



**ARE SCHOOL TEACHERS (PRESCHOOL AND PRIMARY)
OPEN TO THE THOUGHT OF INTEGRATING DIFFERENTLY-ABLED CHILDREN
IN THEIR CLASSROOM? - OPINION REGARDING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION**

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Abstract

Differently-abled children in inclusive education differs from previously held notions of 'integration' or 'mainstreaming' which was largely concerned with disability and special educational needs. It implied learners 'changing' or becoming 'ready for' or 'deserving of' accommodation by the mainstream. The benefits of Inclusive Education have been documented by a number of researchers. Inclusive education is about the child's right to participate in regular education and the school's duty to accept the child. Dearth of research in the opinion of school teachers (preschool and primary) in the Indian context served as an impetus for the current research. The objective of the study was to elicit from the school teachers (preschool and primary) the challenges faced and strategies to overcome regarding integrating differently-abled children in their classroom. The sample consisted of consisted of 20 teachers (11 at the preschool and 9 at the primary school level). Research employed a multi-method (face-to-face in-depth interview, observation and examination of records) was design. Results revealed that, challenges and strategies indicated by school teachers were categorized in relation to (i) schools, (ii) teachers, (iii) differently-abled students (children with special needs), (iv) parents of students with special needs, (v) regular /normal children and (vi) parents of regular/normal children. A majority of the participants (60%) stated that lack of infrastructure and facilities, such as classroom size, modified toilets, ramps, etc were major challenges for school, while half

of them (50%) said that it was a balancing act of catering to different levels of children, the huge class size, the time restraint, their lack of training for teachers made it difficult to understand the child with disability and lastly dealing with the apprehension of the parents of normal students often leads to isolation, low self-esteem and even depression. A large majority of the participants (75%) indicated that normal/regular children find it difficult to adjust to the child with disability, misunderstanding them, pitying them and sometimes even being afraid of them and their behaviour and needs. Teacher's judgment about children with disabilities could have a significant influence on children's emotional, social and intellectual development. Since general educator's willingness to include students with disabilities in their classroom is critical to the success of inclusion, a number of researchers have stressed the importance of understanding teacher's attitudes and beliefs towards inclusion.



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Introduction and Review of Literature

Education for children with disabilities is undergoing a tremendous change. Today the traditional special education model is being challenged by Inclusive education. However many schools and Teachers in regular classrooms in India are not ready for inclusive education. The success of Inclusive education depends upon a lot of factors like: attitudes of the parents, teachers, peers, etc; the collaboration between the schools, teachers and resource centres, etc. However Teacher's attitude is one of the most important variables in the education of children with disabilities (Smith, 2000). Teacher's judgment about children with disabilities could have a significant influence on children's emotional, social and intellectual development. Since general educator's willingness to include students with disabilities in their classroom is critical to the success of inclusion, a number of researchers have stressed the importance of understanding teacher's attitudes and beliefs towards inclusion (cited in Kala Parasuram, 2006).

Inclusive education differs from previously held notions of 'integration' or 'mainstreaming' which was largely concerned with disability and special educational needs. It implied learners 'changing' or becoming 'ready for' or 'deserving of' accommodation by the mainstream. Here there is no change in the general classroom. In mainstream education, students attend some

general education classes for half a day and often for less academically rigorous classes. For e.g. a student with disability will attend the regular classroom education for subjects like art and craft, physical education, singing and drama, subjects that are not academically tough, but will spend reading, writing, mathematical, languages etc. classes in resource rooms with other students that have similar disabilities. These resource rooms are used for remediation.

By contrast, Inclusive Education is about the child's right to participate and the school's duty to accept the child. Inclusion rejects the use of special schools or classrooms to separate students with disabilities. Importance is placed upon full participation by the student with disabilities and upon respect for social, civil and educational rights (Wikipedia.org). In Inclusive Education the major change will occur in the general classroom. Here all students spend time in small groups, receiving instructional assistance, working alongside peers, the students with disabilities don't stand out as being exceptional. The student gains educationally and socially.

The benefits of Inclusive Education have been documented by a number of researchers. Inclusive education is about the child's right to participate in regular education and the school's duty to accept the child. To support this there are many Legislations and policies. The government of India provides facilities and concessions for children with disabilities under various programmes, but somehow the practice of Inclusive Education hasn't really been implemented for various reasons. Some of the reasons are the government hasn't really implemented any of its commitments, the attitudes of those involved aren't very positive so much so that schools are refusing to admit child with disabilities. Alur (2003) observed that in India these is a dichotomy with policy and practices; the government promotes the 'inclusionist' philosophy through its schemes and extends a parallel support to the segregationist policy by promoting the idea of special schools through their assistance of voluntary organizational schemes (Das and Kattumuri, 2010).

Besides the government and local authorities there are other individuals than can have a good influence on Inclusive education. These individuals are teachers, principles, parents, peers etc. However there are many researchers that state that a teacher is one of the key persons in the implementation of Inclusive Education. This is so because Inclusive Education has profound implications for them as they face increased pressure to perform different sets of roles, they are put in diverse classrooms, and they are expected to use various teaching strategies to

accommodate both the child with disability and the normal children. Hence the current study attempts to understand the perception and attitudes of these regular school teachers with reference to Inclusive Education. Inclusive education services allow children with disabilities to stay with their family and to go to the nearest school, just like all other children. This circumstance is of vital importance to their personal development. Interrupting a disabled child's normal development may have far more severe consequences than the disability itself (Rao 2003).

Primary and preschool teachers were chosen to be the participants for this study. This is because it is at this base level (preschool and primary school) that children learn to accommodate and adapt to change, differences, etc. Also it is important that the child with disabilities' first few years in a regular set up be positive, encouraging, hopeful and progressive. This can be possible only if the teachers are positive to Inclusive Education.

Teacher's attitudes are one of the most important variables in the education of children with disabilities (Parasuram 2006). Studies have emphasized the importance of positive attitudes of teachers towards inclusion. Their judgment about the child could have a significant influence on the child's emotional, social and education development. Hence attitudes and roles were studied in the research.

This study is conducted in Mumbai for many reasons. One Mumbai is India's economic capital which means that many more people are moving there. The need for Inclusive Education has increased in Mumbai since the past few years. People have become more aware of their rights. Also many parents do not wish to put their children in regional language schools and rather have them study in English medium and international schools. This holds true for parents of children with disabilities. Also many of the segregated special schools in Mumbai are Hindi or Marathi medium which doesn't give too many options for the parents. Hence they want to put their children in regular schools in Inclusive Education. However many of the school are not equipped to deal with such children that they either refuse admission which is against the right of the child or they admit but don't give proper education according to their needs.

This study would benefit the field of counselling by coming up with strategies to help change the teacher's attitudes towards Inclusive Education, help counsel them wherever possible, help them

me prepared emotionally as well as physically to accept the child in their classroom and help others accept and adapt to them positively.

Objectives of the Study: To elicit from the school teachers (preschool and primary) the challenges faced and strategies to overcome regarding integrating differently-abled children in their classroom.

Methodology

This research has employed a multi-method (face-to-face interview, questionnaire, observation and examination of records) design.

Sample Size: The sample consisted of 20 teachers (11 at the preschool and 9 at the primary school level).

Inclusion Criteria for Preschool Teachers:

A preschool teacher with a minimum qualification of a diploma in a Teacher Training Course or diploma in Early Childhood Education or a diploma/degree in Education after the Higher Secondary Certificate (XIIth standard) or after graduation.

Those with a minimum of two years of experience in teaching preschool children between the ages of three and six years.

Inclusion Criteria for Primary School Teachers

A primary teacher with a minimum qualification of a diploma in a Teacher Training Course or a diploma / degree in Education after the Higher Secondary Certificate (XIIth standard) or after graduation.

Those with a minimum of two years of experience in teaching primary school children between the ages of 6 and 10 years.

Exclusion criteria for Preschool and primary school teachers

1. No Special Educators or resource room teachers

Rationale for Inclusion Criteria: The qualifications of the teachers were specified in order to obtain uniformity in training. Two years of experience was considered in order to give the teachers sufficient time and opportunity to become familiar with Inclusive Education in their school.

Rationale for Exclusion Criteria: Not including special educators or resource room teachers would give better understanding about the perceptions and attitudes about regular teachers in mainstream schools.

Sampling Technique: The sampling technique used was that of “reliance on available subjects”. All those who fulfilled the inclusion criteria and agreed to participate in the study were selected for the study.

Sample Characteristics: The sample consisted of 8 schools located in Mumbai. These included two schools affiliated to the Secondary School Certificate Board (SSC), four to the Indian School Certificate Examinations (ICSE) Board, one to Montessori Education and one to Early Childhood Education (ECCE). They were all English medium schools. The schools were situated in the Western Suburbs and in Central and South Mumbai. Of these eight schools, six schools were co- educational while one was a boy’s school and the other, a girl’s school.

All the teachers from the schools were females. The ages of the teachers ranged from 21 to 54 years ($M= 35$; $SD=10.136$). The ages of the preschool teachers ranged from 23 to 54 years ($M= 37$; $SD=11.375$) and that the primary school teachers ranged from 21 to 50 years ($M=32.56$; $SD=8.368$).

The teaching experience of all the 20 teachers ranged from 2 to 16 years ($M=4.80$; $SD=4.432$). The teaching experience of the preschool teachers ranged from 2 to 15 years ($M=4.64$; $SD=4.545$) and the primary teachers ranged from 2 to 16 years ($M=5$; $SD=4.555$).

The educational qualification of the teachers varied. All the teachers were HSC pass. Seven of the teachers were graduates in Commerce, while the remaining 11 were graduates of arts. Out of these 20 teachers only 5 had a master’s degree, 3 in the arts field and 2 in the commerce field. In addition to this all the teachers had done a teacher’s training course, either a diploma or a degree. Eight teachers had done a degree; out of which 7 had done a B.Ed and 1 had done a M.Ed. The remaining 12 teachers were all trained in a teacher training diploma; 7 in Early Childhood education, 3 in Montessori, 1 in a Teaching training course and the last one had done a certificate course in nursery and crèche.

Procedure of Data Collection:

Schools were randomly approached and permission was sought from the section headmistress or co-ordinator for conducting the survey. Following this, the questionnaire was either handed over

(10%) responses were not applicable and one participant (5%) said time restraint in providing all the necessary interventions is a challenge for the school.

Challenges faced by the teachers: Half of the participants (50%) said that it was a balancing act of catering to different levels of children, the huge class size, the time restraint, their lack of training due to which they find it difficult to understand the child with disability and lastly dealing with the apprehension of the parents of normal students. Little less than half of the participants (40%) said that they find it difficult to give the required attention to the child with disability without neglecting the remaining students and isolating the student with disability. One participant (5%) said that children with disabilities are not capable to complete the given tasks and another participant (5%) said that choosing the right method of teaching for these children is a major challenge.

Challenges faced by differently-abled students (children with special needs): A little less than half of the participants (40%) said that students with disabilities don't feel accepted and have difficulty adjusting to normal children which often leads to isolation, low self-esteem and even depression. Few of the participants (20%) said that the major challenge is bullying and peer pressure. Few other participants (15%) said that students with special needs are often misunderstood and they feel neglected as not enough support and attention is given by the teacher. Very few participants (10%) said that lack of assistive devices and technology, infrastructure and trained personnel is a challenge for the student with special needs. One participant (5%) said that these students find it hard to follow the standardized syllabus. Another participant (5%) said that misunderstanding of the student with disability, their food habits, hygiene needs leads to helplessness. One participant (5%) didn't respond.

Challenges faced by parents of students with special needs: A little less than one third of the participants (30%) said that discrimination of their children and lack of support from family and friends as well as schools and community leads to physical exhaustion, stress and financial burden which is a major issue for parents. Quarter of the participants (25%) said that the parents stress about their child's behaviour and academic performance as it is difficult to get their children on par with normal students with all the time restraints and lack of facilities. Few of the participants (15%) said that the parent's acceptance that their child has special needs and behaviour issues and their helplessness about what to do about it is a challenge. Very few

participants (10%) said that getting admission for their children in regular schools is a challenge for many of the parents. Finally few participants (20%) didn't respond to this question.

Challenges faced by regular/normal children: A large majority of the participants (75%) said that normal children find it difficult to adjust to the child with disability, misunderstanding them, pitying them and sometimes even being afraid of them and their behaviour and needs. The remaining quarter of the participants (25%) said that the normal children are often disturbed by the students with special needs and sometimes feel neglected by the teacher because of the attention given by the teacher to the student with special needs.

Challenges faced by parents of regular/normal children: One fourth of the participants (25%) were afraid that their children would not get enough attention and afraid that there would be misunderstanding between normal children and children with disabilities. Another one third of the participants (25%) said that it is a challenge for the parents to accept that their children are mixing about with students with disabilities and overcoming the fear that their children may be attacked by these students or that their children may pick up the students with disabilities habits and behaviours and this could psychologically impact their child. Few of the participants (20%) said that it was challenge for parents of normal children to overcome their apprehension about how their child will adjust to the student with disability. One participant (5%) said that the parents were indifferent to the situation and quarter of the participants (25%) gave no response.

Strategies to overcome the challenges by the school teachers (preschool and primary) regarding integrating differently-abled children in their classroom

With respect to the strategies to overcome the challenges faced due to Inclusive Education, the responses of the participants can be divided into 6 categories, namely challenges faced by (i) schools, (ii) teachers, (iii) differently-abled students (children with special needs), (iv) parents of students with special needs, (v) normal children and (vi) parents of normal children.

Strategies that could be implemented by the schools: Half of the participants (50%) were of the opinion that the school should provide trained special educators or shadow teachers to work with the students with special needs alongside the regular class teachers. Few of the participants (20%) stated that the school could change the infrastructure to be disabled friendly and also train their regular teachers in special education. Few of the other participants (20%) also said that the

school should provide practical guidelines and counselling facilities to peers, parents, teachers, related services, staff and school administrators about disability and inclusive education. One participant (5%) clearly stated that the school should provide separate classrooms for students with disabilities, with less working hours and friendly environment. One teacher (5%) didn't respond to the question.

Strategies that could be implemented by the teachers: A little less than half of the participants (40%) stated that the teachers could learn new methods of teaching and enhance their skills to teach normal students and those with disabilities. They were also of the opinion of keeping the parents constantly informed. Few of the participants (20%) were of the opinion that they could show more concern and sympathy and also give more time to the students with disabilities. Very few participants (10%) responded that using more teaching aids and making content simpler and questions more objective will be useful to the students with disability. Other very few participants (10%) said that teachers could help in Inclusive Education by motivating the children to be one with normal students and give them jobs to do together. Two participants (10%) said that teachers could identify the needs and abilities of each student with disability and that they should include all individuals who are familiar with the student like parents, therapist, siblings, doctors, etc in the assessment. Two participants (10%) didn't respond to the question.

Strategies that could be implemented by the differently-abled students (children with special needs): A majority of the participants (65%) did not respond to the question. They felt that the students themselves didn't need to use any strategies to make Inclusive education possible. One fourth of the participants (25%) said that these students with disabilities should be open to learning, changing and facing challenges. One participant (5%) was of the opinion that having a partner to help them out could be a good strategy. One participant (5%) was of the opinion that the student with special needs could make use of all the facilities provided.

Strategies that could be implemented by the parents of children with special needs: A little less than half of the participants (40%) didn't respond. One fourth of the participants (25%) were of the opinion that these parents should collaborate with the schools and teachers, discuss the progress and needs of the child and be open to advice. Few of the participants (20%) said that the parents should provide their children the special aids required and communicate and motivate them to participate with the normal students and community. One participant (5%) responded

that the parents should provide their children proper counselling sessions. Another participant (5%) said that the parents should participate in workshops, seminars which will help them to broaden their approach and train them in different handling techniques. Another participant (5%) that parents should organize awareness campaigns.

Strategies that could be implemented by the regular/normal students: Half of the participants (50%) said that these students could be helpful, considerate, supportive and friendly towards the students with special needs. In this way there will be more interaction between all students in all areas. Little less than one third of the participants (30%) didn't respond to this question. Two participants (10%) said that acceptance on behalf of normal students is an important factor in Inclusive Education and another two participants (10%) said that normal student should be made aware of the student's disability and understand ways to help them.

Strategies that could be implemented by the parents of regular/normal students: A little less than half of the participants (40%) said these parents need to be acceptable to other students with disabilities and Inclusive Education. Less than one third of the participants (30%) said that it is the parent's responsibility to not discriminate and motivate their kids to accept and understand and participate with students with disabilities. Little less than one third of the participants (30%) gave no response.

Discussion and Conclusions

Many teachers expressed that though both children with disabilities and those without disabilities would benefit from Inclusive Education, the academic level of students without disabilities may suffer because of the teacher's pressure of balancing a class with different level of students. These results of the study are in agreement with the research by Linlin Li in 2007 who found that parents and teachers agreed that inclusion would benefit children with disabilities by gaining acceptance through inclusion, developing independence in self-help skills, having more chances to participate in variety of activities, feeling better about themselves and being more prepared for the real world. It is believed that through inclusion, typically developing children increase their sensitivity to others, better understand human diversity, and are more aware of their own strengths and weaknesses.

Similarly to the findings of Linlin Li research in 2007, the results of this research too is in agreement that parents and teachers also feel that inclusion might have a negative impact on

children with and without disabilities. In the current research many participants were anxious of the negative impact inclusion would have on students with disabilities like inadequate help and attention from teachers, inappropriate teaching aids, rejection from peers and teachers, unqualified teachers, inappropriate infrastructure etc. Many participants also indicated that there could be negative effects of inclusion on students without disabilities like not being able to understand the students with disabilities, being afraid of the students with disabilities, being injured if a student throws a tantrum, receiving less attention from teachers and slow progress in their learning due to accommodation of the student with disabilities.

Based on the current trends in education and the positive attitudes of teachers the inclusion model appears to be gaining wide acceptance as a viable service model for students with disabilities. However there remain some concerns about implementing Inclusive Education in mainstream schools. Education planners and policy makers should incorporate practical techniques that would be useful in the inclusive classrooms, in training preparation programmes and professional development programmes. The teachers also stated that both students with and without disabilities will benefit from Inclusive Education. The findings should be interpreted in the light of the fact that the questionnaires were filled by regular classroom teachers of the preschool and primary school level of mainstream schools.

No Child Left Behind Act established provisions for all students including sub groups of students identified in terms of their disability, socioeconomic status, language, race and ethnicity. In order to comply with the act, schools were required to merge general and special education into a single delivery model which is known as Inclusion (Kern, 2006). The National policy for Persons with Disabilities announced by the Government of India in 2006 reflects the new emphasis of bringing persons with disabilities into the mainstream of society. It seeks to create an environment that provides them equal opportunities, protection of their rights and full participation in society. The national policy emphasizes the need for mainstreaming of persons with disabilities in the general education system through Inclusive education. The inclusive education policies in India need to be reformed in several ways. Though these efforts have given a good beginning to the Inclusive Education, a lot has to be done for its proper functioning (Singh, 2009).

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