

# The impact of COVID-19 on inclusive education for children from marginal groups in Bangladesh during school closures and school re-openings: perspective, challenges and way forward.

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## Abstract

*The elimination of inequality is an important factor in achieving equity and inclusion that can be achieved through the implementation of inclusive education. It is safe to say that students, teachers, officials, and parents do not have this practice because of the closure of schools during COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the longtime school closure has posed a serious challenge to the inclusive education agenda. On the one hand, COVID-19 is harming marginalized people socio-economically, on the other hand, it is creating learning gaps for children from marginal groups, which is changing the children's mental and well-being environment. This following discussion describes the reason of marginalization and the impact of marginalization on learning outcomes of students during school closures. This study will show the initiatives of the country to address the different needs of children from marginal groups during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study will investigate how much damage is being done to the marginalized population due to during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the negative impact of it has on the well-being of children. This study looks at how the learning gap that has been created since school has been closed for so long can be filled; At the same time, after the reopening of the school, it will discuss how to create a safe and balanced learning environment by bringing back children from marginal groups who have been out of school for a long time. In addition, this following discussion describes the challenges of inclusive education these are present barricades for marginalized students during school closures and school re-openings in primary education. This study investigates the impact of the ongoing offline and online activities in primary schools in Bangladesh that is the focusing issue of inclusion for children from marginal groups during school closures. This study may help educational professionals to promote inclusive education during covid-19 pandemic situation and they can make a recovery plan for the school re-openings emphasizing inclusive education for children from marginal groups.*

**Key words:** Inclusive education, Children from marginal groups, learning gap, COVID-19, School closures, School re-openings.

## Introduction:

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is having a massive impact on children from marginal groups and the most important agendas are how they can learn and well-being (UNESCO, 2021). The importance of inclusive education in a non-discriminatory society is immense which ensures inclusion of all children in the same education system irrespective of gender, religion, caste, language, culture, rich, and poor (Islam et al, n.d). According to Armstrong (2011) inclusive education is difficult to define because of many interpretations and different understandings but Ainscow et al (2006) cited in McAuliffe (2018) underpins that inclusion means the participation of all kinds of people without any classification. So, Inclusive education is a very important agenda for making an inclusive society. During COVID-19 Pandemic, all level students are out of their respective educational institution in Bangladesh (Barua, 2020). So, it has a propound negative impact on students' learning outcomes, exclusively on children from marginal groups whose basic, foundational learning is not strong to begin with (Ahmed, 2020) that can make various challenges to promote inclusive education. So, inclusive education should become a significant issue that is now at theoretical stage in this country (UNICEF,2003). For practicing it, many policies and acts have been developed internationally and locally but there are huge gaps between theory and practice. Bangladesh is also a signatory country of international declaration of inclusive education and there are some articles of Bangladesh

constitution (1971) in favor of inclusion. Despite this legislation framework for promoting the condition of school experience for children from marginal groups, researchers think that this is still an issue that needs particular focus (Ahsan and Mullick, 2013; UNESCO, 2002; Ahamed et al, 2015; Rahaman, 2017; Charema, 2010; Malak et al, 2014; Kawser et al, 2016; cited in Acharja et al, 2021).

The current COVID-19 situation has pushed the inclusion agenda even more strongly because children from marginal groups are affected more for the limitations of socio-economic conditions of their families (UNICEF,2007). This pandemic situation impact on economic flow in Bangladesh that increase the jobless people and this impact has created an unexpected situation in socio-economic sector in Bangladesh (Kumar and Pinky,2020). Recent statistics of International Labor Organization show that COVID-19 pandemic has lost 50% of the world's population and left 1.6 billion unemployed. Moreover, unplanned lockdowns in developing countries like Bangladesh have further deteriorated the overall socio-economic situation which has affected the education and mental health of children (Paul et al, 2021), specially who are slam children, children from street bagger, Nomads, Bedouin, day laborers, domestic workers, street vendors and disadvantaged groups, are at high risk because of covid-19 pandemic (Hossain, 2021). This financial crisis not only impacts on livelihood of marginal people (Genoni et al., 2020) but also impacts on their children's development, learning outcomes, job prospects, well-being and behavior (UNICEF, 2007). The marginalization caused by socio-economic inequality, is basically an obstacle to the implementation of inclusive education. Kurmi (2014) also states that attentiveness of children in education depends on the socio-economic factor of parents. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many countries have been using digital pedagogical tools and virtual exchanges between students and their teachers, and among students, to distribute education as schools closed (OECD,2020). In this pandemic situation, Ministry of the Primary and Mass Education of Bangladesh has also taken many initiatives to keep touch with students in primary school, such as online class through Radio, Television, smart phone but many students cannot access this classes because of financial inconveniences, low speed internet, insufficient resources, and mental instability (Islam et al, 2020) and specially, children from marginal groups are outside of this facilities due to poverty and marginalization (UNICEF, 2020). A report of UNICEF - International Telecommunication Union focus that 63 percent of school aged children in Bangladesh have no internet access at home that establish cycles of intergenerational poverty by depriving marginalized societies (UNICEF, 2020). Teachers and parents (specially parents of children from marginal groups) also do not have enough knowledge about the technological device.

Moreover, Bangladesh has low tech environment where teachers and educational authorities are not accustomed to using digital platform to support learning for multiple children and monitoring the remote learning activities (MoPME ,2020). Teachers also have negative attitude and parents also feel uncomfortable to know the teaching learning method for their ignorance and marginalization (Ahmed et al., 2005; UNESCO,2002 cited in Acharja et al., 2021). However, many activities undertaken by the Government of Bangladesh during COVID-19 school closures, among these the recent distribution of worksheets in the homes of students can see some light through proper monitoring and cordial behavior of teachers and adults towards children from marginal groups (BRAC,2020) but disadvantaged children are also neglected in this case. Attree (2006) states that "for children living in low-income households' life can be a struggle to avoid being set apart from friends and peers" (p. 59). However, Bangladesh has made improvement in the scale and provision of access to education in recent times and gender equality is reasonable (World Bank, 2008), but poverty remains a blockade to education for children from marginal groups (Shohel, 2012) that can have a negative impact to promote inclusive education. The government of Bangladesh also has already made a recovery plan for all children to mitigate massive learning gap and this plan has been developed through a rapid consultative process with the leadership of the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (MoPME) and Ministry of Education (MoE) and the support of UNICEF (MoPME, 2020).

### **Rationale**

The purpose of the study is to explore the impact of COVID-19 pandemic during school closures that creates discrimination against and attitudes towards children from marginal groups in primary education and finding the way forward to continuity of education during school reopening highlighting marginalized students. It aims to identify the current barriers and opportunities that exist in Primary schools in Bangladesh in order to the educational administration to respond. Raising awareness locally and nationally of issues affecting children from marginal groups in education will be helpful for educational professionals. It will also become beneficial for marginal and non-marginal groups within society and educational inclusivity. Areas for teacher development can be identified that

can then be addressed to further promote inclusive education. In addition, policymakers can be benefited from current insights from teachers, parents, children, education officials, and communities on issues facing children from marginal groups in primary education during the COVID-19 school closures and school reopening, this can inform policy development.

### **Special interest**

In my professional capacity as an Education Officer in Bangladesh, part of my role involves supporting teachers to develop a positive context for both a professional and personal interest in affecting change for children from marginal groups and knowing perceptions of students, teachers, adults, education officials, and communities about school closures and school reopening. They are a particularly vulnerable group with significant issues, such as exclusion and poor educational achievements during long-term school closures and the impact of COVID-19 pandemic during school reopening. This study examines educational professionals' objectives in relation to promoting inclusive education in primary sector during school closures and school reopening that can help them to ensure the aims of inclusive education.

### **Limitations**

The researcher acknowledges that the scope of the current research study is limited by their lack of opportunity to include the perspective of all parents of children from marginal groups in Bangladesh. The researcher also acknowledge that it is not possible to reach in school due to school closures to collect data. Another limitation is the findings are likely to be geographically specific.

### **Literature review:**

Inclusive education is a vital factor of wider social inclusion. As such, a comprehensive initiative must take into account anti-discrimination outlines to fight exclusion in education and in the larger society (OECD, 2020). According to UNESCO (2005) inclusion promotes participation of children and adults and helps us to consider the diversity in backgrounds, merits, experiences and interests of children in school. Social justice and social solidarity are required for a sustainable society. Social justice is a theory and practice that fosters democratic relations and social solidarity in order to shape a society that is based on equality, liberty and respect (Benjamin and Emejulu 2012, p. 34). A study underpin that the concept of inclusive education is rooted in the social, cultural, financial, and political spheres that call for a truly balanced education opportunity for the poor and disadvantaged groups in society (Armstrong and Spandagou, 2009). However, the social challenges such as poverty, illiteracy, lack of awareness of parents, negligence of teachers influence on promoting inclusive education (Acharja et al, 2021). Poverty in society is a great curse; This curse does not allow a person to move forward and that is the origin of polarity which has to be passed down from generation to generation. This thinking has a huge impact on the children from marginal groups who are gradually putting their lives at risk. Ali and Bhuiyan (2020) underpin that during COVID-19 pandemic, a large number of people have lately become unemployed while many more are at the hazard of losing jobs. Mainly, the poor section of the population who have very small or no saving at all is the worst target of the economic breakdown. Another study also presents that COVID-19 has pushed 16.5 million people mostly rickshaw-pullers, transport workers, day laborers, street-vendors, hawkers, construction laborers and the employees of hotel, motel and restaurants back into poverty (Islam & Jahangir, 2020).

The impact of COVID-19 on worldwide poor income people who have lost their jobs and become destitute in many countries, which has also affected a large number of people in Bangladesh who are marginalized (Paul et al, 2021). Due to the continuing outbreak of the Corona virus worldwide, the World Health Organization called it a global pandemic on March 11, 2020. The first patient was identified in Bangladesh on March 8, 2020; As a result, on March 26, 2020, the government announced a nationwide lockdown. This lockdown has far-reaching implications for socio-economic and education arena, which has severely affected children from marginal groups. Bangladesh has a large education system with 21.6 million primary students and among them around 75.2% are enrolled in government primary schools (MoPME,2020). When nationwide school closures were declared on March 17, 2020; the Government of Bangladesh also realized the impactions of school closures and long-term impact on learning of children for the COVID-19 pandemic situation. However, the impact of school closures due to COVID-19 can affect every child depending on socio-economic characteristics (Rahman & Sharma, 2021). For this reason, during COVID-19 pandemic school closures, many countries have been applying digital pedagogical tools to meet the challenges of the breakdown of study for the students and these countries have taken many steps to ensure equitable and inclusive access to extra services for children from marginal groups supported by and to teachers (OECD,

2020). For this reason, Ministry of Primary and Mass Education, Bangladesh has also taken some steps like online program (Ghore Bose Shikhi) and offline program (Work sheet distribution) for primary students during COVID 19 pandemic (MoPME,2020).

Despite taking on so many actions, children from marginal groups have not benefited from these steps due to various limitations. Findings from world Bank also shows that children from well-off families are able to join online classes due to adequate facilities but children from socio- economically disadvantaged families are affected more due to infrastructural difficulties and ignorance of technological device (Rahman & Sharma, 2021). Another study also shows that Children in rural areas and from the poorest households are much less access to television, Internet or computers. Only 44% of 5–11-year-old children in rural zones and 6% of children going to the poorest wealth quintile have a television at home. This compares to 75% of urban 5–11-year-old children, and 90% for the richest wealth quintile. Equally, only 3% of rural 5–11-year-old children have a computer at home and adjacent to 0% for the poorest wealth quintile. Concerning Internet, only 30% of 5–11-year-olds in rural parts have Internet access and just 7% in the poorest wealth quintile – generally, through mobile phones. 92% of 5–11-year-old children in the poorest quintile do have a mobile phone in the home, though these will normally be low-cost feature phones, which may be able to connect to Internet but will have inadequate abilities (MoPME, 2020). So, this online program can have extra stress on students from low income and socio-economically disadvantaged who are not accustomed to use this device (Peter Green,2020 cited in BMJ,2020) that can have a massive impact on promoting Inclusive education in Bangladesh. However, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, Bangladesh was facing hard experience with issues of out of school children, low and unequal learning outcomes. According to National Student Assessments, 62% students of grade 3 did not achieve grade - relevant competencies in Mathematics, similarly among grade 5 students, only 36% students in Bangla and only 24% students in Mathematics achieved grade-relevant competencies (MoPME,2017). In this case, the skills of the children from well-off families are better than the children from marginal and disadvantaged groups (Rahman & Sharma, 2021).

A study by Sen and Hulme (2004) underpins that about 31 percent of the rural population in Bangladesh suffers the humiliation of lingering poverty–low consumption, hunger and under-nutrition, lack of access to basic health services, illiteracy and other deprivations for more than a decade. So, Ridge (2002) underpins those possessions and capabilities impact on the exclusion of poor children from two domains in particular school and social networks. Wikeley et al. (2007) also show that poverty affected children’s participation in organized out-of-school activities. A study from Shohel (2014) also comments that poverty is a great problem in Bangladesh society that effect in the educational institution to exercise quality and equity, and it impacts on the school attendance of disadvantaged children and serves as a massive barrier for social and educational inclusion. Even in COVID-19 school closures period, when the Ministry of primary and mass education, Bangladesh has organized online and offline education in the interest to continue the education system, the presence of children from marginal groups is negligible. A study from UNICEF (2020) also agree that the majority of the students from rural areas and marginalized socio-economic background cannot access remote learning opportunities due to limitation of technological devices. So, the implementation of the inclusive education policy has not been smooth and straightforward. Allan (2013) and McAuliffe (2018) categorizes the existing challenges in implementation of inclusive education into environmental, structural and attitudinal. After school re-opening, these barriers can have a massive impact on learning outcomes of children from marginal groups to complete the cycle of presence – acceptance - participation - achievement for inclusive practice (Farrell and Ainscow ,2000 cited in McAuliffe 2018).

## Research Method

The researcher's position is in the primary sector and his professional knowledge of schools provided him with an initial idea of the proportion of children from marginal groups within schools. A qualitative research design has been conducted for this study, which is suitable for the research as it can deliver an in-depth understanding of the nature of a specific phenomenon (Creswell, 1994). The sample is purposive (Dawson, 2009) as it is essential that the sample incorporate individuals who has experience in the situation of COVID-19 pandemic with children from marginal groups and consequently the participants has been selected on this basis. Semi-structured interviews have been conducted with the participants and recorded over mobile phone and lasted for approximately 15 - 25 minutes. The relaxed nature of the interview, that has already established, make a relationship between researcher and participants so that participants can speak freely and dauntlessly (Menter et al, 2011). The interviews are carried out throughout the country by maintaining the representativeness of all administrative divisions (eight divisions). sixteen districts (two from each division) have been randomly selected. An Upazilla has been picked from each selected

district through the same sampling procedure. Mainly the parents have been contacted for this assessment as primary respondents, who have provided information about their school going kids. Moreover, I have interviewed education officials, teachers, school management committee (SMC) members, and students. The parents and the key Informants have been interviewed over the phone during the period of 31 July, 2021-13 August, 2021. I have covered a total (55) of 2 education officers, 6 teachers, 3 SMC members, 32 guardians, and 12 students. All of the students have been selected from primary schools and I have covered the students via their parents. Among the selected participants, 42% of students are girls and the rest 58% are boys. 28% of Guardians are from advantaged families and the rest 72% are from disadvantaged families. On average, I have covered about 7 (seven) participants from each administrative division. Each interview has been audio recorded, and later transcribed, which allowed the researcher the freedom to focus on the conversation. Transcription of each interview has offered a complete record of what has been said in the interview and provided plentiful quotes for data analysis. Every researcher has some role so that he can find the answer to research questions; This has implications for the examination of the data for frequencies of response (Menter et al., 2011). The qualitative data have been then thematically analyzed after going through the interview transcript.

### **Ethical Consideration**

While leading research, the ethical implications of a research examination are parts of the research procedure schedule. In the present study, every participant is made conscious they can participate or refuse to involve in the interview process. A further verbal statement at the start of the interview process reminds interviewees they can withdraw at any time. When conducting research, researchers should respect to the right to privacy and anonymity of participants, and data must be conducted with confidentiality and in accordance with data protection laws (BERA, 2011; SERA, 2005; UWS, 2016). Whilst Menter et al. (2011) also note that full protection of the identity of participants is difficult, particularly within the institution where they are based. They counsel being comprehensible to participants regarding the extent to which maintaining anonymity is possible, as failure to do so can dent trust and thereby the validity of the data. For this research project, every endeavor is made to uphold confidentiality. This study will ensure the principals of equality and equity (UWS 2016) that will be conducted with participants in terms of the experience of gender, age, equity, and ethnicity and it can make a way forward to officials to support students during school closures and school reopening.

### **Findings**

This chapter focuses on the results found from the interviews of different respondents and the analysis of data. The analysis of the data focuses on the views of the parents of marginal groups and also reflects the views of students, teachers, education officials and school committee members. Five themes have been emerged from the analysis of the qualitative data of this study. The themes are the impact of Covid-19 on socio-economic condition of marginal groups, mixed attitude towards children from marginal groups during COVID-19 pandemic, marginalized children's negative experience of online and offline education during school closures, perspective of marginal groups about school closures and perspective of marginal groups about school re-openings.

#### ***Impact of COVID -19 on socio-economic condition of marginal groups***

The qualitative data shows that the COVID pandemic has had a devastating effect on their livelihoods. As a result, they cannot manage three meals a day because they do not work regularly; they cannot even think about nutritious food. This is having a serious impact on the education of children from marginal groups. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic and the healthcare problem, together with connected disruptions, are expected to enhance the adverse impacts on service, household income and livelihood in both rural and urban areas (World Bank, 2020). When people's difficult experience and their basic opportunities are challenged through fewer employment chances, lower health, poor values of education and poor housing and living conditions, then relations between people and communities also suffer (Armstrong and Spandagou, 2009). For this reason, the financial barriers of school fees for many of these children, and children's daily feelings of hunger and malnutrition, which influence their learning (Shohel, 2012). A student admits, "We cannot eat properly. So, I can't pay my attention to read because I remain always sick." A guardian also says, "I am a tea garden worker, I get 150/- taka per day. So, I cannot mitigate the demand of food, milk, and cloths for all member of my family." Poor people in all over the country have been suffering from acute lack of adequate and nutritious food, which put them at a risk of long-term health problems

(The Daily Star, 2020). A SMC member agrees that COVID impact on marginal children massively, their parents have been jobless and they also feel unsafe due to COVID-19 pandemic. A teacher also acknowledges, *“They are very poor, they are not aware of normal norms and behavior, they are living a more miserable life because of COVID pandemic.”* So, without exploring the wider issues of poverty, debt relief and health we cannot think successful inclusive education (Armstrong and Spandagou, 2009).

### ***Mixed attitude towards children from marginal groups during COVID-19 pandemic***

Every society has its individual culture, beliefs and psychological context. However, no society supports the discrimination of attitude towards marginalized people because only non-discriminatory attitude to everyone can establish equity and inclusion in society. So, Attitude is a key factor to make an inclusive society. Without positive conception of community and teachers against children from marginal groups, we cannot expect positive interaction among them. The empirical data demonstrate that positive aspect of teachers, peers, and community can bring a successful supportive environment that can help to encourage disadvantaged children to attentive their lesson and motivate their parents to support their children. A guardian says, *“My husband is very ill; With the help of my neighbors and teachers, I have been able to educate my daughters.”* Maximum students and parents agree that teachers are helpful; A headteacher also acknowledges, *“Some teachers are very positive; However, all teachers are not equal, some teachers have behavioral problems towards children from marginal groups.”* A student also acknowledges, *“The behavior of our teachers towards us is unexpected, they always scold us if we want to know anything. Even during COVID pandemic, they did not make any contact with us.”* An education officer underpins, *“In the existing social system of our country, the attitude of community people towards marginalized people is not favorable, teachers also think about who is rich and who is marginalized and thus their behavior is also controlled by the existing catalysts of the society.”* A SMC member adds, *“No matter how much our school teachers say they treat everyone equally, in fact it is not right; There is a lot of bias towards the children of marginalized people.”* However, many teachers think that it is difficult to maintain good relation with every student due to the large numbers of pupils. So, these non-supportive outset of community people that produces many problems for the school leaders in attempting to build support for the acceptance of diversity in their schools (Mullick et al 2012). During the school closures for COVID-19, the challenges have become more evident. As a result of school closures, children are moving towards learning more poverty that impact each child separately depending on socio-economically characteristics and the most disadvantaged students lose most (world bank, 2020).

### ***Negative experience of online and offline education during school closures.***

The qualitative data implies that most marginalized people do not have televisions in their homes; smartphones are a long way off. So, they are completely deprived of the benefits of digital facilities. Multiple surveys specify that a small proportion of households in Bangladesh benefits from some remote education, and there are differences, between poor and well-off households (SANEM 2021, BIGD&PPRC 2021 cited in Islam, 2021). One of the guardians says, *“We live from hand to mouth, we cannot eat properly, we can't think of a Television and a Smartphone.”* A study from BRAC (2020) shows that distance learning through TV, Radio and online classes cannot mitigate the demand of inclusiveness. Most of the children from marginal groups who are in the school of Bangladesh, they do not get adequate facilities in rural areas (Latif, 2006). Even in the ongoing online classes during COVID-19 school closures, children from marginal groups are lagging behind in the continuity of education due to lack of necessary financial facilities, internet connection, and lack of necessary devices (UNICEF,2020). The empirical data also demonstrate that the distribution of worksheets is not going to reach everyone at the marginal level. In addition, the most cases the reflection of student learning is also not going to be noticed which can have a negative impact on learning outcomes. However, most of the participant agree that worksheet is more effective tools to ensure the assessment of learning outcomes during school closures irrespective of advantaged and disadvantaged learner. However, one of the Guardians says, *“we get these worksheets every week but we cannot understand what my child writes in this paper due to our ignorance.”* Another guardian complements, *“We get worksheets in which my child writes but he cannot understand properly. so, my nephew sometimes helps him to write this worksheet.”* An education officer mentions that I do not think any effect of this worksheet is on the disadvantaged child's learning outcomes because they are not studying due to being out of school for a long time and therefore do not seem to be able to write the answers to the questions in this paper themselves. One teacher also admits, *“We distribute worksheets, but when we evaluate these, we watch that the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students in achieving learning outcomes is very clear.”*

### ***Perspective of marginal groups about school closures***

The empirical data implies that school closures have had a huge impact on children's well-being and overall development. Its negative impact is specially on children from marginal groups which has made them inattentive to their studies. A guardian says, *"Children do not want to sit at home studying at all but they pay more attention to sports."* The reason for the long-term school closures is the large learning deficit of marginalized children which will have a negative impact on the implementation of inclusive education in the future. So, during COVID-19 school closures crisis, many countries have been using online pedagogical platform (OECD, 2020) but a guardian says, *"My child is in class one; In the past, he could read well but now he cannot read properly due to school closures. He has forgotten all lesson. We have a television and at the first time, my child watched online class on Sangsad Television but he could not understand properly so now he does not agree to watch this class."* A student also acknowledges, *"I feel boar at home due to long term school closures."* A study also investigate that the mental health of school children has also been examined lately, which is even more infrequent due to social distance (Hossain et al., 2020) A guardian implies, *"We cannot expect our students will go ahead properly because advantaged children get support from their family but our children do not get this support. As a result, they have forgot norms and rules of school."* A Head Teacher argues, *"Huge learning gap has been created during school closures because about 10% - 15% of disadvantaged students are totally untouched in education system."* A study also investigates that due to COVID-19 pandemic, educational gap has been created that can increase dropout, absenteeism, and long term social-emotional impact on children (OECD, 2020).

### ***perspective of marginal groups about school re-openings***

Just as the closure of schools for a long time has created a kind of apathy among students towards education, parents have also become concerned about the mental health and well-being of their children. In-depth empirical data shows that parents and students are now missing school very much; Just as they are concerned about the huge loss of schooling, the children are also missing out on the company of their classmates. Marginalized parents are somewhat indifferent to their children due to various limitations; The COVID pandemic has exacerbated this indifference that has emerged from data analysis. They are also more dependent on the teaching method of the school, although through various means the Ministry of Primary and Mass education is trying to maintain the continuity of education but its benefits are beyond the reach of marginalized children which is why most of their members are in favor of school re-openings. One head teacher says, *"We have to think deeply to reopen school. if we want to reopen school we have to be vaccinated."* A student also agrees that he feels boar, he reads daily, his mother help him but he misses his peers and school. Most marginal guardians admit that they have no other option but to reopen the school. However, they also acknowledge that teachers need to pay special attention to their children after school reopening, otherwise they will not able to get along with advantaged children. A guardian also adds, *"After school reopening extra educational support is needed to children from marginal groups."* However, attitudes of the members of the communities and institutions towards disadvantaged children, and teacher's behavior in the classroom and out of classroom towards poor children are responsible to create a massive barrier to promote inclusive education (shohel,2012). So, after school reopening, teachers as well as community can have a major role in both reaching the most vulnerable students and keeping their family engaged in their education (OECD,2020).

### **Challenges for inclusive education during school re-openings**

**Poverty:** Due to poverty, marginalized children are unable to meet their basic needs, which has a significant impact on their education and well-being. Constantly struggling with poverty, they forget about a relatively good life. After the school opens, their malnutrition problems and lack of necessary educational materials will be a big risk. This information also came from the empirical analysis of the participants. One parent admits, *"COVID pandemic has had a negative impact on our way of life. I used to work in people's homes but now I can't. I have a hard time running my family."*

**Illiteracy and awareness:** People from marginalized groups are uneducated and relatively less aware of their rights which also affects their children. Because of this ignorance they are unable to provide minimal support to children during the COVID period which will act as an important catalyst in creating huge learning deficits in children. Keeping these marginalized children in school after the school opens is a challenge to fill the learning gap. *"They are busy with their work all day; they don't get a chance to think about their children's education. Since the school*

is closed, they think that the education is also probably closed," adds an SMC member. However, most parents admit that they also want their children to be educated.

**lack of digital device:** The digital platform that the Ministry of Primary and Mass education, Bangladesh is launching to maintain the continuity of children's education during the Covid period has a far-reaching effect that most participants believe can be continued even after the school opens. But marginal students are deprived of its benefits because of inadequate digital content, internet costs, ignorance about digital devices is a big challenge in creating this inclusive digital platform. A guardian also admits, "*We are somehow surviving, we can't afford to buy digital materials.*"

**Attitude:** Expected and positive behavior can always lead to any difficult problem. Due to the school closures for a long time, marginalized children have become inattentive to education and the positive attitude of teachers towards them is very important to fill the huge learning deficit created due to lack of necessary support but in the social context of Bangladesh, this expected behavior towards marginalized children is not seen, a SMC member adds. An education officer also admitted that some teachers are very positive but in most cases the issue of backwardness of marginalized children is passed on to them by the teachers. The challenge of student-teacher relationships needs to be negotiated within the institutional culture with input from the community. Guardians and community participation can support to enhance the positive environment for marginalized society.

**Infection:** COVID infections should be taken seriously when re-opening a school. However, the Directorate of Primary Education, Bangladesh has emphasized on creating a conducive environment for students by fully equipping the school by purchasing the necessary health care materials from various school-based allocations. However, there is still a challenge to how children to adhere to these health rules, and marginalized children are quite unaccustomed to it. "*I can't feed the children properly, how can I wash my hands with soap? we can't be as clean as I can*", a guardian adds. One head teacher also admits that re-opening of school by maintaining complete health rules is a real challenge.

## Discussion

The current COVID-19 pandemic is having a propound impact on the socio- economic conditions of poor people that impact on the students learning and living style; in addition to, the COVID-19 crisis may increase the symptoms of anxiety or other forms of mental disorders in children, adolescents and their parents (OECD,2020). Underprivileged people in all over the country has been suffering from severe lack of adequate and nutritious food, which put them at a risk of long-term health complications (The Daily Star, 2020). All participants of the interviews in this study acknowledge that COVID-19 has adversely affected their quality of life. As a result, children's health, education, and well-being are at serious risk. After all, poverty affects to children's health due to malnutrition that perform worse in school than others (Pridmore,2007). Whereas poverty is a major issue in educational quality and equity, other issues are at play which could be named as 'cultural poverty' (Shohel,2012). A study from Acharja et al., (2021) also shows that poverty creates marginalization and poverty seems to donate to children's exclusion from social networks (Redmond,2008). However, poverty mostly affects children from marginal groups; as a result, children are less likely to go to school, more likely to dropout from school and even once they are in school are more likely to be 'silently excluded' from education (Shohel and Howes, 2008). During the COVID pandemic, about 188 countries including Bangladesh have affected, and around 91% of enrolled learners are out of regular study due to school closures (UNESCO, 2021). School closures mean students lose opportunities to learn vital cognitive, social, physical, and emotional skills. Students also tend to forget part of what they have learned when they take a break from school (Cooper et al. 1996).

In Bangladesh also, where schools remained closed for more than a full academic year, learning loss is a complex issue (Islam, 2021). School closures have a propound impact on children from marginal groups. For this reason, to continue the learning options during the COVID-19 crisis, Bangladesh has rapid in retort to the educational challenges brought on by the pandemic in 2020, primarily through Ghore Boshe Sikhi, and then through Bangladesh Betar (Islam, 2021) and in addition to these programs, the MoPME has recognized teachers and officials groups to develop learning content and roll out lessons through four platforms: television, mobile phones, radio, and internet (Rahman & Sharma, 2021) . However, a study from BRAC (2020) shows that most of students are not benefited from these facilities specially who are children from marginal groups because the marginalized socio-economic

background students are unable to access these online platforms due to limited access to these devices (UNICEF,2020). In addition, disadvantaged children's Parents or caregivers face the challenge of supervising their children's distance learning in addition to other responsibilities due to lack of ignorance, limited knowledge of technology, such as housework and work-from-home (UNESCO, UNICEF, and World Bank 2020). Most of the participants of the interviews in this study admit that due to long delays, students are becoming indifferent to their studies, which has a long-term negative effect on their minds. So, the digital platform has given some relief but the marginal students are not able to take advantage of it at all. Moreover, those who are able also have poor management because it is not working as a learning aid for the student. As a result, these students are likely to lose their learning outcomes (Kuhfeld, et al., 2020) if countries take inadequate actions to promote inclusive education (OECD, 2020).

Remote learning can alleviate these losses, but the success of this approach depends on access to learning materials and the effectiveness of these materials (ADB, 2021). In this arena, teachers can make a substantial role to effective these programs. during this crisis, confirming access to additional services to vulnerable students is vital to foster equity, inclusion and their well-being. It can make a significant difference in the lives of students coming from low socio-economic backgrounds and help prevent widening educational gaps (OECD,2020). In addition, the experience of attitude of teachers, parents and community people towards children from marginal groups is not positive that make an extensive barrier to promote inclusion. Some participants of the interviews in this study admit that teachers, peers and community members do not show their supportive attitude towards children from marginal groups. In Bangladesh, because of lacking institutional experience and capacity, opportunities for special needs, tribal, and vulnerable children have not been created to the expected level (Malak et al, 2014). However, Considering the issue, government think Preparing online training for teachers on pedagogy, content knowledge and supporting remote learning of students while schools are closed. This may also include online platforms for teacher peer groups, upazilla-level teacher support pools, or small groups of teachers (MOPME, 2020).

Explanations for re-opening diverse but encompassed the need to develop students' knowledge and skills, catch up on learning losses, provide extra services, allow parents to return to work, among others (Reimers and Schleicher, 2020). As a result, after COVID pandemic school reopening is a substantial issue for children from marginal groups because this longtime school closure due to COVID-19 pandemic is negatively impacting the inclusive learning capacity of the students (Borua,2020) and this extended school closures threaten to remove educational progress improvements achieved in recent decades, especially for girls and those from disadvantaged backgrounds (World Bank,2020). For recover this compensation Government should some pragmatic steps to mitigate the extensive learning gaps, most participants admit. However, the government of Bangladesh is thinking about three term planning for remedying learning loss of students (MoPME,2020) but the implementation of this recovery plan with inclusiveness and equality issues are likely to be hard task. So, during school re-openings, distinct attention should be given for disadvantaged people and among other groups who are in geographically remote areas or urban slums, students from ethnic minorities and Indigenous communities (OECD, 2020). A holistic approach should be taken by the government of Bangladesh where marginalized people, community people, school committee, and teachers will be connected. Continued absence and detachment from teaching and ongoing professional training will affect the quality of teaching and motivation (MoPME,2020). So, preparing teachers, and supervisory staff for the new teaching learning system represents another important task (Islam, 2021). A study from OECD (2020) also shows that significant joint efforts by school leaders, teachers, parents, students, educational and health care professionals, and communities are needed to restart schools as safe, supportive and inclusive places for all students. The findings have originated from the participants' responses and the findings of the related literature reviews state that children from marginal groups and their families are more affected due to COVID-19 pandemic that has created huge learning gaps. So, a collaborative initiative can mitigate the huge learning deficit after school reopening.

### **Recommendations to ensure inclusive education after school re-openings**

***Creating digital platform:*** Most of the participants believe that after the school reopening, the huge learning deficit creates by marginalized students due to long term school closures during COVID period will create a huge disparity between marginalized and advantaged students that can make a barrier to promote inclusive education. Participants feel that existing digital platforms can play a significant role in bridging the learning gap. In the case of marginalized students, if the digital platform can be used for them outside of school hours, it is possible to reduce the learning deficit. Most of the marginal students' parents are unaware. So, they can be supported by bringing them

under this platform. For ensuring support to and by teachers, teachers should have knowledge about digital device. Government should Provide chances for groups of teachers to arrange locally or nationally to share performs on how to best support to vulnerable students because they are core actors to guide their students through the increasing of online distance learning (OECD, 2020). Such as, Italy have provided teachers with online teacher training resources on how to teach online. They also shape online collaborative stages that permit them to share their resources and provide and accept peer feedback (OECD, 2020a). Researchers and participants all believe that the provision of digital devices to children from marginal groups with the help of various donor agencies, the Ministry of Telecommunications, and organizations working with education and the free internet facility for children from marginal groups can fill the learning gap of them that can promote inclusive education in Bangladesh.

**Long term financial support:** Most of the participants feel that the marginalized people are not able to enjoy the benefits of basic necessities like health and education due to poverty. As a result, social inequality is increasing and it has become more evident due to COVID-19 pandemic. Health problems of disadvantaged students may be manifested after the re-opening of the school due to malnutrition. Although the government is ensuring stipends for all students even when schools are closed, these stipends do little to meet the needs of children from marginal groups. Participants believe that long-term job-related income source of parents of marginalized groups can only improve their quality of life, which can have an impact on their children's education, health, and well-being. In order to establish a socially equitable and just society, emphasis must be placed on the eradication of poverty which can play a role in the implementation of inclusive education. At present Canada government announced up to CAD 2 billion to support for provinces and territories through the Safe Return to Class Fund. This will provide the complementary funding they need, as they work together with local school boards to confirm the security of students and staff members throughout the school year. For example, the fund will assistance provinces and territories by supporting adapted learning spaces, enhanced air ventilation, augmented hand sanitation and hygiene, and consumptions of personal protective equipment and cleaning supplies (cited in OECD, 2020) So, Researcher think that a motivational program should be undertaken to send children from marginal groups to school and it should include financial incentives and extra grant for marginalized parents.

**Collaborative approach:** Researcher and participants believe that marginalized students have suffered a lot emotionally due to social and family non-cooperation due to COVID-19. So, to mitigate the huge learning gap that has been created by bringing them back to the field of education, the teacher should not only be positive. For this, benefits can be obtained by taking up programs like social security, happy environment, various motivational programs, empathy of peers, supportive attitude of the people of the community towards them. A holistic approach to education is one that reflects the learning, social and emotional needs of students and that needs governments to work in corporation with other related agencies such as health and community organizations, social work agencies and other support services to address the complex requirements of the most vulnerable students during and after the COVID pandemic crisis (Cerna,2019). For this reason, all relevant stakeholders should be engaged in policy design and implementation that can promote inclusive education. Such as, the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education has also taken many approaches for post – COVID crisis with the focusing on inclusion and equity that can help to participate all stakeholders in re-opening of schools (MOPME, 2020). Researcher also think that schools need the necessary infrastructure development in order to protect the health of all children, it is necessary to provide the necessary safety equipment. So, a collaborative approach emphasizing children from marginal groups, is needed by the Ministry of primary and Mass Education with other stakeholders.

**Special educational support:** It is predictable that children from marginal groups will be less likely to return to school as they originate to re-open, which could further upsurge the educational break between students from more and less advantaged socio-economic backgrounds (OECD, 2020). Most of the respondent agree that children from marginal groups should be special taken care by teachers in school. such as, teachers have to communicate with them individually that can have a positive impact on children from marginal groups. So, by marking students' learning gaps, marginalized children are more vulnerable and need to be given more importance. At the school-level, encouraging after-school tutoring and peer-to-peer coaching initiatives as well as special after-school study classes can be arranged to mitigate the learning gap of children from marginal groups. For this reason, teachers have to be given special incentives so that they can get inspiration. Participants also say that parents, community and school committee can able to pay a vital role to encourage the vulnerable students. Ministry has also to develop guideline for teachers, guardians, and community to support vulnerable students. However, confirming inclusion needs wider

engagement and a wide-ranging set of actions in order to confirm that all students realize that they are safe and belong to the school. This can ultimately affect their educational outcomes (OECD, 2020). Suppose, The Ministry of Education in Portugal executed a set of educational assistance for students who, according to the guidelines of the health authority, should be considered at-risk and who are unable to attend classroom teaching and training activities in a group or class context (Cited in OECD, 2020).

**Increasing training and Monitoring:** Respondents and researcher also think that for ensuring the learning outcomes of children from marginal groups, the mechanism of monitoring and assessment tools should be changed. For example, Sweden has been conducting a mapping of the condition in many schools in order to uninterruptedly recognize explicit requirements. For example, the situation of “vulnerable students” has been evaluated through direct dialogues (by phone) with school leaders all around Sweden. This endeavor was introduced in March 2020 and is still ongoing. Staff from the Swedish National Agency for Education perform and record the dialogues (cited in OECD, 2020). However, respondents emphasize that ensuring support by and to teachers and school leaders is the core factor to promote equity and inclusion children from marginal groups; attitude towards children from marginal groups should be positive. Researchers believe that in a country like Bangladesh, students are as unfamiliar with the new situation as teachers, officials, and community members. So, more seminars and meetings can be held to motivate them. Moreover, since teachers play a key role in filling the child's learning deficit and bringing them back to school, it is important to train this regard. So, the officers can be brought under training. Moreover, monitoring can be strengthened by holding seminars on what kind of new strategies should be adopted by the officers to strengthen the monitoring on the overall issue.

## Conclusion

Equity and inclusion are one of the most important elements of a slightly balanced society. In an unequally competitive society, the rights of the child can never be guaranteed, especially those marginalized people because financial management has created this inequality here. So, the poor people cannot understand their rights on the one hand and they are always deprived on the other. Although the existing state policies and laws in favor of marginalized peoples are a final strategy to ensure their rights, the reality of their application and practice demands little discussion. The current Covid pandemic has made this question even more important; Because marginalized people have suffered the most due to this weakness. It has not only affected the socio-economic status of the marginalized population, but also the children's education and well-being. Like other countries during the COVID pandemic, the Bangladesh government is trying to keep pace with the pace of education by creating online and offline platforms as a way out of the storm that has swept over the education system. As part of digital learning, 'Ghore Boshe Shiki' which is being carried out through Bangladesh Television, Radio, Mobile Phone and Online Classes as well as distributing worksheets to the students from door to door so that all the students can be connected with this stream. Has had a fatal adverse effect on; It has also come out from the interviews of the parents that the students have lost interest in studying at home. The Ministry of Primary and Mass Education in Bangladesh, in coordination with various local and international organizations, has undertaken various health programs and publicity programs to motivate the students.

However, there are some weaknesses in the ongoing activities online and offline. For example, children from marginal groups are unable to access this facility, leaving them behind from well-to-do students. Interviews with teachers and parents also revealed that although worksheets were distributed to marginalized children, feedback from them was not available properly because their families could not provide the necessary support to their children due to ignorance, financial constraints, and lack of awareness. Many recommendations have also come from interviews with teachers, parents, and students that will play a significant role in the implementation of school closures and the subsequent reopening of marginalized students and their learning outcomes. It is important to formulate an overall plan involving all partners where the necessary support for children from marginal groups is ensured. Special classes for teachers, one-to-one visits at home, training to bridge the learning gap so that teachers are aware of the various barriers to marginal students. Parents of marginalized students need to be trained on job-oriented special financial incentives, changing teachers' attitudes towards marginalized students, and, above all, strengthening monitoring and procedures to make the overall system more effective. The long-term social and psychological effects on students may be most lasting during the COVID-19 crisis. As such, the above strategies

need to be clarified and strengthened during school closures and school re-openings to avoid its lasting negative impact on marginal students.

A holistic approach to inclusive education is vital for students to learn as well as stay well-being after school re-opening. Only significant joint efforts by school leaders, teachers, parents, students, educational officials and healthcare professionals and the community can make the school a safe, supportive and inclusive place for all students. Therefore, it is important to build a lasting foundation in the field of digital learning and the government should extend the necessary co-operation to the marginalized students so that they too can enjoy the benefits of digital technology by overcoming the existing barriers. This requires a special budget allocation for primary education with an emphasis on the well-being of all students, including children from marginal groups, and the elimination of learning gaps. More transparency and efficiency need to be ensured in taking initiatives to assist marginalized students with the participation of all stakeholders, especially organizations working with marginalized children. Above all, an overall initiative can ensure equity and inclusion in society which will further accelerate the movement for inclusive education.

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