# Why 'one size fits all' concept and policies of inclusive education is insufficient to achieve 'true' inclusivity in a national context.  Insight from a tablet based disaster preparedness training programme administered in Bangladesh.

Syed Ali Tarek

PhD Candidate, Liverpool John Moores University, Faculty of Education, Health and Community, S.A.Tarek@2012.ljmu.ac.uk

## Abstract

In today's world, education is a basic human right and it is desired that every human being regardless of his or her personal and societal circumstances should get a fair chance to get access to education. 'Inclusive education' as a concept exists since the mid 19th century which was later translated into various international policy frameworks. Often these international policies had a push impact towards national policy agendas. Majority of the nations that adopted those international policies were hardly successful in achieving 'inclusive' learning practices, as because, 'inclusivity' has various wider (local) aspects which needs to be considered. A chronological review of relevant international policies and Bangladesh government's policies is presented in the early segments and then shortfalls of current notions of inclusivity is explored in this paper. A brief overview is given based on the author's experience of running a tablet based disaster preparedness training in Bangladesh over three years' period, that used networked learning concepts to promote 'inclusivity'. This paper also explores, how the training programme needed to broaden its perspectives to accommodate inclusivity. It was found during the training that the current notion and understanding of the term relates to only a fragment of the people to which inclusivity should be aimed. Adult learners are in a disadvantageous position as the national policies hardly mention their needs. Within a group of policies aimed to serve (special) children in education, practitioners are ill informed to support adult learners' in formal, informal and non-formal education sector. Reports on outcome of the alternate education systems consisting of private education and NGO led training in Bangladesh noted that there is a high level of drop outs those who attend any form of training. Majority of the participants lack awareness and urges to learn about something new. Due to monotonous delivery standards the participants are disengaged quickly with the feeling that they have no voice in their learning experience. The participants crave for a system which would acknowledge and value their experience and bridge those experiences to construct something more useful. The disaster preparedness training thus had to adapt to these less explored inclusivity issues to ensure, there is a true wider 'inclusive' participation. This paper reinforces that, there is a need to understand the varied needs of the adult learners to ensure they are well integrated in any format of the education system, especially where cooperative learning takes place.

### Keywords

Inclusive education policy, tablet based disaster preparedness training, tablet based networked learning

## Inclusive education and international policies

Inclusive education can be expressed as a way of reducing barriers to participate in learning in any educational setting. These barriers can be extrinsic or intrinsic in nature. Inclusive education has been defined by academics, international organisations, countries and NGOs from various points of views and there is no single definition that suffices as a comprehensive universal definition. This makes the implementation strategies of the inclusive

education challenging for any country or community. Within the definitions in existence, there are always boundaries that represent magnitude of exclusions in that particular definition of inclusion or inclusivity.

The roots of inclusive education can be traced back to 1960, when in 'Convention against Discrimination in Education' it was recognised that alongside universal respect for human rights, equality of educational opportunity is also important to consider (UNESCO, 1960, Article 1). Emphasising it to be an international convention, it laid out guidance to be followed my member nations to achieve comprehensive education for all. Reducing age and gender parity in access to education was prime focus among many other existent factors. Subsequent international policies, fairly diverted towards ensuring education for 'children' at least up to the primary level and ensuring barriers of participation are reduced. Some of the notable policies that improvised on this are: Convention on the Rights of Children (1989), Salamanca Declaration (1994), Dakar Framework for Action (2000), and UN convention of Rights of Disabled (2006).

UNCRC Article 28 (1989), clearly indicates that all children should be given equal opportunity of education in the primary and higher school by making resources accessible and where needed, they should be provided with financial assistance. Increase of scientific and technical knowledge was proposed in an attempt to eliminate ignorance and illiteracy. Furthermore, uses of modern teaching methods were suggested especially in developing countries. Salamanca declaration (1994), focused especially on special needs education and acknowledged that a fundamental shift in policy was required to enable schools to serve needs for all the children despite their special educational needs. Within the declaration, there was a call for member societies to understand the potential of those children with special needs. Inclusivity here was again more of enabling access, making children able to study within an educational institute setting. Dakar Framework for Action (2000) extended the focus of education of all children to young and adults in general. In DFA (2000, Section 7-iii, VI) aimed to provide the former access to suitable learning and essential like skills programmes. It was also recognised that gender-based discrimination remains one of the most intractable constraints to achieve education for all (Page 16, section 40). UN convention of rights of Disabled (2006), craved for an inclusive learning system within the member states that will be free of any prejudice related to the disabled children. Ensuring access and having reasonable adjustments for the special children remained a priority in this policy (Article 24).

Historically, the common elements of defining inclusivity remained ensuring access to mainstream education for the special children in particular. These policies in most instances had undermined the need for inclusion of adults who never got access to education or those who had accessed formal education for sometime but never managed to complete his or her education. Tackling gender bias has also a critical role to play in ensuring inclusivity is achieved. Some gender bias is quite obvious in nature, which can also be linked with specific social settings where it is simply unacceptable to give education to female let alone providing coeducation. There are unique scenarios where the gender bias is not explicit but is deeply rooted within mind-set of the community; this is particularly observable in countries that are trying to overcome the dogma of the gender inequality. National policies in most of these countries are shaped by the international policies; a closer look to the national policies across the globe will reveal that they share striking similarities and largely try to reflect the international policies. The 'copy-paste' trend of the national policies may satisfy various international bodies for a shorter term but in longer terms these not so fit for purpose policies rarely be able to improve the condition for the international agendas were put forward. Within the study of the inclusive education, it is important to understand how international policies or frameworks can be translated into different social settings within a national context.

As defining inclusivity remains highly contextual, it is worth exploring the boundaries to understand how that continuously excludes communities from achieving inclusive education. Concepts of inclusivity can be looked into from objective and subjective point of view that covers policies, practices and reality of attainment of inclusion. Objective viewpoint will be more about getting a standard 'one size fits all' international framework that implicitly dictates national policy making. How far reaching this approach actually is can only be understood from a subjective perspective where we have people to whom inclusivity is aimed. Inclusivity from subjective points of view can mean a lot more than access. It can be empathy, can be education tailored for their varied needs, or perhaps it can be recognition of their experiential learning. Inclusion can also be separating different groups of learners - children, youth and adults who do not learn in the same way, not in the same speed and the techniques to educate these groups are not necessarily the same. These are not commonly addressed in the international policies or frameworks mentioned above (Artiles & Kozleski, 2007). A lot of interest is given towards children with special needs, which are absolutely fine but assuming the same system will work for the other age groups is erroneous.

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There are elements of cultural factors to be examined too. Most of these international policies have been formulated in western countries with low context culture that promotes individualism. In these countries, individual achievement is often placed higher than group achievements. This sharply contrasts with high context culture where group accomplishment is much more appreciated. There are many unwritten norms within those social setting that shapes the way an individual behaves within their peers, groups and family. Most of the Asia, South America, Africa and Middle-East countries in general are countries with high context culture. The transition of policies to practice from international to national has apparently hardly considered these factors. These probably are some of the reasons why many third world countries that tried to implement inclusive education, even after decades of efforts achieved little success (UNICEF, 2003; Selwyn, 2013; Toyama, 2010).

## Inclusive education in Bangladesh context

While over the past two decades, most of the western countries have identified the need for inclusive education and have been integrating it in the mainstream educational settings, a good number of developing countries have tried to follow their path to ensure educational rights are safeguarded and there is enough opportunity for children with special needs to integrate in the mainstream education. Bangladesh, a South Asian developing country, is in the early stages of implementing inclusive education though it has provisions for inclusivity within its first written constitution of 1972 (Article 28 and 17(a)).

> [Article 28 (3)]: No citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth be subjected to any disability, liability, restriction or condition with regard to access to any place of public entertainment or resort, or admission to any educational institution (Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs [MoLJPA], 2000, p. 5).

> [Article 17 (a)]…establishing a uniform, mass oriented and universal system of education and extending free and compulsory education to all children to such stage as may be determined by law" (MoLJPA, 2000, p. 8).

In subsequent years Bangladesh government has introduced, policies harmonising with all international policies and frameworks that aimed to foster equality and access to all children to education without any forms of discrimination.



| 2010 | National Education Policy 2010 |
| 2006 | UN convention on the Rights of Disabled |
| 2001 | Bangladesh Disability Welfare Act |
| 2000 | Dakar Framework for Action |
| 1995 | National Policy for the Disabled |
| 1994 | Salamanca Declaration |
| 1990 | Compulsory Primary Education act |
| 1989 | Convention on the Rights of Children |

National Policy     International Policy

**Figure 1: Policy Trajectory Bangladesh and International [Source: (Malak, Begum, et. al., 2013)]**

A range of literatures were reviewed to understand how inclusivity is conceived and to what extent it is achieved in Bangladesh. It is surprising that not only those national policies but also the literatures also solely connected inclusivity with giving access to disabled children in the school (Hill & Rahaman, 2013; Malak et. al, 2013; Mullick & Deppeler, 2011; Šiška & Habib, 2013; Kibria, 2005; UNICEF, 2003), which is only a partial account of the inclusivity agenda. Also, Ministry of Education who controls the centralized education system of Bangladesh has main attention towards the primary education sector and is currently running two specific programmes: Primary Education Development Programs (PEDPs) and Teaching Quality Improvement in Secondary Education Program (TQI-SEP) which are the means by which inclusive education is meant to be practiced in Bangladesh. Despite the fact that PEDPs has been running for more than a decade and TQI-SEP for

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8 years, a comprehensive study conducted by UNICEF (2003) to understand state of inclusive education in Bangladesh noted that the concept of inclusive education hasn't gained much attention and there is a lot of vagueness in understanding among the policy makers and the practitioners. Lack of skilled trainers who can promote inclusivity alongside deficiency of an adequate formal support system jeopardized achievement of the programmes. From UNESCO's observation of good practices, it was found that, all the inclusive practice's initiations have been a result of concerted community awareness and financial support from external agencies. It is a positive thing that there are communities in Bangladesh who are concerned and are aware of the need of inclusive learning. However, as these are only linked to children, or to be specific, children with special needs, these still overlooks diversified learning characteristics of the adult learners. Wider aspects of inclusive education thus remain largely unexplored in the Bangladesh education system.

## Overlooked wider aspects of inclusivity and how we can integrate them in practice

It was identified through the through literature review that the notion of inclusivity or inclusive education has largely been copied over from one country to another; mostly from western- developed countries to developing and poor countries. We need to carefully (re)think whether these notions are interchangeable within different socio-cultural contexts. Bangladesh as a developing country still has millions of people who are deprived of any form of education (Elias, 2011). There are also a huge number of people who were once a part of that formal education system but had to give up due to family or financial reasons. These people have wealth of experiential knowledge but once off the system, they can hardly make a come back. The entry barriers are often too much for them to overcome. This results in lack of confidence to engage in educational activities, which eventually leads to lack of awareness. First, wider aspect of inclusivity can be the issue of bridging education systems to integrate these 'left-behind' people in our educational systems.

As the policies are commonly targeted towards children with or without special needs, how do we fit in adults in this? If we think of the process of learning in children, they are often reliant on reference points to understand a new encounter but for adults, this is different. Adults generally would be self-guided, capable of reflecting on previous experiences and confer meaning by connecting similar experiences or events in the past. Taking both groups of learners as interchangeable heavily generalises their distinctive characteristics and thus is prone to partial biasness. If any educational setting ignores to consider the demographics of the learners that will make inclusive education unattainable at that setting. Any inclusive framework for Bangladesh thus, should have provision for adult learners' inclusion within any possible educational setting.

In the developing countries, one phenomenon is quite common – gender inequality. Though in the past decades, there have been several campaigns, public and private initiatives taken to improve the imbalance, achieving a near equal status still remains a far cry (Khan, 2008). Still in the developing countries, female learners are often reluctant to go for training sessions as they think they are not the best person for this. The male counterpart though often is aware of the importance of sending female members of the family to the trainings, but still falling prey to the societal norms, end up discriminating the female members. It is not indifferent in Bangladesh. Since the 1990s there had been numerous projects undertaken to empower women and build up social awareness about gender equality. Even though there are considerably fewer extreme instances of gender discrimination at present in Bangladesh compared to other neighbour countries – India and Pakistan, there exists a dominant role of the orthodox society that determines roles and responsibilities of a male and a female. Sometimes it is explicitly spoken, sometime it is symbolically expressed. Thus to practice inclusive education it is a challenge is to understand the underlying gender dynamics within the social setting. Women can feel being discriminated or side-lined in terms of contribution to the family & society but they have lesser options to fight against it. The socio-cultural context is needed to be explored further to understand to what extent this gender biasness has a role to play in achieving inclusivity.

Various independent reports made by international agencies and academia (Šiška & Habib, 2013; Hill & Rahaman, 2013; Malak et. al. 2013; UNICEF, 2003) indicates that while lack of resources to fund inclusive education is one of the most apparent issues; lack of knowledge and practical skills on how to implement it makes it even harder to achieve inclusivity. It is also felt that curricula both in the traditional system, and in the NGO led trainings lack the required flexibility for the facilitators to ensure greater participation. It is important that, the practitioners understand various facets of inclusivity and rather than blaming it on the availability of

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resources, try to incorporate novel ways of engaging learners in various learning activities, especially for a training program such as disaster preparedness training. A range of current trainings were reviewed (Tarek, 2014a; Tarek, 2014b; Mathbor, 2007) and it was found that they rarely take into consideration the participants' past experiences to build the training programmes resources so ultimately the participants end up getting into a training where they can hardly see any benefit, leading to higher dropouts (Islam & Hasan, 2009).

Firoz (2010) has found although importance of the local knowledge is accepted but still there a wider scope of negotiation between local knowledge and institutional arrangements. Government agencies and NGOs are often reluctant to consult with the locals before making a training program; thus again, a 'one size fits all' sort of westernized training programs takes in place that undervalues locals' knowledge, which results in leaving them uninterested in the programmes. While becoming less vulnerable by becoming knowledgeable can be treated as an intrinsic reward to encourage participation, having them participating throughout the programme is another trouble. As the notion of inclusivity is vague among the policy makers, it is not hard to imagine what the term will mean to a local trainer. In the developing country's context, often it is believed that, if the elderly person of the family or head of the family becomes knowledgeable about something that is good enough for the rest of the family. This position holder is mostly a male member of the family. In an ideal case, it is the head of the family who will go for such training. Women who are primarily responsible for domestic duties such as childcare and care for the elderly or disabled, they often do not have the liberty of going for training programmes that will not make them any money.

Furthermore, women have limited access to vital resources, be it control over land and other economic resources, education, social networks, skills building activities, personal mobility, freedom from violence and control over decision-making. The woman is closer to the household chores so during an emergency situation; they can play a very active role. The failure to recognize this reality means that women's visibility in the society remains low, and attention to their training needs is woefully inadequate (Ikeda, 2009). An inclusive practice should also pay attention to the gender diversity. Non-traditional skills training for women will not only equip them with necessary reasoned skills and bring those skills into the public domain, it also will help in transforming the perceptions of the community towards women. Likewise, non-traditional skills training for men and boys' i.e, managing household chores, childcare, first aid, caring for the sick, etc., would help them to understand crucial importance of these skills before or after an incident such as a natural disaster (Pincha, 2011).

'Inclusive' should not be a mere buzz word or 'inclusive education' as a key phrase in an attempt to imitate western country's educational approaches. An effective inclusive education system must include both the needs and the potential contributions of men as well as women. In the following section examples are given to establish how an inclusive disaster preparedness training that take into account women's physical, psychological, social and economic vulnerabilities will help to reduce overall women's vulnerability to disaster. Such inclusive programme has the potential to go even further to recognize women's abilities and include them in disaster relief efforts. Thus, having a gender aware approach within disaster preparedness training is essential in accomplishing this goal of empowering people.

## Experiencing inclusivity from the tablet based Disaster Preparedness Training Programme

Bangladesh is situated in a river delta divided into three zones- hilly tracts, terraces and flood plains. Its location is in the basins of three powerful river Padma, Brahmaputra, and Meghna. The government released statistics, from 1980-2010 show that there were 234 natural disaster events affecting 323,480,264 people; 191,836 were killed and economic damage was 1.7 Billion USD (Elias, 2011). In 2012, Maplecroft's Climate-Change Vulnerability Index (CCVI) classified Dhaka (the capital of Bangladesh) as the most climate change affected 'Extreme Risk' cities among the top fifty.

For a disaster-prone country like Bangladesh with a history of regular disaster events, it is desirable that in schools and colleges, students are taught disaster management with an aim to build up a disaster resilient society. Surprisingly, the curriculum of primary and secondary education in Bangladesh is very limited, which rarely provides any constructive knowledge on how to face disasters when they take place (Mahmudul, 2010). NGOs in Bangladesh have designed their own training sessions in a study circle format to overcome limitations

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of public education; yet Rahman (2005) has pointed out that most of the participants feel that the course contents are difficult to absorb due to poor design and lack of interactivity. Furthermore, as there is rarely any repeat training, participants often forget their newly learnt skills. To make it worse, lack of coordination and interaction between government education and these community study circles often leads to delayed decision making in disasters (Rahman, 2005).



**Figure 2: A selection of pictures taken during the programme over the years. * Images are used with the relevant participant permission.**

To overcome these identified shortfalls, a tablet based training programme was initiated in the rural areas of South West part of Bangladesh. Over a three-year period, there were three iterations of the programme in seven locations. 111 participants were trained in this time period. Content and the interface were developed using feedback from the field experts and general public. Networked learning played a key role designing the learning experience for the learners. Networked learning in this context can be expressed as learning where technology is used to promote connections: between one learner and other learners; between learners and tutors; between a learning community and its learning resources (Goodyear, 2005; Hodgson & Watson 2004; Oliver et. al, 2006). To promote inclusive learning a more welcoming 'minimally guided' teaching strategy was used where the learners were engaged in self directed learning to overcome the feeling of awkwardness. Delivery was designed in a way that would involve minimal participation from the trainer. There were designated direct intervention sessions when the trainer would directly engage with the participants. In the training days, participants formed ad hoc groups and used the iPad interface to access the content. The content was designed in a linear way this was to facilitate a quicker adaption rate for those are experiencing such training for the first time. The interactions beyond the interface were nonlinear where participants would engage in relevant discussions, which would branch out to others topics that are also closely relevant. This nonlinear style of group discussion would bring the participant's experience into the context. As the participants at some point of their lives have experienced devastating disaster events they have experiential knowledge of surviving in such situations to some extent. What they lack is a proactive mind-set. Being reactive is also important but proactive person have better survival chances in an emergency event. In this case, to make the programme inclusive, the content was made in a way that would encourage participants with experience of facing disasters would feel engaged and activities where they have to reflect on their experience and tell others what else they might do to stay safer would initiate critical thinking. Here participants were not disadvantaged because of their technical knowledge or educational background.

While interaction with the device was more like accessing a guided programme, the discussion topics presented within the interface would induce a broader range of knowledge creation outside the interface. There was a session on basic first aid; participants anonymously established that they were not aware of the methodical way of doing it the right way. Participants would often say at that point of time when someone is bleeding they would try to stop the bleed with any cloth which can potentially lead to infections. This happens in reality and

many dies during flood because of such infections in Bangladesh. Interestingly, with the CPR sessions participants would be very reluctant to demonstrate that even though they agreed that it was important to know. Further investigation on this revealed that, as because male-female were together they felt a bit awkward. Even changing the pattern and making separate groups didn't solve the problem completely. Though the training environment was made friendly this lack of enthusiasm in doing certain tasks raises important questions on how to do it in an acceptable way?

It was identified from the participant discussions that communication in informal channel exists but is less participatory among the family members. Participants expressed that often they will have to ask the other family members to participate in any planning where generally the elders take the central stage and the younger adults contributes less considering they have very little decision making power. It is common that the female members would stay at home taking care of household chores while the male counterpart would engage in economic activities. In present times the scenario is changing because of micro credit financing as it is enabling many women to take part in various economic activities. Even then, women are the one who is more aware of the house and the surroundings. So it is important that they are completely aware of their roles in disaster preparedness. To reflect this need, the content had a dedicated session on family participation and gender roles. Some of the participants felt that awareness building should have family activity so that other family members realize its importance. Participants were required to create an emergency plan and make it accessible to all family members. The plan required them to jot down all the member contact details, information about the nearest safety shelter, a contact that is not local but can be contacted to inform about present location. Participants throughout the programme contributed towards their self-guided learning. To make them spatially aware they were asked to take pictures of hazardous elements on their surroundings and also note elements that they would put in their emergency kit. These picture taking activity make the programme interesting to the participants. Intervention from the researcher was only two days out of the (maximum) five days' training. In those direct intervened days participants learned about first aid and creating emergency kit.

To sum up, during the training participants created an emergency plan and shared that with their family members, participants reflected on their past experiences and discussed the best practices, they learned step by step procedures to be better informed and better prepared, learned to create an emergency kit, basic first aid skills were adopted too. They have enjoyed the self-guided learning as they were learning at their own pace and they already developed a sense that this is made for their locality and this will help in near future. Furthermore, this reflected the 'connectedness' element of learning (Goodyear, 2005) spread across a network of people who perhaps have faced similar disaster events in the past. Use of tablet device induced learning has enabled the participants to connect their experience and skills with others. At the end majority of the participants wanted their other family members to have similar training to raise their awareness too indicating the programme had managed to be 'inclusive' to those who are normally excluded in the education system.

## Conclusion

In this paper, various underlying factors of inclusive education were looked into. Achieving inclusivity in any form is a tough task in developing and poor countries. Whereas lack of resources can force educators to adopt a botched 'one size fits approach' to inclusive education, which may result in undervaluing local knowledge, skills and their expertise. Furthermore, as mentioned in the beginning of this paper, in Bangladesh, the notion of inclusivity is tied up with children of special needs only. This makes the scope of inclusivity smaller and gives the socio-cultural context of Bangladesh the current notion of inclusivity does not valuate the other categories of the learners who also have the right to get educated. So to summarize the paper, blindly replicating the westernized approach of inclusive education in many ways limits the way inclusivity can be defined, explained and practiced. It is of great importance to understand the local needs then the next step will be to incorporate that with reference to the western systems to have a better scope of success. Issues presented in this paper will may also be applicable to neighbour countries of Bangladesh where the inclusivity concept is similarly neglected.

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