Journal of Education and Educational Development

Inclusive Education in Government Primary Schools: Teacher Perceptions

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Abstract

The perceptions of primary school teachers towards inclusive education was investigated in mainstream government schools of Islamabad capital territory where inclusive education was being supported by Sight savers and other international organizations. The study was carried out involving 54 teachers in six randomly selected primary schools. The sampled group comprised both, teachers trained in inclusive education and teachers working in same schools, but not trained in inclusive education. Purposive sampling method was used to select the teachers. Structured questionnaire (Likert Scale) and structured interview method was used for data collection. The results of the study revealed that inclusive education is considered to be a desirable practice. The teachers believed that all learners regardless of their disabilities should be in regular classrooms and

they showed more favorable attitude towards children with mild disabilities, but were not very optimistic about children with severe disabilities. The study also recognized teachers' capacity as an essential component of inclusive education and recommends that inclusive education should be a part of pre and in-service teacher education.

Keywords: children with disabilities, government schools, inclusion, inclusive education

Introduction

Sixty seven million children of primary school age are out of schools; of which one third live in South Asia and Sub Saharan Africa where Children with Disabilities (CWDs) make one third out of school children (UNESCO, 2009). Over 90% of CWDs in developing countries are not able to access schools (Tahir & Khan, 2010) and only 50% of them enrolled can reach high school (Belchor, 1995).Pakistan has 5.5 million out-of school children which is highest in the world after Nigeria (UNICEF & UNESCO, 2014). Situation of CWDs in Pakistan is not different from the rest of the developing countries. Article 25 of the constitution of Pakistan and National Education Policy (2009) endorse the right of every child to free primary education. National Education Policy (2009) further encourages child friendly and inclusive education. Nevertheless, majority of CWDs are out of school as there are a very limited number of special education schools in the country. Ghouri, Abrar and Baloch, (2010) and UNICEF (2003) have concluded that teachers in Pakistan have a favorable attitude towards inclusion of CWDs in the mainstream education system.

Literature review

CWDs face a severe discrimination and exclusion from education system which affects them in different ways. A number of initiatives have been taken by global community to recognize education as a fundamental human right of every child. United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) and United Nations Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006) recognize education as a basic human right of everyone including CWDs. Article 23 of UNCRC (1989) is specifically concerned with PWDs, recognizing that they are the most vulnerable group that face different kinds of discrimination. Articles 28 and 29 cover the right to education and urge state parties to ensure that every child has an access to free and quality primary education on equal basis without discrimination. Article 24 of the UNCRPD (2006) specifically protects the right of CWDs to the education without any discrimination and urges state parties to ensure inclusion of CWDs in the mainstream education system.

Inclusive education is the process of responding to the diversity of children through enhancing participation in classrooms and reducing exclusion from education (UNESCO 2007). The education system which addresses the needs of all children including CWDs in mainstream schools is termed as Inclusive Education System. According to Khan, Ahmed and Ghaznavi (2012), inclusive education expresses the obligation to provide every child with quality education in mainstream schools, to the maximum extent possible. An inclusive education system allows carrying educational

services to the child, rather than carrying the child to the educational services. This system of education focuses upon children who are enrolled in schools, but are excluded from learning; who are out of schools, but can be educated if schools are accessible. These are children with severe disabilities, with specific learning needs and require a specialized environment. Inclusive education canbe successful if a child friendly and accessible learning environment is provided to all children to ensure their inclusion in mainstream education system.

It has been more than a decade now that inclusive education is being promoted in both developed and developing countries, but there are a number of barriers confronting full participation of all children particularly CWDs. According to UNESCO (2009), lack of relevant policy support, discriminatory attitude towards CWDs and neglect of their right to education are the major challenges confronting their right to access schools. Fernando, Yasmin, Minto and Khan (2010) conclude that inaccessible school infrastructure; limited learning materials, limited capacity of teachers, poverty, disability, conflict and a lack of supporting policy frameworks are the major causes of exclusion of CWDs from the mainstream education system. McDonnell and Hardman (1989) state that everyone in the school has a role to play, but teachers are the most important players in the provision of inclusive education. Ghouri, Abrar and Baloach(2010) also recognize teachers' reluctance to educate CWDs as a barrier to inclusive education.

It is the responsibility of the teachers to meet the needs of all learners in classrooms regardless of their abilities or disabilities (Forlin& Cole, 1993). Hsien (2007) suggests teacher preparation

for inclusive education is important for building confidence and developing positive attitude towards inclusion of CWDs. Teachers in ordinary schools are willing to offer their services for inclusive education, provided they are facilitated with proper training (Garner, 1996, 2000; Rose, 2001; UNICEF 2003). Pinhas and Schmelk in (1989) confirm that teachers cannot ensure inclusion of CWDs without support from head teachers. Bailey and Du Plessis (1997) endorse that the majority of the teachers in mainstream schools hold positive attitude towards inclusion of CWDs in regular classrooms. Fakolade (2009) subscribes to the idea that professionally qualified teachers havemore favorable attitude towards the inclusion of CWDs. According to LeRoyand Simpson (1996), teachers feel more confident when they spend time with CWDs. Zenija (2011) alleges that most teachers are confident that inclusion of children with special needs is possible to achieve. The study findings of Lambe and Bones (2006) show that pre-service teacher training is the most suitable point of intervention to build up teachers' attitude towards inclusion of CWDs in regular class rooms. Romiand Leyser (1996) conclude that positive teacher attitude towards mainstreaming of CWDs are influenced by numerous factors, such as, policies on inclusion, school culture and availability of resources to satisfy the needs of CWDs. The attitude of mainstream teachers toward inclusive education is considerably influenced by their own levels of efficiency (Florian, 1998).

Payne and Murray (1974) have confirmed that teachers accept children with physical, visual, hearing and learning disabilities more than that of children with mental retardation or severe disabilities. Rose (2001) urges to build capacity and positive attitude of teachers towards inclusive education.Attitudes of teachers towards CWDs

are therefore very important for inclusive education; however, Fakolade (2009) believes that attitude of the teachers and educators are very complex to measure.

Minimal studies have been carried out in Pakistan on this important topic. The current study is therefore designed and carried out to find out the viewpoints of mainstream school teachers about inclusive education. The study was carried out in selected schools of Islamabad Capital Territory, where inclusive education was implemented with the support of Sight savers which is an international non-governmental organization that works with partners in developing countries to promote equality for people with visual impairments and other disabilities.

Methodology

Permission was obtained from Federal Directorate of Education (FDE) in Islamabad to conduct the study in 12 schools managed by them. FDE issued a directive to all schools to participate in the study to facilitate the researcher. These twelve schools were selected for the study because they were declared as Inclusive Schools by FDE and there were greater chances that all teachers would have interaction with CWDs. A descriptive method was followed to collect the data as the variables of the study were examined in natural settings. The study was based on two approaches: (a) selection of sampling points, and (b) data collection from pre-determined survey points through questionnaire and focus group discussions by the researcher during data collection.

Participants

The target population for this study was 54 teachers: 12 trained in inclusive education practices and 42 having a short orientation of inclusive education practices. All participants of the study were female teachers having an experience of interacting with CWDs. Six schools were randomly selected as a sample for the study. This sampling technique was used because it provides equal opportunity to all members of the population to be selected. It also helps to generalize the results of the study on overall population. At the second stage, purposive sampling technique was applied to select the teachers.

Instruments

A self-developed Likert Scale questionnaire was constructed called Viewpoint about Inclusive Education (VPIE). This was validated by experts, and pilot tested before gathering data from teachers about inclusive education and mainstreaming of different type of disabilities. Sixteen items were finalized based on the literature review, meeting with experts and pilot testing. Each item was rated on a five point agreement scale from 'Strongly Agree' to 'Strongly Disagree'. 06 focus group discussions were conducted with the sample group to validate teachers' responses given through questionnaires.

Reliability and validity

Survey questionnaires were validated by experts and their suggestions were incorporated before administering the questionnaires in the field for data collection. The reliability of all items in questionnaire

was tested using Cronbach Alpha method. All items (α= .802) were found to be reliable and internally consistent.

Data analysis

Descriptive analysis method was used to analyze the data gathered from teachers through questionnaires using SPSS. All results including mean, SD and frequency percentages were combined in one table for convenience. A simple content analysis method was used to analyze the responses gathered from the teachers through focus group discussions. Thematic analysis was not conducted as the purpose was to seek verification of the responses obtained through VPIE.

Results

The reliability of 16 items was tested using Cronbach Alfa method. All items of the scale were found to be internally consistent (α= .802). Descriptive statistical analysis was applied to analyze the data gathered from teachers through a questionnaire. Frequency tables and descriptive statistical tables were combined showing items, mean and frequency percentages for convenience. Responses of the teachers were also grouped, changing them from scale 05 to scale 03 combining Agree and Strongly Agree and Disagree and Strongly Disagree to identify the percentage of respondents actually agreeing or disagreeing with the statements (see Table 1). The higher number in the column Agree shows the percent of people supported the statement, indicating their positive perceptions about inclusive education.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of VPIE Scale to Measure Teacher Attitude towards Inclusive Education

Item No.	Statements	Mean	SD	Agree (%)	Uncertain (%)	Disagree (%)
VPIE1	In general, inclusive education (inclusion) is a desirable Educational practice.	3.81	1.134	74.1	1.9	24.1
VPIE2	All learners should have the right to be in regular classrooms	3.85	1.035	77.8	5.6	1.9
VPIE3	It is feasible to teach gifted, normal and intellectually disabled learners in the same classroom.	2.52	1.225	33.3	13	52.9
VPIE4	Learners with visual impairments who can read Standard printed material should be in regular classrooms.	2.96	1.288	48.1	9.3	42.6
VPIE5	Hearing impaired learners, but not deaf, should be in regular classrooms	3	1.303	51.8	5.6	42.6
VPIE6	Deaf learners should be in regular classrooms.	2.24	1.063	20.4	3.7	75.9
VPIE7	Physically disabled learners confined to wheelchairs should be in regular classrooms.	3.13	1.15	51.9	13	35.2
VPIE8	Learners with cerebral palsy who cannot control movement of one or more limbs should be in regular classrooms	2.39	1.172	22.2	16.7	61.1
VPIE9	Learners with speech difficult to understand should be in regular classrooms.	3	1.303	44.5	11.1	44.5
VPIE10	Learners with epilepsy should be in regular classrooms.	2.81	1.304	37.1	18.5	44.5
VPIE11	Students with Disabilities make friendships with other students	4.09	0.784	89.9	0	11.1
VPIE12	Other students hoot on Students with Disabilities due to their disability	3.41	1.019	63	14.8	22.3
VPIE13	You use teaching methods and instructional material suits CWDs	3.04	1.243	46.3	14.8	38.9
VPIE14	You help Students with Disabilities in the class when they need extra support from you	3.98	1.037	79.6	9.3	11.1
VPIE15	You respond to the questions of Students with disabilities politely	4.3	0.603	92.6	7.4	0
VPIE16	You are happy to teach Student with Disabilities	3.63	1.248	68.5	13	18.5

The results of the present study conducted through VPIE and validated by focus group interviews showed that the teachers favored inclusive education. The majority of the teachers (74%) agreed that inclusive education is a desirable practice whereas 77% believed that all learners regardless of their disabilities should be in regular classrooms. 68% of the sampled group agreed that they feel very happy to teach CWDs, but at the same time 52% were of the view that it was not feasible to teach every type of CWDs in one classroom (items 1, 2 and 3). The study also indicated that the teachers have a positive perception about children with visual and hearing impairments and other minor physical disabilities in children. Around 50% of the sampled group agreed that these children should be in regular classrooms (items 4, 5 and 7). 75% of the sampled group believed that deaf learners and 61% believed that learners with Cerebral Palsy (CP) cannot be accommodated in mainstream classrooms (items 6 and 8). 44% of the teachers opined that children with speech difficulty and children with epilepsy should not be in regular classrooms (items 9 and 10). Item numbers 11 and 12 investigated if inclusive education played a role in social inclusion of CWDs, for which 90% agreed that CWDs in mainstream school helps students make friendships with their non-disabled peers; whereas 63% of the sample also endorsed that CWDs faced hooting from other children due to their disabilities.

Item 13, 14 and 15 were attempted to know how teachers dealt with CWDs in the classrooms. The findings showed that the majority of the teachers (93%) gave CWDs extra time when needed and 63% responded to their queries politely; whereas, 46% were able to use teaching and learning aids which were according to the needs of CWDs.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that the majority of the teachers in mainstream schools have positive attitude towards inclusive education and they are happy to teach CWDs in their classrooms. They believe that inclusive education is a desirable practice, which can benefit CWDs and the society and at the same time they are well aware about the concept of inclusive education and recognize education as the basic right of CWDs. This is also confirmed by previous studies (Ghouri, Abrar & Baloch,2010; UNICEF, 2003), which have determined that the teachers have a positive attitude towards mainstreaming of CWDs and they are well aware of the idea and significance of inclusive education, but teaching all types of CWDs in the same class room was not feasible.

The study also revealed that teachers in mainstream schools have a more favorable attitude towards children with visual and hearing impairments and children who are physically disabled (mild to moderate disabilities) have a less favorable attitude towards inclusion of children with deafness, cerebral palsy, speech difficult and epilepsy (severe disabilities). This is similar to the conclusion drawn by Payne and Murray (1974) that the school staff is inclined to accept students with physical, visual and hearing impairments or learning disabilities and they are less inclined to accept children with mental retardation. This reflects that the teachers are confident that they can address the educational needs of children with mild and moderate disabilities and feel that handling children with severe disabilities in regular classrooms is challenging. One possible reason of having less favorable attitude towards these children is the limited capacity of teachers and inaccessibility and unavailability

of assistive technologies. These factors were also highlighted by teachers during interviews and considered them as major challenges confronting teachers while dealing with disabilities.

Despite the fact that teachers believe that CWDs face bullying and hooting by peers without disabilities, inclusive education enhances opportunities for CWDs to be socially included through interacting, socializing and making friendships with peers.Inclusive classrooms are better for CWDs, both academically and socially and there are greater chances for them to be socially included (Baker, 1995; Bunch &Valeo, 2004; Lipsky & Gartner, 1996).

Though teachers provide CWDs with extra time and deal with them politely, but they are still not able to address their educational needs as they have a limited capacity and instructional material in schools. Rose (2001) has also concluded from her study, that teachers need training to address the specific needs of CWDs. Teachers are the change agents and front line service delivery force for mainstreaming of CWDs and successful implementation of inclusive education program immensely depends on the capacity and willingness of teachers to address the diversity of their educational needs.

Conclusion and recommendations

On the basis of the results of the study, it is concluded that despite all challenges, mainstream school teachers have a positive and favorable attitude towards inclusion of CWDs. They are ready to be part of such interventions provided all prerequisites for introducing inclusive education are ensured.

It is also concluded that though the teachers are willing to accept CWDs in their schools, they have a limited capacity to address special educational needs. Teachers are not provided with training through regular professional development to address needs of all learners. Though policies support inclusive education system, the school infrastructures and facilities are not accessible forCWDs.

Based on the literature review, responses from respondents and observations by the researchers during school visits, following are some of the key recommendations:

1. The study recommends that the problem of teachers' limited capacity should be addressed at the level of pre-service teacher training by incorporating inclusive education in the curriculum. For the teachers who are already in service, changes should be made in in-service teacher training curriculum.

2. Departments of educationin universities should take steps to ensure infrastructural accessibility in all schools. Changes should also be made at policy level to ensure accessibility in all future constructions.

3. International Non-Government Organizations, Corporate Sector and Civil Society Organizations should join hands with the government for provision of assistive technology and teaching learning aids for CWDs to ensure their full participation in learning process in regular classrooms.

4. The government should scale up inclusive education instead

of practicing it in selected schools,so that a maximum number of CWDs can benefit from such services.

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