



THE IMPACT OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION COURSE ON PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' PERCEPTION ABOUT INCLUSION: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION

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ABSTRACT :

Inclusive Education visualizes learners of varying learning needs learn together in a friendly atmosphere. The country made various efforts to make inclusive education as a possible practice in the educational contexts. It is very important to have inclusive classroom setup from the bottom ladder of the education. For that, teachers need to be prepared that requires teacher education role in bringing requisite sensitivity and skill development. The present study explored pre-service teachers' 'The Inclusive School' course experiences and its influence on their perception about inclusion. FGD was conducted with the participants revealed that course on inclusion influenced their perception about inclusion and it prepared them for the inclusive classroom to a certain extent. However, they are generally getting theoretical knowledge than practical aspects. Implications for teacher education programme were discussed.



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KEYWORDS : *Inclusive Education, Pre-service teacher, Teacher Education Programme.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The paradigm shift in special education from 'segregated instruction' to 'mainstreaming', 'integrated education' and 'inclusive education' has been part of the discourse of professionals in education worldwide in the last three decades. Inclusion tries to make mainstream of education to all the children who are vulnerable, excluded and marginalized. It is the process that strengthens the capacity of the educational system to reach out to all the children. The growing body of research has shown that children do better academically when in inclusive settings and inclusion provides opportunities to develop relationships such as friendships, personal principles, and social skills, comfort level with people who have special needs, and caring classroom environments (Singh, 2016). We need to rethink on school and teacher education policies, curriculum and practices so that the needs of students with diverse abilities can be met.

2. NATIONAL INITIATIVES

There have been many initiatives made by Govt of India for inclusion. It starts from the Inclusive Education for Disabled Children (IEDC) scheme (1974) implemented to provide equal opportunities to children with disabilities in mainstream schools and facilitate their retention. National Educational Policy (1986) recommended one of its goal as, 'to integrate the handicapped with the general community at all levels as equal partners, to prepare them for normal growth and to enable them to face life with courage and confidence'.

The Rehabilitation Council of India Act (1992) initiated a training programme for professional teachers to respond according to the needs of students with disabilities. The National Policy for Persons with Disability (2006) in its framework clarifies that 'the state, civil society and private sector must operate in order to ensure a dignified life for persons with disability and support for their caretakers'.

The Person with Disabilities Act (1995) proposed the provision of improved educational services, medical care, vocational training, employment, and social security for all persons with disabilities. It ensured that 'every child with a disability is entitled to a free education up to the age of 18 years' which has conjunction with Right of Children for Free and Compulsory Education (2009). Sarva Siksha Abhiyan (SSA) ensured the right of all students with disabilities (SWD) in the regular education. To achieve the target of Education for All (EFA) by 2010, Govt. of India had stimulated many schemes of Inclusive Education. We can see the educational policy in India gradually increase the focus upon children with special needs, and inclusive education in general school.

3. TEACHER EDUCATION FOR INCLUSION

For the current movement toward inclusion, all teachers, must have positive attitudes regarding the inclusion of diverse students with various educational needs, as well as knowledge and skill. A teacher has to realize the value of each student as unique, and their attitudes toward diversity among students are very important for successful inclusion. Many policy and legislation enforce equality of access to all of the educational opportunities. Here, ensure the attitudes of acceptance and tolerance among teachers is very problematic. Many research findings revealed that one of the most important predictors of successful inclusion is attitudes of teachers (Coates, 1989; Bacon & Schultz, 1991; Semmel et al., 1991).

The survey conducted in Delhi classroom found that many teachers did not understand the concept of inclusion and lacked the skill of effective teaching in the classroom with SWDs (Das, Kuyini, & Desai, 2013). Another study found that the teacher's negative attitude toward inclusive practice due to lack of an essential tool for the instructing SWDs in Delhi (Sharma, Moore and Sonawane, 2009). The major challenge for the implementation of the inclusion policies is lack of dissemination of information about inclusion (Hettiarachchi & Das, 2014; Shah et al., 2014; Tiwari, 2014). Research reported that pre-service teachers showed more willingness to accept pupils with special education needs (SEN) than experienced teachers (Harvey, 1985; Forlin et al., 1996; Forlin, 1998).

On the other hand researchers found that teacher education programme plays a vital role in improving pre-service teachers' perception of inclusion (Linda & Christopher, 2014; Sharma & Anthony, 2016; Tangen & Beutel, 2016). It indicates that pre-service teachers might be open to change their previously held attitudes. Hence, teacher education programme has to give the opportunities for the open discussion about concerns relating to inclusion would help to the pre-service teachers for their development of confidence in the inclusive classroom.

National Curriculum Framework (NCF, 2005) articulated the need for addressing diversity and inclusion, equity and quality. As per the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE, 2014) regulation the perspective course on 'Creating an Inclusive School' included in the two year B.Ed. programme. The aim of the course is developing an understanding of the cultures, policies and practices that need to be addressed in order to create an inclusive school. The course on 'Creating an Inclusive School' highlight that inclusion involves (Two-year B.Ed. curriculum),

1. The firm that all children can learn and grow,
2. A strong belief in positive and varied outcomes,
3. A pedagogy has to responding constantly to the changing needs of learners,
4. An assessment policy that assesses skills and knowledge rather than content and assessment open to a variety of assessment methods and time frames,
5. An environment that functions with the support and active participation of all - children, parents, community, teachers, administrators and policy makers.

“As part of their field tasks, student-teachers would be required to engage with:

1. Popular narratives of ‘disability’ and ‘ability’ so as to track the changing definitions;
2. To track how learning/achievement is perceived and understood in policy/state documents. What power equations exist between the different notions;
3. To visit educational institutions to attempt an identification of the ‘barriers to learning and participation’ and to help schools move towards positive practices, cultures and policies” (Two year B.Ed. curriculum).

As per NCTE (2014) norms, teacher education program has become increasingly concerned with preparing pre-service teachers to teach students with disabilities in inclusive settings. Insight getting from the above literature review, the objective of this study is to see the impact of “*The Inclusive School*” paper in two year B.Ed. programme on pre-service teachers’ perception of the inclusive classroom. Research questions for this study included,

1. Does studying “*The Inclusive School*” subject influence the pre-service teachers’ perception of inclusion?
2. Does the teacher education programme give an adequate understanding of inclusion to the pre-service teachers to engage inclusive classroom set-up?
3. Whether pre-service teachers get to know that how inclusive practice followed in the schools during their Internship/School Experience Programme (SEP)?

4. The current study

A Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was used to see the influence of inclusion paper in teacher education programme on pre-service teachers’ perception of inclusion. The present study demands two sets of student groups. 1. Students of first year M.Ed. who completed two year B.Ed. programme (where “*The Inclusive School*” has a core paper), 2. Students who are in first year B.Ed. programme (yet to study the inclusion paper). Twelve M.Ed. students from group one were participated in the FGD 1 based on the theme “The pre-service programme prepares all teachers for inclusive school”. Six B.Ed first year students from group 2 participated in the FGD 2 based on theme “All Schools should be inclusive”. Data collected from the two FGD was transcribed into English. Transcribed data were categorized and analyzed thematically.

5. Findings

As a result of analyses of the two FGD transcripts the following themes emerged.

5.1. Idea about inclusion before and after studying inclusion paper

Before joining the B.Ed. programme most of the students (Both B.Ed. and M.Ed.) said that they had the perception like inclusion means it is an education for physically disabled or special child and helping them in their work. They never thought the education for the disabled child in the normal school. They thought that children with special needs to have the separate school and curriculum. Few of them said that they never listened the word inclusion so they are not concerned about it. They come to know the word ‘inclusion’ during their pre-service programme.

M.Ed. students expressed that, while studying inclusion paper they got to know the broader aspect of inclusion, and it changed their perception about inclusion. In their view, inclusion means – “include everyone” and “education for all”. They opined that, schools can include children of “different kind” in the normal classroom and engage with varied pedagogies, instead of separating them. One of the Master’s students expressed that “everyone has the rights to participate in the regular classroom irrespective of their disability” and stated that,

“The idea was that (having) equal rights to all who are unequal in the society.... (and) having a sympathetic view on it”.

They felt that course on inclusion in B.Ed. programme boosted their thought process and different subjects gave understanding about inclusion in a different way (including gender, culture,

socioeconomic background etc...) and inclusion is more about catering the heterogeneity. A M.Ed. student stated that

"As we consider the classroom as a miniature of the society, where the need of all kind of students of different interests, caste, class, gender, special children, all the children to be catered".

5.2. Experiences at School

The B.Ed. first year students who visited schools as part of their School Observation programme expressed that, schools are not inclusive in terms of infrastructure, facilities, cooperation from the teachers and administration to the students with disability. They opined that, schools don't give admission for disabled students even when there has certain facilities for inclusion due to various reasons. In their observation, special children did not get adequate attention from regular teachers in the classroom and it is generally expected that the special teacher will take care of them, so they tend to sit some other place in most occasions.

M.Ed. students expressed that, during their School Experience Programme (SEP) as pre-service teachers they learned lot about inclusion; and they had the experience of how the inclusion practiced in the real situation. They got the opportunity to know how peers behave with a disabled children and the attitude of teachers towards the children from Economically Weaker Section (EWS) category. A student expressed that,

"In my view SEP experience was a tool to...(understand inclusion)..."

Only few of them said that they could able to see the practice of inclusion which they studied in their B.Ed. programme. Hence, many of them stated that the in-service teachers were not given adequate attention to the disabled children and children from EWS category. Schools also did not have the proper infrastructure and other facilities for the disabled children. They felt the interaction of special educators and the teachers in the school is needed to cater the needs of the special children in a better way.

5.3. About B.Ed. programme

The B.Ed. students expressed that, they were not given specific training to engage inclusive classroom.

The M.Ed. students expressed that, their perspective on inclusion was changed during their B.Ed. programme. They learnt how to write a lesson plan and assessment criteria for inclusive classroom, need for question papers with bigger font size for children with visually challenged, etc. But they felt that they were not capable to handle the inclusive classroom as they don't have practical exposure. They had an opinion that the B.Ed. Inclusion curriculum focuses more on concepts of special education than issues like social exclusion. They felt that social exclusion components need to be catered through the inclusive curriculum as a teacher they need to connect the curriculum with local (social and cultural) context.

5.4. B.Ed. (general) Vs B.Ed. (Special)

Both B.Ed. and M.Ed. students felt that special education requires specific training which is not given in B.Ed. (general) programme. The B.Ed. special education caters those requirements. So, those who undergone B.Ed. (general) programme, may not be able to engage with the special children. They also felt that teacher educators who are specialized with special education need to teach the B.Ed. general programme, so that, they could able to engage students with special needs in the schools.

5.5. Role of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in Inclusive Education

M.Ed. students had an opinion that technology plays a bigger role in inclusive classroom. They were aware of some assistive technologies and tools such as screen reader (JAWS), mobile apps, use of braille printing, creating specimens, using presentation software etc. They said that in their pedagogy courses teachers discussed about which are all the technologies can be used for the students of visually and auditory challenged. They also expressed that ICT facilitate them to locate various resources and helped to think and change their perspectives on inclusion.

6. DISCUSSION

The FGD conducted with pre-service teachers provided a clear picture of their perception about inclusion before and after joining B.Ed. programme. From the findings we could able to see the pre-service teachers who are in the B.Ed. programme do not have adequate knowledge about inclusion and they were not trained for the inclusive classroom.

The findings from M.Ed. students revealed that B.Ed. programme influenced their perception about inclusion and it prepared them for the inclusive classroom to a certain extent. Many research (Andrews & Clementson, 1997; Shade & Stewart, 2001; Campbell et al., 2003; Linda & Christopher, 2014) also found the similar result that general teacher education programme influenced pre-service teachers' perception about inclusion and their attitude towards disability changed significantly after completion of the course. Therefore course on "The Inclusive School" in two year B.Ed. programme has a positive effect on pre-service teachers' perspectives toward inclusion and increased awareness of techniques for successful inclusive practices.

Even though the pre-service teachers felt that training is not sufficient to handle the students with special needs in general education settings, they think teachers who trained from the B.Ed. (special education) programme might have more knowledge and skill to handle the inclusive classroom effectively. Hettiarachchi and Das (2014) study also revealed that special education teachers who working with special need students had a higher perceived competence compared to general education teachers. They stressed for the special training to cater the need of all the children in the programme contributes to the successful inclusion practice. This is similar with the previous research which has documented the general education teachers do not have the adequate training in special education and they reported a lack of confidence and unpreparedness to teach in the inclusive classrooms and these studies are also emphasized the special training for both pre-service and in-service teachers for the inclusive education (Das et al., 2013; Bhatnagar, 2014).

Both B.Ed. and M.Ed. students from their experience at school observed that absence of appropriate materials, well-trained teachers and other facilities in general education schools are the barriers for making inclusive practices successful both special need as well as students of socially excluded. Therefore, there is a need for having inclusive teacher education programme which can thoroughly investigate knowledge, provide adequate experience and skill training to the pre-service teachers that can make them effectively engage inclusive classrooms.

Finally the study report revealed that pre-service teachers getting the competence for inclusive classroom in their B.Ed. programme. However, they are generally getting theoretical knowledge than practical aspects. So the teacher education programme needs to have both theoretical and practical components to provide required exposure to the pre-service teachers. An interaction/peer learning of general and special teacher educators is necessary to develop requisite repertoires in them. In such scenario, they will be able to facilitate the pre-service teachers to develop the knowledge, attitude, skills and aptitude to engage inclusive classroom.

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