# Teachers' Roles and Challenges in Developing Social Skills of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder Within Inclusive Classrooms in Dhaka

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**Abstract:** *Social development is a fundamental aspect of human growth, playing a vital role in shaping an individual's behaviour, interpersonal relationships, academic success and overall life outcomes. Children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) often face significant challenges in social interaction and communication. Teachers play a crucial role in fostering social skills among autistic children within inclusive classrooms. Unfortunately, teachers face several challenges supporting autistic students in developing social skills in inclusive settings. This study aimed to explore the roles and challenges faced by teachers in developing the social skills of autistic children in inclusive classroom settings in Dhaka. A qualitative research approach was employed, incorporating both semi-structured interviews with teachers and classroom observations to gain a comprehensive understanding of teaching practices and interactions. The findings revealed that teachers actively promote communication, emotional reciprocity, and social adaptability among autistic students through structured activities and individualized support. However, the research also identified several challenges, including children's behavioural, cognitive and environmental problems, parental resistance and misconceptions, limited teacher training and support. Effective strategies observed and reported include peer modelling, group-based learning activities, increased parental involvement, targeted teacher training, and counselling support for both educators and families. By addressing existing barriers and promoting structured group activities, inclusive education in Dhaka can become more socially supportive and developmentally enriching for all learners.*

**Keywords:** Autism Spectrum Disorder; Teachers Roles; Teachers Challenges; Social Skill Development; Inclusive Classroom

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## 1. Introduction

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by deficits in social communication and the presence of restricted interests and repetitive behaviours (American Psychiatric Association., 2013). This condition may impact the educational performance of the child with ASD, due to the disorder being characterized by resistance to any change in the daily routine or environment, non-typical responses to all kinds of sensory experiences, and the engagement in activities of a repetitive nature. The Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA]., 2004) aimed to ensure that all children with disabilities have access to free and appropriate education in the

least restrictive environment and are supported by related services designed to prepare them for the future. The prevalence of Autism is increasing in Bangladesh paralleled to other developing countries (Preity et al., 2017). These individuals often struggle with adapting to different situations, face challenges in social interaction, and may exhibit uncontrolled behaviours, all of which complicate both the learning process and the classroom environment (Whitaker, 2004). In Bangladesh, students with ASD are officially recognized as having long-term disabilities under the guidelines of the Ministry of Education, in accordance with the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5). Children with autism often encounter challenges when transitioning into new environments, including difficulties in communication, emotional regulation, understanding social relationships, and in inclusive classrooms (Dechsling et al., 2022; Estival et al., 2023). Therefore, comprehensive preparation across multiple areas is crucial to help autistic students successfully adapt and thrive in inclusive educational settings (Petersson-Bloom & Holmqvist, 2022).

Inclusive education serves as a crucial framework in global educational policies, ensuring equitable learning opportunities for all students, regardless their abilities or disabilities. A key aspect of inclusive education is to integrate students with special needs into mainstream classrooms, fostering an environment where diversity is valued and all learners can develop academically, socially and emotionally (Jardinez & Natividad, 2024). In recent decades, the education of children with special needs has increasingly shifted toward inclusive practices, with a strong emphasis on the critical role of peer integration in enhancing social skills. In line with these trends, international initiatives, such as UNESCO's "Education for All," highlight the significance of social integration and collaborative learning for children with disabilities, particularly those with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Furthermore, recent studies have demonstrated that structured peer interactions within inclusive education can significantly enhance communication and adaptive skills in autistic children (Chang, Shih, & Kasari, 2023).

Social development is a vital aspect of a child's overall growth, encompassing their ability to interact effectively with others, regulate their emotions, and demonstrate motivation and persistence in various tasks. However, the autistic children frequently face considerable challenges in acquiring social skills, including difficulties interpreting social cues, sustaining meaningful conversations, establishing peer relationships, and recognizing emotional expressions all of which are critical for their social and emotional development (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). It also affects their behaviour, including managing anger and conflicts, and their relationships with important people like parents, teachers, and peers (Melinda & Izzati, 2021). As a result, autistic children may face social isolation and struggle to participate in group activities. Inclusive education aims to address these challenges by providing structured peer interactions and support systems to help autistic children enhance their social skills and overall social development.

Given the increasing emphasis on inclusive education in Dhaka, it is crucial to understand how teachers navigate their roles and overcome challenges in fostering social skill development among children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). This study focuses on the strategies teachers employ to facilitate meaningful peer interactions and create socially supportive learning environments. By examining both teacher perspectives and classroom practices, the research aims to provide actionable insights into how inclusive classrooms can be optimized to support the social growth of autistic children. The findings will contribute to the development of informed recommendations for educators, policymakers, and stakeholders seeking to enhance inclusive education through teacher empowerment and peer-based interventions.

**Rationale of the Research**

Research on teachers' roles and challenges in developing social skills for children with autism spectrum disorder is crucial for fully understanding how teachers support autistic students within inclusive classrooms in Dhaka. By focusing on the importance of fostering social skills, this study provides valuable insight into the strategies, responsibilities, and dedication of teachers supporting autistic children. Developing social skills not only enables these children to express themselves and form meaningful relationships but also helps them participate more independently in classroom and community life.

Although many studies related to autism in Bangladesh have focused on early intervention, parental perspectives, and the role of families in socializing autistic children (Khan, 2015; Hafiz, 2021; Uddin & Ashrafun, 2023), research has also addressed challenges in language development and communication (Taskin, 2025). However, only a few have explored the specific roles and challenges faced by teachers in developing social skills among autistic children within inclusive classroom settings. Given the growing emphasis on inclusive education in Bangladesh, it is essential to investigate how teachers support in developing social development of autistic children and what barriers they encounter. Therefore, this study aims to explore the roles of teachers in fostering social skills among autistic children, while identifying both the opportunities and challenges present in inclusive classrooms within the Bangladeshi educational context.

The findings will inform policymakers, educators, and families in Bangladesh on strategies to enhance social inclusion, empowering autistic children to build meaningful relationships, adapt to social norms, and achieve greater autonomy. This research aligns with global commitments to equitable education (UN Sustainable Development Goal 4) while addressing localized needs, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive society that values neurodiversity.

## 2. Literature Review

**Inclusive Education in Bangladesh**

Inclusive education (IE) in Bangladesh is still in its nascent phase of implementation, yet substantial policy initiatives have been undertaken to promote equity and access to education for all children. The commitment to deliver universal education has been integrated in the country's legal framework since its independence. The Bangladesh Constitution (1972) emphasizes non-discrimination in education through Article 17 and Article 28, ensuring equal access to education for all children, regardless of their background or abilities. Agreeing with all the international treaties, Bangladesh has committed to address IE within the existing education system. Like many other countries around the world, Bangladesh has agreed with the declaration of Education For All (EFA) (UNESCO, 1990), the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994), the Dakar Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2000) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities-UNCRPD in which education is to be provided to all children with an inclusive approach. In addition, Bangladesh also promised to achieve Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (United Nations,2008), which also articulated the rights of all children into education through uniform system. It is important to note that the trend of enacting IE policy and legislation in Bangladesh is mainly based upon the international treaties. Figure 1 shows how Bangladesh government endorsed IE related policy and legislation soon after signing an international treaty.
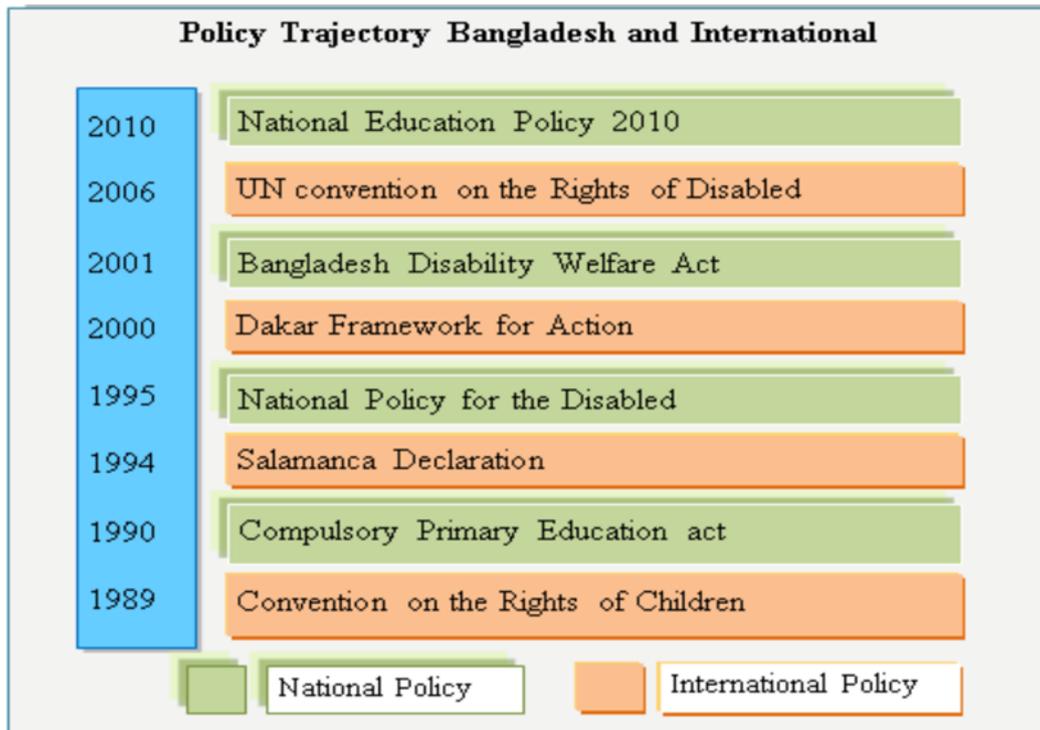
**Figure 1: Inclusive Education policy initiatives of Bangladesh**
**Source: "Inclusive Education in Bangladesh: Policy and Practice," Malak et al., 2013**

The above figure shows that IE initiatives in Bangladesh have been embedded in different policy and legislations; including Compulsory Primary Education Act, 1990, National Education Policy for the Disabled, 1995, Bangladesh Persons with Disability Welfare Act, 2001 and National Education Policy, 2010. In addition, a Comprehensive Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) Policy has been drafted in 2012 for offering every child an effective IE environment through early childhood development. This is to note that National Policy for the Disabled-1995 has been incorporated in the Bangladesh Persons with Disability Welfare Act, 2001.

To implement inclusive education (IE) in line with policy initiatives, the Government of Bangladesh has introduced two major programs: the Primary Education Development Programs (PEDPs) and the Teaching Quality Improvement in Secondary Education Program (TQI-SEP). According to government documents, these initiatives are central to promoting inclusive practices within classrooms. The PEDP has been active for over a decade, while TQI SEP has been operating for the past eight years, both aiming to improve teaching quality and inclusive practices across the country.

Despite these efforts, several barriers continue to hinder the implementation of inclusive education in Bangladesh. Research and reports have identified environmental, structural, and attitudinal challenges. Physically, many schools lack accessible infrastructure such as user-friendly classrooms and toilets for children with disabilities. Structurally, the Directorate of Primary Education (DPE) has acknowledged issues such as outdated teaching methods, inadequate academic guidance, and a rigid curriculum (DPE, 2015). Attitudinal barriers include widespread social stigma, misconceptions, and prejudices towards students with disabilities (Kawser et al., 2016). Reports highlight instances of name-calling, teasing (Mullick et al., 2012), and even teachers avoiding engaging with these students due to misunderstandings about their learning abilities (Malak et al.,2013). Additionally, centrally designed policies and

top-down decision-making processes limit local autonomy, especially in resource identification and professional development planning (Mullick et al., 2012), further constraining effective implementation of inclusive education.

## Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) refers to a group of complex neurodevelopment disorders characterized by repetitive and characteristic patterns of behaviour and difficulties with social communication and interaction. The American Psychiatric Association (APA) defined ASD children as individuals who are experiencing deficits in social emotional, non-verbal communication, and in developing, maintaining and understanding relationship (Joseph, Soorya & Thurm, 2015, p.4). According to the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (2017), ASD occurred since childhood and affected child's ability in social, communication, language and having lack of interests in daily activities. Autism is a complex developmental disability that typically appeared during the first three years of life due to a neurological disorder that affects the functioning of the brain' and it mostly occurred in boys. Children with ASD easily get depressed, feeling anxious and also easily experience attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (World Health Organization, 2017).

## Social Skill

Social skills play an integral role in children's early development, as they are closely related to future success and quality of life. Positive outcomes have been found for children who exhibit more advanced social skills at an early age, including higher academic performance (Malecki & Elliott, 2002). Furthermore, Social skills are also essential for children's success in their families, education, and communities, as they enable them to form lasting relationships and actively participate in society (Arslan, Durmusoglu-Saltali, & Yilmaz, 2011). These skills involve sharing, communication, understanding social roles, and responding appropriately to social situations. Early childhood is a critical period for social development, and educational environments such as preschools play a key role in fostering these abilities (Porath, 2009). Teaching social skills at a young age helps identify developmental concerns early, allowing for timely intervention (Gülay & Akman, 2009). Research has shown that children with strong social skills develop higher self-confidence, better peer relationships, and improved emotional well-being, while those lacking these skills may face rejection, social isolation, and behavioural difficulties (Arslan et al., 2011; Suresh & Sandhu, 2012; Beauchamp & Anderson, 2010).

## Social Skills Development Among Autistic Children In Inclusive Education Settings

Social skills are the biggest challenge for individuals with ASD (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). This leads to problems with friendships, relationships, everyday life, and professional success (Mahmoud, 2015). Children with ASD are characterized by the inability to participate in social relationships and disturbances in the ability to make traditional friendships as they do not have the skills necessary for this. Researches showed that children with ASD in comparison with their peers interact less with other children, are less truly dynamic and staying next to adults during recess (Lang et al., 2011; Anderson et al., 2004; Gutierrez et al., 2007).

Inclusive education settings offer opportunities for both typically developing children and those with special needs to enhance their social skills through structured peer interactions (Watkins et ai., 2015). In understanding how social behaviours develop, Hurlock (2018) identified three major influencing factors: children's expectations of social acceptance, their understanding of behavioural strategies, and their cognitive development that enables recognition of the relationship between their behaviour and social outcomes. These elements

align with Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory, which emphasises observational learning, imitation, and reinforcement.

While Bandura focuses on how children learn social behaviour through watching and replicating others, Hurlock adds that internal motivation and cognitive readiness also play vital roles. This integration is especially relevant in inclusive classroom settings, where autistic children can benefit from structured guidance and exposure to positive peer models. Teachers play a crucial role by helping students make the connection between actions and consequences, thereby supporting both behavioural and cognitive development. Therefore, combining Hurlock's and Bandura's perspectives provides a richer foundation for understanding how social skills can be cultivated through intentional peer interaction and teacher facilitation.

Peer interactions in inclusive classrooms help children with autism and other developmental challenges build meaningful relationships and succeed both socially and academically (Taylor, Peterson, McMurray-Schwartz, & Guillou, 2002). It would be beneficial for educators to concentrate on ways to facilitate and enhance social interaction between students with ASD and their typical peers, especially since research has demonstrate that interaction between these two groups tends to be limited naturally (Chamberlain et al., 2007; Humphrey & Symes, 2013). These interactions are particularly crucial, as they aid in developing communication skills, social understanding, and adaptive behaviours that directly address core challenges associated with ASD. Koegel et al. (2020) emphasized the importance of inclusive classroom dynamics, supported by structured peer interactions, as a means of fostering effective peer relationships. This finding aligns with Locke et al. (2019), who reported that targeted interventions such as social skills training and peer education not only enhance peer acceptance but also promote social inclusion for autistic children.

However, while these studies underscore the value of peer interaction, they also reveal challenges in implementing these strategies effectively. In particular, the success of peer-mediated interventions and cooperative learning heavily relies on the training and engagement of peers, which, unfortunately, may not be feasible in all educational settings. Furthermore, Vaughn et al. (2021) highlighted the variability in teacher effectiveness, indicating a need for standardized training programs to ensure consistency across different classrooms. Therefore, continuous professional development for teachers is essential to equip them with the skills necessary for implementing inclusive practices effectively.

**Teachers' Roles in Inclusive Classrooms**
In an inclusive classroom environment, teachers have a crucial role in helping children with autism develop better social skills. According to (Margaret Aurelia et al. 2024), children with low social skills tend to show passivity, have a lack of self-confidence, and need guidance in developing initiatives in social interaction. Therefore, teachers not only act as academic educators, but also as facilitators who guide autistic children in understanding and applying social rules that apply in the school environment.

In this context, the role of the teacher becomes crucial in guiding autistic children to develop better social skills. Teachers not only function as teachers, but also as facilitators who create a conducive social environment so that autistic children can learn to interact more effectively (Apriliyani et al., 2024). In addition, according to Dian Rahmawati et al. (2024), teachers also have the responsibility to provide consistent guidance in helping autistic children complete tasks, interact with friends, adjust behavior, and participate in various school activities. Their responsibilities extend beyond academic instruction to include emotional, behavioural, and

social support tailored to each student's needs (Skura & Świderska, 2022). For autistic learners, who often experience deficits in social interaction and communication, the teacher's role becomes even more critical in facilitating engagement with peers and promoting prosocial behaviours.

Furthermore, teachers are responsible for creating a supportive environment that allows autistic children to participate meaningfully in group activities and classroom routines in inclusive classrooms. This may involve differentiating instruction, developing individualized support strategies, and fostering a classroom culture that values diversity (Basu, 2025). Research highlights that when teachers proactively plan inclusive lessons and social skill-building activities, students with ASD show greater progress in communication and peer interactions (Warnset, 2024).

Teacher attitudes and experiences significantly influence how inclusive education is delivered for students with autism (Valenti, 2020). Positive attitudes are often associated with a greater willingness to accommodate diverse learners, adopt flexible teaching methods, and implement inclusive strategies (Agenga, 2023). Conversely, negative attitudes often stemming from limited training, lack of resources, or high workload can hinder the effective inclusion of children with ASD (Yuan, 2023).

In the context of Bangladesh, studies have found that although teachers may support the idea of inclusive education in principle, many express concerns about their capacity to manage diverse classrooms without adequate professional development (Ambia & Rahman, 2021). The presence of societal stigma around disability may further influence teachers' expectations and interactions with autistic children (Hassan et al., 2020). Therefore, improving teacher attitudes is closely linked to enhanced training, institutional support, and awareness.

## Challenges Faced by Teachers in Inclusive Classrooms

Research has highlighted several challenges faced by teachers in fostering social skills development among autistic children in inclusive classrooms. These challenges include the lack of specialized training and resources, the difficulty in addressing the diverse needs of autistic students, and the need for individualized attention and support. Many teachers in inclusive settings come from general education backgrounds and are not adequately trained in special education techniques (Devi et al., 2024; Mukti et al., 2023). This lack of preparation affects their ability to modify classroom strategies to meet the individual needs of autistic students, especially when developing essential social skills. As noted by Quddush (2024), in Bangladesh, most teachers have limited exposure to autism-specific training, which reduces their confidence in implementing effective social interventions.

Effective development of social skills among autistic students often requires a **collaborative approach** involving teachers, parents, therapists, and special educators (Al-Shams et al., 2023). However, the limited collaboration between teachers, parents, and specialists can hinder the effective implementation of social skills development programs. Hasson et al. (2022) noted that when collaboration is absent, teachers may feel isolated in their efforts, and interventions may lack consistency between home and school environments. Additionally, the need for collaboration with parents and specialists requires effective communication and coordination, which can be challenging to manage effectively.

Autistic children often require individualized instruction and targeted support, particularly in learning how to interact socially. However, teachers in inclusive settings frequently struggle to

provide the necessary one-on-one support due to large class sizes, limited instructional time, and a shortage of support staff (Smith et al., 2022; Miller et al., 2024). These constraints make it difficult for teachers to design and implement personalized strategies that can foster meaningful social engagement (Wilson et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the integration of autistic children into inclusive classrooms requires a supportive environment that caters to their unique needs (Lee et al., 2022). Teachers may face challenges in adapting their teaching methods and materials to accommodate the diverse learning styles of autistic students (Clark et al., 2023). Additionally, fostering positive social interactions among all students can be a complex task, requiring teachers to create inclusive learning opportunities and address any instances of social exclusion (Williams et al., 2024). The pressure to meet academic requirements while also supporting the social-emotional development of autistic children can place additional demands on teachers (Clark et al., 223).

In the context of Dhaka's inclusive classrooms, teachers face specific challenges due to factors like limited resources, inadequate training programs, and a high student-to-teacher ratio (Rahman et al., 2022). The lack of specialized support staff and assistive technologies can further impede the effective implementation of inclusive education practices (Islam et al., 2023). Additionally, cultural and societal perceptions of disabilities can sometimes create barriers for inclusive education, requiring teachers to engage in community outreach efforts to raise awareness and promote acceptance (Hossain et al., 2024). The limited availability of resources and support systems within Dhaka's schools necessitates targeted interventions and capacity-building programs for teachers to effectively address the unique challenges of inclusive education in the region (Ahmed et al., 2023). Teachers often face resistance from community members or parents who may not fully accept the inclusion of autistic children in mainstream settings. This societal pressure can reduce teacher motivation and hinder broader efforts to foster inclusion (Chowdhury et al., 2024; Hossain et al., 2024).

Overall, the challenges faced by teachers in inclusive classrooms include a lack of specialized expertise in handling students with special needs, difficulties in balancing attention between regular and special needs students, and psychological and emotional challenges in managing a heterogeneous classroom. Therefore, the need for ongoing professional development and access to specialized training is crucial for equipping teachers with the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively support autistic students (Robinson et al., 2023). The importance of creating a collaborative and inclusive school environment, where teachers, parents, and specialists work together, is essential for promoting the social-emotional development of autistic children (Patel et al., 2022). Continuous professional development opportunities for teachers, along with adequate resources and support, are crucial for overcoming the hosts they face in promoting social skills development in autistic children in inclusive classrooms (Thompson et al., 2023).

## Research Objectives
This research aims to investigate the challenges teachers face and the strategies they employ in fostering the social skills development of autistic children within inclusive classroom settings. The study served two objectives:
  i. To identify the challenges teachers face in supporting social skills development in autistic learners within inclusive classrooms.
  ii. **To explore teachers' roles in developing social skills among autistic students within inclusive classrooms.**

**Research Questions**
With the objectives mentioned above, this study sought to answer the following questions:
  i.   What challenges do teachers encounter when supporting the social development of autistic children in inclusive classroom settings?
  ii.  What roles do teachers play in developing social skills among autistic students within inclusive classrooms?

**Theoretical Framework**
This study is grounded in two complementary theories: Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) and Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978). These theories provide a conceptual foundation for understanding how autistic children can develop social skills through observation, interaction, and scaffolding within inclusive classroom environments, and how teachers play a pivotal role in facilitating that development.

Bandura's Social Learning Theory is integral to this study's framework, as it provides a clear explanation for how autistic children can acquire social skills through observation, imitation, and interaction within inclusive classrooms. The theory emphasizes the significance of peers and teachers serving as models and the impact of positive reinforcement on motivating social development.

Sociocultural Theory by Vygotsky emphasizes that learning is inherently a social process and occurs most effectively through interaction with more knowledgeable others such as teachers or peers. The concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) highlights the importance of adult guidance and peer collaboration in helping children achieve skills they cannot master alone. In inclusive classrooms, teachers scaffold autistic students' social development by structuring supportive peer interactions, mediating collaborative activities, adapting tasks to meet individual needs, encouraging communication within social context.
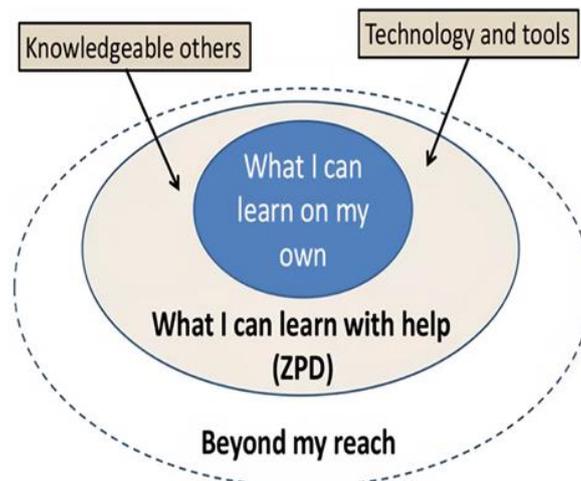


**Figure 2: Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory**

This framework aligns with the goals of inclusive education, where learning is co-constructed and social development is embedded in everyday classroom interactions. Teachers' awareness of students' cultural and developmental contexts is crucial in shaping effective strategies. The role of the teacher becomes crucial in guiding autistic children to develop better social skills. Teachers not only function as teachers, but also as facilitators who create a conducive social environment so that autistic children can learn to interact more effectively (Apriliyani et al.,2024).
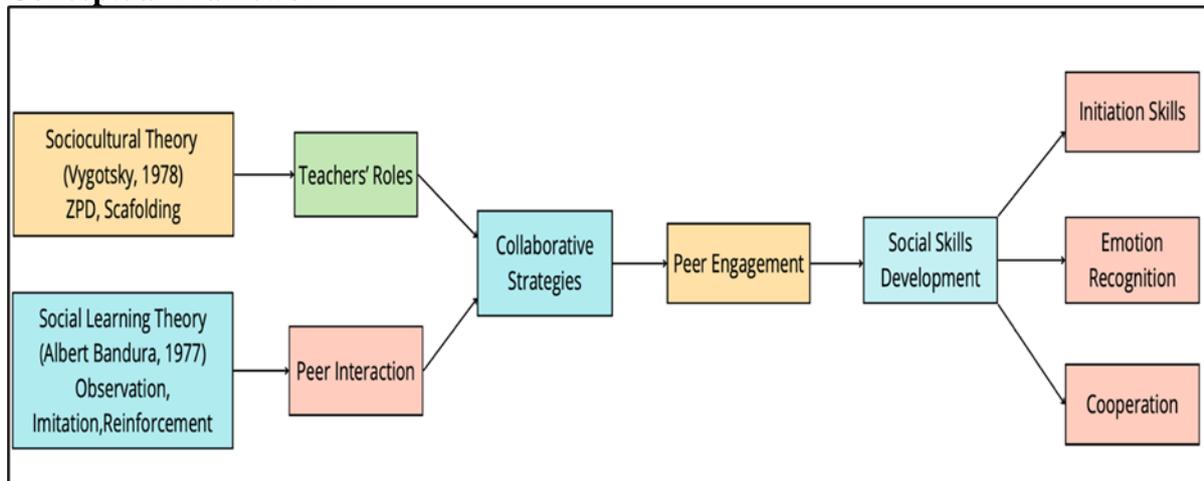
**Conceptual Framework**



**Figure 3: Conceptual Framework**

In the context of inclusive classrooms, autistic children can learn social skills by observing their neurotypical peers engage in various social interactions. By modelling appropriate behaviours, reinforcing positive peer interactions, and facilitating structured social learning opportunities (e.g., turn-taking games, role plays), teachers become agents of social skill development for children with ASD. Teachers facilitate peer-based activities and collaborative learning environments, intentionally guiding behaviour and modelling socially acceptable practices. In this way, SLT not only informs the choice of pedagogical strategies (e.g., peer modelling, group tasks, role play) but also underpins the importance of teacher roles in creating inclusive and socially rich learning environment.

## 3. Methodology

**Research design**
This study adopted an exploratory qualitative research approach to examine the roles and challenges faced by teachers in developing the social skills of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) within inclusive classroom settings in Dhaka. By employing qualitative methods, the researcher engaged with key informants primarily teachers who work directly with autistic children in inclusive educational environments. This approach enabled a deeper exploration of their experiences, strategies, and perceptions regarding social skill development.

Through in-depth interviews, the study gathered insights into how teachers facilitate peer interactions, adapt teaching practices, and collaborate with parents and school administrators to support autistic students. The research also investigated the barriers teachers encounter, such as limited resources, lack of training, and social stigma, which may hinder the effectiveness of inclusive practices. Ultimately, this design provided a comprehensive understanding of the practical realities and systemic challenges involved in fostering meaningful social engagement for children with ASD in Dhaka's inclusive classrooms.

**Informants**
The informants of this study consisted of six teachers from three different inclusive schools in Dhaka. These informants were purposefully selected based on their direct involvement with autistic children, ensuring they have firsthand experience.

## Data Collection

In qualitative research, non-probability sampling is a commonly used as it focuses on specific individuals relevant to the research objectives rather than random selection. Alvi (2016) highlighted that this approach involves a small group, enabling in-depth exploration of participants' experiences. Accordingly, this study adopted non-probability sampling, selecting teachers of three inclusive schools based on their direct involvement with autistic children. This study employed semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions and classroom observations as the primary data collection method. Mukherji and Albon (2010) emphasized that semi-structured interviews are particularly effective in qualitative research, as they provide flexibility while maintaining a structured approach. Each interview lasted between 50 to 60 minutes, was recorded via mobile phone. Then transferred to a laptop and securely stored in the cloud to ensure detailed accounts of informants' experiences were preserved.

To ensure ethical research practices, informed consent forms were provided to all participants, outlining the study's purpose, their rights, the significance of their participation, data collection methods, and confidentiality measures. Before interviews began, the researcher explained the consent form thoroughly and allowed informants to review it independently. Since their movements, expressions, and feelings were recorded, informants were asked to sign the consent form. To maintain confidentiality all details regarding their names, school names, recorded videos, and interview transcripts were kept in a secured place.

## Data Analysis

Data analysis in qualitative research begins the moment researchers enter the field. Iterative cycles of interviewing, observing, transcribing, reading, and rereading data are essential to refine research questions and identify emerging themes (Liamputtong, 2009). In this research data was critically analysed and divided into different themes. The researcher did the process of thematic analysis coding manually without using any software. In qualitative research, validity was defined as the tool's processes and data appropriateness while reliability was referred to the exact trustworthiness of the processes and the findings in the research (Leung, 2015). Validity of a qualitative research referred to the truth value of the findings. Audio recording for semi-structured interviews also helped in finding truth. The researcher could listen to the recorded audio repeatedly and verify for the corrected data. In terms of reliability or consistency, the researcher clearly described the research process from initial stage until the process of reporting the findings. Thus, throughout the research, the researcher clearly explained the processes involved in order to make sure its validity and reliability has achieved the scientific rigour of the research.

Furthermore, triangulation was used as a strategy to strengthen the internal validity of a research (Merriam, 2015). According to Carter et al. (2014), research validity can be enhanced by combining information from multiple sources. In this study, the researcher employed data source triangulation, a commonly used method in qualitative research. Data were collected from teachers in three different inclusive schools located in distinct areas of Dhaka, each offering unique perspectives on the development of social skills in autistic children. By comparing and analyzing these multiple viewpoints, the researcher ensured that the emerging themes were grounded in consistent and credible evidence. In addition, the researcher considered the transferability, dependability and confirmability of the generated themes and findings thereby enhancing overall trustworthiness and credibility of the study.

**Findings and Discussion**

The present research is designed to explore the roles and challenges of teachers in developing the social skills of autistic children within inclusive classrooms in Dhaka. In this research, the researcher focused on six teachers with experience teaching children with autism spectrum disorder in inclusive school settings in Dhaka.

The research only focused on the roles and challenges of teachers supporting the social development of children with autism spectrum disorder in inclusive classroom. In terms teachers' roles in developing social skills among autistic children, the researcher has categorised the findings into several themes, namely understanding social skills; cooperating with parents, children and other teachers; teachers strategies for social skills development.

**Teachers' Roles in Developing Social Skills Among Autistic Children within Inclusive Classrooms**

After transcribing the interviews of the participants, three main themes and several sub-themes emerged from the first research question. Figure 4 illustrated the themes and sub-themes derived from the data.
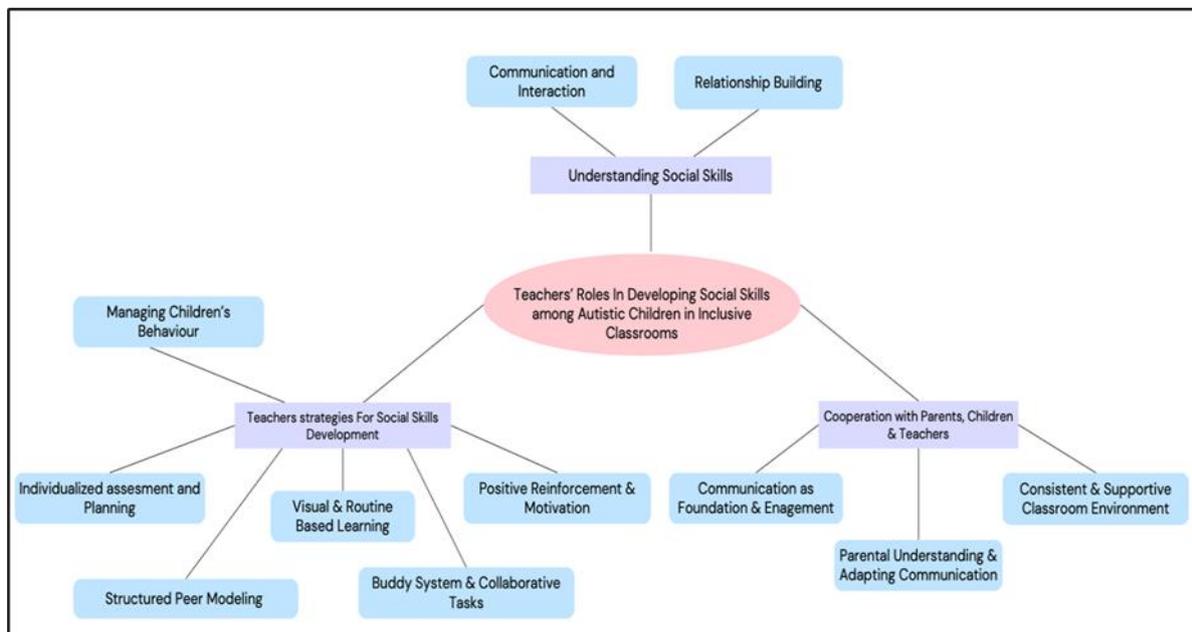


*Pink: Research Question, Purple: Themes, Blue: Sub-themes*

**Figure 4: Research Question and Corresponding Themes & Sub-themes**

**Understanding Social Skills**

Teachers generally viewed social skills as the child's ability to communicate and interact meaningfully with peers and teachers. For them, this included both verbal and non-verbal aspects of interaction. As one teacher explained,

> *"For autistic children in inclusive classrooms, social skills are the ability to understand, communicate, and interact with peers and teachers in ways that are meaningful and comfortable for them"*

(Participant 1)

Another emphasized that social skills primarily involve relationship-building. As he stated;

> *"What social skills mean, or what we mean by it, is how the students can communicate and interact and how they build relationships with the students and the teachers as well."*

(Participant 2)

These insights align with the literature, which emphasizes that developing **social competence and interaction abilities is central for autistic children's adaptation within inclusive settings** (Özerk, Özerk, & Silveira-Zaldivar, 2021). The teachers' perspectives reflect an understanding that social skills go beyond academic participation, serving as a foundation for meaningful relationships and emotional well-being.

### Cooperating with Parents, Children and Other Teachers

The study found that effective cooperation with parents, children and other teachers is essential for supporting the social development of autistic children in inclusive classrooms. Most participants agreed that clear communication is the most effective method for fostering such cooperation. Recent research highlights that ongoing, multi-channel communication including formal meetings, phone calls, and informal interactions continues to be the best strategy for fostering collaboration and supporting social skill development for autistic children in inclusive classrooms (Means, 2023). Teachers often share updates not only on academic progress but also on social and emotional development, ensuring parents are well-informed and involved in supporting their child's growth. Participant 1 stated that she regularly updating parents about classroom activities, routines, and their child's interests, using both formal and informal communication methods. This aligns with research by Rodrigues, Campos, Chaves and Martins (2015), which emphasizes the value of sustained, multi-channel communication among teachers and parents in promoting social engagement for ASD children.

Participant 2 mentioned that some parents focus only on their children's clear improvements, sometimes overlooking gradual social progress. Modern studies emphasize the necessity for parents to understand and celebrate small steps in social skill development, as this awareness can lead to greater participation in interventions and therapies, which ultimately help autistic children better socialize with their peers. Collaboration between home and school, when based on mutual understanding rather than just academic outcomes, leads to more successful inclusive experiences (Alassaf, 2025).

In addition to that, teachers sought support from colleagues and specialists, such as experienced teachers and speech therapists, to enhance their ability to foster social skills. Seeking help from more experienced teachers or specialists enabled educators to implement strategies that better supported autistic children in communication and social interaction. Teachers also get cooperation and support from other experts such as a speech therapist and an experienced teacher. Participant 1 mentioned that she referred to a speech therapist on ways to assist autistic children to speak better. Participant 3 and 5 stated that they would ask help from other teachers who have more experienced than them. This finding was consistent with Takala, Pirttimaa and Törmänen (2009) who found that cooperation among teachers would help children in developing their skills and confidence levels.

Teachers also reported modifying the curriculum, designing meaningful tasks, and attending to individual needs all strategies that help autistic children participate in social activities and develop relationships with peers (Finch, Watson & MacGregor, 2013).

**Teachers Strategies for Social Skills Development Among Autistic Children**
**Individualized assessment and planning**
Teachers in inclusive classrooms emphasized the importance of conducting personalized, child-centered assessments to address the unique needs of autistic students. Upon admission, each child undergoes a comprehensive pre-assessment across multiple developmental domains—cognitive, physical (including gross and fine motor skills), socio-emotional, literacy, and social development—to identify their strengths and challenges. Teachers closely observe the child's behaviour for several days and communicate with parents to gather additional insights from home and medical recommendations. This process guides the creation of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) tailored for each child's strengths and challenges. For instance, participant 5 and 6 mentioned;

> *"When a child first comes in, we assess their developmental domains—such as cognitive, physical (including gross and fine motor skills), socio-emotional, literacy, and social development. Each domain contains several indicators. Based on this, we create the IEP."*
>
> *(Participant 5)*

> *"To do this effectively, we observe the child for several days before admission. During this observation, we try to understand their specific challenges. We also communicate with the parents to learn what they've observed at home and what doctors have recommended."*
>
> *(Participant 6)*

Chong (2010) also believed that the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) should be used to assess children's communication skills, cognitive abilities and other abilities that they might have. Teachers should play important roles in both observing and assessing ASD children as it would lead them to making positive achievements.

**Conducting observation and assessment**
Observing and assessing ASD children was also one of the teachers' roles. By doing so, teachers were able to identify their progress and social development. Teachers would normally observe and asses these children during the learning processes that took place in daily activities. For instance, Participant 3 assessed these children on what they could and could not do, whereas Participant 4 would assess them according to their levels of capability.

Most participants assessed the ASD children in terms of their behaviours, abilities and interests. According to Katsfanas (2006), observations and assessments could be done by giving the children class work activities, homework and tests. Teachers could also apply the rating scale technique as suggested by Chong (2010). The scale was used to measure children's behavioural changes, attention span, and other aspects of their development.

**Positive Reinforcement and Motivation**
Teachers frequently employ positive reinforcement such as rewards, stickers, and verbal praise to motivate and encourage autistic students when they display appropriate social behaviours or complete tasks. This reinforcement encourages active participation and social engagement. Participant 4 & 5 stated;

> *"One of the strategies I use is positive reinforcement. For example, if a student completes a task… I reward them with a small token gift such as a sticker or I tell them a story they enjoy. This kind of reinforcement really motivates them."*

Another emphasized how praise and encouragement foster engagement:

> *"When they respond positively, even with small efforts, I immediately appreciate them in front of peers. It builds their confidence and encourages them to try again."*

### a) Structured Peer Modelling

Three informants highlighted the effectiveness of **peer modelling**, where a neurotypical child acts as the model, and the special child tries to imitate what they see. Typically developing classmates demonstrate social and academic behaviours, helping autistic children learn through observation. According to Owen De-Schryver, et al. (2008), when typically developed children starts to interact with their ASD classmates, encourage them to imitate their example. Autistic children mimic their peers' actions, which builds confidence. The Participant 6 mentioned;

> *"During art class, we pair students and say, 'Watch how your friend colour, try to do like that. Then they observe their neurotypical peer and learn how to colour by watching them."*

This is evident as Participant 2 said;

> *"We train neurotypical peers to slow down and exaggerate steps, like washing hands slowly, so autistic students can follow along."*

This approach aligns with **Social Learning Theory** (Bandura, 1977), which posits that observational learning enhances skill acquisition. By observing peers, autistic children learn context-appropriate behaviours, such as turn-taking or collaborative play. Research by Watkins et al. (2017) supports this, noting that peer modelling in inclusive settings improves joint attention and reduces social anxiety in autistic learners.

### b) Buddy Systems

Schools implemented buddy systems to pair neurotypical and autistic students during routine activities to encourage meaningful interactions. Most of the participants emphasized on structured partnerships to promote mutual support, with neurotypical peers guiding autistic students through routines. The following responses from the participants reflect the concept;

> *"Our 'Lunch Buddy' program pairs students for meals. Neurotypical peers remind their buddies to use napkins or take turns talking."*

> *"During circle time, neurotypical peers demonstrate greetings. We ask the child to watch first, then try."*

These partnerships promoted mutual understanding, with neurotypical peers learning empathy while autistic children practiced social reciprocity. For instance, collaborative tasks like group games or shared routines (e.g., handwashing) encourage reciprocal interaction. A study by Kasari et al. (2012) found that structured peer partnerships increase social initiations and reduce isolation, fostering a sense of belonging.

### c) Collaborative Group Activities

Participants 2 and 6 mentioned group activities that are part of the daily routine, such as circle time, snack time, role playing acting out scenarios (e.g., doctor-patient, teacher-student) to practice social roles. During snack time, everyone sits together and eats. Circle time includes activities like motor imitation and turn-taking games, which help develop the children's play skills. Here are some examples of what they said;

> *"During turn-taking games, they need to be taught waiting skills. We tell them, 'Now you have to wait. When it comes to you, only then you can take it.' During that time, we make them do a countdown from one to ten. They don't naturally understand the concept of turn-taking; we explain it to them through support."*
>
> *(Participant 2)*

> *"We show what a doctor does, and the kids act it out. They learn empathy and dialogue through role-play."*
>
> *(Participant 6)*

These collaborative activities structured group interactions, play-based learning, and inclusive sports or nature-based experiences collectively address key challenges in social communication for autistic children. By embedding peer engagement into daily routines and play, educators create meaningful opportunities for observational learning and the development of empathy. This approach aligns with Vygotsky's Social Development Theory, which emphasizes that peer interactions during group activities act as scaffolding, allowing autistic children to develop skills (e.g., communication, patience) with guided support from neurotypical peers and teachers.

### Visual and Routine-Based Learning

Teachers utilized visual aids (e.g. social stories, social books, and flashcards) and predictable routines to scaffold social understanding. Participant 4 stated that she create tailored social stories to break down abstract social norms into sequential steps. These stories act as "mental blueprints" for autistic children, clarifying expectations and reducing ambiguity. She expressed;

> *"We use social stories to explain what they need to do at social gathering like weddings or birthday parties. These stories are broken into small task sequence – for example, 'What will you do first when you go there? Then what will you do next? This way, we create a mental map setup in their mind. So, when they go to a social gathering, they follow that setup."*

A study conducted by Frolli et al (2022) and Park et al (2023) explored the effectiveness of social stories in enhancing social interaction and personality development in adults with ASDs, learning disabilities, and dyslexia.

### Managing Children's Behaviour

All participants agreed that they had to manage the children's behavioural problems on a daily basis. For example, Participant 1 mentioned that she would give them a 'time out' for few minutes, before calling the student to explain about what had happened. She believed that the 'time out' strategy worked well. Participant 2 and 3 would make sure that the child with behavioural problems would not get any closer to other children. They would normally take the child to sit with them or at the corner of the classroom and facing the wall. Participant 4

stated that she would let the child to cool down, whereas Participant 6 believed that it was acceptable if the child wanted to be isolated or alone since he would join the class activities once he had felt better. For Participant 5, she suggested not to ignore the child, instead, teachers should gain their interest in participating classroom activities.

All participants suggested different techniques in managing children's behavioural problems since their parents were not there to protect or care for them. Thus, teachers needed to learn to manage their behaviours to help smoothen the learning process (Devecchi, Dettori, Doveston, Sedgwick, & Jament, 2012); Roslan et al., 2017). Furthermore, teachers should be equipped with the appropriate skills in handling ASD children. They should be aware of the behavioural changes and seek support from other (Cavanaugh, 2012). In other words, teachers should learn to manage children's behavioural problems as their behaviours can be unpredictable and consistently changing depending on their mood and surroundings.

## Challenges of Teachers

The second objective of this study was to investigate the challenges faced by teachers in developing social skills among autistic children in inclusive classrooms. The themes emerged include children's behavioural problems, children's cognitive problems, Environmental problem, parental resistance and misconceptions, systematic resource gap and institutional support, negative peer behaviour and inappropriate language. Several observations were derived from the data, which are presented as key points in Figure 5 below.
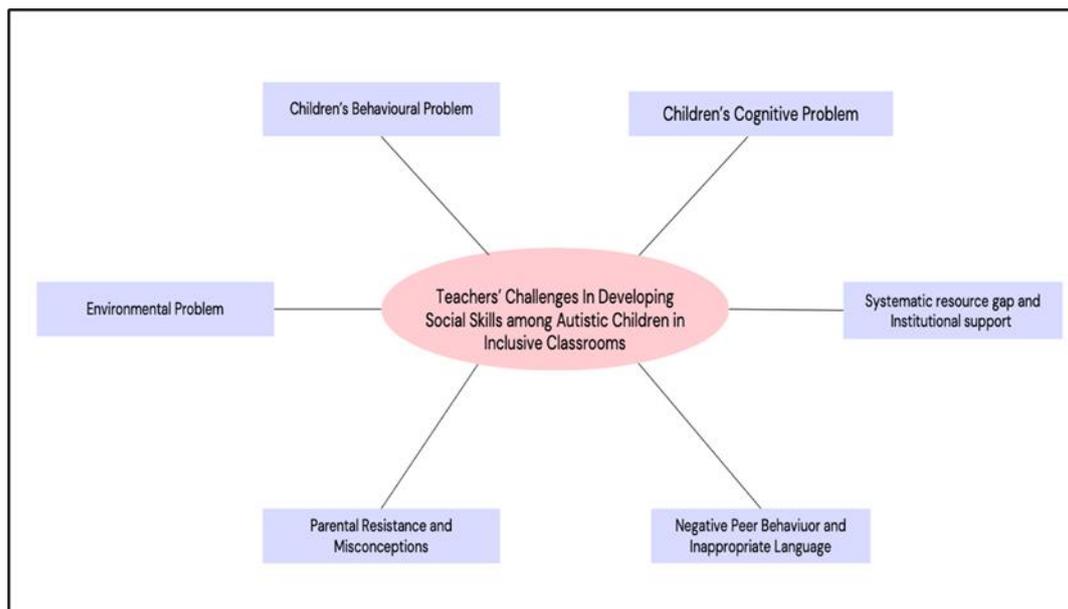


Pink: Research Question, Purple: Themes
**Figure 5: Research Question and Corresponding Theme**

## Parental Resistance and Misconceptions

A significant proportion of parents express discomfort with inclusive settings, fearing harm or negative influence on their neurotypical children. Some don't want their children to mix with autistic children. They expressed their fear as like;

> *"My kid is normal, why should they be with a special child? If they hurt my child, then what?"*

School teachers often face fear and wrong ideas that come from common social beliefs, especially from the parents of neurotypical children. These negative attitudes make it harder to support inclusion and can lead to more exclusion, as neurotypical children may copy the biased behaviour they see at home.

### Systematic Resource Gaps and Lack of Institutional Support

Many teachers lack adequate knowledge about the behaviours, life style and functional limitations of autistic children making classroom management challenging. Some expressed the need for advanced training and practical workshops to improve their teaching skills. Effective training boosts both inclusion and teacher confidence when working with autistic children (Johnson et al., 2024).

Moreover, teachers also mentioned some limitations such as poor remuneration, insufficient government support, and a lack of special teaching materials, especially audiovisual aids. The 3rd participant pointed out,

> *"We face barriers even within inclusive schools—like a lack of essential facilities. For example, we need proper RAMs, OT devices, and specialized professionals like SLTs."*
> *(Participant 3)*

This finding is supported by Starks and Reiche (2023) who found several barriers such as lacking access to special device, internet facilities, advanced software and digital literacy skill, lacking in technology training and time of teachers, school authority lethargy to technology and so on. The 3rd informant also highlighted that there no consistent support from the government, stating,

> *"We don't currently receive any dedicated assistance from the government… If the government supports us, we could achieve much more."*
> *(Participant 3)*

Therefore, without adequate funding, professional training, and governmental backing affecting the social and emotional development of autistic children in inclusive settings.

### Children's Behavioural Problems

All participants agreed that autistic children's behavioural problems such as throwing tantrums, biting or hurting other children, running around in class were some of the challenges that they face on a regular basis. Participant 3 added that their moods and behaviours frequently changed, whereas Participant 2 and Participant 6 stated that they disturbed other students with aggressive behaviours that include hitting, slapping and biting. There were four categories of behaviours for autistic children; namely physical behaviour, intellectual behaviour, social behaviour, and emotional behaviour (Roslan et al., 2017). In line with the findings, all participants faced challenges in dealing with behavioural problems, especially both physical and social behavioural problems. Furthermore, Nair (2015) believed that academic performance was not the main problem for autistic children as compared to their behavioural problem. Thus, teachers needed to focus more on ways to manage their behaviours rather than formal learning.

### Children's Cognitive Problem

Another challenge that was faced by these participants was related to the cognitive abilities of autistic children. Participant 1 and Participant 4 stated that some of these children do not talk and communicate at all. Participant 3 added that they did not respond when their names are

being called out and they avoided having eye contacts. Moreover, Participant 2 mentioned that some of them have difficulties in feeding themselves and going to toilets. They were not toilet trained. The communication process was the biggest challenge. This finding was consistent with Nair (2015) who mentioned that most autistic children with cognitive problem would have difficulties in both verbal and written language. According to Participant 6, they have a very short attention span, which supported by Zuki and Rahman (2016). Therefore, teachers needed to think creatively on ways to improve the children's communication process and make learning enjoyable so that they were able to be involved in daily communication and learned better.

**Environmental Problem**

Environment could be a factor that would bring challenges to teachers. It involved individuals who were related to the ASD children such as their parents, other teachers and students. Participant 1 stated that the biggest challenge was to make sure that parents understood what teachers do. Based on her experience, she realized that most parents did not understand how autistic child learned and developed. She also stated that dealing with other teachers could also be challenging as each teacher has their own ways and methods of doing things, including teachings. Hussin and Hamdan (2016) revealed that the school administration and parental involvement affect children's learning environment. Therefore, teachers should to be able to manage the parents and other teachers effectively.

In contrast, Participant 6 mentioned that her biggest challenge was to assist normal children to mix with autistic children. Normal children did not understand why autistic children suddenly became aggressive and started to hit others. In other words, it took time for them to understand and accept the autistic children. She said that it was quite challenging to explain to the normal children the reasons why most autistic children suddenly became aggressive and threw tantrums. She added that it took about one year for the normal children to understand their ASD classmates.

According to Nasir and Efendi (2016), facilities, readiness, resources and appropriate materials for teaching were the challenges that teachers faced in teaching children with ASD. However, none of the participants regarded providing materials for ASD children as a challenge. This was because the preschool has provided enough materials for them. As mentioned by Participant 2, it was not necessary to use expensive tools in teaching them but teachers should think of other creative ways to teach by using available materials. In addition to that, Participant 2 mentioned that most parents have already provided their children with daily needs and essentials such as foods, toys or puzzles. Thus, teachers only need to think of creative and fun ways in teaching them. This was also related to teachers' abilities in making observations and assessments on the ASD children and preparing lessons according to their interests.

**Negative Peer Behaviour and Inappropriate Language**

One significant issue is that some neurotypical pupils behave and speak inappropriately toward autistic children, often due to jealousy when autistic students receive additional attention or support from teachers. The teacher also added, children often imitate the language they hear at home and this can have adverse effects on their peers. The informants stated;

> *"When I give a little extra care or support to a child with special needs—because obviously, they need it some of the neurotypical children become jealous."*

This behaviour not only disrupts the learning environment but also influences the younger or more impressionable children in the classroom. As the informant noted;

> *"Some kids behave inappropriately. They use offensive language like 'Gadha(donkey),'*
> *'Pagol (crazy),' 'Boka (fool)'—words that are not acceptable. I strongly advise children*
> *not to use such language."*

The persistent negative behaviour from peers led the children to feel "helpless" in classroom environment. This not only impacts the emotional well-being of the autistic student but also hampering the goals of inclusive education.

## 4. Discussion

This research aimed to explore the roles of teachers and the challenges they encounter in developing social skills of autistic children within inclusive classrooms in Dhaka. The findings highlighted the pivotal role of teachers in creating structured opportunities for autistic children to engage with their neurotypical peers, which in turn contributed positively to their social, emotional, and academic development.

The results of this study align with Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, which emphasizes that children acquire behaviours through observation and imitation. Teachers in inclusive classrooms acted as facilitators by organizing peer modelling activities, encouraging group work, and scaffolding social exchanges. These strategies allowed autistic children to observe, practise, and internalize essential social skills such as turn-taking, maintaining eye contact, and initiating conversations. This finding is consistent with Chaithornthanawat (2019), who found that role-play and peer-based learning enhanced the social skill development of autistic students.

Teachers in this study emphasized that intentional strategies such as structured group activities, guided peer modelling, and teacher-led facilitation were effective in fostering communication and relationship-building. Importantly, educators also highlighted the role of peer engagement in promoting emotional development, noting that children displayed increased patience, empathy, and a stronger sense of belonging. These findings resonate with Chaudhary, Shahid, and Bashir (2022), who observed that inclusive education not only supports children with special needs but also nurtures empathy, tolerance, and social solidarity among neurotypical students. Thus, teachers play a dual role: supporting autistic children in social skill acquisition while also guiding their peers to develop compassion and acceptance.

Despite these benefits, teachers identified a range of challenges. These included behavioural difficulties, sensory sensitivities, occasional negative peer attitudes, lack of teacher training in special education, societal stigma, and insufficient institutional resources. Such barriers limited opportunities for consistent and meaningful inclusion. Teachers expressed the need for ongoing professional development, greater access to specialized resources, and stronger community awareness to ensure effective implementation of inclusive practices.

Overall, this discussion reinforces the critical role of teachers in advancing inclusive education for autistic children in Dhaka. While previous research has often emphasized policy frameworks and structural provisions, this study contributes by illustrating how teachers' daily practices and facilitation strategies directly shape the social skill development of autistic learners. By strengthening teacher preparation, ensuring the availability of resources, and

addressing classroom-level challenges, inclusive education can move beyond physical placement toward fostering genuine peer interaction and holistic growth for all students.

## 5. Conclusion

The findings emphasize that teachers play a central role in creating structured opportunities for autistic children to practise communication, cooperation, and empathy alongside their neurotypical peers. Through strategies such as peer modelling, group activities, and teacher-led facilitation, educators fostered social skill development while also cultivating empathy, patience, and acceptance among neurotypical students. Thus, teachers' practices are crucial not only for supporting children with ASD but also for nurturing a more inclusive and compassionate classroom environment.

At the same time, this study revealed that teachers in Dhaka face numerous challenges in effectively carrying out this role. These include behavioural and sensory difficulties among autistic students, negative peer behaviour, and exclusionary attitudes that sometimes stem from societal stigma and misconceptions about inclusion. Teachers also reported constraints due to insufficient professional training, limited access to speech and occupational therapists, and inadequate institutional resources. These barriers often prevent them from fully supporting autistic children's social participation in classroom activities.

The insights gained from educators highlight that inclusive education must go beyond physical placement of children with and without disabilities in the same setting. For inclusion to be meaningful, teachers require ongoing professional development, adequate resources, and strong support systems. Schools need to implement targeted strategies such as structured peer modelling, collaborative group activities, and family awareness programs, while also ensuring access to specialized professionals and appropriate facilities.

In conclusion, the study underscores that teacher are at the heart of inclusive education for autistic children in Dhaka. By empowering teachers with the right training, resources, and community support, inclusive classrooms can move beyond basic integration to become spaces that genuinely promote social skill development, peer engagement, and holistic growth for all learners.

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## Conflict of Interest Statement
The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this study.

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