

School Teachers' Perceptions of Inclusive Education with Reference to Children with Special Needs

Ms. Bhawna & Ms. Swati Vasisht

Master of Education (M.Ed) at CIE, University of Delhi. (Alumni)

Abstract

The concept of inclusion rests upon the values of equality and non-discrimination and thus can be viewed from a human rights perspective that suggests that any form of segregation in schooling is morally wrong. Thus, the process of implementation of the concept of inclusive education becomes a rich area of exploration.

This article reports the findings of a study designed to examine the perceptions of school teachers toward the inclusion of students with special needs into regular classrooms. A semi structured interview schedule was prepared to analyze various aspects and dimensions of the theory and practice of inclusion. A two-part questionnaire and a rating scale were used to collect data from participants. Thirty elementary school teachers were interviewed and a thematic analysis of their responses was carried out. One can gain insights about various barriers to inclusion like lack of expertise in assisting children with diverse abilities and non-availability of collaborative institutional structures. Findings reveal the need for collaboration between regular and special education teachers and underline the responsibility for different stakeholders in making inclusion work.

Keywords: *Inclusive education, inclusion, children with special needs*

“One goal of inclusion is, for every school to be ready in advance to accept children with diverse abilities. This may involve not only a change in the way our schools are structured and work but also a change in the attitudes of many special and regular education teachers, who view their job as to educate a certain ‘type’ of child. Most schools advocate the use of a child-centered approach to education, which implies that all teachers should be willing to meet the needs of all children (Loreman 1999)”.

Introduction

More recently, ‘inclusion’ and ‘inclusive education’ have been key terms in the vocabulary of educators and the discourse of education. Inclusion is a discipline of extending our boundary to take into consideration another’s needs, interests, experiences, and perspectives, which will lead to clearer understanding of ourselves and others, fuller description of the issue at hand and possibly a newly negotiated boundary of the community to which we belong. (Eric H.F. Law 2000). Inclusive education helps to represent children with diversity abilities in classrooms and allows teachers to become facilitator for all.

Inclusion means enabling pupils to participate in the life and work of mainstream institutions to the best of their abilities, whatever their needs.” (Maitra and Saxena, 2008).

The earmark of inclusive education is the teachers’ ideologies and their beliefs related to children with special needs as their attitudes

have implications for children’s education. While the policies related to education are framed, it is unfortunate to note that, the voices of teachers continue to be underrepresented as their perspective is not taken into consideration. As an impact of these policies and the changing ideologies of schools, Children with Special Needs (CSN) have become a part of the regular schools. However, the extent to which the needs of these children are addressed, is a question, which can only be answered by actual practitioners of these policies or perspectives. Teachers’ perceptions and beliefs about developing an inclusive classroom must be borne in mind, as it is likely that these perceptions may influence their behaviour towards and their acceptance of Children with Special Needs.

It is easy to find legislative policies and acts like “The Rehabilitation Council of India Act,1992”, “Article 45 of Indian Constitution”, “UNESCO Salamanca Statement 1994”, “The Persons With Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of

Rights and Full Participation) Act 1995”, and “Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, 2002”, for realization of the goals of inclusive education. The Salamanca Statement declares that every child has a fundamental right to education, and must be given the opportunity to achieve and maintain an acceptable level of learning, and, every child has unique characteristics, interests, abilities, and learning needs. When these policies are framed, we must ensure that decision makers are not out of touch with classroom realities. But, we often neglect the fact that teachers are the ones who are in direct contact with the children in the real field, that is, classrooms, and it is important to gauge their perceptions and beliefs derived from their experiences and interaction with other agents of the process of inclusion.

Objectives of the study

The study taken by the two authors, aims to examine the perceptions of school teachers towards the inclusion of CSN into regular classrooms. The objectives of the study were:

1. To find out the attitudes of regular teachers towards the concept of ‘inclusion’
2. To gain insight into the teachers’ beliefs and perceptions of an ‘inclusive classroom’
3. To investigate the factors that support the practice and implementation of the ideology of ‘inclusive education’
4. To examine the different kind of barriers to inclusion faced by teachers that prevent them to address the needs of Children with Special Needs (CSN)

Sample

The total sample size for the study was thirty elementary school teachers of Delhi. The subjects were selected through the convenient sampling technique. The teachers who were willing to participate were selected.

Procedure of data collection

Keeping in view, the broad objective in mind, following tools were used for data collection:

1. Questionnaire

A semi structured interview schedule was employed to elicit teachers’ responses to various aspects and dimensions of the theory and practice of inclusion. This main research instrument was divided into the following two components:

- Part A: It was designed to gather information about demographic variables like teaching experience and qualification.
- Part B: With the help of open-ended

questions, another section explored the teachers’ lived experiences of inclusive classrooms and their awareness of policy frameworks of inclusion. It also investigated concerns related to actual practice of inclusion. For instance, it involved questions like:

- Can you share any classroom experience that shows that there is a need to rethink about the existing policies related to inclusion? Give example.
- Do you face any challenge in teaching Children with special needs? If yes, what are these?
- What impact do you see on classroom environment as a result of inclusion?

2. Rating scale

Rating scale comprised of questions and statements used to elicit attitudes towards the policies of inclusive education. A Likert-type inventory (eighteen items) was adopted to measure the teachers’ attitudes and beliefs associated with ‘inclusion’. It included items and statements with three point rating response (‘Agree’, ‘Neither Agree nor Disagree’ and ‘Disagree’) indicating the strength of the respondent’s approval or disapproval of the statement. For example, the scale contained statements like -:

- Inclusion of CSN within regular classrooms will help in their socio- emotional development.
- CSN are a source of problems related to classroom management and discipline.
- I feel competent and empowered enough to teach in an inclusive classroom.

The present study builds upon qualitative analysis of rich experiences of the practitioners of the policy of ‘inclusion’, that is, the school teachers. It is our inviolable belief that teachers’ beliefs can be investigated effectively only with the qualitative approach comprising of the usage of semi-structured interview and consequent thematic analysis of their responses. The rejection of a purely quantitative approach can be attributed to various factors like the interrelationships between the complex constructs of attitudes and inclusion, the social desirability bias factor, low return rate of questionnaires and the cynicism towards questionnaires among teachers.

Analysis of data and discussion

The obtained information was organized and processed to suggest the given findings. The responses were analyzed and certain themes emerged which are enlisted as follows:

1. General attitude and beliefs of teachers towards the concept of inclusion

- Teachers are the prime agents of inclusive education whose vision and commitment make it practicable. To know the teachers' understanding of inclusive education, questions were asked about the definition and meaning of 'inclusion'.

- The opinions of the participants, that is, the school teachers reflected that they were mainly positive towards the ideology of 'inclusive education'. Almost every participant demonstrated the belief that the Children with Special Needs can be included in regular classrooms along with the provision of support to learning. For instance, one of the respondents shared her understanding of 'inclusion' as: "Inclusion means 'including' every child and every kind of learner in school and in classroom settings and not marginalizing them by creating a different kind of a school for them. Basically, it is about including 'special' children in a regular setting and understanding individual differences."

- Similarly, another teacher stated that "Inclusion means creating an environment where the child feels accepted and is given equal exposure as every other child irrespective of his/her background. Equal opportunities mean adequate support to the child in both physical and cognitive terms."

- In the same manner, another respondent voiced out that "inclusion means to 'include' children of varied abilities/ learning styles into the system. The system is altered according to needs of the children thereby giving centrality to 'need of learner' in the system."

- Recent research, again, indicates that teachers' attitudes play a role of paramount significance to make inclusion successful in real classrooms. Positive teacher attitudes are essential to making inclusion work. (Sharma and Desai 2002)

- The teachers' perceptions of 'inclusive education' support its meaning as defined by policy frameworks well. According to the National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCFSE) (2000), brought out by the NCERT, "Segregation or isolation is good neither for learners with disabilities nor for general learners without disabilities. Societal requirement is that learners with special needs should be educated along with other learners in inclusive schools, which are cost effective and

have sound pedagogical practices." (NCERT, 2000)

- Moreover, the results of the study indicate that children with emotional and behavioral difficulties were perceived as causing more concern to teachers than other kinds of special needs. Such illustration is found in a participant's response when she remarked, "At times, there are CSN who indulged themselves in hitting other children or screaming badly, or exhibit certain behaviour so frequently that may hamper learning of other children." It is again exhibited when another school teacher told about an autistic child who did not connect with teachers and peers initially and he became destructive and used to throw things anywhere in the classroom. Thus, it can be said that the nature of special needs influence the attitudes of teachers which in turn affects the practice of inclusion.

1. Factors promoting the concept of inclusion

- The teachers believed that few support services provided by school and its positive impact on classroom environment encourage the teachers to practice inclusion.

Ainscow (2004) describes the factors that bear on inclusive developments within an education system as possible 'levers' that can help to move the system forward.

- The only factor that made the attitudes more positive, optimistic, and pragmatic is 'Classroom atmosphere'. Most teachers mentioned that students are more sensitive and cooperative among each other in an inclusive classroom as they acknowledge the differences among their peers. The children develop empathy with each other and they are willing to learn together with the spirit of collaboration and teamwork.

- Moreover, the teachers felt that students are able to develop in different domains along with learning life skills and social skills. This belief of teachers is reaffirmed when all the participants agree to the statement that 'Inclusion of CSN within regular classrooms will help in their socio- emotional development.

- These reflections by teachers support the growing body of research that highlights that there are benefits of inclusion for children with and without disabilities. McGregor and Vogelsberg (1998), in a comprehensive review of the literature mention these benefits as: 'high levels of social interaction with non- disabled peers', 'improvement in social competence and communication skills', 'advanced academic

success with more rigorous educational program', 'enhancement of social acceptance of children with diverse abilities with the help of frequent small group work nature of their instruction' and 'development of friendships'. Thus, the teachers' experience of 'inclusion' supports findings of literature.

2. Barriers to inclusion

Being the regular education teachers of different schools, their responses reflected levels of support received by them. On the other hand, they also spelt out and expressed concerns which stand in their way of making their classrooms significantly inclusive. These are as follows:

- The teachers stated that there was a lack of professional training, knowledge and expertise. They said that they were less confident of their instructional expertise. They demanded professional training at both pre- service and in-service levels and accepted that they did not feel equipped to design and deliver appropriate curriculum for CSN with effective teaching strategies for them. One of the teachers used the phrase 'having no concrete ideas to help the child' to describe her inability. While few teachers pointed out that they were inducted to the idea of 'inclusive education' and 'children with special needs' in their pre- service teacher education programmes, there could be more focus and elaboration on practical knowledge of how to assist CSN.
- Not having enough material resources like teaching- learning aids and assistive technology to support CSN, is another major problem faced by teachers. Most of the teachers talked about the dearth of material resources and infrastructure for CSN. It was appalling to note that few schools did have curricular materials allocated to them but those remained locked and unused in the almirahs and shelves in specific rooms. One of the teachers said in response that "the materials were available but not too accessible". It would not be incorrect to say, here, that successful implementation depends upon resources, both material and human; rather, it depends more on the vision, approach and policy of schools.
- Owing to organization of schools and classrooms, most teachers could not plan well for CSN. One of the teachers indicated that "...but foremost, the entire system is still not very friendly in 'actually accepting' these children, which, is the real problem. Layout of classrooms and structure of school were the prominent issues for teachers.

- The matter of insufficient support from community including parents also left the teachers disturbed. In some cases, it was parents' apathy due to which the teachers could not contribute in the learning of CSN.

- Besides, there were factors like high student- teacher ratio, different non- academic and administrative tasks for teachers like lot of paper work, and non- availability of special educators as per the strength of students etc, that were obstacles to inclusion of CSN. All participants disagreed to the statement 'I have sufficient time in my schedule to include CSN in mainstream classroom' in the Likert scale.

3. Status of implementation of policies of 'inclusion': The current scenario

- The teachers expressed and conveyed awareness of different policies and initiatives. However, they also felt that their voices are not represented in framing such policies. A common response was that that they must be included in the process of policy formulation as they are the ones who are dealing with learners in the actual setting- that is the classrooms. They were of the opinion that there are gaps between policy and practice that need to be bridged.

- Others pointed out that teachers still need to be more sensitive towards CSN and adapt their teaching in accordance with their needs. Few teachers commented that the implementation of 'Inclusive Education' fails in government schools, which have inadequate number of teachers for students in spite of the policies designed after critical and thorough research. Again, some teachers added that there is an urgent need to empower teachers and make the infrastructure of schools ready for inclusion.

4. Gaps to be filled to make inclusion a complete success

The respondents were also asked to suggest possible facilitators to the barriers identified, in order to promote full participation of CSN. The proposed changes in the classroom and school environment by teachers as well as the previous research conducted in similar areas are as follows:

- Schools must have a vision and belief in the concept of 'inclusive education' and work towards building a healthy and positive atmosphere.
- Capacity building among teachers with the help of comprehensive training, workshops, and sessions with the assistance of resource persons is the key to the success of inclusion. The respondents seek training and knowledge to

design meaningful educational experiences for CSN.

- Provision and placement of special educators in schools as per the nature of special educational needs and total strength of students in school is the demand of the time. Most teachers shared that they wanted that special educators were available and assisted them to organize and prepare pedagogic interventions for CSN at the level of the curriculum. Working with and for CSN on ground realities-identification and assessment of CSN and planning for them is advocated.
- Collaboration among different stakeholders- regular teachers, special educators, parents, administrators, and support staff etc. can prove to be of utilitarian value. There should be effective and collaborative organizational structures like teamwork of general education teachers with special education teachers, and peer learning among classmates etc.
- Support services in school like technological support (special labs, smart classes, audio-video materials, concrete materials, and models etc.), resources, curriculum materials, and support staff in classrooms must be accessible when required.
- Schools should favour appropriate student- teacher ratio (class- size) and teachers should not be involved in non- academic work. They should have time in their schedule and freedom for individualized planning of curriculum for children with diverse abilities.

Concluding Remarks

The movement of inclusive education to include Children with Special Needs in classrooms is based on the human rights agenda. Inclusion

begins with the belief that education is a basic human right and the foundation for a more just and democratic society. One of the elements of inclusion involves a particular emphasis on those groups of learners who may be at a risk of marginalization, exclusion or underachievement. (Ainscow, 2004) Again, the National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCFSE) (2000) advocated inclusive schools for all learners while it also recommended definitive action at the level of curriculum makers, teachers, writers of teaching-learning materials, and evaluation experts for the success of this strategy (NCERT, 2000).

The present study reiterates that teachers' beliefs and perceptions act as a pivotal force in strengthening the efforts for worthwhile inclusion of CSN. It may be stated that majority of the elementary school teachers have heard of it and they have willingness to make their classrooms fully inclusive. However, it will materialize only when they have proper support structures and knowledge of emerging trends, issues and pedagogical innovations.

To conclude, it can be asserted that including Children with Special Needs in general education classrooms is a common practice in schools today. For inclusion to be successful and practical, there are components of collaboration and support services that are currently missing. When all administrators, teachers, and staff have access to appropriate support, it would be an easier transition to having a student fully included in the general education classroom. A balanced approach of resource support, recognition of teachers' voices in policy frameworks and continuous professional training would make the case for inclusion stronger.

References

- Ainscow.M (2004). "Developing inclusive education system: What are the levers for change?". Retrieved from <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/56b3/4d5a3c37c59cd25a314981afa9e88fa4cf1f.pdf> on July 2, 2017
- Alur, M. (2002). Special Needs Policy in India, in S. Hegarty and M. Alue (eds), *Education and Children with Special Needs: From Segregation to Inclusion*. New Delhi: Sage.
- UNESCO(2000).*Inclusion in Education: The Participation of Disabled Learners. World Education Forum: Education For All 2000 Assessment*. Paris: UNESCO.
- Department of Education (2000). *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan: A Programme for Universal Elementary Education*. New Delhi: MHRD, GOI
- Loreman, T, Deppeler, J and Harvey D (2006). *Inclusive education: A Practical Guide to Supporting Diversity in the Classroom*. Allen and Unwin, Australia
- UNESCO (1994). *The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education*. Paris: UNESCO.