

Focusing Inclusive Education in Teacher Training Programmes in India

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Abstract: Education is at the core of equality and empowerment in a society. Though the right to education and equality of educational opportunities is guaranteed by the constitution of India, it is disturbing to find that more than half of the population of children and youth with disability and varying competencies are denied these rights and do not receive adequate schooling in an appropriate environment. There is a need for high quality education for all children and it can be possible only if teachers are well trained and sensitized towards special needs and inclusive modes of effective teaching. We firmly believe that all children can learn and most of them can be included in regular/mainstream education, for this we need to create a regular class environment that nurtures acceptance of diversity and promotes co-operation based on reciprocity and mutual respect [1].

Inclusion of children with special needs in mainstream education demands the preparation of teachers to suit their needs. The need for teachers who have both the knowledge and the ability to teach in an inclusive classroom is more critical today than ever before. This paper aims at making contributions to the ongoing debates in the challenges and quality of teacher education. It focusses on the status of in-service and pre-service teacher training programmes preparing teachers for teaching in inclusive classrooms.

Index terms: Inclusive Education, Children With Special Needs, Equality, Empowerment, Diversity.

Introduction: Man is a social being and an integral part of society. The man is product of society and society in turn depends upon its individuals for its development. Aims and objectives of any society can be achieved through the proper education of its citizens. For such an educational system, we require efficient teachers. It is believed that teacher is the nation builder and enabled to discharge such a high responsibility. It necessitates teachers becomes conscious of their role towards society. Their personality must reflect characteristics of good citizenship, dignity of the individual, rights and duties etc., so that they may transmit the same to the younger generation. These facts express the dire need of teacher-education.

Meaning of Teacher Education:

Teacher education refers to the policies and procedures designed to equip teachers with the knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, and skills they require to perform their tasks effectively in the school and classroom.

According to Goods Dictionary of Education Teacher education means all the formal and non-formal activities and experiences that help to qualify a person to assume responsibilities of a member of the educational profession or to discharge their responsibilities more effectively.

In early times, teachers were often scholars or clerics who had no formal training to acquire expertise of their subjects to be taught. In fact, many believed that "teachers were born, not made." It was not until the emergence of pedagogy, the "art and science of teaching," as an accepted discipline that the training of teachers was considered important. Though there has been continued debate about whether teaching is a "science" that can be taught or whether one is "born" to be a teacher. To qualify a person as a teacher, one should have knowledge of the subject matter to be taught, knowledge of teaching methods, and practical experience in applying both. Now-a-days, these points are focused upon by most of the educational programs for teachers. However, the internal character of the individual is also an important aspect of teaching.

Understanding Inclusive Education:

According to UNESCO (1994) "Inclusive education is seen as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion from education and from within education." [2] It clearly indicates here that inclusive education promotes a learning environment where the individual needs of the learners are met and every learner has an opportunity to succeed. In addition, inclusive education respects, acknowledges and maximizes the potential of all the learners. In conclusion, Inclusive education puts into place structures, systems and strategies that equally caters to the needs and differences of all the learners.

Inclusive education can be seen as a process of strengthening the capacity of an education system to reach out to all learners. It is, therefore, an overall principle that should guide all educational policies and practices, starting from the belief that education is a fundamental human right and the foundation for an impartial society. In this respect inclusive education must find ways of enabling schools and other centers of learning to access and serve all learners in their communities. With an inclusive education system the efficiency and cost-benefit relationship of education system is upgraded. Inclusive education is perceived as an optimization of the use of resources. Schools are likely to be less expensive when all students are educated together, thus giving governments an economic justification to move towards an inclusive education system. [3]

Role of Teacher in Promoting Inclusive Education:

Education plays an important role in facilitating development, personal growth and poverty eradication, regardless of barriers of any kind, including disability. The teacher at any stage is expected to nurture and bring out the best in the child and youth and help them to realize their maximum potential- physical, intellectual, social, emotional, moral and spiritual. The teacher education system should ensure adequate supply of professionally trained teachers to guide and facilitate those who study in schools and institutions of higher learning. The main concern is therefore to build teacher capability to translate curricular objectives into appropriate learning experiences for children to enable them to acquire the desired knowledge, skills, attitudes and aptitudes.

Teaching is a profession and teacher education is process of professional preparation of teachers. A profession is characterized by an organized body of knowledge which is based on a formal and rigorous professional training along with practical experience in the field. The knowledge base of teacher education is built by teaching professionals through systematic observation, study, reflection, practical experience and experimentation. All these- knowledge base, rigour of training, thrust on field practice/ performance and attitude and skill development- define the quality contours of teacher education. Teachers must have the time, support and the training to provide a high-quality education to meet the students need, based on their individual differences-.

To be an effective teacher in an inclusive setting does not merely mean that you should have the right qualifications, in terms of a degree or diploma in teaching students with special needs, but there are other crucial skills that qualify you to be an effective teacher.

- The ability to manage the classroom: It is integral that a teacher is able to handle behavioral problems in the classroom so as to maximize the process of teaching and learning. Furthermore, they are able to set high standards and expectations during the lessons that motivate the students to work to their maximum potential. An effective teacher will also adapt a range of strategies that will assist students to be on task and minimize any interruptions.
- The ability to give regular and prompt positive feedback during all classroom activities: This ability to give feedback helps to build strong positive relationships with the student and teacher and hence provide opportunities for the students to become reflective learners. Feedback is another way of recognizing what the student can and cannot do and then devise relevant strategies to produce better outcomes.
- Their ability to create appropriate conditions for instruction: This simply means that the mode of instruction that is taking place in the classroom is varied and targeted to meet the learning needs of various learners. By doing so, the teacher is able to get the message across to the different learners using varied strategies. Invariably, all the learners are going to benefit rather than just a specific group of learners. This makes the learners feel a sense of belonging and gives rise to their level of self-motivation and success.

Reflections on Teacher Education for Inclusion:

Inclusion requires a wider vision and specific competencies for all teachers. Now the teachers need to know the diversity present in the classroom, and be skillful to attend learners with a range of diverse needs, ability, capability and interests. In this frame, it is imperative to have teacher readiness for inclusion in all curricular plans for pre-service teachers, also for in-service teachers, with the following professional aptitudes:

- **Researcher:** Always searches for explanations about their educative reality, has intellectual skills to propose diverse hypothesis, solve problems, generate innovation, and face real challenges in the field of education.
- **Strategic:** A professional with strong self- regulation, skills for planning, guiding and assessing, not only their own intellectual resources about the learning of curricular issues but also in their performance as a teacher. Always has an attitude to learn and improve. Uses thematic, interdisciplinary curriculums and accommodate students' individual learning styles.
- **Resilient:** Always moves towards the future, in spite of difficult situations, by making healthy adjustments against adversity.

The knowledge, skills and attitudes for all inclusion teachers must emphasize that the purpose of all teacher interventions is the students' learning. They also need to have high expectations for all (inclusive vision), develop inclusive projects including diverse teaching strategies and support systems (inclusive practices) and participate in a collective work (inclusive language).

Three important educational aspects that makes every teacher inclusive are

Equality: promoting the same opportunities for all

Equity: responding to special educational needs of all and

Quality: offering functional and meaningful learning to all.

Florian and Rouse (2009) state: 'the task of initial teacher education is to prepare people to enter a profession which accepts individual and collective responsibility for improving the learning and participation of all children'.

[4] Savolainen (2009) notes that teachers play an essential role in quality education and quotes McKinsey and Company who say: 'the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers'. [5] Cardona

(2009) notes that concentration on initial teacher education '... would seem to provide the best means to create a new generation of teachers who will ensure the successful implementation of inclusive policies and practices'. [6]

Taking all this is consideration teachers must be aware of fact that "education and training systems can increase their capacity to include all learners and to achieve equitable outcomes for all, while meeting the increasing diversity of learners' needs, maintaining cultural diversity and improving quality". [7]

The awareness about inclusive education in schools in India is still at infancy stage .The success of education of children with special needs has been a big challenge for the administrators, who are skeptical about imparting education to both normal & disable children in the same class room. They are facing many challenges such as preparedness of teachers for inclusive education, imparting of training to teachers to handle successfully such students, lack of flexibility in the course curriculum, classroom size, bullying of such children, and need of extra attention from the teacher to such children & consequently promoting an environment, where personal development, social skills & students' participation is to be strongly encouraged. [8]

Our National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986/1992 says that no nation can rise above the level of its teachers. [9]

Therefore, teacher education to produce teachers of such high quality is of utmost importance and dynamic action has to be taken to ensure that our teacher education institutions produce teachers of high quality and caliber.

Various conscious initiatives mentioned below are necessary to influence the quality of teacher education at various levels for promoting inclusive education:

Innovative Methods and Materials of Teaching-Learning

Today education has become more complex due to the vast societal changes, new insights in the field of pedagogy and explosion of knowledge in every field. There have been tremendous advances in science and technology, and more so in information and communication technology (ICT). All these developments have brought about significant changes in the methods and materials of teaching and learning. Unfortunately, our teacher education institutions have not been able to keep pace with these developments. Researches on classroom processes and

present practices of teaching indicate that teaching in our schools remains didactic and emphasis is still on memorization of facts, and assessment of these through achievement tests.

Literacy in ICT

Today our classroom processes are mostly based on traditional 'chalk and talk' method. This has to change and all teachers have to be made ICT literate. All pre-service and in-service teacher education programs should include intensive training in the use of modern tools of ICT including off-line and on-line electronic resources such as CD-ROMs, multi-media, Internet and world-wide-web (WWW). ICT acts as a support mechanism in an inclusive classroom.

Learner-Centered Pedagogy

We have been talking about child-centered or learner-centered pedagogy for many years, but even today our classroom practices mostly remain what they were 25 years ago. Large over-crowded classes, ill-trained and untrained teachers, poorly equipped classrooms, single teacher schools, and multi-grade teaching are some of the stark realities that severely restrict the use of learner-centered pedagogy. It is high time that we switch over from teacher-centered education to learner-centered teaching and learning. Teachers need to be trained and facilitated to handle learner-centered pedagogy in inclusive classroom.

Subject-Specific Teacher Education Programs

Quality in pedagogy depends on the professional competence of teachers. Competence here includes academic qualifications, knowledge of the specific-subject, pedagogical skills and commitment. In the years to come, teacher education programs may have to be more and more subject-specific. The teacher education institutions may have to offer more specific programs separately to prepare teachers in the areas of science, social science, languages, physical education, and vocational streams. Such subject-specific courses in teacher education will provide greater scope and appropriate opportunities to delineate and discern suitable theoretical inputs and conceptualization in relation to practices in education. They will facilitate the process of bringing theory and practice together addressing the diverse needs of their learner.

Building competency of Students and Teachers

The current training programme does not provide proper opportunities to the student teachers to develop competency because the organizers of teacher's training programme are not aware of the present problems of schools. The demands on schools and teachers are becoming more complex as society now expects schools to deal effectively with different languages and student backgrounds, to be sensitive to culture and gender issues, to promote tolerance and social cohesion, to respond effectively to disadvantaged students and students with learning or behavioural problems, to use new technologies, and to keep pace with rapidly developing fields of knowledge and *approaches to student assessment*.

Attitude towards Inclusive Education

Another central concern of teacher education relates to what is known as- inclusive education. Inclusive education should cover not only children with mild disabilities, but also street or working children, children from remote and nomadic populations, children belonging to ethnic, linguistic or cultural minorities and children from other disadvantaged or marginalized groups. There is an emerging consensus that children with special educational needs should be included in the educational arrangements made for the majority of children. This is the essence of inclusive education. Inclusive education is a pre-condition for social justice and empowerment. It is a growing concept and evolving practice, and it needs to be supported in every way and by all means. At present, the capacity of teacher education programs to take care of disabled and disadvantaged children in inclusive settings is quite limited. To do justice to inclusive education and to provide it to the challenged learners in the manner it was conceived, teacher education programs have to be suitably strengthened incorporating relevant components. Needless to add that challenged learners receiving inclusive education should be facilitated in their learning by providing them with necessary equipment and customized learning materials.

Para Teachers

The scheme of appointing para teachers started in 1987 when Rajasthan started the 'Shiksha Karmi Project' to overcome the problem of dysfunctional schools due to teacher absenteeism. Under this project, a local person

with class VIII qualification in the case of male candidates (and even less in the case female candidates) was appointed Shiksha Karmi. The main purpose of this project was to achieve universalization of primary education and improvement in primary schooling by adapting the form and content of education to local needs and conditions. Unfortunately, of late, para teachers are appointed under several schemes and for a variety of reasons including financial. In some States like Madhya Pradesh para teachers are appointed even up to higher secondary stage mainly to economize on teacher's salary. Para teachers are not adequately qualified academically and they are totally untrained. No scheme of appointing para teachers should be resorted to as an economy measure. It is estimated that there are more than two lakh para teachers all over the country. They pose a serious threat to quality-related aspects of school education. If the growing trend of appointing para teachers is not checked, quality aspects of teacher education are sure to be jeopardized. No para teacher should be regularized as a teacher against a regular post unless s/he acquires the qualifications prescribed for the post to provide quality education to the diverse learners. The existing handful of teacher trainers cannot reach the vast number of teachers working with children with disabilities in rural/remote areas. So, para teachers must be trained accordingly.

Preparing Teachers to Advocate for Inclusion:

With various policy initiatives and educational opportunities there is a rapid increase in number of inclusive classrooms. For successful implementation of these provisions on one hand we need to assess the readiness of teachers' already in school and on the other hand we need to critically reflect upon the existing teacher training programmes. Suitable modifications are required at pre-service as well as in-service teacher training.[10]

During the training the teachers are oriented towards classroom processes and possible ways to maximize learning through various classroom interactions. The different components of the course, conceptual knowledge building, the school-based teaching practice and various other field experiences sensitize and further empower teachers to create more dynamic teaching-learning environments within their respective schools.

The foundation courses of the teachers training would enable these future teachers to address issues related with diversity in a classroom, the pedagogy courses would prepare them to plan for an inclusive classroom process and the field experiences would place them face to face with the real world situation.

Conclusion

There is an urgent need for training when it comes to meet the requirements of an inclusive school system. Now-a-days, the presence of children with special needs is a reality into the schools. In order to teach all children regardless of their learning needs, behavioral, intellectual, emotional, social and physical capacities, and our facilitators/teachers must be well prepared and have access to a high quality teacher training system that allows them to get access to information and prepares them to become proficient in what they do. They need appropriate training to acquire readiness to teach in an inclusive environment and at the same time all teachers must held a set of specific skills, teaching methods and tools. This will provide children with a qualitative learning experience and as well assist to realize our main goal, to value and respect classroom diversity. We need to develop new training opportunities for teachers, opportunities that will be in favour of meeting the requirements of the new educational system, a system that promotes creativity, innovation, and gives equal opportunities to all children. Inclusive classrooms are a wonderful concept but it requires a lot of training, patience and compassion on the part of the teachers. Because fully inclusive classrooms have students across the educational and developmental spectrum, ranging from typically developing students to severe and profoundly disable students. It becomes a challenge for the teacher to find balance to serve all the students as they are the people who actually accommodate students practically on ground.

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