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Readiness of Pre-Service Special Educators for Inclusive Education

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Abstract

Teacher education programs have undergone major reforms in the country so as to equip pre-service teachers with inclusive skills, knowledge, attitudes and values which are very critical for successful implementation of inclusive education. Pre-service teachers' readiness and preparedness plays a vital role. RCI has envisaged the situation and has framed new curriculum especially in the field of special education to meet the growing demands for inclusive teachers. The purpose of the present study was to find out the views and readiness of pre-service special educators in light of the new curriculum. The sample included 30 final year pre-service teacher trainees undergoing training in the field of Special Education - Mental Retardation. Descriptive survey design method was used by the researchers. The study revealed mixed results. The findings of the study revealed that majority of the participants wished to include all the children with disabilities. Study also revealed that participants were prepared to meet the needs of the various children with disabilities but had their own concerns regarding their personal competency, practical exposure especially with regard to other disabilities.

Keywords : Readiness, Inclusive Education, Pre-Service Special Educators.

Introduction

Inclusion means full inclusion of children with diverse abilities in all aspects of schooling that other children are able to access and enjoy. It involves regular schools and classrooms genuinely adapting and changing to meet the needs of all children, as well as celebrating and valuing differences (Loreman.T, 2002). This definition does not imply that children with diverse abilities will not receive specialized assistance nor teaching outside of the classrooms when required, but rather that this is just one of many options that are available for children with diverse needs. Inclusive education is perceived to be one of the ways to increase educational access to large number of students with disabilities. This means more children with disabilities will be placed in the regular classroom than before (Mukhopadhyay.S, 2009). A lot of research is happening on inclusive education across the world.

There are several factors related to child and teacher variables which seem to contribute to the successful inclusion students in mainstream classrooms such as flexible curriculum, instructional strategies, accessible material, availability of support services, curricular adaptations including the evaluation procedures. Apart from these effective inclusion practices often require that teachers, administrators and other professionals give up traditional attitudes and expectations. One of the indicators of successful inclusion seem to be the teachers' positive attitudes towards students with special needs (Anita et. al. 2002; Avramidis, & Norwich, 2002; Powers, 2002). Apart from having positive attitudes it is also essential that teachers are well prepared to face the challenges posed in inclusive education. This requires that the teachers are equipped with necessary skills and competencies to deal with all kind of disabilities.

Government of India has always taken proactive measures to encourage inclusive education. The flagship programs includes District Primary Education Program, Integrated Education for the Disabled, Sarva Shiksha, Abhiyaan (SSA), IEDSS all focus on promoting inclusive education in one or the other way.(Singhal, 2005). Since the introduction of SSA, 2002, all children with disabilities are entitled to admission into regular schools.

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In India general education and Special Education have been bifurcated, which has caused drift between the systems of general education and special education. In order to smoothly include children with special needs and teach them effectively it's necessary for the teacher trainees to be ready and to be positive towards Inclusive education. India being signatory to the UNCRPD, has also taken initiative to be in line with the convention principles and has replaced the existing PWD Act with the new RPWD act. The new RPWD act strongly emphasises the need for providing inclusive education to all children with diverse abilities. Preparing quality teachers for inclusive education is a challenging task in both developed and less developed countries.

Sadler (2005) found that 87.6% of teachers reported that they have "limited" or "very limited" knowledge of inclusive education. None of the teachers rated themselves as having sufficient knowledge. Similarly, Gaad and Khan (2007) found that teachers do not have enough knowledge and training to address the needs of students in integrated settings. Participants considered their limited knowledge to have an influence on their attitudes, suggesting that lack of knowledge may be an attitudinal barrier, as well as a practical barrier, to the implementation of inclusion.

The attitudes of classroom teachers has long been recognized as being key to the successful inclusion of learners with special educational needs into mainstream classrooms (Norwich 2002, Carrington 1999) Consistently research has shown that positive attitude are one of the main predictors of the successful implementation of inclusive practices in the classroom (Avramidis 2000, Bacon 1991). Studies of trainee teachers have tended to indicate more willingness to accept pupils with SEN. The majority of studies that have investigated educators, concerns and attitude to Inclusive education have focused on teachers' in the field (Agbenyega, 2006; 2001; Gaad and Khan, 2007 Das.A & Kyini, 2013; Mangope 2002) rather than on student teacher.

Ajay Das (2013) conducted a study titled "Inclusive Education in India: Are the teachers prepared?" this study examined the current skill levels of regular primary and secondary school teachers in Delhi, India. 223 primary and 130 secondary teachers participated in the study. Investigator collected the data using a two part questionnaire. Purposive sampling method was employed. Findings revealed that nearly 70% of the regular school teachers had neither received training in special education nor had experience teaching CWSN. All the participants rated themselves as having limited or low competence for working with CWD.

Several studies have shown that there is inadequacy of teacher training in India especially pertaining to inclusive education provisions for all students (Bindal & Sharma, 2010; Sharma & Desai, 2002; Swaroop, 2001). Other studies show that teachers who have received training are still concerned about implementing inclusion (Sharma & Desai, 2002) and yet some are able to translate training into actual instructional practices to promote inclusion of those with disabilities (David & Kuyini, 2012). Studies of both Pre -service and In-service teachers attitudes towards Inclusion of pupils with special educational needs in mainstream classrooms have also shown that attitudes were affected by the quality of preparation received (Lambe and

Bones 2006, Avramidis et al 2000, Wilczenski 1993) concluding that improving and increasing training provision at the pre-service phase of teacher education would be the most effective method of promoting better attitudes to inclusion. If student teachers complete their pre-service education without having developed positive attitudes towards inclusion this will be very difficult to change and may have a negative effect on the integration of learners with disabilities into mainstream settings (Lambe and Bones 2000) found that positive attitudes were evident in student teachers early in their initial training, concluding that improved provision at pre-service through a structured approach towards training for inclusion based practices would be the best point to nurture these attitudes. While much research has focused on the views of practicing teachers, it is in the pre-service period that offers significant potential to influence positive attitudes.

In India, teacher training in the field of Special Education and disability rehabilitation is regulated by Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI), which was constituted by an act of parliament act in 1992. One of the mandates given to RCI is to regulate and monitor services given to persons with disability, to standardize syllabi and to maintain a Central Rehabilitation Register of all qualified professionals and personnel working in the field of Rehabilitation and Special Education. The Act also prescribes punitive action against unqualified persons delivering services to persons with disability. With the growing need and challenges in inclusive education RCI has entered into a memorandum of understanding with NCTE in the year 2015.

As an initiative RCI has taken up the task of revising and developing curriculum for teacher education to support inclusive education practices. With the Hercules task to cater to more than 1 million students with diverse needs, RCI has designed courses such as diploma in Special Education and Bachelors in Special Education of two years duration to prepare and equip pre service special educators for promoting inclusive education.

The main purpose of the present study is to find out the readiness of pre-service special educators for inclusive education.

Method

Research Design and Instrumentation

Descriptive survey design was used for conducting the study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to elicit the information. Interview schedule with 10 open ended questions were used to gather information. The second of the tool consisted of 13 statements to measure the readiness and competencies acquired during the training period. The interview questions were developed through a review of the literature relating to practices in inclusive education. The interview questions were given for validation to professionals in the field. This approach was specifically chosen to enable the exploration of pre-service trainees' perceptions on the readiness for inclusive education.

Participants

The participants of the study were 30 pre-service teachers in their last year of their B.Ed. Special Education in MR/ID studying in three colleges affiliated to Osmania University. Only students in the final semester passing out students were included as the sample

Procedure

The final year student teachers were requested to participate in the study and they consented and participated. The semi-structured interview method was employed and each group was interviewed face to face by one of the investigators. Interviews ranged in duration from 45 to 60 minutes. The rating scale was given to each trainee and the purpose of the study was explained to them. The investigators were informed that the investigators were interested in finding out about their preparedness. The investigator remained as neutral as possible and clarification was sought wherever it was required. The investigator ensured to paraphrase at regular intervals to have clarity in terms of the information expressed by the participants.

Data Analysis

The verbatim and the responses were studied thoroughly for analysis. Each transcript was examined separately and whenever a new theme emerged, it was highlighted. The identified themes within the transcript were then compared across transcripts and overall themes were developed which were later used to report the findings of the study.

Results

Majority of the participants were female teacher trainees (73.3%) while male trainees were 24% of the sample. The mean age of the participants ranged from 22 years to 42 years. The overall perceptions of the teacher trainees are presented under the following sub themes

Attitudes

Majority of the teacher trainees have expressed positive attitude towards inclusive education which is very critical for successful implementation of inclusive education. Majority 82% opinionated that inclusive education is needed and they strongly felt that there should be more awareness about children with special needs to regular teachers. However the teacher trainees expressed their concern regarding the attitude of regular teachers during their teaching practice. One of the participants has expressed

The teachers in the regular school treat us as if we are aliens. They say special education is very simple.

One more participant who has a special child has expressed that

I came to do this course for the sake of my child so that I can be able to manage well.

But after doing this course I have learnt so much and now I feel that I am in a position to help many parents with special needs.

Knowledge

The participants of the study have expressed they have gained knowledge about special education and inclusive education practices. Majority of them have expressed that since the curriculum has been revised they have gained knowledge about all major disabilities. One of the participants has expressed that

When I joined I thought of learning about only Intellectual

Disability but now I learned about Autism, Learning Disability, Hearing Impairment and Visual impairment also. The course covers theoretical aspects well. When it comes to practical part I am not confident about teaching children with sensory disabilities.

One more participant has expressed concern regarding sign language and Braille inputs.

Although theory is included, I feel that practical inputs are not sufficient. The curriculum has very less inputs as it is not a major optional. How will I be able to teach children with sensory issues if any are in my class?

Similar sentiments were shared by one more participant

I am comfortable in teaching children with intellectual disability, Autism and learning disabilities. But it's hard to teach children with hearing impairment. I do not know much about sign language.

My internships have given very good exposure. I have learned a lot in the classroom. One my friend who completed the same course said they never received such exposure. I feel this is good.

Skills and Competencies

All the participants were asked to list down the major competencies acquired. The various skills and competencies expressed by the participants are listed in table-I.

Table-1: The various skills and competencies expressed by the participants

S.no	Skills and Competencies	%
1.	Identification and Assessment	96%
2.	Planning and Implementing	92%
	IEPs	
3.	Preparation of TLMs	86%
4.	Evaluation	78%
5.	Counseling	82%
6.	Curriculum Adaptation	62%
7.	Sign Language	46%

One of the participants has expressed that

It would have been better if the theory and practical go hand in hand. Theory is placed in one semester and practical is placed in another. Moreover there are no practical inputs included on therapeutics and behavior modification.

At a positive note one of the participants has expressed that

When I went to inclusive teaching practice to regular schools the teachers appreciated me a lot especially my TLMs. I really felt happy about it.

At the end the investigators have asked the participants the crucial question that is do you see yourself as an inclusive teacher? And Why? Majority of the participants 76.6% responded yes. Rest of the participants 23% have expressed no. When further probed into the one of the participants said

“I know how to teach CWSN as well as regular children. I handled different kinds of CWSN like ID, LD, Autism and HI in my practical. During

Methodology practical I taught to regular students also. I feel I can very well teach in inclusive settings”
 You know it’s difficult to manage both regular students and special students in the Class. During my teaching practice, the regular teacher and students were very Cooperative. So I could do well. But will it be the situation always? During my Internship in govt. Inclusive schools I saw a different picture... However I am ready to face the challenges

On the Contrary trainees also have expressed concern in the following way

“I have basic skills and patience. But those are not sufficient. During cross disability Inclusive practical I have faced a lot of problem in teaching children with HI. I don’t Know sign language. With mere one week of exposure how do you think I can master the skill? ”

Finally the participants were asked what recommendations and suggestions would they give to further improve the course curriculum. The majority of the suggestions given by the participants have been themed and listed down in table-2.

Table-2 - Recommendations given by the participants

S. No	Recommendation	Percentage
1	Course is hectic in the last two semesters and it should be reframed	90%
2	In depth practical inputs should be imparted on sign language and Braille language also.	83%
3	Practical on therapeutics like speech, physio and occupational therapy should be Included.	70%
4	Practical inputs on Behaviour modification should be included	66.6%
5	Theory and Practical should be placed in the same semester	66.6%

Discussion ad conclusion

The study aimed at finding out the views on the readiness of pre-service special educators for inclusive education. The finding of the study revealed that they are prepared for inclusive education and see themselves ready inclusive settings. Majority of the participants reported that they are ready to handle children with diverse needs. This finding is contradicting many earlier research findings where pre-service educators felt poorly prepared for inclusive education Hemming. B & Woodworks, 2011; Gonzalez, Pastor, Flores.N, Jenaro.C, Poy.R & Gomez.M, 2013; Zulfia.M, Indira.O & Elmira.U, 2013. Previous research conducted by the Manogna. S and Raj. P (2014) has also revealed that pre-service teachers felt more competent and confident in being special educators rather than inclusive educators as they felt they lack the exposure and training to be inclusive teachers. With growing need and demand for qualified and trained professionals to support inclusive education practices RCI has developed new curriculum trying to focus on imparting positive attitude and training to pre-service special education teachers for inclusive education. This move has resulted into a positive direction as the participants of the study felt confident for inclusive teaching.

However the participants have also expressed many concerns regarding the competencies and skills acquired during the training period. Especially majority of the participants felt that they lacked sufficient practical training inputs in the areas such as sign language, Braille, therapeutics, behavior modification. Many also felt the curriculum should be adjusted such that all semesters are equally loaded with practical unlike now. Pre service teachers were also worried about the non availability of support services in the regular schools which were offering inclusive education. This needs to be addressed adopting the policy very strictly that every school should be able to provide necessary support services needed by children with special needs in the regular schools.

As rightly stated by Zulfia.M, Indira & Elmira, and 2013 critical skills of offering solutions to the new problems, organization and motivation should be imparted at the university education level teacher training if inclusion is to be successful. This has been well tackled with new curricular reforms in the special education teacher training programs.

Inclusive education, which includes intensive practice of modern schools, it poses many complex issues and challenges. Current scenario in India demanded special educators with not only deep knowledge and skills in the field of inclusive education, owning a modern interactive teaching methods and education of special children, but also personality, patience and tolerance for people, regardless of their diversities. Our results indicate that professional training imparted for pre service teachers in light of inclusive education has shown positive attitude mixed with concerns. However, the pre-service teacher trainees were confident on their abilities to handle children with disabilities in their own classroom in the near future and to face the challenges within these circumstances. The authors also acknowledge the need of large scale and systematic training of general in-service and pre-service educators Das. A (2013) also if the dream of inclusive education has to benefit any children with disability. The authors also highlight the fact that this is a small attempt to study the preparedness of pre-service special educators and the results cannot be generalised as the sample was specific to one university offering special education course. The scenario needs to be further analyzed with other pre service teacher trainees receiving education from various universities across the country.

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