

Awareness and Attitudes of Primary Grade Teachers (1-4th Grade) towards Inclusive Education

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Abstract—The present research aimed at studying the awareness and attitudes of teachers towards inclusive education. The sample consisted of 60 teachers, teaching in the primary section (1st – 4th) of regular schools affiliated to the SSC board in Mumbai. Sample was selected by Multi-stage cluster sampling technique. A semi-structured self-constructed interview schedule and a self-constructed attitude scale was used to study the awareness of teachers about disability and Inclusive education, and their attitudes towards inclusive education respectively. Themes were extracted from the interview data and quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS package. Results revealed that teachers had some amount of awareness but an inadequate amount of information on disabilities and inclusive education. Disability to most (37) teachers meant “an inability to do something”. The difference between disability and handicap was stated by most as former being cognitive while handicap being physical in nature. With regard to Inclusive education, a large number (46) stated that they were unaware of the term and did not know what it meant. Majority (52) of them perceived maximum challenges for themselves in an inclusive set up, and emphasized on the role of teacher training courses in the area of providing knowledge (49) and training in teaching methodology (53). Although, 83.3% of teachers held a moderately positive attitude towards inclusive education, a large percentage (61.6%) of participants felt that being in inclusive set up would be very challenging for both children with special needs and without special needs. Though, most (49) of the teachers stated that children with special needs should be educated in regular classroom but they further clarified that only those should be in a regular classroom who have physical impairments of mild or moderate degree.

Keywords—Attitudes, awareness, inclusive education, teachers.

I. INTRODUCTION

PEOPLE with disabilities face discrimination in various aspects of their life. They have for long been discriminated against and deprived of education. “There is one world everyone is born to live in” [22]. However, the kind of society we live in does not quiet live this idea to the fullest. Initiative has been taken by the government of India (especially the education ministry) to increase inclusion of children with special needs in mainstream classrooms as seen by the laws/Acts such as, The Persons with Disabilities Act, Sarva Siksha Abhiyan, Right to Education Act etc. Through these acts, the government has aimed to provide children with special needs access to regular education. The education of people with disabilities has moved from no education at all to

special education to integration to what is now being advocated for the most i.e. inclusive education. However, the reality is far from what the law states. Despite this provision, it has been found that students with disabilities still remain to be excluded from regular classrooms. The reasons for this exclusion are multiple globally as lack of resources, teacher’s inability to handle inclusive classrooms, parents’ satisfaction or dissatisfaction with services provided, with additions specific to Indian settings (parents/families not being aware of inclusive education).

Inclusive education can be defined as an approach that ensures not only the presence of all students in education in an inclusive classroom, but also assures their participation and achievement. Unlike in an integrated system, an inclusive system works towards changing the structure, system, culture, policies, practices and attitudes to be able to respond to the diversity among the students. Inclusive education is about designing learning environments that meets the unique needs of each individual, acknowledge, and appreciate the diverse nature of the human community [7]. There is an emphasis on equal participation, but within the same framework, students with special needs can avail differentiation through a variety of facilities and special assistance [18].

Inclusion cannot occur in isolation. Several stakeholders need to work together to make Inclusion a reality. One such stakeholder and perhaps the most important one for its success is the regular classroom teacher. A major part of the responsibility for the actualizing of an inclusive system where excellence and equality work in perfect harmony therefore rests in the hands of the teacher [16]. According to [10] teachers are the ‘key change agents’ responsible for the success of inclusive education programs. They further state that, teacher’s beliefs to a great extent shape the format of instructions and learning that children with disabilities will receive in a regular classroom. Similar view has been emphasized by [8], according to them, teachers play a fundamental role in implementing an open and inclusive environment for all children in the classroom.

Being aware about the special needs of children with disabilities, the necessary modifications in class curriculum, and the awareness about the need for extra input are all significantly essential for teachers to be able to be truly inclusive in the type of education they impart. When teachers are aware and well informed about the concept of inclusion, they feel more confident about the roles they need to play in the classroom. A lack of awareness and skill to include and support students with disabilities along with other children in a regular classroom however can prove to be a major barrier in

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such a process [6]. Not only does it affect the implementation of inclusive education in the classroom, but also has an impact on teachers' belief in and attitude towards inclusive education. Teacher attitudes significantly influence the learning environment they create for the students and the application of appropriate practices in the classroom [2].

To be able to truly overcome our history of a system of exclusion of individuals with a disability, just a rudimentary knowledge of the different types of disabilities is not enough. What we also need is radical change in the way we think.

The attitudes held by teachers play a crucial role in the implementation of inclusive education. It is important that teachers believe that through their ability to make decisions they can make a great difference in the education of their students with a disability [6], [20].

Teachers' perceptions of inclusive policies not only determine the level of acceptance they show towards inclusive practices but also affect their commitment towards the implementation of such policies [1]. It is the teacher who works most closely with the student. The knowledge that the teacher acquires and the attitudes he/she holds, greatly influence the ability of students to adapt to their environment as well as their performance in the classroom. The awareness, knowledge and attitudes of the teacher also impact the effectiveness, with which inclusive practices are implemented [4], [13].

Positive teacher attitudes help facilitate successful inclusion however negative attitudes are directly linked to less frequent use of effective classroom accommodations [19]. When general education teachers have negative attitudes toward inclusion and are unwilling to have students with disabilities in their classroom, they may not provide the necessary supports that would create a beneficial learning environment for the students. Reluctance to include students with disabilities in the regular classroom and the negative, unenthusiastic attitudes of teachers towards inclusive education restrain the imperative support required to build the type of learning environment that would best support the needs of these students [5]. These negative attitudes held by teachers may become a significant barrier to the effective implementation of inclusive education [12]. Reference [17], therefore explains, that, to be able to teach, train the students and guide their parents, teachers require a comprehensive combination of the right type of attitudes along with awareness about the various aspects of disabilities including their causes, characteristics, identification criteria and assessment coupled with the knowledge. Thus, the present study aimed at studying the awareness of teachers about inclusive education and their attitudes towards it, which are both critical factors that may either, thwart or ease the entire process of inclusion.

II. METHOD

A. Sample Size

The sample consisted of 60 female teachers teaching in the primary grades (1-4th grade) in the English medium schools

with SSC board, having a minimum teaching experience of 3 years. Those teachers who were involved in secondary job other than teaching were excluded from the sample. In addition, those teachers who had a child with disability were not included in the study.

B. Sample Characteristics

More number of teachers (33) was below 40 years and 8 were above 50 years of age. Most (41) of them were married and majority (44) of the teachers were Christians.

- Teaching Experience: The range of teaching experience for the sample was three to twenty-five years, with a majority (29) ranging from three to ten years.
- Educational Qualification: Of the 60 teachers, 24 had completed their B.Ed. degree courses, there were 16 with a D.Ed. and 13 had completed the Teachers Training Course. There were 3 teachers who had done a BA degree course and 4 who also had completed their D.Ed. course along with it.

All 60 teachers taught a language subject with a majority of them (51) teaching English. Maths was taught by 50 teachers. An equal number of teachers taught the subjects of History and Geography (16 each) and there were 11 who taught the subject of Science.

C. Tools for Data Collection

The Attitudes of Teachers towards Inclusive Education Scale based on the Attitude towards Inclusion/Mainstream, a scale by [14] was developed by the researcher. Attitudes were examined on seven different domains. The scale consisted of 60 items, with rating options that ranged from "Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree and Strongly Disagree" with a minimum obtainable score of 60 and a maximum obtainable score of 240. Reliability analysis was done using Cronbach Alpha and the tool was found to have an internal consistency of 0.928 for the 60 teachers.

A semi-structured, Interview Schedule for Awareness and Attitudes of Teachers towards Inclusive Education was made to assess the awareness of teachers about the various domains related to inclusive education. The interview also included a few questions to obtain qualitative data about teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education. The domains under which information was sought included awareness about disability and Awareness and Knowledge about inclusive education inclusive education.

D. Analysis

Quantitative Data was analyzed using SPSS package, while theme extraction was done with the qualitative data.

III. RESULTS

A. Awareness of Teachers about Inclusive Education

Majority (37) of the teachers stated that disability means "an inability to do something" while 13 teachers perceived it to be a mental or a physical handicap. When asked about how a disability was different from a handicap, 44 teachers stated that a disability was a "cognitive deficiency" and 34 saw a

handicap to be a “physical deficiency”. Six teachers differentiated between the two saying that disabilities were not as readily visible as a handicap and 2 teachers said disability and handicap were synonyms for the same condition.

According to the majority of teachers (49), environmental factors and prenatal factors (45) were the major cause of disability. Four teachers were of the opinion that negative thoughts and low spirituality could be a causative factor.

Physical disabilities such as hearing, visual and speech impairments, handicap of the limbs and mutism were found to be the most known (54) type of disability among the teachers, followed by cognitive disabilities, majorly mental retardation and learning disabilities (40).

Personal challenges (43) and social challenges (40) were the two major types of challenges that all teachers felt people with disabilities face. Marital challenges were also made a mention of by 5 of the teachers. All teachers believed these children possess certain abilities as well. These included, being skilled in arts including both, performing and fine arts (40 and 55 teachers respectively), 28 teachers said they could perform well at various other activities some of which included sports, oratory skills, and performing household chores.

Talking about the rights of people with disabilities, 14 teachers said they were not aware of rights that were entitled to individuals with disabilities. Most of the teachers who were aware of the rights of these children mentioned educational rights, and a few (13) of them mentioned that there are some rights related to the employment of people with disabilities. Similar responses were received when the teachers were asked to state their awareness about the services provided to the people with disabilities. Travel and transport related provisions were a response mentioned by more than 50% of the teachers. Similarly, educational services (31) and employment provisions (24) were the other services provided or made available for people with disabilities, according to the teachers.

Moving on to the awareness of the teachers about inclusive education, 46 teachers were unaware of the meaning of inclusive education, out of which, 21 teachers said that they were cognizant of the fact that students with special needs need to be placed in regular classrooms, however they were unaware that such a concept was known as inclusive education.

When asked about the challenges that may come along with the implementation of inclusive education, majority (52) of the teachers stated that it was the teachers who would face majority of the challenges. These included challenges faced during the initial period of getting acquainted with the students, being able to meet the needs of children with special needs, dealing with the parents of those children and coping up with the entire process that may be extremely emotionally draining. Only 25 teachers stated that challenges would be faced by children with special needs some of which would include lack of acceptance among peers, low self-esteem and difficulties in being able to participate in academic and extra-curricular activities.

Teachers not only saw more challenges for self in teaching in inclusive classroom but majority (47) of them also stated their own roles to be important for the implementation of inclusive education which is followed by the role of the school administration (44) and the role played by parents of children with special needs (35). Further, Teachers rated their role of catering to the needs of children with special needs (35) as one of the most important role. Being open and accepting (22), and getting training and education (17), were the other roles that were stated. Skills that they thought necessary for an inclusive education teacher included, personal skills (60), such as empathy, patience and love, at the same time, professional skills (41) including skills in using teaching techniques, good class management skills (10).

Providing knowledge (49), training in methodology (53), were seen to be the most important roles of the Teacher Training Courses. Providing support and assistance to the teachers (41), providing infrastructure and special services (35), as well as staffing (25) in order to have a team of professionals to support the teachers and the growth of children with special needs were outlined as the roles of the school administration and management.

Training for teachers was stated as the most important factor for the successful implementation of inclusive education by most (36) of the teachers. Increased parent involvement (21) and a lowered number of students per class (14) were rated as the next two factors most crucial for inclusive education.

When asked for their overall opinions about which setting they felt would be most conducive to be able to best meet the needs of students with disabilities, 49 were of the opinion that these children would benefit more in a regular school whereas 11 teachers preferred for them to be placed in special education classrooms. When asked about how many students with disabilities they would prefer having in their classroom, 26 teachers said they would prefer only one or two students. There were 20 others who they would be able to work fine even if they had 3 to 5 students with disabilities in their class. In addition, amongst these students with disabilities more than 50% of the teachers (34) they would be most comfortable working with students with learning disabilities. An equal number of teachers (16 each) said they would be comfortable with having students with physical impairments including a handicap of the limbs and those with visual impairments in their classroom. Only 8 teachers mentioned that they would be comfortable having even students with mental retardation in their classroom. However, they specified the children needed to be only those falling in the mild category and there were 9 others who said they were open to working with children irrespective of the disability as long as the child ranged in the mild to moderate categories of the disability.

B. Attitudes of Teachers towards Inclusive Education

Results showed that majority of the teachers (83.33%) had a Moderately Positive attitude towards Inclusive Education that is; they were in favor of children with disabilities being educated with the children without disabilities.

Across the two domains that catered towards identifying the attitudes of teachers towards the benefits of inclusive education, an equal number of teachers (18 each) had a positive attitude on this domain for both children with special needs and those without disabilities. Although none of the teachers showed a negative attitude on these domains, 7 and 2 teachers held a moderately negative attitude towards the benefits of inclusive education for children with special needs and children without disabilities respectively.

In the domain that measured attitudes towards the perceived challenges of inclusive education for children with special needs, 8 teachers had a negative attitude while 27 had a moderately negative attitude, that is, they believed that children with special needs face lot of challenges in an inclusive set up. Similarly, 24 teachers held a moderately negative attitude about the challenges faced by children without disabilities, thereby agreeing that children without disabilities also face a number of challenges in an inclusive classroom. Further when teachers were asked about their attitudes towards the Teachers' role, and towards Teacher Training Courses, it was found that more than 70% of them had a Moderately positive attitude, that is they rated the role of teachers as primary in successful implementation of inclusive education. The teacher training courses were reported as fundamental in preparing them for such classrooms.

On the domain that is measured the attitudes of teachers towards the role of school administration and parents of children without disabilities. It was seen that a little bit more than 50% of the teachers had a moderately positive attitude, and the rest of the 28 teachers showed a positive attitude directing towards the fact that all the teachers considered the above-mentioned stakeholders to be making equally noteworthy and significant contributions in the implementation of inclusive education.

IV. DISCUSSION

According to [23], it has been universally agreed upon and thereby declared, that individuals with Special Education Needs (SEN) must have access to admission into regular schools which must not only accommodate them but also provide the necessary support they require through child-centered pedagogy capable of meeting those needs. And the means through which such a kind of academic success and social integration can be achieved for those with special needs and those without disabilities is inclusive schooling [6], [9]. Regular classroom teachers play the key role in successful implementation of Inclusive programs.

The personal characteristics of teachers including their openness to change and attitudes towards a new pedagogical practice influence the effective implementation of inclusive education [3]. However, along with their openness to change and positive attitudes towards a new pedagogical practice, what is equally important is the awareness and knowledge that the teachers have about disability in general and inclusive education in particular. In the present study, the teachers' knowledge about meaning of disability, types, causes and intervention was more based on what they have seen around

them then the scientific knowledge base. Most of them were not aware of the term "inclusive education". Similar findings were reported in a study done by [15], many teachers were unaware of the correct meanings of terms such as special educational needs, integrated education, inclusive education, disability, handicap, mainstream school, special education and personalized intervention plan. Further, with relation to rights and services for the people with disability, the results of the present study revealed that teachers were only aware of those rights, services and provisions which they had seen around them. According to [15], it is impossible to make inclusive education work without knowing the actual meaning of the concept of inclusive education, the principles of this type of education, its specific requirements, and the work of prior practitioners in the field.

It was heartening to note that 83.3% of the teachers in the present study had a positive attitude towards inclusive education that is they were in support of educating children with disabilities in a regular classroom. However, the same teachers felt that placing children with disabilities in a regular classroom will be very challenging not only for the children with disabilities but also for those without disabilities. This inconsistency in responses may be due to lack of clarity about the concept of Inclusive education as well as their lack of experience with the children who had disability.

According to [24], the teachers who are aware of rights of children with disabilities, and the policy on inclusive education and make comments supportive of the inclusive policy, does not mean that the teachers will have positive attitudes towards children with special needs if they are placed in their class. Most teachers prefer teaching children without disabilities rather than children with disabilities.

The present study used a self-report inventory to tap the attitudes of the teachers, and as more number of the teachers was presently not teaching in an inclusive system, their rating was more on a hypothetical situation. There lies a possibility that the attitudes of the teachers would be different if they had to teach in an Inclusive education setup.

The teachers in the present study opined that they would not want more than one or two students with disability in their class. Further they stated that they would be comfortable having students with learning disability, physical impairments including a handicap of the limbs and those with visual impairments in their classroom. Only 8 teachers mentioned that they would be comfortable having even students with mental retardation in their classroom however they specified the children needed to be only those falling in the mild category. Again, the results are a clear indication of the teacher's lack of knowledge and awareness about disability and inclusive education that made them so cautious about the number, type of disability and severity in including the children with disability in their classroom. Reference [21] found in their study that respondents voiced strongly the need for more information, knowledge, and expertise in their attempts to include students with disabilities into mainstream classrooms.

Reference [11] conducted a survey of 67 pre-service teachers at an Australian university to identify their concerns regarding the implementation of inclusive education. They reported that the respondents were concerned about their lack of knowledge and skills based difficulty with appropriate attention to all students in an inclusive classroom and an increasing workload. The findings of the present study also showed similar concerns of teachers wherein they emphasized the role of teacher training courses in imparting knowledge and practice to them in order to implement inclusion successfully. Teachers saw these courses as sources of adequate theoretical knowledge about disabilities and child psychology and also a paramount opportunity to extensive practical experience and learning to utilize varied teaching techniques, handle the behaviors of students with special needs and also deal with any emergency situations that may arise. As one teacher reported, “*If I don't have the necessary training to teach children with special need and help them, I wouldn't prefer them in my class, as I wouldn't be able to do justice to them. But if I get the training I require, I would be comfortable with having them in my class*”.

Majority of the teachers (47) in the present study mentioned their own role as a teacher as most important for the implementation of inclusive education. Being open and accepting, catering to the needs of children with special needs, being equipped with the necessary training, and investing time in a lot of pre planning, promoting oneness in the class along with coordinating with parent stakeholders were mentioned as some of major role the teachers perceived themselves to have in an inclusive classroom. This was in line with the earlier result of the study wherein most of them stated that children with disability should be included in the regular classroom. This was indeed a very striking finding of the study which endorsed the findings of earlier researches that teacher's positive attitude and openness towards children with disability is the most important factor in making inclusion possible. According to [5], when general education teachers have negative attitudes toward inclusion, they may not provide the students with the essential assistance and scaffolding that would aid in being able to build for the students with special needs a valuable learning environment. On the other hand, the positive attitudes of teachers towards all students leads to establishing a positive learning climate in the classroom that has a major effect on the academic and social achievement of all students, especially those with disabilities [2].

A teacher who is well aware of the typical needs and characteristic behavioral patterns of her/his students, and also has the right attitude towards teaching in an inclusive classroom, will be equipped with the necessary skills that are needed to support the growth of both, children with special needs and those without disabilities in an inclusive classroom.

V. SUMMARY AND CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

Using education as an agency of change and thereby instilling a system of unconditional inclusion into the body and soul of our society, calls for conscious effort into the implementation and successful functioning of what we call as

Inclusive Education. Thus, the onus laid on teachers' positive attitudes towards including the students with disabilities into regular classroom and generally towards the policy of inclusive education indeed is the most important feature of inclusive education being successful. This implies that teachers need to be urgently provided with a lot of intensive training to ensure they are well equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to support all children within the same classroom.

In order to become more effective as an inclusive classroom teacher, the teachers need to be well aware about the type of disability, the requirements of children with special needs and regularly update themselves with newer methodologies and upcoming technology and at the same time believe in the policy of inclusive education and have a positive attitude towards it. Therefore, the need of the hour is to have a separate subject on disability and inclusive education in the teacher training courses. It is imperative to make the general educator aware of the disabilities and prepare them with skills and competencies that are needed to handle all diversity in class. It is important that teachers should have positive attitude towards children with disabilities, which will lead to an increase in the number of students with disabilities in the general classroom.

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