

Dilemma of Parental Aspiration for Children with Special Needs in Early Childhood Education (ECE) Settings: The Case of Bangladesh

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Abstract

This study explores parental aspiration for children with special needs in Early Childhood Education (ECE) settings in Bangladesh. A social justice theoretical approach framed the design of the research, and data were collected in two locales namely rural and urban areas in Rajshahi Division, Bangladesh. This study followed the case study methods, and findings suggest that there were differences among the rural and urban areas and in parental aspiration, beliefs and practices in ECE in Bangladesh. This article explores how parental aspiration varies for access and enrolment of children with special needs in ECE by exploring parental perspectives in Bangladesh. Many parents with astronomical anticipations for their children in ECE are mostly based on a distinctive mixture of childrearing and social ideals in the Bangladesh context. As an outcome, this study relates considerations of what parents anticipate their children's enrollment, readiness for schooling, and children's learning outcomes. Mostly, parental struggles and expectations are closely related to different socio-economic conditions, regions, and children's gender (transgender and girls) in line with special needs. This study attempts to explore how ECE is positioned within the multifaceted contention of Bangladeshi society where parental aspiration plays a vital role for the schooling of children with special needs.

Key words : Parental aspiration, children with special needs, Early Childhood Education, Bangladesh

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Introduction

Early Childhood Education (ECE) means providing all children aged 3-5 years with educational supports indispensable for ensuring justice and optimum improvement (Evans, Myers, & Ilfeld, 2000). ECE could be distinct as pre-schooling or pre-primary schooling and for children in the age range of 3 to 5 years old to ensure their preparation for school (Abington & Blankenau, 2013). For lifelong learning and future development, ECE is recognized as the foundation in the early years as well as the phase following childhood. Despite the world-wide policy advocacy and practices, ECE in Bangladesh is confronted with exertions in relations with government focus and integration. In this study, the term “children with special needs” applies to the children with severe malnutrition; developmental delay; physical and mental challenges; and ethnic and gender issues. Currently, there are debates among the scholars to call children with special needs “children with disabilities.” However, I believe that the nomenclature of children with special needs is better in terms of ensuring justice for the education of these children in Bangladesh. So I will use the term “children with special needs” in this article.

Ideally, ECE services should provide comprehensive developmental programs for children in the 3–5 age group (Nath & Sylva, 2007). In the constitution of Bangladesh, the government introduces the basic human rights and access to education for all. However, social justice for children with special needs is violated widely in Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, only one-fifth of eligible children were enrolled in primary classes, and of that none attended pre-primary (Nath & Chowdhury, 2009). However, the socio-economic factors have a direct significant role in children’s access to ECE in Bangladesh. For example, only 30% of 3-year-olds in rural areas have learning and playing material (Aboud, 2006; Stipek & Ryan, 1997). Parental aspiration for school choice for their children with special needs reflects parents’ concern for ECE because parents are factually confused when and which school would be better for their children (Ritzen, Dommelen & Vijlder, 1997; Lee, 2010).

In Bangladesh, there are socioeconomic disparities for entrance and involvement in pre-primary schools and regional inequalities mostly with rural and urban gaps for ECE services (Ahmed, Nath, Hossain & Kalam, 2006). Children, who start late in school, drop out early (Hossain & Zeitlyn, 2010; Sakaue, & Ogawa, 2016). Average government expenditure is US\$17/child/year at government schools, but the private expenditure of

children education is estimated to be US\$34 (Ahmed et al., 2005; Chowdhury & Nath, 2009). Parents from low-income backgrounds are not aware, especially in rural areas, of the appropriate age of entry, enrollment, and cost for ECE in Bangladesh (Leseman, 2002; Nomura & Matsuda, 2017).

Previous studies have shown that in Bangladesh over 87% of children had to bear the private expenditures for pre-primary education which is creating disparities among regions (Al-Samarrai, Region, & Bank, 2007; Nath & Sylva, 2007). There is a general perception among households that the private school system is of better quality than the public-school system (Cameron, 2011; Sommers, 2013). Diverse curricula among different ECE settings mostly generate learning inequalities in the early life of childhood and especially for the children with special needs in Bangladesh (Opel, Ameer, & Aboud, 2009). The objectives of this study are (a) to explore the way parental aspiration supports to choose ECE services for children with special needs, (b) to analyze how parental socio-economic factors limit or support parental choice in ECE services for children with special needs, and (c) to understand how parental socio-economic aspirations assist parents in managing ECE expenditure among rural and urban areas in Bangladesh.

Social Justice in ECE Settings: A Theoretical Framework

In the constitution of Bangladesh, the government already enacted several laws to ensure justice for all, especially for the children. The laws are unswervingly portraying to reduce the social inequalities among the children in Bangladesh. Nancy Fraser (2008) examined the education sector through a social justice perspective. Social justice (Rawls, 1999) is demarcated as the “parity of participation” that allows all children to participate in school irrespective of socioeconomic limitations (Bradbury-Jones, Taylor, & Herber, 2014). These theoretical intentions intensify the understanding of parents to choose and enrollment for children with special needs as follows:

- a) Children who never attend ECE school;
- b) Children who drop out before completing ECE school;
- c) Children enrolled but who do not consistently appear at school;
- d) Children who do not make the transition from ECE to Primary school; and
- e) Children who repeat ECE.

Social Justice is an issue to resolve the seemingly competing claims of freedom and equality. In this study, the research issues are meticulously plotted to Social Justice as the reinforcement theory (Fraser, 2008). The social justice theory is represented as an engine for this study and influences the research design. The central arguments are to support the reliably pragmatic use of social justice theory. However, there were some challenges to adopt and disagree with modification to test the theories and concepts for this study.

Current Situation of ECE and Children with

Special Needs in Bangladesh

The government of Bangladesh took a worthy number of initiatives for the further development of ECE. The Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (MoPME) has already approved to stipulate one year of pre-primary education for children aged 5 to 6 years to ensure all children are ready for primary schooling. Further, the government in collaboration with several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the Bangladesh Early Childhood Development (ECD) Network have also developed the Pre-Primary Education (PPE) operational framework in 2008. Figure 1 presented below shows the government initiatives for all children irrespective of socio-economic conditions and special needs.

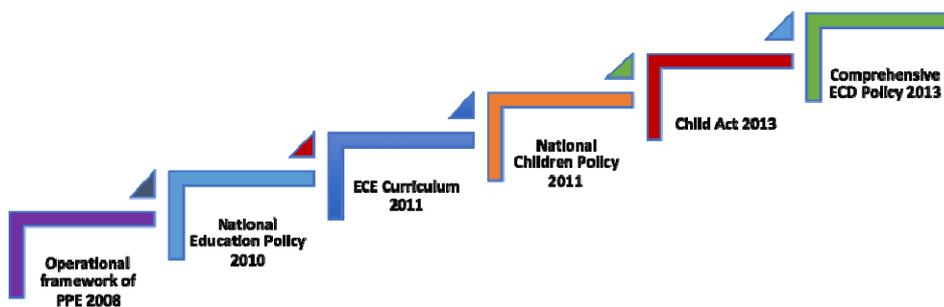


Figure 1. Trends of government ECE policy in Bangladesh based on MoPME Data (2018)

Note. Operation framework of Pre-Primary Education (PPE) in 2008; ECE Curriculum in 2011; Comprehensive Early Childhood Development (ECD) policy 2013.

The National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) has already developed a PPE curriculum in 2011 in cooperation with other stakeholders, including INGOs and NGOs. Further, the National Academy for Primary Education (NAPE), the NCTB, and the Directorate of Primary Education (DPE) arranged a training manual for a 15-day training course for pre-primary school teachers.

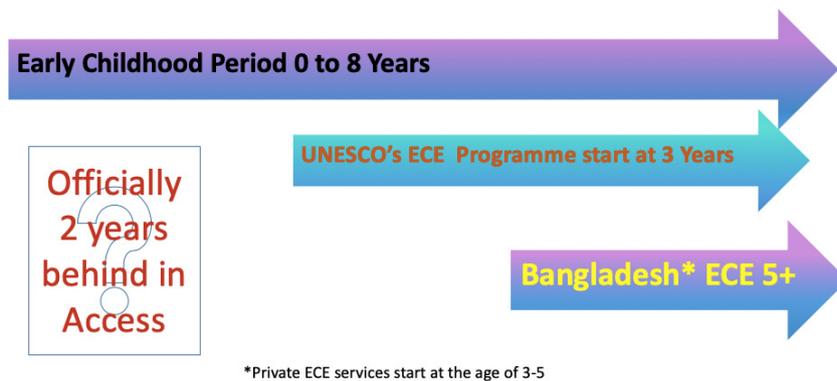


Figure 2. Enrollment age of ECE in Bangladesh based on UNESCO (2016) and DPE (2015)

Note: As per the policy of the government of Bangladesh, all the government schools are obliged to provide access for all children aged 5 to 6 years but the private schools are independent to take decisions for enrollment of children in private schools. In Bangladesh, the school enrollment for children mostly depends on the school authority.

The government of Bangladesh has no specific budget for the PPE, but each year the government is providing 5,000 Bangladeshi taka (BDT), equal to US\$ 63 (US\$ 1 = 80 BDT), for all government primary schools to purchase teaching-learning materials.

Presently, almost all of government primary schools successfully implemented one-year PPE despite a lack of resources which impeded the children's access, enrollment, and parental aspiration. In Bangladesh, most of the primary schools are inadequately organized and have commonly overcrowded pre-primary classes with children aged 3 to 5/6 years (Jahan, 2005). Bangladesh, among the Least Developed Countries (LDCs), started implementing the PPE where the primary education quality is the major concern for this nation and especially for the children with special needs (Ahmed et al., 2007). In Bangladesh, the children with special needs are mostly not enrolled in school, out of school or absent for a long time from schools.

Table 1. *Types of Available ECE Services in Bangladesh*

	Public		Others (Private, NGO, etc.)				
Age	Type 1	Type 2	Type 3	Type 4	Type 5	Type 6	Type 7
Age 3					Nursery	Play Group	Nursery
Age 4			KG 1	Nursery	KG 1	Nursery	KG 1
Age 5	Pre-Primary	KG	KG 2	KG	KG 2	KG	KG 2

Source: Based on Nath and Sylva (2007)

Note. The term “Kindergarten” (KG) is widely used for pre-schooling in Bangladesh especially among private schools. Most of the private schools define ECE as KG1 and KG2 to entice parents with children of aged 4-5 years.

Context and Methods

This is a qualitative case study. I used interviews and document analysis, while identifying the respondents through purposive sampling (Durepos, Mills & Wiebe, 2010). Creswell (2013) points out that the case study method helps us understand a phenomenon through the construction of real-life experiences. Further, the case study method helps investigate the phenomenon in depth when the margins between the phenomenon and perspective may not be evident (Yin, 2014). The multiple case study design is likely to be stronger than the single case study design (Baxter & Jack, 2008). One principle is to use multiple sources of evidence (i.e., evidence from two or more sources) (Curtis, Gesler, Smith, & Washburn, 2000). For this study, Rajshahi division in Bangladesh was chosen based on the existing average number of early childhood education institutions in the region. The findings of this study are based on a combination of qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews with parents and key informant interviews (e.g., education officers, headteachers, and ECE teachers) and observations in school, class, and home. To understand the parental aspiration for children with special needs, a categorical coding method and the development of themes were used to analyze the data.

Table 2 shows data collected from the high achieving schools and low achieving schools in consultation with the education officer from the Rajshahi Division in Bangladesh. Each school serves three social classes, including low, middle, and high-income groups. In 2017

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and 2018, I conducted the field studies in rural and urban areas in Rajshahi Division. Rajshahi division has been famous for education since the British period and presently called as “city of education” in Bangladesh. This study aimed to understand the prominence of ECE for children with special needs and their access hurdles to ECE schools. Rajshahi division was selected for this case study as the country’s average number of education institutions exists in this region.

Table 2. *Data Collections and Sampling Design*

Location	Area	School Types	No. of Schools	No. of Households (In-depth/FGD)	Households of Children with special needs (In-depth/FGD)*	ECE Teacher	
Rajshahi Division	Rajshahi City	GPS/NNPS/NRNGPS	5	10	5	5	
		Private School (Kindergarten)	5	10	5	5	
		NGOs	3	6	3	3	
		Madrassa (Religious)	2	4	2	2	
		Others (Asroy Indeginous)	2	4	2	2	
		Durgapur	GPS/NNPS/NRNGPS	5	10	5	5
	Upazilla (Sub-District)	Rural	Private (Kindergarten)	5	10	5	5
			NGOs	3	6	3	3
			Madrassa (Religious)	2	4	2	2
			Others (Mosque)	2	4	2	2
	Total			34	68	34	34

Source: Based on Field Study in 2017 and 2018.

Note. I interviewed the parents of children with needs who are mostly not enrolled in schools, out of schooling, and/or absent from school for a long time. The purposive sampling method was used to collect the data.

For this study, a baseline interview was carried out with divisional education officer to uncover the coverage of field study design and mapping. As shown in Table 2 below, Interviews were carried out in 34 schools in both rural and urban areas and with 17 parents (9 women and 8 men) of children enrolled in schools, 17 parents (8 women and 9 men) with children aged 3-5 not enrolled in schools; and 17 school teachers, including 2 community leaders and 4 government officials. For this study, the gender of parents was

important to understand the differences in parental perceptions for children with special needs in ECE. In this study, I expended a noteworthy amount of interval, noting the daily life actions of parents and children in the community.

Parental Aspiration for School Choice and Enrollment: Dilemma or Fate?

Based on in-depth interviews and document analysis, it was clear that among the three social groups (high-middle-lower) of households the knowledge and practices of ECE schooling did not improve among the parents. However, families exposed to the ECE program were more likely to register for the existing national ECE program. Parents of children with special needs did show modest aspirations and improvements in the cognitive, linguistic, socio-emotional, and physical development of children. Both indigenous and children with special needs faced severe challenges for enrollment in ECE settings at a very early age.

Parental freedom in choosing a school for their children makes a positive contribution although, in many of the cases especially in rural areas, parents of children with special needs do not have the freedom to choose among the ECE services. The government policy failed to address the social justice for children's enrollment in ECE settings at a very early age. Mostly the indirect cost impedes parental aspiration in school choice in Bangladesh among the middle-income families and families in rural areas. Community engagement could assist in improving schooling to be an organization in such a way as to help increase equality of opportunity for all children in society.

Most of the ECE schools have less qualified and untrained teachers, especially private schools with larger class sizes. In addition, parents are not aware of ECE school quality and use friends' recommendations to decide the school for their children. In most cases, parents have a very limited time to contact teachers or schools to find out about quality. In particular, I paid attention to the comments of the headteachers and ECE teachers and found that they had limitations on creating an atmosphere of equity and social justice for equal access and better child attainment especially when children are in special needs. The

case study reflects that parental aspiration for children with special needs mostly depends on the social structure, future job opportunity, and the local community partialities in choice of schools.

Households of socio-economically disadvantaged groups face severe challenges to access the ECE schools, and especially the lower and middle-income group households' children with special needs have limited opportunity to choose schools from among the available services. Both the urban and rural schools have the diverse schooling facilities irrespective of public, private, or others. However, most parents of children with special needs have limited access to pre-school education (Moore, Akhter, & Aboud, 2008).

Further, the government officials also believe that effective and efficient public policy management could be generated for the development of ECE which would have a positive impact among regions in Bangladesh. Especially in poor rural areas where the services to choose from are limited. Government schools are providing free access where households do not need to pay the tuition fees. Nonetheless, the indirect cost is very high among the households in the rural areas to access school. Lack of public management compromises quality too, as parent's fees alone cannot cover the full cost of providing existing facilities.

Parents send their children to private schools, although the quality is not good and most of the time the teachers are very new and less qualified than the government schools. Households are not aware of teachers trainings and teachers' educational qualifications for the decisions of enrollment. The training of private schools is very limited, and only on the job training is available. The government school ECE teachers have the facility of training for 15 days. However, due to the lack of teachers and daily class schedules, mostly they could not participate in the training in time before joining a designated school especially in the rural areas.

Mostly rural parents do not enroll their children with special needs at the appropriate ages because of the social standing, financial limitations, and the indirect cost for enrollment. Parents in the poor rural areas used to sacrifice a lot to keep their children in school, even borrowing money for school lunch and pocket money for the children to encourage their children's education. Further, rural parents reduce the consumption of foods and fundamental necessities, and parents want to pay for their children's schooling (Kregel & Unger, 1993).

The non-required educational expenditures are assumed to be the cause of non-enrollment of children especially in urban areas and for the private kindergarten (Chapman, 2016). Households decide not to enroll their children with special needs or indigenous minorities at school at early ages among the lower and middle-income groups in Bangladesh. Mostly, the private and NGO operated schools highly depend on volunteer teachers without formal training or very low educational qualifications to teach them. Households decisions to enroll and support the child in ECE varies mostly as a result of social obligations (rural areas) and household's social factors. An increase in public spending for ECE can be more effective when targeted at the lower end of the income distribution.

In the rural areas, it was evident that insufficient support of the community and society is a major impediment for school enrollment of children with special needs. ECE has been widely considered critical to the development of children and lifelong learning. In this study, parents felt burdened by children with special needs, they are concerned about enrollment in schools whereas government support could not minimize the disparities between rural and urban areas.

This study reveals that most of the parents of children with special needs have a concern about the proper information about ECE services. Parents continued struggling with a lack of cooperation from schools, teachers and the community. Parent A shared her concerns:

Like others, when I decided to enroll my child at school, I had to sacrifice other opportunities. As we believe, at school children should acquire friendships and atmosphere education and cope up with the environment. But children with special needs face great challenges, and we feel like not to go to school every day.

Schools, especially private ones mainly focus on daily activities, and parent B expressed her thoughts: “where my child who needs special care . . . my child could not concentrate and the teachers didn't show proper care for his educational development.”

Parent C shared her concerns even if she enrolled her child in ECE:

Sending my child at school, I feel very anxious . . . always contemplate why I am sending him in difficulties which could pressurize his mind. Fortunately, I continue to send him school although I understand that my child cannot compete with his peer group.

Parent D was worried about her child with special needs. She did not want to send her kids to school and did not want to enroll at school at this early age. She was also concerned whether her child was academically behind, compared to his peer group, and whether her child would not be able to minimize the gap in the future.

Parent E felt:

Concerned and hugely anxious what every child is doing. . . . Maybe my child couldn't match with the other children. I am afraid about the educational system of Bangladesh. Why doesn't the government have policies and services for children with special needs?

Some of the parents indicated that there are few opportunities for educating the children with special needs in Bangladesh. Most private schools deny the enrollment of children with special needs in their schools. These schools believe that providing the enrollment opportunity for children with special needs could interfere the educational attainment of other typically developing children. Because of this, many parents manipulated to choose public schools for their child with special needs. This parental aspiration also tangled for mothers' occupation for children with special needs. In this study, only two mothers had a job, the rest of the participants say they don't have any jobs because their child with special needs requires extra care for further development.

Several parents of children with special needs indicated that they decided not to work as their children are not like the others, so they needed to devote more time to take care of children. Parent F explained:

I don't work for my children. . . . I am taking him to schools everyday. . . . parents of children with disabilities should not work as mostly there is nobody to take proper care of the child'.

In Bangladesh, diverse social pressure and expectations for children's gender are widely practiced where boys are prioritized more than girls, though the gender parity is close to one. It is noteworthy that due to social pressure many parents had different aspirations depending on children's gender. The metamorphosis was noticeably evident where many parents with special needs children face incisive pressure to support their daughters especially among the rural areas in Bangladesh. Further, I asked about the aspiration for boys and one parent commented:

A girl can be married at a very early age where boys are distinctive. Boys should have a good education and a good job. So, they have to enroll at school at a very early age to prepare for primary schools, whereas girls don't need to. (Parent G)

Several mothers who enrolled their daughters at school at early ages in the rural areas believed that they should start schooling at an early age so that they could arrange their child's marriage as early as possible.

Discussions

In Bangladesh, school location and class size are considered to be access characteristics for schools, and they hypothetically influence the children's admittance to teachers and learning outcomes. The socio-cultural heritage of family is ordinarily mentioned as the inspiration of parents on school enrollment and choice. In Bangladesh, girls' schooling is valued less in poor rural areas and usually to established the norms of religion in some cases (Barnett & Belfield, 2006). However, the parents of children with special needs and as a case of girl parents mostly face social difficulties. The socio-cultural philosophies about the importance of education for children with special needs impact the parental aspirations for school access and enrollment especially in the rural areas in Bangladesh (Heckman & Masterov, 2007). These child-rearing practices are always signifying the degree to parents aspiration to prepare for schooling irrespective of race and ethnicity (Britto & Kohen, 2005; Zhou, Li, Hu & Li, 2017).

ECE access, enrollment, and absenteeism are a consequence of parental socio-economic factors among the stratified society, especially among middle- and lower-income groups (Brown, 2006; Carneiro & Heckman, 2003). Alternatively, children with special needs are mostly out of school because of the school environment and the curriculum practiced at schools in Bangladesh (Hu, Roberts, Ieong & Guo, 2016).

Supply constraints are an issue in terms of the quality of ECE schools for children with special needs (i.e., disabilities, religion, gender, and race) in Bangladesh. In rural areas, a significant proportion of schools are enrolling children of five years old but the school

rarely provide access for children with special needs, and most do not maintain the age group especially for three to four years at the government schools (Bruns, Filmer & Patrinos, 2011). In remote rural areas especially the hard to reach areas, this problem is exclusively serious and it is not exactly clear whether school availability or lack of teachers and appropriate schools facilities for children with special needs are the main barriers for enrollment. In Bangladesh, parents in rural areas are simply not sending their children with special needs to ECE settings and they don't aspire to send their children to schools. Mostly, parents believe that the school could not take proper care for their children with special needs (Burger, 2010).

School access and enrollment are indirectly related to the direct and indirect costs for education, but this study finds that cost of education is not the main problem whereas the service providers are making disparities among the societies and parents, who have children with disabilities (Blankenau, & Youderian, 2015; Hanushek & Woessmann, 2013). In this study it was evident that some of the parents cannot have enough money for required school materials, and some of their children are needed to assist at home and farming. For example, parental aspiration is chaotic as the future effectiveness of children in sending to school, as the children with special needs are not like their peer groups. These parents believe that keeping their child with special needs at home is safe and that rudimentary literacy and numeracy proficiencies is enough for their future development. Parents showed their anxieties about the quality of schools, and the teacher's justice matters to the discourse of education for children with special needs (Lee & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2008).

In Bangladesh, parents do not enroll their children at the early age because of the future potentials and social security where the government policies do not compel the parents to demand especially the social justice in education at an early age especially in rural areas. This is perhaps due to the lack of relevance and potentially extreme expenses for the children with special needs (Cunha, Heckman, Lochner & Masterov, 2005). Further, most of the parents did not enroll or study at pre-school, and they doubt about attending schools could make differences for their child with special needs. Mostly the teachers at school could not concentrate on the children special needs because of the number of students especially in the private schools in the urban areas and government schools in the rural areas. Children aged 3-5-year old are considered very little, and parents are mostly

considered to enroll school as late as possible for the children with special needs (Fuller & Clarke, 1994; Handa, 2002). Parents are concerned about school availability and appropriate services for their child with special needs, but generally teachers perceive some of the parent choices as the lack of aspiration and awareness of the importance of schooling for children with special needs. Some of the households of children who are not in school gave reasons related to the direct and indirect costs of schooling (Ben David-Hadar, 2016; Cunha, Heckman & Schennach, 2010).

In line with the social justice (Fraser, 2008) framework, whether their child has special needs children, all the parents are supposed to engage with school activities. However, unfortunately, the children with special needs have very low participation at schools. In Bangladesh, the government has policies for equal access of all children irrespective of special needs but this study finds that the parents have a limited scope of participation and choice for their child's ECE. This study reveals that mostly in rural areas, fathers play a vital role in a child's education but in the urban areas mothers are playing the key role in the education of children with special needs.

Conclusion

ECE should be relevant to the local context, age-specific, and appropriate for children with special needs. Equal availabilities of services irrespective of the special needs are necessary where households can easily access the schools for children's better attainment and school readiness. Parental social aspiration is the main factor behind children's education among the rural areas whereas the urban areas parental aspirations mostly depend on the economic conditions. Government policy incorporating social justice and equal access of all children are supposed to allow parents to be able to choose educational institutions. However, in reality, the schools are choosing the children who can enroll in schools. Schools mostly consider the children's age and their readiness for schooling and, as a result, the children with special needs are mostly out of school. Parental aspiration for ECE, especially for the children with special needs, is disregarded mostly in urban areas irrespective of economic abilities. Although parents would like to enroll their children,

urban schools hardly allow the enrollment of children with special needs. In the rural areas, the government schools appear to encourage children to attend school irrespective of special needs. However, even if many children with special needs enroll, they tend to be mostly absent from school. The rote learning methods and diverse curricula especially among the private schools are mostly demotivating urban parent's aspiration with special needs to attend school whereas in the rural areas parents are more concerned about the pressure and usually send their children to the government primary schools.

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