



From a different perspective

Given a warm welcome at all the special needs institutions she visited,

Alison Wagner had a memorable trip to Bangladesh

In February 2011 I spent a week in Bangladesh on a trip sponsored by the British Council looking at special needs education. I was part of a delegation of 14 teachers from the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. We visited schools and organisations supporting the education and rehabilitation of children with special educational needs in the capital Dhaka and in Sylhet. In Tower Hamlets nearly a third of the population is of Bangladeshi origin and I wanted to gain insight into the cultural background of the families I work with and the challenges of enhancing inclusive education in a developing country.

In 1990, legislation introduced compulsory education for all at primary level in Bangladesh. However, due to economic circumstances many families are unable to fulfil this obligation. Drop-out rates also remain high due to the system of having to pass exams at the end of the year to go up to the next class; this is a major barrier for children with learning difficulties. The number of disabled children in schools is extremely low, with the majority placed in separate special schools which cannot accommodate all children with disabilities. There is growing interest among educators and policy makers in providing more inclusive education but there is no central or local government co-ordination or funding for this.

In Sylhet we visited the Government School for the Deaf. The pupils were all keen to communicate with us through a mix of Bengali Sign Language and their own signs. They welcomed our delegation warmly, lined up smartly outside their classrooms and signed the English alphabet for us. Classrooms were dimly lit and bare, with only rows of desks and a blackboard. The headteacher expressed concern that he had few trained staff and a lack of materials so children had to learn mostly through writing. None of these pupils had hearing aids as these are prohibitively expensive for most families. The school teaches science, Bangla (the national language) and religious studies using national textbooks. Parents have to apply for a place and 60 pupils are admitted annually. Last year 30 children were turned away.

The enthusiasm for education against all odds came over strongly on our visit. In Sylhet we visited the Bholananda Night School where boys from poor families who work during the day can come from 6–10pm. Despite exhaustion, they attend classes and



many achieve outstanding results. The headteacher proudly told us that 11 out of 12 pupils have recently passed the Secondary School Certificate exam.

In Dhaka we visited an audiology clinic attached to a large hospital in the Mohakhali district. The clinic is run by the Society for Assistance for Hearing-Impaired Children, a voluntary non-government organisation established in February 1987. It is here that audiological testing takes place. The clinic also has a school attached – The Rosi Flower Integrated Pre-School for Hearing-Impaired Children – and we were privileged to visit many classes of three to six year olds with moderate and severe hearing loss. We heard the children singing and saw them enjoying circle games in a supportive environment accompanied by their parents. We saw excellent practice, with children learning to listen and use their bodyworn hearing aids which families can rent from the clinic. The school can take 160 children in two shifts, with 16 teachers for every 80 children. Many of the children go on to attend mainstream primary schools as the early intervention helps them to develop their language. Some children who can afford it pay an annual fee to attend the school (1,200–6,000 Taka or £10–50) and around 50% benefit from free places.

Despite all the economic challenges the high value placed on education by all those we met in Bangladesh was inspiring, as was the personal commitment of many working in the field. The warm welcome we received as a group was memorable and the openness and willingness to learn from outsiders was refreshing; we have much to learn from this attitude. There was a pragmatic approach to problems, which were faced with a positive spirit and the enthusiasm to take on challenges.

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