

Road to Inclusion-Through Teacher Education

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Abstract: *Inclusive education aims at improving practices in schools to accommodate diversity. Inclusion is a journey and not the end. It requires commitment from all stakeholders- School, teachers, parents, children and community at large. Teacher is a pivotal to the success of inclusive education. For inclusion, teacher should possess appropriate attitudes, skills, competence and commitment. Required values and skills should be developed in novice teachers during pre-service teachers' education programme. So, it is the responsibility of teacher education institutes to equip teachers with appropriate knowledge, skills and attitudes, so as to make inclusion a reality. This paper tries to explore various research based steps which could be taken by teacher education institutes in India to foster positive attitude towards inclusion, required skills and knowledge in student teachers.*

Key Words: *Inclusive education, teacher education, collaboration, co-teaching.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Education is a fundamental right of all children and Inclusion is the only way to achieve it. Inclusive education advocates quality education for all, including those who might be marginalized due to disability, emotional/behavioural problems, giftedness, hearing or visual impairment, language delay, culture and race. It is an opportunity for the school to be a change agent and provide equitable quality education to ALL children and play an important role in building an inclusive society. **Inclusive education is defined by UNESCO as a process of addressing and responding to the diverse needs of all learners by increasing participation in learning and reducing exclusion within and from education.** This means that all children have the right to a quality education that caters, to their individual needs. Inclusive education is a move towards improving school system than just to accommodate diverse learners. It aims at responding to the learning needs of every child. One of the guiding principles of inclusive education is that schools should accommodate all children regardless of their diverse backgrounds (Pearce, 2009). This means that in inclusive schools, curriculum, activities, assessment, teaching methods are adapted according to the needs of children. In an actual inclusive classroom, teachers provide their students with special needs with equitable support to enable them to participate physically, socially and academically with their peers (Pearce, 2009). The success of inclusive education largely depends on teachers because they are to play the most crucial role in classroom practice (Jerlinder et al, 2010). Inclusion expects general classroom teachers to understand the needs of wide range of students, manage a diverse classroom, make appropriate accommodations in curriculum, methods of teaching and assessment. It expects teacher to collaborate with number of professionals to provide special services to the children in need. Hence, general classroom teacher is pivotal to the success of inclusive education (Stanovich and Jordan 2002). Inclusion cannot be achieved alone. All the stakeholders including government, teacher education institutes, schools, school personnel, teachers, parents should commit themselves for the cause. If teachers are the pivotal to the success of inclusive education than teacher education institutes are responsible to instil appropriate attitudes and skills in them. Florian & Rouse (2009) states that the task of teacher education institutes is to prepare the individuals for the profession which accepts every child and is responsible for improving the learning and participation of all children. Inclusive policies are vastly being implemented in schools worldwide, teacher education is just beginning to address inclusion as part of general teacher training (Chambers and Forlin 2010). In other words, teacher education programmes have been lagging behind in their response to the inclusion in the schools and often take an add-on approach (Forlin and Lian 2008). Preparing teachers for regular class teaching has undergone a major pedagogical shift in recent years. Training institutions are now required to ensure that pre-service teachers are competent to cater the needs of an increasing range of diverse learners. This move has been furthered by international recommendations from UNESCO to include content on inclusion as a part of teacher training programs (UNESCO, 2005).

2. NEED AND RATIONALE:

Each year, aspiring teachers join general education classrooms to begin their student teaching experience. They enter the classroom with their own personal beliefs, values, attitudes and concerns towards inclusion and their new primary responsibility to teach all students, especially students with exceptional learning needs. A large number of studies from different countries have reported that pre service teachers had concerns working with children with special

needs in their classrooms. Brownlee & Carrington (2000), stressed that attitude of pre service teachers towards students with special needs is a critical component in inclusive education. “The shaping of positive attitudes toward students with disabilities is an important aspect of the education of pre-service teachers” Sze (2009). It is the responsibility of teacher education institutes to ensure pre-service teachers possess a professional attitude towards including students and are confident in their ability to meet the needs of all students. Stressing on the need of positive attitude Murphy (1996) states that if teachers leave teacher education institutes with negative attitudes then it is very difficult to change them in later stages. Positive attitudes can be and need to be fostered through both training and positive experiences with students with disabilities (Hobbs & Westling, 1998). Hence pre service teacher education seems to be the best time to address educators’ concerns and possibly modify their negative attitudes about inclusive education as well as toward persons with disabilities.

In response to the inclusion movement, pre service teacher education institutions have recognized their role in preparing preservice teachers with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to successfully manage diverse groups of learners (Ashan, Sharma, & Deppeler, 2012; Lancaster & Bain, 2010). There is an urgent need to equip teachers to work in diverse settings, and it is evident as most pre service teacher education institutions offer some form of inclusion training as part of their teacher preparation program. Pre-service teachers are important agents for the implementation of inclusive education. They should be trained in teaching strategies and assessment methods to cater to the diversity in the classrooms. Many researchers have demonstrated that doing a course in inclusive education during pre-service teacher education positively influences the attitudes, self-efficacy and professional efficacy of pre-service teachers to work with diverse range of students (Burton & Pace, 2009). Li et al (2010) revealed that pre service teachers had favourable attitudes towards inclusive education but were inadequately prepared to teach students with special needs in some parts of United States and China. Study by Burton and Pace (2009) suggested that having positive attitudes cannot compensate for insufficient preparation, while Lancaster and Bain (2010) concurred that a sense of preparation is not contingent on attitudes alone, but that preservice teachers must also feel they have the strategies and the capability to execute the necessary practices. Hodkinson’s (2005) found similar results and reported that pre service teachers felt that their training provided them good understanding of the theory of inclusive education but their understanding of its practical applications was limited. These findings should have serious implications for teacher education institutions. For inclusion to be successful, only attitudinal change through theoretical knowledge is not sufficient. Pre service teachers should feel that they have skills and strategies to deal with diversity in the classroom. As India is revamping its teacher education programme it becomes all the more important to analyse the existing curriculum of inclusive education in teacher training institutes and discuss methods and strategies which would lead to training of teachers which will be adequately prepared for inclusion. A course on inclusive education has been included in pre teacher education curriculum after 2015 reforms in teacher education in Indian universities. The course on inclusive education provide theoretical knowledge about different types of learners, their specific learning needs, curricular adaptations and accommodations, differential instruction and assessment required according to the needs of children. The curriculum lacks practical applications of concept of inclusive education. Sharma, Forlin, Deppeler, & Yang, (2013), after reviewing curriculum of teacher education of thirteen countries of Asia-pacific region found that focus on inclusive education in teacher education programmes is secondary and isolated. According to them, some universities covered theoretical information about disabilities and inclusion but none have practicum component to practice inclusion in the real classrooms. Better prepared teachers for inclusion not only provide high-quality education to children with disabilities but all children benefit in classrooms taught by competent, inclusive teachers (Sharma & Loreman, 2014). One aspect that needs to be given significant attention relates to addressing gaps between theory and practice of inclusion. Ryndak, Jackson, & White, (2013) advocated to improve the expertise of educators to implement effective practices for learners in inclusive settings. Booth, Nes, & Stromstad, (2003) stressed on the need of both theoretical and practical knowledge about inclusion. From the researches mentioned above it is clear that the curriculum and assessment is theoretical which is insufficient to instil the values and attitudes to serve the purpose of inclusive education. Curriculum of inclusive education course is overcrowded with information and leave very little scope for practicum. Assessment is based on semester end examination which covers theoretical concepts. To make inclusion a reality, some reforms in pre service teacher education are required which deepens the understanding of individual differences while addressing student diversity in Indian context. An attempt should be made to make sure that the teacher coming out of the program not only have skills and knowledge, beliefs and commitments but also have sufficient experience in teaching the diverse students in their classrooms. Inclusive education is a practice to be followed, so it is necessary to impart required skills and attitudes in students.

3. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS:

From the review of related literature on the current topic, few steps could be taken to make inclusive education more effective and meaningful. Inclusion is an attitude. Positive and right attitude towards including children with special needs in the classes is the foundation stone for inclusion. It starts with acceptance and valuing diversity. There

is much evidence that training in inclusion has a positive impact on preservice teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. Size (2009) conducted an international review of the research in this area and determined that teacher education for inclusion brings awareness about the characteristics of children with special needs, and hence form positive attitude towards inclusive education. Kim's (2011) study also demonstrated increases in positive attitudes from both single-unit courses and an infused approach. Hence including a course on inclusive education enhances the knowledge of pre service teachers towards inclusive education. Emphasis should be given in developing positive attitude in pre service teachers towards inclusive education by providing them with field experiences and opportunities to interact with children with special needs. This could be provided by incorporating field experiences in the curriculum. Avramidis & Norwich (2002): Jobling & Moni (2004) demonstrated in their research that teachers preferred practice in direct teaching of students with special needs for the preparation of teachers for inclusive education. Lambe (2007) examined the changes in attitudes of pre service teachers after completing a post graduate diploma in education with field experience. Completion of course with field experience resulted in positive effect on pre service teacher's attitude for inclusive education. Rose and Garner (2010) also laid emphasis on importance of practical, school based experiences with the theoretical knowledge of inclusion. Loreman (2010) stressed that direct contact with students with special needs and field experience may be the only meaningful solution to improve training in inclusion. Swain, Nordness, and Leader-Janssen's (2012) found that special education course coupled with field experience of 24 hours influenced the attitude of student teachers positively. Other researchers also stressed on providing direct field experience to inculcate desired skills, competencies and attitudes in pre service teachers. Therefore, field experiences should be an explicit requirement for pre service teacher education program. Loreman and Earle (2007); Romi and Leyser (2006), considered direct experience with students with special needs as one of the promising way to prepare pre service teachers. Several innovative and effective approaches to teacher education have incorporated opportunities for preservice teachers to work with students with exceptional needs through literacy programmes, after-school programmes, and tutoring.

Different programmes should be conducted to develop required skills, competencies and knowledge about inclusive education and pedagogy by teacher training institutes. These programmes should have credits or additional certificates. These programs should be open for working teachers as well as teacher educators who would like to enhance their capacities to work in inclusive settings. These programmes should ensure that teachers have adequate opportunities for experiential learning and continuous professional development through short term courses, workshops and seminars. Teacher education institutes can organise such professional development activities apart from their mainstream programmes and could be conducted through online, correspondence, face to face or in blended form. Every programme should be coupled with practicum or field experience. This will develop required skills and competencies in the student teacher to deal effectively with the diverse needs of students. Sokal L., Woloshyn D. and U Savannah Funk (2013) conducted an experimental study on 60 pre service teachers to survey about their confidence, concerns, and efficacy for inclusive classroom teaching before and after a course on inclusive education with or without practicum in inclusive setting. The students who experienced a practicum in an inclusive setting developed greater teacher efficacy in classroom management than those students with no practicum. The findings support the importance of high-quality inclusive practical as an essential feature of effective inclusive teacher preparation programs.

First hand experiences during field work help them to understand the learning needs of children with special needs. This will also provide them with the opportunities to practice their skills and reflect on their practices. Teacher education institutes should also provide opportunities to student teachers to observe inclusive classrooms in which classroom teacher's work collaboratively with parents and other professionals to provide equitable learning experiences to all the students. Inclusion require participation and collaboration of all the stakeholders, children with or without special needs, their parents, special educators and other professionals. The most important collaboration is required between general classroom teacher and special educator. Collaboration, the interaction style between school professionals, is defined as two or more equally certified or licensed professionals implementing shared teaching, decision-making, goal setting, and accountability for a diverse students. According to Grant and Gillette (2006), classroom teachers do not have required skills and competencies to deliver instructions effectively to diverse population of learners. Classroom teachers lack in the ability to co-teach and collaborate with special educators. Paulsen (2008) reported that teachers often lack collaborative skills needed to provide learning for diverse students. Ruppard, Dymond, & Gaffney (2011) stressed that special education teachers might lack the understanding of how to adapt grade level content for students with significant disabilities, a gap in knowledge that may affect their ability to implement inclusive practices successfully. Otis-Wilborn et al., (2005) reported that teacher education failed to develop strategies for building collaborations in formal and informal ways with general education teachers. Montgomery and Mirenda (2014) found that teacher self-efficacy for collaboration predicted more positive beliefs and sentiments for inclusion of students with developmental disabilities while simultaneously predicting fewer teacher concerns about including this population of students. In addition, when a special education teacher work together with general education teacher, better individualized instruction and support were provided to children with special needs.

Teacher education institutes should practice co-teaching to model the benefits of collaboration. It is unrealistic to think that every teacher will be skilled in every aspect of teaching students with and without disabilities. Teachers should be prepared to collaborate in order to provide most effective learning experiences to all students. Student teachers should be given ample opportunities to work collaboratively during theory classes. They should be given exposure to co-teach during their school experience program. Vail.C (2014) in the paper titled Preparing Special educators for collaboration has cited about researchers which called for higher education to initiate changes resulting in successful collaboration skills and given some solutions

- Integrated programs with other disciplines such as elementary education, school psychology, or a specific content area
- Classes designed to teach collaboration skills
- Co-teaching during practical or student teaching and
- Modelling co-teaching in the higher education classroom

There is also urgent need to bring preparation of special educators and general classroom teachers under one umbrella. Their training should provide them opportunities to collaborate with each other during school experience program. Solutions given by researchers to develop collaborative skills in pre service teachers could be implemented in India by developing integrated programs between special education and general education. Assignments and projects could be given to student teachers on which they have to work collaboratively. Opportunities should be provided to the student teachers to co-teach with the classroom teacher and their peers. Forlin C and D.T. Nguyet (2010) reported that one of the key issues which hinder a more inclusive curriculum approach for institutions, especially in countries which are embracing inclusion for the first time, is that teacher educators themselves are poorly equipped to take on the role of educating pre service teachers about inclusion. Universities should collaborate with experts in the field of inclusion, education and special education to design need based specialized courses in inclusive education for teacher educators. Services from specialized personnel like occupational therapists, physiotherapists, speech therapists, teacher educators of special education, teachers practicing inclusion should be taken to practice collaboration for maximum output from the course. The course should have compulsory field engagement where teacher educators should try to practice their skills and develop new competencies. In India, to train competent teachers in inclusive pedagogy teacher preparation programmes should carefully consider the combination of both coursework and direct experiences when designing their inclusion training programmes. Also, emphasis should be placed on providing preservice teachers with the knowledge and skills for practising inclusive instructional strategies, managing behaviours, and collaborating with parents and other colleagues. They should be given opportunities to observe and work with diverse population of students and collaborate with different professionals to design instructional process according to the needs of each child.

4. CONCLUSION:

The problem of inadequate preparation of teachers to teach in inclusive classrooms is evident in Indian conditions. It is only few years' back, teacher education has given importance to inclusive education. After the inclusion of this course in pre service teacher education, it is felt that theoretical paper on inclusive education could result in increased awareness level of student teachers about the diversity in the classroom. It may result in development of positive attitude among student teachers towards inclusive education. But to instil required skills and competencies to make inclusion a reality, teacher education curriculum should incorporate more opportunities for student teachers to interact with children with diversified learning needs through field work and practical components.

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