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Perspectives of Preservice Teachers on Inclusive Education in Secondary Schools

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Abstract:

This study seeks to explore the perspectives of preservice teachers of Uttarakhand as to their attitude, preparation and concerns about inclusive education in secondary schools. Qualitative methodology was employed and semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. The sample consisted of 20 preservice teachers pursuing B.Ed. coursework either from Hemvati Nandan Bahuguna Garhwal University, Uttarakhand or Sri Dev Suman Uttarakhand University, Uttarakhand. All 20 participants had already completed 16 weeks of school internship of 16 credits/400marks and had studied the course 'Creating an Inclusive school' of 4 credits/100 marks. Data analysis followed pattern coding. Major themes that emerged through data analysis were: their attitudes toward inclusion, their perspectives regarding preparation to implement inclusion in classrooms, their concerns and expectations from the teacher education program so that they are

better prepared to deal with inclusive classrooms. The results of the study highlight that maximum preservice teachers support concept of inclusive classrooms. At the same time, they accept that their preparation for inclusive education as well as that of school, parents and society is highly insufficient. More hands -on experience and awareness among the stakeholders regarding inclusive education need to be incorporated in teacher education programmes. The recommendations for practice are discussed in light of the study findings.

Key words: *Preservice teacher, Inclusive Education, Perspectives, Children With Special Needs (CWSN), Secondary schools.*

Introduction

The basis of Inclusive education is that it is the fundamental right of every child to get educated irrespective of the diversity in student population. Its implication is that all children have access to schools through a proper network of support services. Inclusion principle was adopted in “World Conference on Special Needs Education: Access and Quality” (Salamanca, Spain 1994). Inclusion is defined as “a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from a full array of educational opportunities”(UNESCO,2005).

Its philosophical basis is acceptance where all people are respected and valued (Carrington, 2000). It is students’ right to be a part of the system, active participation in varied learning experiences, valued members of school and access to quality education as per their specific competencies, attributes and skills. (Farrell, Ainscow, 2000; Fisher, D.& Frey, N., 2002). The demand of inclusive classrooms rest on the reconstruction of educational thinking in regular schools so that all students are benefitted from it(Slee, 2001b). It aims to change the mindset of all the

stakeholders- students, teachers, parents, community, administrators, professionals and policy makers to accept diversity as a challenge and not a problem.

Policies and Legislative frameworks in India

Article 45 of Constitution of India ensures provision of compulsory & free education to all children up to age of fourteen years. IEDS launched in December 1974 by the Government provided children with special needs (CWSN) with opportunities for education in regular schools. Another initiative towards Inclusive Education was PIED which came into existence in 1987. The component of inclusive education was added in DPEP in 1997 so that learning opportunities could be provided to children with special needs according to their requirements. According to National Policy on Education, 1986 “...Future emphasis shall be on distance and open learning systems to provide opportunities and access to all the major target groups, especially the disadvantaged, viz., women, scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, the adult working class, and people serving in the far - flung remote areas.” Special teachers have to be mandatorily registered by Rehabilitation Council of India Act, 1992. Moreover, the council advocates all children with disabilities should be taught by a qualified teacher. India was a signatory to Salamanca Statement in 1994. The Persons with Disabilities Act, 1995 ensures free education to all children in till 18 years of age. The National Trust Act, 1999 protects and promotes the rights of persons who are more marginalized within the disability sector. SSA was launched in 2001 to attain the goal of universalisation of education upto elementary level for all children in 6-14 years of age. The RTE Act, 2009 ensuring compulsory and free education to all children between the age of 4 to 16 years thereby emphasising on inclusive education.

Significance of the study

Although policy framework and legislation have brought equality of educational opportunities for all, inclusive classrooms can only be brought to reality

by ensuring attitudes of acceptance and tolerance among educators. The foundation of a school rests on its quality of teachers (Amatori, 2019b). The crucial element in the promotion of an inclusive didactics is the ability of the teacher who can bring forward the talents of everyone, remove barriers to education through methodological and organisational choices (Chiappetta Cajola, 2013). For this reason, it has become pertinent to reflect on the perspectives, educational practices and concerns of the preservice teachers towards inclusive classrooms. Dispositions, attitudes, and beliefs of preservice teachers are the major constituents of success in inclusive classrooms (Parker, & Crisp, 2014). Success of inclusive education is largely dependent upon teachers' competence and their attitude towards inclusion (see e.g. Hodkinson, 2006; Leyser, Zeiger & Romi, 2011).

However, the readiness of preservice teachers towards the implementation of inclusion in classrooms has not been extensively investigated in India. NCTE revised B.Ed. curriculum by adding internship of 16 weeks and adding course work on Inclusive education for preservice teachers in 2015. Thus, the preservice teachers have been introduced to the concept of inclusive education and are exposed to field experience for 16 weeks. So, the present study employed qualitative methodology in order to develop in-depth knowledge of perspectives of preservice teachers toward inclusion, their preparedness and expectations regarding inclusive education.

Research questions that arose in the study are as follows :

1. What perceptions do preservice teachers have towards inclusive education in general education classrooms?
2. How do preservice teachers perceive their preparation in Teacher Education Programme for inclusion?

3. What are the concerns and expectations of the preservice teachers regarding Teacher Education Programmes so that they are better suited for inclusive classrooms?

Methodology

An interpretive qualitative methodology was selected in order to answer the research questions. The method used for data collection was semi-structured interviews. Trustworthiness of the research was maintained through several steps (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Firstly, the data sources were triangulated. Secondly, field notes and comments were used to cross-check themes that emerged from the interviews. Thirdly, preservice teacher participants were made to read the interviews summary written by the researcher as a means of “member checking.”

Data Collection

Twenty prospective teachers from two universities in Uttarakhand: Sri Dev Suman Uttarakhand University, (Uttarakhand) and Hemvati Nandan Bahuguna Garhwal University, (Uttarakhand) were selected via a snowball sampling technique. All 20 participants had already completed 16 weeks of school internship of 16 credits/400marks and had studied the course ‘Creating an Inclusive school’ of 4 credits/100 marks. The preservice teachers who gave consent to participate in the interview were approached through proper channel. The interviews were subsequently conducted according to the convenience of the participants. The method used for data collection was semi-structured interviews. Hindi or English or bilingual language were used to conduct the interview which were tape-recorded. Moreover, notes and comments were also written which appeared to add value to the interview. The duration of an interview was about 30 to 45 min. Participants were assured that the anonymity would be maintained.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the data was done through constant comparative method. Research questions were analysed to identify the themes. The themes were further analysed to achieve the findings. Once the interviews were completed, they were reproduced verbatim. Each interview was read several times and then coded was performed using NVivo software. Cross case analysis was then done for each interview. Pattern coding was performed in which the interview transcripts were read several times and then reviewed. The codes were refined and eventually themes were derived. Themes were derived from interpretation of data. Emerging themes were then organized systematically in support of the research questions of this study.

Findings & Discussion

Three major emerged themes that correspond with the research questions of this study are –

First theme – Preservice teachers’ perspective toward inclusion;

Second theme- Preservice teachers’ perceived preparation to implement inclusion;

Third theme- Preservice teachers’ concerns and expectations about inclusive classrooms.

Findings are discussed in accordance with research question and respective themes. Excerpts from participants’ statements are given which support the themes connected to research questions.

Objective of the 1st research question was to study the preservice teachers’ perceptions towards inclusive education in classrooms. Theme that emerged from the responses to the question was- Positive perspectives towards inclusive education.

Following excerpts from participants’ statements show their strong support for inclusion :

Shailja: *“Inclusion is an essential practice through which society can be benefitted including children with special needs(CWSN) and getting the best out of them.”*

Neeru elaborated: *“I support inclusion. Every child has the right to live and be educated as other normal children”.*

Vivek: *“We need to change the outlook of the society by bringing about inclusion in our classrooms. The more we include them, the more we think they are one of us.”*

Ashu: *“I have a lot of admiration for them. They come to school inspite of so many odds. I think they are stronger than we are. . . .”.*

On analysing the interview transcripts, it was found that majority of participants showed positive attitude toward inclusion. Participants spoke enthusiastically about children who were different from the normal children. This is in line with the results of Avramidis and Norwich (2002) who opined that perception of the teachers is very important for successful implementations of inclusive education. Attitude of teacher is the key to successful inclusion (Forlin, Loreman and Sharma 2007). Although other people’s attitudes- students, parents and community- are significant, the attitudes of teachers are most important (Meijer, 2003; Forlin, Loreman and Sharma 2007;).

Two of the pre-service teachers felt that complete inclusion of CWSN was inappropriate in a regular classroom. Special need students are better adjusted in special classrooms in a regular school . However, they can be included in regular classrooms in non-curricular activities only.

Arjun: *“They(CWSN) can be included in recess and leisure time but including them during regular classes is not a good idea.”*

Rajeev: *“The normal students have a higher education standard compared to the special needs students in a regular classroom. When they are placed in these classrooms they don't benefit from the classroom and would be better if they are in a special class.”*

These preservice teachers suggested that it would be difficult to address the requirements of CWSN in a general classroom thereby lowering their self-esteem. This finding is corroborated by the studies of Neilsen-Gatti, Allday & Hudson (2013); Adel (2015) who studied that general education teachers showed unpreparedness towards acceptance of CWSN.

Objective of 2nd research question was to probe into the preparation of pre-service teachers for implementation of inclusion in schools. Analysis resulted in the emergence of the following themes-

1. School related issues

a. High pupil teacher ratio

b. Lack of human resources and infrastructural facilities

2. University related issues

a. Insufficient knowledge

School related issues

High Pupil Teacher ratio

Following excerpts are from two pre-service teacher participants' statements-

Himanshu: *“Instead of having 40 students, we need to have 10 so that we can cater to the needs of all the students. However, ...if we include them (CWSN) into regular classes, then only two should be included in a class of 40”.*

Saurabh responded: *“ Each student is different. It would be a herculean task for the teacher to focus and create an IEP plan for each student in a class of 35-40 students . I feel that it is unfair because each student deserves a plan in an inclusive class.”*

There are a large number of students in regular classrooms in schools of Uttarakhand. Some pre-service teachers opined that all students especially CWSN

were not receiving the required attention. Hence the students' strength in an inclusive classroom should not be more than 10. The present finding is corroborated by Sharma et al. (2009) who cited that the prime concern for many teachers was high teacher student ratio. Also, Bhatnagar and Das (2014) found that the low student teacher ratio could positively change teachers' perceptions toward inclusion.

Lack of human resources and infrastructural facilities

Following excerpts are from pre-service teacher participants' statements-

Tejas: *"There is no flexibility in the curriculum to accommodate all types of children"*.

Shruti: *"There is no modernized technology- no new gadgets like smart boards to be used for teaching in schools. Everything is old fashioned- chalkboards."*

Kavita: *"Even the staircase or the toilets are not adapted for the special needs students. The schools aren't fully ready to accommodate all types of students"*.

Preeti: *"I feel like there should be at least an on-campus doctor, or a professional that is educated in these medical issues so that they can come to students' aid. They should also have counsellors and a whole special education team working in the schools."*

Aman: *"There is not just a shortage of specialists but also of special education teachers."*

Priyanka mentioned that she had two CWSN classmates during school days. She reported, *"we didn't have ramps back then and we still don't have any accommodations especially for them [CWSN]. We only had these children with us in the class with no efforts at all for inclusion."*

There was a general consensus among participants that lack of human resources, infrastructural facilities and support do not help make inclusion

successful. Concerns were shown by the participants regarding the availability of specialists like counsellors, doctor, speech therapist and psychologist. Preservice teachers felt the requirement of collaboration with special education team for students' help. These findings are in resonance with Das and Bhatnagar (2014) who cited that changes in teachers' perceptions toward inclusion was seen with the access to, assistive technology, teaching tools and professional support. Teachers working in collaboration with support professionals, administrators, parents and society is an important feature of inclusive schools (Thousand, & Villa, 2005; Friend & Cook, 2007;).

University related issues

a. Insufficient knowledge

Following selected excerpts highlight the lacunae felt by the preservice teachers regarding their current teacher education programme:

Amit: *“There are many types of children with special needs and I do not think one course is enough to cover the pedagogy for them all.”*

Avantika: *“The course provided us with the information regarding the types of disability and policies related to them, but did not teach us how to teach these children and implement the policies when they are with typically developing peers.”*

Meena: *“Things in reality is different than the coursework. When it came to use our theoretical knowledge in a real-life experience it was completely different. There should be a unified curriculum that integrates courses between general and special education.”*

On analysing the interview transcripts, it was found that all the participants were quite apprehensive about their professional preparation. They did not feel adequately prepared for inclusive classrooms. They desired that the parent university should modify the coursework such that there is more content, pedagogy

courses and more practical experiences that relate to students in inclusive classrooms. Majority of participants reported that the mandatory course on inclusive education in their curriculum has little scope and provided narrow and limited practical skills. This is corroborated with the findings McKay (2016) that unpreparedness was experienced amongst preservice teachers working with diverse children. Preservice teachers face anxiety and fear for working with students with disabilities due to limited exposure and unpreparedness (Everhart, 2009). Training is effective method for improving attitudes toward inclusive education (Forlin, 2010). Staff development and training play an important role in developing positive attitudes towards inclusion (Van Reusen et. al., 2000; Avramidis et. al., 2000).

The objective of third research question was to investigate pre-service teachers' concerns and expectations for the improvement of their teacher preparation program. The themes that appeared were:

1. Additional practical experience.

2. Spread of awareness

Additional practical experience

Following excerpts are from pre-service teacher participants' statements-

Arjun: *"I wish I had more practical experience more than theoretical. Theoretical knowledge has no value compared to the implementation and experience. I'm not sure, I wish we had an intensive experience so that we had more of a direct contact."*

Tanu responded, *"I mean I wish there was more hand-s on experience than theoretical, I would have learned much more."*

Shruti: *"Had there been more field experience, I would be able to deal with CWSN in a better way."*

All the participants expressed their needs for more relevant training and field experience. More opportunities should be provided in order to overcome lack of experience. This study is in line with the findings of Campbell (2003) who found out that pre-service teachers of those teacher education programs which provided instructions based on research along with field experiences showed positive attitude towards inclusion. For effective teaching, more specialized teaching skills and special teacher characteristics are needed in inclusive classrooms as compared to a general education classroom (Sakarneh, 2009),

Spreading Awareness

Following excerpts are from pre-service teacher participants' statements-

Ashutosh: *“Even the teachers aren't prepared for inclusion. They shouldn't bully or pick on the CWSN, rather they should understand because most of them were picking on them which affect the student in a way that makes her doesn't want to study.”*

Kavita: *“If we want to do this, there needs to be a lot of work to be done. The first thing is that we should bring awareness in the schools for the students themselves and the teachers too.”*

Neeru: *“Schools need to devote time to raising parental awareness through workshops or meetings and enhancing their social acceptance before implementing inclusion”.*

According to Vikas, *“Children may mock students with disabilities because they're not taught to respect others and their differences. We need to teach them that before we implement inclusion.”*

Thus, the participants suggested awareness programmes for teachers, students, parents and society before implementing inclusive education in general school setting. Past studies also suggest that changes in attitudes towards disabilities can be

brought through raising awareness on the disability. (Campbell,j., Gilmore, Cuskelly,M. 2003). Moreover, Rillotta and Nettelbeck (2007) found in their study that training in awareness on disability for secondary school students showed positive attitude towards education of CWSN.

Conclusion

This study focused on the perspectives of preservice teachers on inclusive education in secondary schools in Uttarakhand. Results of this study suggest that preservice teachers possessed a positive perspective for inclusive classrooms. They faced many challenges during internship like lack of infrastructural facilities and human resources, high teacher student ratio, less exposure to practical experience and insufficient knowledge. Participants also recommended for the improvement of their teacher education program by increasing the hand-on experience and field work in schools, unified curriculum that integrate courses between special and general curriculum, and spreading awareness about inclusive practices. This study can provide insight to the policymakers and professionals for preparing future teachers best suited to inclusive classrooms.

Recommendations

It is imperative for the Government to strive for provision of well- equipped inclusive schools all over the country. This demands for realistic, time bound goals for the implementation of universal inclusion in schools.

The participants' responses imply suggest that there is paucity of monetary and human resources in the schools. Immediate action should be taken to allocate the needed resources to schools. However, Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) made a landmark move by passing an order on 8th July 2015, according to which a special education teacher has to be appointed by all affiliated schools to meet the needs of SWDs.

Immediate measures should be taken to provide barrier-free school infrastructure, adequate support staff, counsellors, special education teachers, reduce teacher student ratio and awareness programmes for parents and society in order to bring about inclusive practices in schools.

More field-work and courses related to inclusive practices should be incorporated in Teacher Education programmes thereby ensuring opportunities to the teachers to develop their inclusive education knowledge and skills. The Universities should introduce additional special education courses with practicum in Teacher Education Institutions to enable the teachers to deal appropriately with CWSN. Emphasis should be placed on the competencies like professional knowledge, assessment, proficiency in the use of assistive technology, collaboration and evaluation in which the preservice teachers expressed relatively lower skill levels.

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