



AMERICAN JOURNAL OF DEVELOPMENT STUDIES (AJDS)

ISSN: 2837-6676 (ONLINE)

VOLUME 2 ISSUE 2 (2024)

PUBLISHED BY
E-PALLI PUBLISHERS, DELAWARE, USA



Unveiling Hope-A Beacon for Special Children: Perspective Ali Akber Memorial Autistic School at Thakurgaon District in Bangladesh

Mst. Ronita Parvin Rune¹, Md. Sohel Rana^{2*}

Article Information

Received: December 01, 2023

Accepted: January 09, 2024

Published: October 21, 2024

Keywords

Autistic, Beacon, Community Support, Education, Empowerment

ABSTRACT

This article explores the transformative impact of Ali Akber Memorial Autistic School in Ranisankail, Thakurgaon, Bangladesh, serving as a beacon for the perspectives of special children. Delving into the unique approaches and educational methodologies employed, the narrative unveils hope through tailored interventions and inclusive strategies. Through first-hand accounts and success stories, the article sheds light on how the school fosters a supportive environment, emphasizing the potential and abilities of autistic children. As a tribute to late Member of Parliament of the People's Republic of Bangladesh after liberation, Ali Akber's memory, this piece highlights the school's role in providing education and championing understanding, acceptance, and empowerment for autistic individuals in the community. In essence, "Unveiling Hope" invites us to reflect on the transformative power of education and collective efforts in fostering hope, resilience, and inclusivity for special children. As we envision a more inclusive future, the lessons drawn from the Ali Akber Memorial Autistic School, Ranisankail, Thakurgaon can guide us in creating educational landscapes that celebrate diversity, promote understanding, and ultimately unveil hope for every special child.

INTRODUCTION

In a world where diversity and inclusivity are increasingly recognized as essential facets of education, the journey towards understanding and supporting autistic children has taken centre stage. Amidst this narrative of acceptance and empowerment, the Ali Akber Memorial Autistic School in Ranisankail, Thakurgaon emerges as a beacon of hope, fostering an environment that not only embraces the unique qualities of autistic children but also amplifies their perspectives. Juvonen *et al.* (2019) explored the challenges and opportunities of promoting social inclusion in educational settings, focusing on the complexities of fostering inclusive environments.

The educational landscape for individuals on the autism spectrum has seen remarkable transformations, with a growing emphasis on tailored approaches that cater to the diverse needs of autistic learners. As we delve into the nuanced realm of Ali Akber Memorial Autistic School, this article aims to unveil the hope encapsulated within its walls and the broader community it serves. By exploring the innovative educational strategies employed at the school, we endeavor to shed light on the transformative impact it has on the lives of autistic children, emphasizing their potential and contributions to society. Sakari *et al.* (2019) investigated the struggles for inclusive education in Japan and Finland by examining teachers' attitudes towards inclusive practices, providing insights into the challenges faced in both educational contexts.

In this exploration, we navigate through the existing literature on inclusive education, community involvement, and the unique perspectives of autistic children. By doing so, we lay the groundwork for a comprehensive

understanding of the Ali Akber Memorial Autistic School's role as a beacon for change. As we embark on this journey, the aim is not only to showcase the school's accomplishments but also to contribute to a broader discourse on creating inclusive spaces that celebrate diversity and pave the way for a more empathetic and understanding society. Join us in unveiling the hope that emanates from Ali Akber Memorial Autistic School in Ranisankail, Thakurgaon, as we explore its profound impact on the perspectives and lives of autistic children.

In recent years, the discourse on inclusive education and support for individuals on the autism spectrum has gained prominence globally. Despite this positive shift, there remains a significant gap in understanding and addressing the unique needs and perspectives of autistic children, particularly in diverse cultural contexts such as Bangladesh. The establishment of the Ali Akber Memorial Autistic School in Thakurgaon signifies a promising step towards filling this void. This institution not only caters to the educational needs of autistic children but also serves as a symbol of hope for fostering acceptance and empowerment within the community.

Haug (2017) delved into an exploration of the understanding of inclusive education, scrutinizing the disparities between ideals and reality. The Ali Akber Memorial Autistic School, Ranisankail, Thakurgaon stands as a beacon of hope in its dedication to providing specialized education and support services for children with ASD in Thakurgaon District. By illuminating special children's experiences and the school's efforts in mitigating challenges, this article underscores the critical role of educational institutions in fostering inclusivity and

¹ Ali Akber Memorial Autistic School, Thakurgaon, Bangladesh

² Cantonment Public School & College, Saidpur Cantonment, Bangladesh

* Corresponding author's e-mail: sohelrana8941@gmail.com

empowering children with diverse learning needs. The existing literature reveals a scarcity of research focusing on the experiences, challenges, and successes of autistic children in the specific cultural and educational landscape of Thakurgaon District, Bangladesh. This study aims to address this gap by delving into the unique context of the Ali Akber Memorial Autistic School. The specific challenges faced by autistic children in this region, as well as the effectiveness of the school's educational approaches, remain areas that require comprehensive exploration. Understanding these intricacies is crucial for informing future educational practices and community initiatives that can better support autistic individuals in Thakurgaon and beyond. In their study on inclusion in Norway, Flem and Killer (2000) delved into the practical application of ideology, shedding light on the complexities and nuances of inclusive education in the Norwegian context.

Background

In Bangladesh, the awareness and understanding of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and other developmental disabilities have been gradually evolving. However, many children with special needs still face significant challenges in accessing appropriate educational resources and support systems. The Ali Akber Memorial Autistic School, located in Thakurgaon District, stands as a critical institution that addresses these gaps, providing specialized education and rehabilitation services for children with autism and other developmental disabilities. This school serves not only as an educational facility but also as a community support system for families grappling with the complexities of raising children with special needs.

Despite the progress made in recent years, societal stigma and lack of adequate resources continue to impede the development of inclusive practices in education. The experiences of children and families navigating these challenges are crucial for informing future initiatives aimed at improving the quality of life for individuals with ASD. The unique perspective of the Ali Akber Memorial Autistic School provides a valuable case study that sheds light on the multifaceted needs of special children in Bangladesh and highlights the importance of tailored educational approaches.

Significance

The significance of this study lies in its potential to unveil the stories of resilience and hope among children with autism and their families, particularly within the context of the Ali Akber Memorial Autistic School. By focusing on the experiences of these special children, the research aims to highlight effective strategies employed by the school in fostering an inclusive and supportive learning environment.

Moreover, the findings from this study can serve as a model for similar institutions in Bangladesh and beyond, advocating for the development of educational frameworks that prioritize the unique needs of children

with special needs. By documenting the successes and challenges faced by the school, this research contributes to the broader discourse on autism education and inclusion, providing insights for policymakers, educators, and practitioners seeking to enhance services for children with ASD. This study holds significance on multiple levels. Firstly, it contributes to the existing body of knowledge on autism and inclusive education by providing insights into a specific cultural context. Secondly, the findings are expected to inform educational policymakers, educators, and community leaders about effective strategies for supporting autistic children in Bangladesh. Thirdly, by highlighting the role of the Ali Akber Memorial Autistic School, the study aims to inspire similar initiatives and contribute to the on-going global conversation on creating inclusive spaces for individuals with diverse abilities. Ultimately, the research endeavours to uncover hope and illuminate a path towards a more understanding and inclusive society for autistic children in Thakurgaon and beyond.

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The primary objectives of this study are to unveil the multifaceted aspects of the Ali Akber Memorial Autistic School in Thakurgaon, with a focus on its impact on the perspectives and lives of autistic children. Specific objectives include:

- i. To examine the tailored educational approaches implemented at the Ali Akber Memorial Autistic School.
- ii. To explore the unique challenges faced by autistic children in the Thakurgaon cultural context.
- iii. To understand the perspectives and experiences of autistic children attending the school.
- iv. To assess the significance of the school as a beacon for inclusive education and community empowerment.

Ultimately, this study emphasizes the importance of understanding and supporting the individual journeys of children with special needs, showcasing the Ali Akber Memorial Autistic School as a beacon of hope and a catalyst for change in the community.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature round autism and inclusive education underscores the significance of tailored interventions in fostering positive outcomes for autistic children.

Studies emphasize the need for specialized educational approaches to accommodate diverse learning styles and needs. Ali Akber Memorial Autistic School in Thakurgaon aligns with these principles, implementing innovative methodologies that prioritize individualized support. Florian (2014) explored the criteria for evidence in the context of inclusive education, highlighting its importance within the European framework. Haug (2010) presented a variety of approaches to empirical research on inclusive education, making a substantial contribution to the Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research.

Research consistently highlights the positive impact of inclusive educational environments on the development and well-being of autistic individuals. The school's commitment to creating a supportive atmosphere is in line with global best practices, promoting acceptance and understanding within the community. Al-Zyoudi (2006) conducted an investigation into the viewpoints of teachers concerning inclusive education within Jordanian schools. Blackman (2016) undertook an examination of the attitudes of Barbadian students toward including peers with disabilities in mainstream education. Flem and Killer (2000) executed a study on the concept of inclusion in Norway, concentrating on the analysis of ideology in practical application.

Moreover, literature underscores the importance of community involvement in supporting autistic individuals. Ali Akber Memorial Autistic School's role as a beacon extends beyond the classroom, contributing to a broader societal shift towards inclusivity. This aligns with the growing recognition that fostering acceptance and empowerment requires collaborative efforts involving educators, families, and the community at large. Koster *et al.* (2010) examined the social participation of students with special needs in regular primary education in the Netherlands. OECD (2012) articulated the OECD perspective on education in 2013, with a specific emphasis on highlighting inclusive education as a fundamental aspect. Shyman (2015) proposed a definition of inclusive education that is globally sensitive and rooted in principles of social justice. Sunko (2006) investigated the viewpoints of students in teacher education regarding the integration and inclusion of children with special needs.

It becomes evident that the perspectives of autistic children are often marginalized. This article aims to contribute to filling this gap by unveiling the unique perspectives nurtured at the Ali Akber Memorial Autistic School. By doing so, it not only adds to the growing body of knowledge on inclusive education but also emphasizes the transformative potential of schools like Ali Akber's in shaping a more inclusive and understanding society. Sharma (2019) conducted a study on parents' attitudes toward inclusive education in early years settings in Bangkok, Thailand. UNESCO (1994) adopted the Salamanca Statement, a pivotal document in the advocacy for inclusive education, during the World Conference on Special Needs Education.

Zelina (2020) carried out interviews with teachers to

collect insights into their perspectives on inclusive education. These pieces of works on autism and inclusive education underscore the significance of tailored intervention in fostering positive outcomes for children on the autism spectrum.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research employs a qualitative exploratory case study design to comprehensively investigate the educational practices and experiences of autistic children at the Ali Akber Memorial Autistic School in Thakurgaon. The case study approach allows for an in-depth understanding of the school's contextual nuances, providing rich insights into the perspectives of educators and autistic children. The study's participants include educators, parents, and autistic children enrolled at the Ali Akber Memorial Autistic School. Purposeful sampling will be employed to ensure diversity in perspectives and experiences.

Data Collection

Interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted with 15 educators, 30 parents, and 30 autistic children to gather qualitative data on their experiences, challenges, and perceptions related to the school's educational environment.

Observations

Participant observation was carried out to capture the day-to-day activities within the school, shedding light on the implementation of tailored educational approaches.

Document Analysis

Relevant documents, such as educational materials, school policies, and success stories, were analysed to supplement the data collected through interviews and observations.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring themes and patterns within the qualitative data. Transcripts from interviews, field notes from observations, and data from document analysis were coded and analysed to extract key insights into the educational strategies and experiences at the Ali Akber Memorial Autistic School.

Ethical Considerations

Informed Consent

Prior to participation, all participants were provided with detailed information about the study, and their informed consent was obtained.

Anonymity and Confidentiality

Participants' identities would be kept confidential, and any personal information will be anonymized during data analysis and reporting.

Respect for Autonomy

Given the unique needs of autistic children, special attention will be paid to ensuring a comfortable

and supportive environment during interviews and observations.

Limitations

The study's findings would be specific to the context of the Ali Akber Memorial Autistic School in Ranisankail, Thakurgaon and may not be fully generalizable to other settings. Potential biases in participant responses, including social desirability bias, would be acknowledged and mitigated through rapport-building and a transparent research approach.

Data Validation

Triangulation of data sources, member-checking, and peer review were employed to enhance the credibility and validity of the study's findings. This rigorous approach aims to provide a comprehensive and reliable exploration of the Ali Akber Memorial Autistic School as a beacon for autistic children's perspectives in Thakurgaon.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Tailored Educational Approaches

The study revealed that the Ali Akber Memorial Autistic School employs a range of innovative and tailored educational approaches; including individualized learning plans, sensory-friendly environments, and specialized teaching methodologies. These findings underscore the school's commitment to addressing the diverse needs of autistic children, providing an inclusive educational setting that fosters individual growth and development. The tailored educational approaches employed by the Ali Akber Memorial Autistic School align with global best practices emphasizing individualized learning plans and sensory-friendly environments. This concordance suggests that the school's strategies are culturally relevant and share commonalities with effective inclusive education models worldwide. It underscores the universal need for personalized approaches to accommodate the diverse needs of autistic learners.

Unique Challenges Faced by Autistic Children

The research identified specific challenges faced by autistic children in the Thakurgaon cultural context, including societal stigmatization, limited awareness, and a scarcity of support networks. Understanding these challenges is crucial for contextualizing the significance of the Ali Akber Memorial Autistic School as a beacon, as it addresses educational needs and contributes to dismantling societal barriers through awareness and community engagement. The identification of societal stigmatization, limited awareness, and a lack of support networks as challenges faced by autistic children in Thakurgaon resonates with findings in diverse cultural contexts globally. This comparative insight highlights the pervasive nature of challenges confronting autistic individuals and underscores the need for multifaceted interventions that extend beyond the educational sphere to address societal attitudes and foster community support.

Perspectives and Experiences of Autistic Children

Through in-depth interviews and observations, the study illuminated the perspectives and experiences of autistic children attending the school, showcasing their resilience, talents, and the transformative impact of the school on their self-esteem. These insights highlight the importance of giving voice to autistic children and emphasize the profound positive influence that tailored education can have on their well-being and sense of identity. The study's emphasis on giving voice to autistic children aligns with a growing body of literature recognizing the importance of centering the experiences and perspectives of individuals with autism.

The comparative perspective emphasizes the universal significance of amplifying the voices of autistic individuals, reinforcing the transformative impact that such empowerment can have on their overall well-being.

Significance of the School as a Beacon for Inclusive Education

The research demonstrated that the Ali Akber Memorial Autistic School plays a pivotal role not only in providing education but also in fostering community understanding, acceptance, and support for autistic individuals. The school's broader impact on the community aligns with the global movement toward inclusive education and signifies its role as a beacon not only for Thakurgaon but also as a model for similar initiatives globally. The Ali Akber Memorial Autistic School's role in fostering community understanding and acceptance aligns with global trends promoting inclusive education as a means to challenge societal norms and create more accepting communities. This comparative observation underscores the school's potential as a model for other communities globally, emphasizing the interconnectedness of inclusive education with broader societal shifts in attitudes towards neurodiversity.

Overall Impact and Implications

The study indicates that the Ali Akber Memorial Autistic School contributes significantly to unveiling hope for autistic children in Thakurgaon by addressing educational gaps, challenging societal norms, and creating an environment where these children can thrive. The school's success offers valuable lessons for educators, policymakers, and communities worldwide, emphasizing the potential for positive change when tailored educational approaches are coupled with community engagement and awareness. The study's findings on the overall impact of the Ali Akber Memorial Autistic School resonate with literature emphasizing the positive outcomes of inclusive education on the well-being and development of individuals with autism. The comparative perspective strengthens the argument for the scalability and adaptability of the school's model, suggesting that similar initiatives may yield positive outcomes in diverse cultural and geographical contexts.

LIMITATION

The study acknowledges limitations, including its specific focus on one school in Thakurgaon. Generalizability to other contexts should be approached with caution. Future research should explore the scalability of the school's model and further investigate the long-term outcomes for autistic children who receive education within such specialized settings. Acknowledging the study's limitations and the need for caution in generalizing findings aligns with scholarly discussions emphasizing the context-specific nature of research on autism and inclusive education. This comparative reflection underscores the on-going challenge in research to balance the specificity of local contexts with the broader applicability of findings, guiding future studies to adopt nuanced approaches in examining inclusive education initiatives.

The findings of this current research illuminate crucial aspects of its impact on autistic children's perspectives and experiences. In the context of inclusive education for individuals on the autism spectrum, a comparative discussion with existing literature enriches our understanding of the school's unique contributions and potential implications for broader initiatives. The above interpretations to results of this study underscore the multifaceted impact of the Ali Akber Memorial Autistic School in Thakurgaon, positioning it as a beacon that not only addresses educational needs but also contributes to the broader societal shift towards understanding, acceptance, and empowerment for autistic children. The study's findings hold implications for educators, policymakers, and communities striving to create inclusive environments that celebrate diversity and unveil hope for individuals with autism. The comparative discussion positions the Ali Akber Memorial Autistic School as a noteworthy exemplar within the global discourse on autism and inclusive education. The study's findings, when viewed in conjunction with existing literature, provide valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and advocates seeking to create inclusive spaces that unveil hope for autistic individuals, not only in Thakurgaon but also globally. The school's success offers a compelling narrative, urging stakeholders worldwide to consider the holistic implications of inclusive education for the well-being and empowerment of individuals on the autism spectrum.

CONCLUSIONS

This current research work provides a compelling exploration of the challenges faced by special children in accessing education and support, focusing on the unique perspective of the Ali Akber Memorial Autistic School. Through a comprehensive examination of the prevailing challenges and a critical analysis of recent interventions, this article sheds light on the importance of addressing the distinctive needs of children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) in the context of Bangladesh. The challenges identified in the article, such as limited resources and societal stigma, echo broader issues facing

special education globally. However, the discussion also highlights the importance of recent work, encompassing studies and interventions, which has significantly contributed to the evolving landscape of autism education. The strides made in understanding autism and refining educational strategies underscore the continuous need for evidence-based practices and innovative approaches to enhance the quality of life for special children. As we navigate the complexities of providing inclusive education, the Ali Akber Memorial Autistic School serves as a model, inspiring further research, advocacy, and policy development in the realm of special education in Bangladesh and beyond. By emphasizing the importance of a collaborative and interdisciplinary approach, this article encourages stakeholders, including educators, policymakers, and community members, to work together to dismantle barriers and create an environment where every child, regardless of their abilities, can thrive.

Acknowledgments

The authors are profoundly grateful to the founder and the chairman of the Governing Body of this institution namely Mrs Selina Jahan Lita, Member of Parliament, Bangladesh (Ex), Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh and her Better-half Professor (retired) Md. Anwarul Islam for their dedicated guidance and patronization in connection to this research work regarding this institution. The authors are also thankful to all the sincere faculty members, staff and the beneficiaries of this specialized institution.

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