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Innovating Sign Language Education for the Deaf: A Service-Learning Approach in South Asia

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ABSTRACT

Deaf communities in South Asia continue to face barriers due to limited sign language recognition, lack of trained teachers, and insufficient policy support. This paper introduces service-learning as a strategy for inclusive deaf education, based on case studies from Bangladesh. The results demonstrate improved sign language literacy, leadership skills, empathy among hearing students, and policy advocacy. Service-learning is presented as a scalable model that aligns with SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities).

1. Introduction

Despite education being a basic right, millions of deaf children in South Asia are excluded from formal learning. Bangladesh shows one of the lowest completion rates for deaf learners, as mainstream teachers often lack sign language training. This paper argues that service-learning, which combines academic study with community engagement, can empower deaf students and create a more inclusive system.

2. Methodology

The study follows a qualitative case study approach, focusing on workshops and training sessions held in Bangladesh between. Data were collected through interviews with 25 deaf students, 10 teachers, and 5 community leaders, as well as document reviews from NGOs and deaf associations.

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3. Findings

The analysis identified four outcomes: Enhanced Literacy: Deaf and hearing students learned sign language together, improving mutual communication. Leadership: Deaf youth gained confidence by training university students. Empathy: Hearing students developed awareness of deaf challenges. Policy Impact: Projects encouraged universities and policymakers to integrate sign language into curricula.

4. Discussion

Service-learning shifts deaf learners from passive recipients to active co-educators, promoting equity and respect. However, challenges include lack of funding, weak policy support, and resistance from traditional educators. With proper investment, service learning can be scaled across South Asia to support inclusive education.

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