

Assessing Teacher-Trainees' Attitudes towards Inclusive Education

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Abstract – Inclusive Education (IE) is a step forward in re-affirming the rights of all children to be given equal opportunities and to be treated with respect. It means that schools and classrooms must function assuming that students with special needs are also competent just like any other student. One important element that ensures this right is providing teachers who not only believe in the philosophy of IE but also has the skill set to cater to students with special needs. The present study was attempted with aimed to assess teachers' attitudes towards IE among those who had courses on IE as opposed to those teacher-trainees who did not study any IE course. Results indicated that overall, teacher-trainees who had IE course are likely to have more favorable attitude towards IE as compared to teacher-trainees who did not have any IE course. On the components, no significant differences were observed between the two groups on issues of IE philosophy and logistical concerns indicating. The two groups however differed significantly on advantages and limitations of IE and issues related to professional requirements. The study highlights the need of having a compulsory course of IE for pre-service teachers.

Keywords: Teacher Trainees, Attitudes, Students with Disabilities

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INTRODUCTION

Inclusion refers to an all-embracing societal ideology. It is founded on the principle of basic human right to be included as opposed to segregation because of some disability (Avramidis, Bayliss and Burden, 2000). Inclusive education (IE) is thus, a step forward in re-affirming the rights of all children to be given equal opportunities and to be treated with respect. It means that schools and classrooms must function assuming that students with special needs are also competent just like any other student. For an education system to be inclusive, all stakeholders must accept, understand and attend to the diverse needs of the class; such diversity which may come in any form ranging from physical to behavioural, cognitive or emotional.

Effective implementation of inclusive education can be achieved through curriculum adaptation (Al-Zyoudi, 2006), innovative instructional formats (differentiated instructions, multi-sensory instruction technique, peer-mediated instruction, co-teaching), universal design for learning, peer learning, cooperative learning, individualized education programme, and involvement of various stakeholders in the development of the child (Avramidis and

Norwich, 2002; Al-Zyoudi, 2006). When one looks at most of the techniques for effectively implementing IE, maximum of these fall within the classroom setting. This means that one of the most important stakeholder, after the student population, is the teacher, whose positive attitude is important for effectively implementing IE (Sharma, Forlin & Loreman, 2008).

Literature points towards the idea that teachers' attitudes does matter in ensuring that student's feel adequately supported and challenged in their efforts. Teachers' acceptance of the inclusive education is the first step for implementation of IE (de Boer, Pijl, and Minnaert, 2011). Teachers are seen to have misconceptions regarding needs of students with special needs suggesting that they will not benefit from an inclusive school (Hodkinson, 2006; Dev and Kumar, 2015). They also seem to think that students without special needs would get neglected due to their time and effort being given to students with special needs and will be burdensome for students without special needs (Bothma, 1997).

Significant number of teachers also view inclusion as burdensome and affecting their workload

despite their beliefs that students with special needs can benefit more in an inclusive set-up and through mainstream classrooms (Rakap and Kaczmarek, 2010; Shevlin, Winter and Flynn, 2013; Gunnþórsdóttir and Jóhannesson, 2014; Saloviita, 2018). This supports the idea that even if teachers may get training on IE and have favorable attitudes towards it, it does not necessarily translate into a professional space of displaying such behavior to accommodate students with special needs (Fernández, 2017). This does not imply that courses on IE should not be part of teacher-training program. It has been seen that pre-service courses as well as in-service trainings on IE has positive impact on the understanding and acceptance of students with special needs within a mainstream classroom (Bekirogullari, Soyturk, and Gulsen, 2011; Sharma, 2012; Mahony, 2016).

Diverse classroom settings also seem to aid teachers in developing positive attitudes towards IE (Avramidis, Bayliss and Burden, 2000; Unianu, 2012). When Dev and Kumar (2015) surveyed teachers on their perception about integrating students with learning disabilities into mainstream classrooms, they found that more than half of participants (52%) reported unfavorable perception. Teachers who teach general education are also seen to be less supportive of IE as compared to special education teachers (de Boer, Pijl, and Minnaert, 2011; Engelbrecht, Savolainen, Nel, and Malinen, 2013; Hernandez, Hueck and Charley, 2016). These may be because teachers perceive themselves to lack in confidence, skills and training to handle the varying needs of students with special needs (Avissar, 2007; Mahony, 2016).

Person characteristics are also seen to have an impact on teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education. Younger teachers appear to have more favorable opinions towards IE as compared to older teachers (Ahmed, Sharma, & Deppeler, 2014; Saloviita, 2018); male teachers have more negative attitudes as compared to female teachers towards IE (Avramidis, Bayliss & Burden, 2000; Dev & Kumar, 2015; Saloviita, 2018). Teachers who also score high on self-efficacy tend to have more favorable attitudes towards IE (Weisel & Dror, 2006; Enam & Mohamed, 2011; Mahony, 2016). Thus, teachers who view themselves as effective are able to take up the challenges provided in an inclusive school and exhibiting positive attitude towards IE. Researchers have also studied professional commitment and found that positive attitude towards IE is reflected in those teachers who are high on professional commitment (Bansal, 2016).

Experience also has a positive impact on attitudes towards IE where teachers having more teaching years tend to be negative towards an inclusive set-up (Enam and Mohamed, 2011). This may be because younger teachers are exposed to inclusive courses and diverse classrooms, which makes them more sensitive and aware of diverse needs. Such

experience has positive impact on attitude towards IE only if it is in relevant areas. Eg., Primary teachers tend to be more inclusive than secondary and senior secondary school teachers (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Alvarez McHatton, & McCray, 2007; Unianu, 2012; Chiner & Cardona, 2013; Dev & Kumar, 2015).

The present study was aimed to assess teachers' attitudes towards IE among those who had courses on IE as opposed to those teacher-trainees who did not study any IE course. The study has implications for teacher-education programs and in-service training programs that will aid in effective implementation of IE in India.

METHOD

Participants

A total of 60 pre-service/in-service teachers who were undergoing a teacher education program were purposively selected for the study. All the participants were in their last year of the teacher education program and had no prior experience of teaching in any school. There were 30 participants in each group. Group 1 had participants from Bachelor of Education (General) who had no exposure to an inclusive course while Group 2 had participants from Bachelor of Special Education. They had studied at least one course on inclusive education. The age range of the participants was 22-32 and there were a total of 42 female participants and 18 male participants.

Tool

The attitude scale, Scale of Teachers' Attitudes towards Inclusive Classrooms (STATIC) developed by Cochran (2000) was used for the present study. The scale has 20 items measuring four components of teachers' attitude namely advantages and disadvantages of inclusive education, professional component, philosophical component and logistic concerns of inclusive education. The responses are measured on a 5-point Likert scale with responses ranging from *Strongly Agree* to *Strongly Disagree*. The scores obtained is on the four components as well as a composite score where high scores indicate positive attitude and low score indicate negative attitude. The scale has an high internal consistency (alpha .89).

Procedure

Sixty participants were purposively selected for the present study, thirty in each group. After their consent was sought, the attitude measure was administered, followed by debriefing. The data was then analyzed and interpreted.

RESULTS

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation of the two teacher-trainee groups

Sl.no	COMPONENTS	Group 1		Group 2	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
1	Advantages & Disadvantages	22.7	1.95	28.43	2.37
2	Professional	13.87	2.17	17.36	3.67
3	Philosophical	14.00	1.55	14.32	1.76
4	Logistics	14.90	1.21	15.25	1.34
5	Total	65.47	4.23	75.32	4.21

Table 1 shows the mean and standard deviation of the two groups. Group 1 indicates the participants who had no exposure to inclusive course and Group 2 indicates those who had IE course. The range of mean was between 13.87 and 22.70 for Group 1, 14.32, and 28.43 for Group 2, while the standard deviation ranged between 1.21 and 2.17 and between 1.34 and 3.67 for Group 1 and Group 2 respectively. The total mean and standard deviation for Group 1 was 65.47 and 4.23 respectively while for Group 2 it was 75.32 and 4.21.

Table 2: Summary of t-test, Independent measure on the Attitude Measure

Sl. No.	COMPONENTS	Mean Difference	Level of Significance
1	Advantages & Disadvantages	5.72	.05
2	Professional	3.49	.05
3	Philosophical	0.32	NS
4	Logistics	0.31	NS
5	Total	9.85	.05

Table 2 contains the summary of the Independent t-test that was calculated to see whether there was any difference teachers' attitudes towards IE between the two groups. Significant differences were observed in the two components of Advantages and Disadvantages of IE and Professional component. No significant differences were observed on the Philosophical and Logistics Components. Overall, the two groups differed significantly in their attitude towards IE.

DISCUSSION

The impact of teachers' attitudes towards IE is an established fact for its effective implementation. Positive attitude of teachers can be formed during their teacher-training program, which will give them basic understanding and training on how to handle a diverse class. In this context, the present study was carried out to see whether exposure to an IE course would make any difference in teachers' attitudes towards IE.

Results indicate that on the component of Advantages and Disadvantages of IE, significant mean difference was found between the two groups.

Teacher-trainees who had course on IE reported positive attitudes about students with special needs benefitting from a regular classroom as opposed to special schools. They are also more likely to disagree with the idea that other students will be denied of quality education or will have lower academic achievement when placed in inclusive schools. The other teacher group on the other hand, is more likely to think negatively about the impacts of inclusive classrooms on all students generally, which is also consistent with researches that indicate that teachers who teach general education are less supportive of IE (de Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2011; Engelbrecht, Savolainen, Nel, & Malinen, 2013; Hernandez, Hueck, & Charley, 2016)

On the component of professional, significant difference was observed between the two teacher-trainee groups indicating that the general teachers are more likely to perceive themselves as ill equipped or incompetent to handle the varied needs of an inclusive classroom. They are more likely to perceive themselves as untrained for the challenges that comes from an inclusive class and may experience low self-efficacy and low self-confidence about their ability to handle such challenges (Avissar, 2007; Mahony, 2016). The teacher-trainees who had IE course on the other hand is more likely to express comfort and skill adequacy even when handling children with cognitive deficits or behavioural problems, which may in turn lead to more favorable attitudes towards IE (Weisel & Dror, 2006; Enam & Mohamed, 2011; Mahony, 2016). Under such conditions, teacher-trainees can be trained on how to re-structure curricula, seek support from other teachers, and create and develop opportunities to ensure active interactions between all stakeholders of IE.

Results indicate no difference on the philosophical component of the attitude scale indicating that both the groups ideally believe in the values contained in IE. Both sets of teacher-trainees are likely to express positive attitude towards inclusion of students with special needs in an inclusive class and also believe that they are likely to benefit more in an inclusive class as compared to a non-inclusive class. Both the groups are also likely to support in-service training to help them equip them better. Research however indicates that positive attitude on the philosophy of IE does not predict or lead to positive behavioral change and/or accommodation of an inclusive classroom.

On the last component of Logistics, the two groups did not differ on their attitudes to make physical accommodations for students with special needs. The mean scores of both the groups are on the high end, indicating highly positive attitude in this component. Such a positive attitude can be supported by undertaking logistic changes like reducing the class strength, giving teachers

sufficient time to plan and prepare for educational activities, and increased funding to make equipment and other resources easily available for an inclusive.

Overall, teacher-trainees who had course on IE reported more positive attitude towards IE. Because they have received training on IE, they tend to experience high self-confidence and self-efficacy in handling challenges of IE. Such positive professional attitudes lead to positive attitude towards the philosophy of IE and a belief that IE will benefit all students despite diverse needs.

CONCLUSION

The present study addresses the issue of non-inclusion of an IE course for teacher-trainees who will eventually be inducted in inclusive classrooms due to a policy mandate. The findings conclude that overall, teacher-trainees who had IE course are likely to have more favorable attitude towards IE as compared to teacher-trainees who did not have any IE course. On the components, no significant differences were observed between the two groups on issues of IE philosophy and logistical concerns indicating. The two groups however differed significantly on advantages and limitations of IE and issues related to professional requirements. The study indicates the importance of having a compulsory course of IE for pre-service teachers. Such courses will not only provide sufficient knowledge and acceptance of IE but also equip teachers with preparatory skills to work effectively in an inclusive classroom. Such learnt skills can then be enhanced regularly through in-service and sensitization workshops.

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