inclusion team that meets monthly to discuss issues and successes." – R12*

Peer support plays a critical role in reinforcing inclusive practices. Some teachers highlighted staff meetings or internal workshops as helpful mechanisms. Others, however, reported a siloed teaching culture where attempts to implement new strategies were met with resistance. Private institutions were more flexible with teacher-led innovation, while government schools were hampered by bureaucratic inertia.

The role of professional learning communities in fostering sustained change in school practices, especially in inclusive education.

**7.2.7 Societal Attitudes and Parental Resistance**

A recurring theme was the resistance or misunderstanding teachers face from the larger community, especially parents. *"Some parents feel their children are being neglected because we give extra support to a child with special needs." – R8 "Parents don't want their child in a classroom with students who have learning difficulties." – R10*

Social stigma surrounding disability remains a major obstacle. Many parents are not informed about inclusive education and perceive it as lowering academic standards. Teachers described having to 'educate' parents about inclusion, which was emotionally taxing and time-consuming.

UNESCO (2017) stresses the need for community engagement and public awareness to support school-level inclusion.

**7.2.8 Assessing Diverse Learners**

Traditional assessments often fail to capture the progress of students with special needs. Teachers reported experimenting with flexible and personalized tools.

*"Instead of tests, I use weekly progress journals and creative tasks." – R3*

*"Some students express better through pictures or oral work, and I try to accommodate that." – R6*

Assessment methods used include project-based evaluation, oral questioning, visual outputs, and peer feedback. However, teachers voiced concerns about how these methods are not aligned with national exam standards, creating tension between innovation and institutional demands.

Black and Wiliam (2009) advocate for formative assessments that are adapted to learner needs, a principle echoed in inclusive education philosophy.

**7.2.9 Confidence in Inclusive Teaching**

Teachers rated their confidence on a scale from 1–10, mostly averaging between 5 and 8. Confidence improved with time and peer collaboration.

*"I'm at 7. I've grown, but I still hesitate with some disabilities I'm not familiar with." – R5*

Confidence is tied to exposure, experience, and school support. Teachers who had mentorship or team teaching opportunities reported higher self-efficacy. Conversely, those in isolated or unsupported roles often felt demotivated.

*"My confidence increases when I see results students engaging more and parents appreciating the changes." – R2*

**7.2.10 Strategies for Overcoming Challenges**

Despite limited support, many teachers showcased resilience by developing creative coping mechanisms.

*"I use recycled materials to make visual aids because we have no funds." – R7 "I involve peers to support those who need extra help." – R1*

Common strategies included peer mentoring, cooperative learning, rotating group leadership, flexible seating, visual charts, and reduced homework. Teachers also used digital media (e.g., YouTube videos with subtitles) where possible. Innovation often emerged from necessity, and such examples reflect a grassroots commitment to inclusive practice.

#### 7.2.11 Recommendations for Future PD

Respondents were vocal about the limitations of existing PD and proposed practical improvements.

*"There should be classroom-based training, not just conference room lectures." – R4 "We need regular follow-ups, not just one-time workshops." – R9*

Longer training durations, follow-up mentoring, in-school demonstrations, shadow teaching, simulation activities, and modules on local disabilities. Teachers also called for certified inclusive education tracks within teacher training colleges.

#### 7.2.12 Systemic Improvements for Inclusive Education

Respondents emphasized policy-level reforms to make inclusive education feasible and sustainable.

*"Every school should have a special educator or at least a trained support teacher." - R6 "The curriculum itself needs to change its too rigid." - R11*

Policy suggestions included government grants for inclusive education, mandatory inclusive planning in school inspections, revised national curriculum frameworks, and accountability for resource allocation. Teachers also stressed the importance of mental health support for educators managing inclusive classrooms. Booth and Ainscow's (2011) Index for Inclusion outlines how systemic change must involve curriculum, culture, and community.

## 8. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

The findings of this study reveal a complex but promising picture of inclusive education practice in Dhaka's mainstream specialized schools. Key observations include:

- **Strong Teacher Motivation**: Most teachers were intrinsically motivated to attend PD programs, often triggered by real-life challenges with diverse learners.
- **Moderate Relevance of PD Content**: While PD sessions introduced valuable concepts such as differentiated instruction and UDL, participants noted the lack of context-specific, hands-on practice.
- **Practical Skill Development**: Teachers developed a range of inclusive strategies like flexible lesson planning, visual aids, peer learning, and formative assessments.
- **Barriers in Implementation**: Resource shortages, time constraints, overcrowded classrooms, and rigid syllabi emerged as consistent barriers across all institutions.
- **Inconsistent Institutional Support**: While some schools encouraged peer collaboration and knowledge-sharing, others lacked structured follow-up mechanisms or leadership buy-in.
- **Parental and Societal Stigma**: Deep-rooted cultural misconceptions about disability limited the acceptance of inclusive education among families and communities.
- **Creative Classroom Solutions**: Teachers showcased resilience by improvising strategies using local and low-cost resources.
- **Confidence and Capacity**: Though most teachers felt moderately confident, they also expressed the need for continuous learning and expert guidance.
- **Need for Systemic Reform**: The research underscores the importance of structural change, including policy support, curriculum flexibility, and the recruitment of special educators.

## 9. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the analysis and in light of teachers' experiences and perspectives, the following recommendations are proposed:

***Policy-Level Recommendations***

- Introduce mandatory inclusive education modules in all pre-service and in-service teacher training.
- Revise the national curriculum to allow flexible pacing, adaptive assessments, and context-specific accommodations.
- Allocate dedicated budgets for inclusive education implementation in every school.
- Include inclusive practices as part of regular school inspection and performance evaluations.

***School-Level Recommendations***

- Establish inclusive education committees in schools to monitor progress and share practices.
- Provide necessary infrastructure such as sensory corners, accessible seating, and learning materials.
- Recruit at least one special educator per school to support inclusive classrooms.
- Foster school-wide awareness campaigns and parental engagement initiatives.

***Training and Pedagogy***

- Offer hands-on, school-based training programs including classroom simulations, real case analysis, and peer mentoring.

- Conduct regular follow-up workshops and mentoring visits by inclusive education experts.
- Train school leaders and management on inclusive practices for sustainable implementation.

***Community Engagement***

- Launch public awareness campaigns through mass media and local community forums to challenge stigma.
- Encourage partnerships between schools, NGOs, and health professionals to ensure holistic child development.

## 10. CONCLUTION

In concluding remarks it can be said that authorities need to introduce mandatory inclusive education modules in all pre-service and in- service teacher training. Need to revise the national curriculum to allow flexible pacing, adaptive assessments, and context-specific accommodations by offering hands-on, school-based training programs including classroom simulations, real case analysis, and peer mentoring. And finally conduct regular follow-up workshops and mentoring visits by inclusive education experts.

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