

## **Practitioner Paper**

# **Braille Champions: Inclusive and Community Development Approach to Support Children with Visual Impairment - Experience of Sightsavers Bangladesh**

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## **Introduction**

Braille champions are the resource persons at community level who support children and persons with visual impairments to learn Braille. Most of the Braille champions are trained persons with visual impairments, interested family members of children with visual impairment and community members. In this paper, the experience of Sightsavers Bangladesh utilizing the Braille champions or community resource persons in supporting visually impaired community members in education, are described.

In Bangladesh, children with disabilities are among the most marginalized groups to be included in the regular education system, especially children with visual impairment. Most of the people believe that the children with visual impairment cannot be enrolled in mainstream regular schools and they cannot be educated with other sighted children. As a result, they are treated as severely challenged children and placed at special setting/residential schools. In mainstream schools, only 4% children with disabilities attend, but there are no children with visual impairment (Handicap International [HI] & National Forum of Organizations Working with the Disabled [NFOWD], 2001).

It is believed by the school authorities as well as the teachers that the regular teachers cannot learn Braille. It is very difficult and time consuming to apply teaching learning techniques for the children with visual impairment for a regular school teacher. Thus, the school authority has not been interested to enroll any children with visual impairment. Another reason is the lack of teaching learning capacity through inadequate teachers' training on how to teach children with visual impairment. They do not have the information and experience of teaching blind and low vision children in inclusive settings. As a result children with visual impairment are not admitted and supported in the regular schools by the school authorities. Community people also do not have information about the educational facilities for children with visual impairments. They also feel that the children with visual impairment cannot study in schools with other children (Sightsavers, 2009; 2010; 2011).

Different organizations/NGOs have been implementing inclusive education in regular schools for children with disabilities in Bangladesh including the children with visual impairments for last few years. These organizations include the Centre for Disability in Development (CDD), and Sightsavers, Child Sight Foundation. There is, therefore, an increasing awareness of how inclusive education initiatives can improve the situation of children with visual impairment in regular schools and local communities, if the communities and school authorities are somehow engaged with the initiative.

Sightsavers Bangladesh country office is showcasing inclusive education practice in regular government primary and secondary schools. The trained government school teachers are actively involved in teaching children with visual impairment (total blind and low vision) with prior orientation on inclusive education and disability (Sightsavers, 2009; 2010; 2011; 2012). They are also receiving training on Braille reading and writing and specific inclusive teaching learning techniques in an inclusive classroom. The Sightsavers Inclusive Education program includes-

- Capacity building initiatives through training of teachers and government officials on inclusive education, disability issues, specific teaching learning approaches and techniques for the children with visual impairments and other types of children with disabilities, Braille, low vision issues etc.
- Provision for supply of educational materials (Braille frame with stylus, Taylor board with dices for mathematics of visually impaired learners, Braille alphabet books in Bangla and English with mathematical signs and Braille textbooks)
- Provision for supply of assistive devices (like-white cane)
- School and classroom adaptation
- Awareness-raising and sensitization activities at different levels stakeholders.

Simultaneously, continuous advocacy initiatives at local and national levels occurred. For example, regular meetings with local and central level government education officials and arranging exposure visits for Education Ministry level high officials at the intervened areas of inclusive education practices by Sightsavers has created significant changes in the education scenario for children with disabilities in selected regular schools in Narshingdi, Sunamgonj and Cox's Bazar districts. After showcasing these practices to the concerned government people, they were highly sensitized with the effort of Sightsavers' inclusive education interventions involving the community resource persons (Sightsavers, 2010; 2011; 2012).

### **Approach: Building capacity of Braille champions**

Besides building the capacity of the school teachers on Braille and inclusive education, and to involve the community people in the process of implementing inclusive education, to support children with visual impairments, Sightsavers Bangladesh initiated the 'Braille champion' approach. This focuses on community development and sustainability with prior consultations with community people, school teachers and school authorities (Sightsavers, 2012a). To build the capacity of community resource pool on Braille learning, some illiterate

visually impaired community self-help group members were trained on Braille writing and reading with the support of trained 'Community Educators' (the trained project staff of Sightsavers supported projects). In this process, some parents and family members of children with visual impairment, who wanted to support their child or brother/sisters with visual impairments to complete their education in regular government schools were involved and they also received the training on Braille. At the beginning, only 15 persons were trained on this, gradually, the number of persons increased, as there was a great need from the community people. All these trained persons are now the 'Braille Champions' or trained resource persons on Braille in their own community and they are continuously supporting the children with visual impairment and other persons in learning Braille.

First, the process of building the capacity of Braille champions started with a basic orientation on Braille by the trained education project staff to persons with visual impairment from the community who had no orientation on Braille. To teach Braille to these Braille champions, different types of tactile objects were used in orientation for practicing pre Braille techniques at a preliminary level. These materials have different textiles such as, lentils, rice, sticks, strings, piece of clothes (cotton, silk, woolen), piece of papers (plain, offset, sand paper, art paper) etc. These materials are pasted on papers so that the persons with visual impairment can easily touch these with their fingertips. Some strings/tactile lines were made on different pieces of papers and with fingertips they follow the lines, which helped them to learn tracking with fingertips properly. This helped them to practice pre Braille techniques and gradually their tactile sensation increased.

After practicing to feel these tactile objects, the Braille alphabet books both in Bangla and English language with mathematical signs were introduced to them. These books were developed and printed by Sightsavers Bangladesh country office for practice tracking Braille alphabets through touch sensation. While touching the Braille printed alphabets in several lines, learners can memorize the position of Braille dots. Thus they are easily learning to write and read in Braille. They are practicing reading and writing Braille on regular basis and now all the Braille champions are following the same process to support the children with visual impairment in their nearby area. At the same time, they are learning to do simple mathematics using Taylor board with dice and transferring the knowledge to the VI learners at a community level (Sightsavers, 2012a). Interested parents and siblings/family members of children with visual impairment were also oriented on Braille through this process on how to teach Braille to a visually impaired child. It has been seen that, after this training, the trained persons started to provide teaching learning support on Braille to the visually impaired learners in their schools and home. The visually impaired students mentioned that it is helping them to progress in learning Braille easily as they can now get help in their home too (Sightsavers, 2010; 2011; 2012).

Now the trained visually impaired self help group members and parents/family members of children with visual impairment and community volunteers are providing educational support in writing and reading Braille to the children in their own home and community. The children with visual impairment are also happy to get this support in their own home. They seem to be more confident to learn as they can access some elderly persons with visual impairment and their family members to support them as their educators, besides the trained regular teachers at schools (Sightsavers, 2010; 2011; 2012). The community people are also sensitized with this

effort and now they believe that the people with visual impairment can also read and write and they can contribute in their community and support others in education too. These Braille champions are now recognized as resource persons in their own community (Sightsavers, 2010; 2011; 2012).

### Conclusion

Sightsavers Bangladesh is demonstrating the Braille champion approach, which is creating mass awareness in the community and ensuring more involvement and participation of community people in the process of implementing inclusive education of persons with visual impairment and children. Thus, illiterate persons with visual impairment are becoming literate and the children with visual impairment are getting community level support in learning Braille. The education officials from local government and school authorities are highly impressed with the demonstration of such initiatives of building capacity of the community on inclusive education through learning Braille. In future, Sightsavers is planning to utilize this resource pool on Braille at a community level in different districts of Bangladesh, to contribute to make the inclusive education more community focused for the children with visual impairments. It is hoped that this approach/evidence will convince the government and other concerned agencies and NGOs, to understand the need of education for the members with visual impairments of the community and to help them to replicate this approach through effective planning.

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