Secondary School Teachers’ Perceptions of Inclusive Education in Bangladesh

Tania Afreen Khan
Government Teachers’ Training College, Pabna, Bangladesh

Abstract

A willingness on the part of teachers to support all children in the mainstream classroom, including children with special needs, is the hallmark of inclusive education. This study used a qualitative design to explore the knowledge about inclusive education of six purposively selected secondary school teachers in Bangladesh. The results suggested that secondary school teachers have diverse conceptualisations of inclusive education, and that challenges to the success of implementing inclusive education include issues of knowledge, training, and teaching materials. The current findings are a step towards understanding the current situation of Bangladesh and to increasing knowledge about and implementation of inclusive education, not only in Bangladesh, but also in other developing as well as developed countries.

Introduction: Power, knowledge, education and inclusion

A variety of initiatives are currently under study and implementation in the field of education in Bangladesh. One of these initiatives is to ensure education for all children, including children with special educational needs, in mainstream schools; a concept known as inclusive education. The present work focuses on secondary school teachers’ knowledge about inclusive education.

Internationally, the education of students with differing needs and specific disabilities is a highly contested issue, and one that challenges traditional mindsets about fairness and access to education. It is only in recent decades that there is recognition of the right of all people, regardless of differences in physical and intellectual capabilities, to education, and to education in the same classrooms as those of their peers who are commonly categorised as normal (Ali, Mustapha & Jelas, 2006). Like many other countries, with longer histories of universal access to education, Bangladesh has made a commitment to inclusive education, and also in common with other countries it struggles to fully achieve this goal.

In their discussion of social inclusion in schooling, Bottrell and Goodwin (2011) emphasise that “schools are invented or constructed institutions” (p4), and ones that have replaced some of the roles families and communities traditionally took for preparing young people for adult roles in society. In contemporary western, and indeed global, constructions, schools have been constructed as standalone places that facilitate both access to required knowledge and entry into social communities. Those outside schooling are denied the possibility of gaining not only the knowledge systems required in commercial and political society and the qualifications demanded for employment, but also the friendships and social networks that may develop in the peer group. The opportunity to be powerful in society is therefore significantly impacted by inclusion or exclusion from mainstream schooling.
A country like Bangladesh faces a twofold struggle in its commitment to implement inclusive education: it struggles with historic legacies of multiple colonisation that leave it at the margins of the knowledge system that allow access to power in the contemporary world of global interactions, and it struggles with similar attitudinal and systemic difficulties to those that face western nations. Other articles in this issue address the broader issue of educational change within a legacy of postcolonialism. This article focuses on the particular challenges that face teachers in understanding and implementing educational inclusion. Accordingly, it reports field research that identifies the understandings, difficulties and hopes that ordinary classroom teachers face. However, the challenges identified do need to be read in the broader context of this twofold struggle. As might be expected, many teachers express their sense of uncertainty and unpreparedness. Within Bangladesh itself such findings will not be read as a failure on the part of the teachers, but rather as an indication of what work still needs to be done. It is to be hoped that international readers will approach the findings in the same way.

**Definition of inclusive education**

Inclusive education was first introduced from an international perspective at the Salamanca World Conference in 1994 in Spain which included international papers on special needs children (Ainscow & Cesar, 2006). In some countries, inclusive education is thought of as an approach to serve special educational needs children within general education settings. Internationally, however, inclusive education is seen as a system which caters for the needs of a diverse range of learners and supports diversity, effectively eliminating all forms of discrimination (UNESCO, 2001, 2009). Boer, Pijl and Minnaert (2011) noted that educating children with disabilities in regular schools is an important goal in many countries, and this is considered as an indication of educational development.

Over the years the terms “inclusive education” and “integrated education” have been used interchangeably in some countries (e.g. the United Kingdom), and the term “mainstreaming” has been used in the United States of America (Hossain, 2004; Long, Wood, Littleton, Passenger, & Sheehy, 2011). In the United States, inclusive education is defined as the education of children with disabilities with their non-disabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate. Some other countries use the term “integration” but the term “inclusive education” is broader than ‘integration’ (Long et. al., 2011). “Integrated education” generally refers to an approach in which children with disabilities and learning difficulties are placed in a mainstream setting and given help to ‘fit in’. In an inclusive education system, the school and the school’s practices should be developed to support a diverse range of learners in mainstream settings, making them more flexible and child-centred (Long et. al., 2011). In recent years, the concept of inclusive education has expanded to allow all manner of disadvantaged children to be educated (Mitchell, 2010).

According to the teachers’ manual of inclusive education provided by the Teaching Quality Improvement in Secondary Education Project (TQI-SEP, 2010; a project of the Ministry of Education, Bangladesh), inclusive education is based on seven principles:

i) all children have the right to education;

ii) all children can learn and they learn from one another;

iii) every child is different, so instruction should be organised according to their needs;


iv) inclusive education is student-centred;
v) the inclusive approach addresses all aspects of the learning environment;
vii) learning is possible only when there is cumulative cooperation among teachers, students, parents or guardians, and society;
vii) an active participation of all education agencies in society is important for the successful implementation of inclusive education.

According to these principles, inclusive education in Bangladesh is perceived as a cumulative social responsibility to educate all children, and teachers play the key role in its successful implementation. Inclusive education is also perceived to provide a flexible learning environment in which teachers adopt student-centred approaches and understand that individual children have different ways of learning.

The Government of Bangladesh has recently taken vigorous initiatives to implement inclusive education in schools. The national constitution and the education policy of Bangladesh declared the right to education for all since independence in 1971, but owing to various socio-economic and political issues, this was not rigorously implemented. At present, the Government is implementing this policy through development projects such as the TQI-SEP. Therefore, Bangladeshi policies are now focusing on raising awareness of inclusive education, developing positive attitudes towards it and creating an appropriate classroom environment.

Inclusive education is an approach which aims to develop a child-focus within schools by acknowledging that all children are individuals with different learning needs and speeds (National Disabled Forum of Bangladesh, 2009). It works as a catalyst for change because it not only enhances education within schools, but also represents an increased awareness of human rights and leads to a reduction in social discrimination between poor and rich. Inclusion has the potential to be a very effective starting point for addressing the Rights of the Child in a range of cultures and contexts.

Research Context: Education in Bangladesh
Bangladesh is a country in South-East Asia, which achieved independence from Pakistan in 1971. The country is overwhelmed by various challenges encompassing social, political and economic spheres (Rahman, Hamzah, Meerah & Rahman, 2010), and is densely populated (more than 140 million) with a growth rate of 1.39 (The Daily eProthom Alo, 2011). Education is widely considered a basic human right as well as a tool for socio-economic development and poverty reduction in Bangladesh. As a result, the education system of Bangladesh is continually undergoing reforms.

Primary, secondary and higher education are the three major educational layers in Bangladesh. Primary or basic education starts at the age of six, and lasts for five years. It is provided by two major institutional arrangements: the general (mainstream) and the madrasah (a religious system). Secondary education lasts for seven years and is divided into two stages: three years for junior secondary education (children aged 11-13) and two years for each of the two levels of higher secondary education (children aged 14-15 and 16-17). Secondary education has three major branches: general, technical/vocational and madrasah. Higher education is usually completed in the form of a Bachelor’s and Master’s degree, which take 5-6
years within one of the three general streams: arts, science or social science (Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information & Statistics, BANBEIS, 2010). There is also a separate special education system for children with special needs such as visual or hearing disabilities (Ahsan & Burnip, 2007). Yet another stream of education uses English as the medium of instruction.

The Government of Bangladesh has recently developed an ‘Education for All’ (EFA) policy with achievement of the target by 2015. This aligns with The United Nations’ eight development targets widely known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which are to be met by 2015 by all nations, and have a special focus on poverty-stricken nations. Out of the eight MDGs, two are particularly concerned with education; one is about universal primary education (all children, boys or girls should complete primary education), and the other is concerned with ‘equality’ between boys and girls and the empowerment of women. It is agreed upon that all organisations, including the United Nations, will give priority to education. Active measures such as increasing the number of schools and teachers and increasing enrolment are already being accepted both in primary and secondary education. The government maintains that Education for All (EFA) is a policy which is implemented as part of a global campaign. It is also recognised that this policy is essential to develop a prosperous and progressive nation; there is a need to educate everyone irrespective of race, creed, gender, and socio-economic status. Inclusive education is one of the concepts included in this policy as a strategy for achieving EFA (Ahsan & Burnip, 2007).

Statistics suggest that 10% of the total Bangladeshi population have a disability and 89% of the school age children with disabilities are not involved in mainstream education; with the situation being worse in rural areas (DPE & CSID, 2002). Only 4% of these children have the opportunity to go to school, despite the fact that children with disabilities are entitled to educational facilities based on the Bangladesh Constitution (Mamun, 2000) and on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989).

According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information & Statistics (BANBEIS, 2010), in Bangladesh there are an estimated 81,508 primary schools, 19,083 secondary and higher secondary schools, as well as dozens of institutions at tertiary level. Similar to other countries dealing with the consequences of historic colonisation and contemporary monetarist neo-colonisation, Bangladesh is trying to enact the philosophy of inclusive education on the basis of various international and national declarations: The United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Declaration on Education for All (UNESCO, 1990), the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (UNESCO, 1994), the Dakar Framework for Education For All (2000), and the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, PL94-142, the Compulsory Primary Education Act (1990) and UNESCO International Conference on Education, held in Geneva in November 2008 (cited in: Ahsan & Burnip, 2007; Hossain, 2004).

The Government of Bangladesh is enacting some laws on inclusive education to safeguard the educational rights and welfare of children with disabilities (Kibria, 2005), such as the Bangladesh Disability Welfare Act (2001), the National Child Policy (1994), and the 1997 National Gender Policy (see Ahsan & Burnip, 2007; Kibria, 2005; Hossain, 2004).
The Government of Bangladesh is trying to establish inclusive education both at primary and secondary levels through educational projects from the Ministry of Education and with the support of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). There are many NGOs running formal and informal education programmes, for instance targeting community schools (Mamun, 2000). However, the number and capacity of such special schools are not sufficient, as there are vast numbers of children with disabilities who are excluded (Ahsan & Burnip, 2007).

Since inclusive education is a new phenomenon in Bangladesh, inclusion is now being trialled in various projects administered by the Government. At the primary level, one of the government projects named Primary Education Development Project-phase two (PEDP-2) is now being implemented and at the secondary level, one of the projects being pioneered is the Teaching Quality Improvement in Secondary Education Project (TQI-SEP). The aim of this project is to help the government to enhance the quality of secondary education (government or otherwise) by managing and coordinating secondary school teacher training more efficiently. Over the period of this ongoing project (April, 2005-2011), a programme on inclusive education awareness has been provided to 41,827 people, including principals and members of school boards. However, only 624 full-time classroom teachers received training in inclusive education (TQI-SEP, 2010).

In Bangladesh, most mainstream school teachers are used to conducting their classes with a ‘homogenous’ group of learners (Ahsan & Burnip, 2007). This homogeneity in classrooms is taken for granted; children with special educational needs are not expected to be accommodated in the mainstream schooling system. Teachers are not accustomed to teaching heterogeneous learners in a single classroom and Ahsan and Burnip (2007) suggested that teachers in Bangladesh are not willing to teach special educational needs (SEN) children together with regular students. Harding and Darling (2003) argued that teachers’ views, attitudes and knowledge are important in making any change in their classroom practices. This suggests that the knowledge teachers acquire about inclusive education may affect their ability to adapt, as well as their classroom performance.

Inclusive education allows the inclusion with regular children and children with special needs by placing them together in mainstream classes, to be taught and instructed by mainstream teachers (Ali, Mustapha & Jelas, 2006). It is considered a way to create an environment that can give all children access to education. If teaching is effective and responds to both students’ needs and strengths, there is a possibility for all children to learn (Lindsay, 2003). Students with disabilities are able to fit into an inclusive programme because they usually receive some individual support from class teachers to help them complete the required tasks (Chhabra, Srivastava, & Srivastava, 2010). Academic success depends on how much a student learns from teachers, whether they have disabilities or not (Young, Wright & Laster, 2005). Teachers play a vital role in the learning process of students because, in the traditional classrooms of Bangladesh, they are the ones imparting the knowledge. Successful and effective implementation of inclusive education depends upon teachers having adequate knowledge of it through training (Ntombela, 2009) as well as positive attitudes towards it (Loreman, Deppler & Harvey, 2005).
Therefore, given the importance of teachers’ knowledge and attitudes in the implementation of inclusive education, the present research used semi-structured interviews within a Bangladeshi school context to investigate how secondary school teachers of Bangladesh conceptualise inclusive education. Teachers’ attitudes are influenced by their beliefs and knowledge. Borko and Putnam (1995) argued that teachers’ knowledge guides their decisions in academic practice, and claimed that we must help teachers to increase and expand their knowledge in order to aid them practically. However, knowledge is not something unbiased or neutral; knowledge is shaped by one’s ontological and epistemological perspectives of understanding a phenomenon (Kincheloe, 2008). Understanding is grounded in an epistemological perspective of what knowledge is, "how we get it, how we recognize it, how it relates to the truth, how it is entangled with power" (Griffith, 1998, p. 35). Knowledge is a vast term and it is not possible to fully assess people’s knowledge of an idea or concept within a single study. In this study, knowledge refers to the way teachers conceptualise inclusive education or, in other words, how they define inclusive education.

Method
The researcher of the study is a teacher educator and has experience as an inclusive trainer in Bangladesh and her personal experiences and interests are the driving force behind this study. As such, the researcher’s aim was to explore Bangladeshi teachers’ conceptualisations of inclusive education, and thereby better understand Bangladeshi teachers’ knowledge about inclusive education in mainstream secondary education settings.

Given the aim of the research was to understand teachers' knowledge about inclusive education, a qualitative approach was adopted. The research was conducted in six selected secondary schools in the Dhaka district within the central region of Bangladesh. Six teachers, one from each school, were purposely selected for semi-structured interview. The criteria of the teachers being interviewed included having some teaching experience (minimum three years), an academic background with a professional degree, and willingness to participate. The demographic variables of the six participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic representations of participants for semi-structured interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Teaching Subject</th>
<th>Years of Teaching Experience</th>
<th>Academic Background</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ami</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Bengali, Social Science</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>M.A, B.Ed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raz</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>B.A, B.Ed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zahi</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Science</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>M.A, M.Ed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meher</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Science</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>M.A, B.Ed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naj</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Bengali</td>
<td>07</td>
<td>M.A, B.Ed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shah</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Math, Religious Studies</td>
<td>05</td>
<td>B.Sc. B.Ed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Qualitative data were analysed using a thematic approach. After receiving all the information, interview records were examined by the participants. All participants were addressed with pseudonyms in place of their real names and the schools where they worked were not identified. (Further information on the methods used can be found in Khan, 2011.)

**Results**
The interview questions were categorised by themes, including teachers’ attitudes towards inclusive education, barriers, success of inclusive education, and government initiatives. The final category included “other” related issues regarding inclusive education. In this section the findings of the qualitative aspects of the research is presented.

**Findings from the semi-structured interviews**
Qualitative data were analysed using a thematic approach. After getting all the information, interview records were examined by the participants. Before formal analysis, the researcher translated all interviews from Bengali to English, and read each transcript multiple times in order to check the ideas match between English and Bengali. Formal analysis involved firstly categorising the data, next coding them on the basis of the categories, and finally identifying themes. Table 2 provides a summary which shows the themes and subthemes that emerged from the data.

**Table: 2 Themes and subthemes from the semi-structured interviews**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teachers’ knowledge of inclusive education</td>
<td>Inclusive education as a system of education for all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(different conceptualisation of inclusive education)</td>
<td>Inclusive education as integration of special educational needs children</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Inclusive education as a way of reducing social discrimination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practical barriers towards inclusive</td>
<td>Insufficient knowledge of inclusive education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>education</td>
<td>Inclusion confusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of teaching materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Large class size</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success of inclusive education</td>
<td>Benefits to family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Benefits to society</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Benefits to the nation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Government initiatives and funding</td>
<td>Existing education projects (e.g. TQI-SEP)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Changes to education policy</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Education budget</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following is an explanation of the emergent themes and sub-themes outlined above:

**Theme 1: Knowledge of inclusive education**
**Subtheme 1: Inclusive education as a system of education for all**
Some participants conceptualised inclusive education as "Education for all". For example, Raz explained that “Inclusive education is a type of educational system where all children can learn and it includes all children in the mainstream classroom.”
Another participant, Ami, supported this view:
Inclusive education is the concept of giving opportunity to all sorts of children; including physically disabled, socially deprived or intellectually disabled children; where all children can get opportunities of education.

Another teacher, Naz, gave the following opinion:
Inclusive education has some core concepts and these are: all children have the right to go school; all children can learn; all children have the right to get education... Here all different types of children are acknowledged including street children, children of sex workers, children of HIV mothers ...

**Subtheme 2: Inclusive education as integration of special needs children**
On the contrary, some participants thought that inclusive education is primarily related to the integration of children with special educational needs in their regular class. One participant identified inclusion “as a system to integrate mainstream children with special educational needs children in the mainstream classroom...”. Likewise, Zahi added that inclusive education means the accommodation of physically disabled children and socially deprived children in our classroom with our regular students.

**Subtheme 3: Inclusive education as a means to decrease social discrimination**
Among six of the participants one of the female teachers, Meher, explained inclusive education from another point of view:
Inclusive education means more than education for all. It is a system where poor and rich children are treated equally. We could consider it as a pathway to reduce social discrimination.

**Theme 2: Barriers towards inclusion (relevant to knowledge)**
Some obstacles were identified from the qualitative data which could have an effect on the teachers’ attitudes and knowledge. These barriers focussed on factors such as insufficient knowledge of inclusive education, inclusion confusion, lack of training, lack of teaching materials and large class size. Teachers mentioned that their lack of knowledge of inclusive education is the main barrier and is related to their existing attitudes.

**Subtheme 1: Insufficient knowledge of inclusive education**
Most teachers agreed that they have a lack of knowledge (basic and practical) about inclusive education, which is also reflected in their conceptualisation of inclusive education and in their existing attitudes. Naz lamented:
I only know the concept of inclusive education, but I know it is not enough. Still I do not know if I could conduct an inclusive class. My amount of knowledge is not sufficient to do that. How could I manage a class with different types of students having different difficulties...? I want the strategies for the implementation of inclusive education, I want to know the curriculum of inclusive education...but I do not know... There is not enough publicity or information from the government...

Raz also agreed with Naz. He questioned, “If inclusive education means all children in the same classroom, then what should I do with those who are mentally disabled? Are they fit for my class?” Shah agreed and asked, “What about the mentally
retarded children?...Should we include them?..." and indicated that “it is not possible to include all children...we can segregate them according to their severity...". On the contrary, one participant, science teacher Zahi, said that “basic knowledge is not sufficient to be a classroom teacher. We need practical knowledge.” Another science teacher, Meher, commented:

As a science teacher, I think that knowledge is not complete before it is practically implemented. To implement inclusive education I need practical knowledge...when the government starts inclusive education programmes there will be more skilled people.

Shah agreed with Meher and advised that “in training, there should be some practical sessions on inclusive education where teachers can get ideas to conduct a class”. In these ways participants expressed their existing knowledge on inclusive education, but they also mentioned some existing confusion on inclusive education.

**Subtheme 2: Inclusion confusion**
Participants mentioned that they have some confusion about inclusive education, which was reflected in their conceptualisation of inclusive education.

Naz expressed her confusion about inclusion in this way:

I have some knowledge about inclusive education but I am confused about the labeling of it. We have an admission test to enter this school but what will be the criteria to enter a mainstream class?

Ami and Zahi also questioned the researcher:

What will the curriculum be like if inclusive education is added? Now we have a curriculum but after the implementation of inclusive education we need a different curriculum to include children with disabilities.

**Subtheme 3: Lack of training**
Participants mentioned that more training may be the best way to gain knowledge and to reduce confusion. Therefore, these participants think that insufficient training for inclusive education is another barrier towards its implementation.

Most of the school teachers have training on their teaching subject under Continuous Professional Development (CPD), but they do not have training for inclusive education. Naz explained the situation in this way:

I do not have any inclusive training but I have training entitled Continuous Professional Development (CPD) for my subject, Bengali. I participated in only four sessions (each session one and half hours) which were related to inclusive education. This is not sufficient training to know about a new concept or idea. We need exclusive training about inclusive education.

Zahe expressed her position, “My knowledge about inclusive education is not appropriate to be an inclusive teacher. I want to know more...........” Another young teacher, Shah, added “I want to know about the curriculum of inclusive education”. Ami also questioned the curriculum, “What should the curriculum be like if it includes inclusive education?”

**Subtheme 4: Lack of teaching materials**
Teachers mentioned that insufficient teaching materials are one of the barriers towards inclusion. Most of the schools do not have teaching materials relevant to inclusive education. Raz thinks that:

The materials are not sufficient and if I want to take a class with disabled children then I need different materials, such as those for vision impairments. They need a Braille machine, but we do not have one...I do not know how to use these teaching materials. We have neither appropriate resources, nor specialised skills to help include these children.

Naz also asserted that "even if we have materials, we also need to know how to use them and how to preserve them for further use". On the contrary, Ami suggested that "if we wish we can make some of our own materials for our class purposes. We only need a positive attitude...". Zahi supports Ami: "It is not impossible for a teacher to make teaching materials".

Subtheme 5: Large class sizes
In Bangladesh most of the secondary schools have large class sizes, more than 50 students in one classroom. Participants mentioned that it would be difficult to conduct inclusive classes with class sizes that are so large. Raz claimed, "Normally I have 55-60 children in my class. If you add even more, how could I tend to all students within a short class period (40-45 minutes)?" Shah also agreed that it would be impossible to handle such a large number of children. However, Ami indicated, "In our country most of the schools have different sections in the same class." Zahi added, "We have morning and day shifts in our school. It reduces the class size".

Theme 3: Success of inclusive education
In spite of barriers, participants also mentioned some possible benefits of inclusion.

Subtheme 1: Benefits to the family
Inclusive education is a new concept which is now becoming more widespread in Bangladesh. Meher said, "It is not only a concept; it can have benefits ranging from in the family to the entire nation..." Ami and Zahi agreed, "It would help to change my mind about deprived children". Zahi also noted, "Inclusive education also helps to boost children's self-esteem, morale and interdependence with peers". However, Naz pointed out, "It has advantages but there is a poor area near our school, and the children from this area do not have access to this school. Is it really the proper way to change our mind about deprived students?".

Shah recommended the implementation of inclusive education as early as possible. He asserted:

We should start it. Inclusive education helps to change our prejudices and stereotypes. Students without disabilities can learn to value and respect children with disabilities. We need to consider what a child needs to learn, how he or she learns best, as teachers can build positive relationships with each child.

Subtheme 2: Benefits to society
A few participants thought that inclusive education could result in societal benefits. One of the female participants, Meher, expressed the following opinion:
If we established this inclusive system it may help to reduce the discrimination of lower socio-economic classes. Students from poor and rich families can come together within the same education system, learn to tolerate each other, and perhaps even become friends.

Ami also thought that inclusive education presents an opportunity for all children to get an education, which is essential because the right to an education is a basic human right. Zahi had a similar opinion:

By passing education from one child to the next, a chain reaction in education can occur which would be positively reflected by social changes.

Subtheme 3: Benefits to the nation
Meher mentioned that through inclusion the nation as a whole can become better educated, which would result in the fulfilment of the Millennium Development Goal (MDG). Shah lamented that "Most of the developed countries have already established this concept in their education systems but we are too late..."
Participants also mentioned some government initiatives which could contribute to the evolution of inclusive education in Bangladesh.

Theme 4: Government initiatives and funding
Teachers also mentioned awareness of various different government initiatives.

Subtheme 1: Existing educational projects
With regard to government projects, Shah explained, "I joined the Teaching Quality Improvement in Secondary Education Project (TQI-SEP), which is the first Government project that offers training for the subject that I teach...". Naz mentioned that "It is a good initiative from the government". Meher added that some teacher educators are studying in foreign universities and they can provide quality teaching strategies for inclusive education to secondary teachers.

In contrast, Raz questioned the effectiveness of Government projects:
As a developing country, it is not possible to successfully implement inclusive education only through Government projects. We have some barriers also... Governments can give us support and facilities but I think that my real support is myself. I have to change...not only externally but also in my mind...

Zahe, however, admitted, "I can change my mind but I need support to do that...In rural areas many non-Government organizations (NGO's) are doing a good job with education for deprived children...".

Subtheme 2: Changes to education policy
Recent changes to education policy were perceived as helping with the effective implementation of inclusive education. Shah stated that "The Government of Bangladesh has changed education policy and inclusive education is now in the 2009 Education Policy". Raz, however, criticised this policy:
In our current policy, there is no term which directly means “inclusive”...in Bangali the term in the policy is “somonnito” which means “integration” in English.
Most of the participants supported the idea that the government has taken some initiatives, though these initiatives were not perceived to be sufficient for effectively supporting inclusive teaching. Naz elaborated:

Even though I am a classroom teacher, teaching is not only my responsibility. It is a combined process with teachers, head teachers, school authorities, guardians … the educational policy is not sufficient…we need co-operation from others…

Subtheme 3: Funding
Some participants noticed that the Government of Bangladesh has always given a high priority to the education sector. Government school teacher Zahi mentioned, “The government can distribute the major portion of the educational budget to develop inclusive environments for teachers and students.”

Discussion
The aim of this study was to examine the way of their conceptualisation of inclusive education by Bangladeshi secondary school teachers. The teachers who participated in the semi-structured interviews expressed diverse interpretations of the concept of inclusive education. For instance, four out of six participants (more than 50%) perceived inclusive education as an opportunity for education for all. One of the remaining two interviewees viewed inclusive education as the integration of special needs children in education, while the other considered it as a way to remove social discrimination. All participants conceded that they did not have sufficient practical knowledge of inclusive education. They gave a variety of reasons as barriers to implementing inclusive education. These reasons included insufficient knowledge, lack of training to increase this knowledge, large class sizes and a lack of teaching materials. They also stated that there was some confusion about inclusion, confusion which was perceived as presenting a challenge for the successful implementation of inclusive education. Interestingly, teachers also acknowledged some government initiatives and policies as positive views towards inclusive education. Teachers also encouraged inclusion because they viewed it as a manifestation of the basic human right of education, and a way of reducing social discrimination.

The secondary school teachers acknowledged that their conceptualisations of inclusive education are varied and insufficient. Most of the participants reported that inclusive education is a term that relates to education for all, but one participant considered it as a way to remove social discrimination between social classes. The remaining participants considered inclusive education as an integration system to include special needs children. Hodkinson and Devarakonda (2009) also found that the term “inclusive education” is vague and difficult to define.

In this study, most of the participants believed that the reason behind their insufficient knowledge of inclusive education was a lack of training. In Bangladesh, there are few opportunities for school teachers to get training for inclusive education (Hossain, 2004; Kibria, 2005). The participants who took part in this study did receive subject based CPD training which included four sessions on inclusive education. However, the participants reported that these four sessions were not sufficient to get a clear understanding of inclusive education.
Moreover, the idea of inclusive education as a vague concept is supported by the notion of inclusion confusion as expressed by Hornby (2010). Hornby mentioned that there are different types of confusion surrounding inclusive education, namely the definition of the term inclusive education. There is also confusion in the labeling, curriculum and goals of inclusion, as well as etiology and what can realistically be achieved (Hornby, 2010).

Other factors have also been postulated as reasons for the negative attitudes of teachers. For example, large class size and a lack of teaching aid foster negative attitudes. Positive attitudes were often related to support from the government and the possibility of the passing of legislation for inclusive education. The recognition from the government in legislation on inclusive education as a manifestation of human rights would perhaps encourage teachers to be positive. Nevertheless, teachers need more training related to inclusive education for it to be implemented successfully, even if improved legislation is passed.

The findings of this study provide a useful indication of the knowledge of Bangladeshi teachers; and give an indication of the possible attitudes of the range of individuals involved in various areas of the educational sector such as teachers, educational administrators and policy makers. A teacher is always considered as the “key person” in the implementation of inclusive education (Boer, Pijl & Minnaert, 2011). Teachers play a vital role in the success of the implementation of any educational idea or concept. The successful implementation of inclusive education also depends on teachers’ attitudes and knowledge (Harding & Darling, 2003). Previous research (Leatherman & Niemeyer, 2005) has argued that teachers’ attitudes and knowledge toward inclusive education influence the success of their inclusive classrooms. It could be suggested that prior awareness of a teacher’s attitudes and knowledge could determine whether that teacher will be successful in creating a positive inclusive learning environment. Therefore, administrators could estimate teachers’ understanding of inclusive education and make subsequent plans for training that can fill the gaps in teachers’ knowledge. The data suggested that, although some teachers have received training related to inclusive education, understanding was variable. In particular, this study suggests that teachers need additional training to gain skills and knowledge (both basic and practical) which would allow them to be effective inclusive teachers. Many studies have indicated that support from a government can have a positive impact on teachers’ attitudes, as well as the ability to affect the successful implementation of inclusive education (Charema, 2007). The findings reported from the present study also suggest that increased support may increase positivity towards inclusive education.

Conclusion

Inclusive education has been introduced in Bangladesh because of a broad policy commitment to the guiding principles of access to all students and in compliance with international conventions. It is a one of the key strategies of the Millennium Development Goal, and is seen as essential to accelerate the Education For All (EFA) program. In order to achieve this goal, two different government projects, such as PEDP-2 and TQI-SEP, are working respectively for primary and secondary sectors.
This study found that the secondary school teachers interviewed have some awareness of inclusive education, but limited knowledge of how to implement programmes and mixed attitudes towards the concept. For example, one of the participants of this study, Raz said that the government can only provide some physical facilities, but teachers’ positive mindset for implementing inclusive education is the key factor, because teachers are habituated with teaching in normal/homogeneous learners and not with heterogeneous learners in a inclusive classroom. On the other hand, some other teachers think that changing teachers’ mindset is not enough for an inclusive classroom, if the government does not provide necessary supports, such as training, teaching materials and incentives. It is understood that different teachers have different beliefs about implementing inclusive education in the schools, and this diversity can be considered as a challenge to successful implementation of the policy, because of classroom teachers’ confusion or uncertainty about inclusive education. However, despite areas of confusion about the concept, those interviewed were optimistic that inclusive education will develop within in the educational setting of Bangladesh, while acknowledging they and their colleagues needed to learn more in order to make inclusion effective.

This study suggests that at a national level the most important challenges might lie in supporting teachers to not only understand the principles of inclusiveness but also, as suggested by the earlier citation of Griffith (1998) and Kincheloe (2008), to evaluate their own approaches to knowledge and about who can hold it and what forms it should take. In the interviews Raz had said: "Governments can give us support and facilities but I think that my real support is myself. I have to change…not only externally but also in my mind". To some degree Zahe agreed, but he had a reservation: "I can change my mind but I need support to do that". The two statements sum up the challenge. Policies in themselves cannot create an effective implementation of inclusive education. Teachers in the classroom need to the ontological and epistemological perspectives that will allow them to acknowledge the rights and potential of all learners. However, teachers need to be supported by effective professional development that they themselves see as relevant to their needs and inclusive of their own emerging understandings.

At the national level, such shifts in consciousness may challenge other things in the educational system: such as the predominant focus on examinations and the acceptance of neo-liberal ideas of educational success. This article began with citing Bottrell and Goodwin (2011)’s concept of schooling as a constructed institution. Bottrell and Goodwin conclude their arguments by suggesting that the ways schools interact with their communities may have to move beyond neo-liberal ideas of education for economic productivity, though they may still need to work with them. Instead, they suggest (p292), education needs to reclaim the space so that inclusion "reasserts and extends critical and social justice frameworks".

References


