

Teacher Trainees' Perceptions of Inclusion of and its Challenges

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Teachers' perceptions of inclusion could differ in relation to their knowledge and understanding of inclusion at different stages of the teacher training programme. This paper explores associate teachers' perceptions of the concept of inclusive education in 21st century England.

Method: A group of participants (n=126) in a teacher education course at Chester University, UK, were asked to represent their understanding of the concept of inclusion within the local context. A self-developed questionnaire was used to collect data.

Results: Analysis revealed that many teachers had struggled to understand and operationalise inclusion as: everyone included in education under the same roof (57.89 %); catering to individual needs (22.8 %); and, everyone getting equal rights and opportunities (19.3 %). For 85% of respondents the understanding of inclusion came from their school-based learning, for 70% it was from modules, research and discussion, and for 22% it was through lectures and seminars.

Conclusion: A shift in conceptualisation of inclusion was observed at different levels during the training. It is therefore recommended that orientation training of policy-makers and education department officials, both at the state and block levels, be conducted.

Keywords: Special education, inclusion, disability, integration.

INTRODUCTION

Inclusion has become a political and philosophical movement all over the world. All students, regardless of their diverse abilities and backgrounds, are recognized as part of the school community. In an inclusive model, the education

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of students with exceptional needs alongside their peers in the general classroom is the first placement option to be considered. From a theoretical perspective, the principle of inclusion is based on the assumption that the general classroom teacher not only 'includes' the student physically in the classroom setting, but also delivers effective, individualized instructional programmes (Winter, 2006; Westling, 2010). Consequently, general classroom teachers are increasingly faced with the challenge of meeting a wide range of student needs through inclusive practices. More than ever before, classroom teachers are required to understand exceptional needs, manage a diverse classroom, make appropriate accommodations for individual students, and collaborate with parents, staff, and other paraprofessionals. Since the general classroom teacher is pivotal to the success of inclusive education (Stanovich and Jordan, 2002; Forlin et al, 2009), it is very important that teacher educators consider effective ways of preparing pre-service teachers for inclusive teaching.

Defining Inclusion

What is meant by 'inclusion'?

The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) strongly advocates that:

Regular schools with this inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all; moreover, they provide an effective education to the majority of children and improve the efficiency and ultimately the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system.

An educationally inclusive school is one in which the teaching and learning, achievements, attitudes and well-being of every young person matter. This does not mean treating all pupils in the same way. Rather it involves taking account of pupils' varied life experiences and needs. They identify any pupils who may be missing out, difficult to engage, or feeling in some way to be apart from what the school seeks to provide (Office for Standards in Education -Ofsted, 2000).

Education for All (EFA)

The 2009 Global Monitoring Report drew attention to some positive and inspiring national and regional performances. For example, the UNESCO's Courier Special Issue (2008) succinctly summarizes that:

An estimated 75 million children of primary school age worldwide are currently out of school with partial projections suggesting that at least 29 million children will still be missing out on their right to an education in 2015. A further 776 million adults, or 16% of the world's population, lack even basic literacy skills. Two-thirds of these are women.

Hastings and Oakfords (2003) explored the impact of special needs category (intellectual disabilities versus emotional and behavioural problems) and student teachers' training (being trained to work with either younger or older children) on their attitudes towards inclusion. The results of the study revealed that the majority of the domains of student teachers' attitudes towards inclusion measured by the IIQ were affected by the nature of the special needs of children considered as candidates for inclusion. Children with emotional and behavioural problems were rated as likely to have a more negative impact on other children, the teacher, and the school and classroom environment. Attitude research in the special needs field in general has found that experience or contact with special needs typically has a positive effect on attitudes in a wide variety of samples (Beh-Pajooch, 1991; Hastings & Graham, 1995). In keeping with this pattern of findings, teachers' attitudes towards inclusion of children with special needs have been found to be positively associated with their non-working experience of special needs (Harvey, 1985). However, those with more years of teaching experience have been found to express more negative inclusion attitudes (Center & Ward, 1987; Soodak et al, 1998).

Hodkinson and Devarakonda (2011) studied the development and operation of a system of inclusive education in England during the latter part of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century. Teachers' perceived that inclusion meant involving all students who are in a learning environment in the experience, and ensuring that they get the best possible outcome from that experience. Although relating that inclusion referred to a range of pupils, the teachers mainly conceptualised it in terms of children with physical disabilities or behavioural difficulties. For many of these teachers, inclusion centered on whether such children could or indeed should be included in mainstream education.

Phillipson and Forlin (2011) explored the use of visual imagery as a strategy for gaining a greater understanding of diversity and inclusion within regular schools from the perspectives of 118 newly-qualifying teachers in Hong Kong. Dyads or small groups of teachers participating in a teacher education course were asked to represent their understanding of the concept of inclusion within

the local context by using a visual imagery approach. Use of visual imagery was found to be an innovative and engaging way to prepare teachers for inclusive education.

Avramidis and Norwich (2002) concluded that although most teachers held positive attitudes on inclusion, feelings of unpreparedness were associated with factors such as including students with severe learning difficulties and behavioural/emotional disorders, as well as a lack of resources, support, and teacher training. The researchers concluded that pre-service training should be a top priority for policy-makers, in order to equip future teachers with the skills required to implement inclusive practices. Hodkinson (2005) conducted a qualitative study in England with 80 pre-service teachers, and found that through inclusion training the participants had a good understanding of inclusive education theories; however, their understanding of the practical delivery was limited. Another study of 120 pre-service teachers in the UK had similar findings (Richards and Clough, 2004). Avramidis et al (2000), in their study of 135 pre-service teachers in the UK, noted that participants lacked confidence in their practical ability to effectively meet diverse student needs, while expressing specific concerns about their preparedness for teaching students with severe behavioural problems.

Jobling and Moni's (2004) Australian study included interviews with 13 participants, all of whom revealed that they lacked experience, knowledge, and understanding related to teaching students with special needs. The participants felt that more experience and time to put their knowledge and skills into practice would improve pre-service training for inclusion. In addition, Moore-Hayes' (2008) study with 350 pre-service and beginner teachers in Canada, reported that participants cited the need for more preparation and experience in order to feel equipped to work with students with disabilities. In a study in Mexico, Forlin et al (2010) investigated the perceptions of 286 pre-service teachers and found that most were generally convinced about benefits of inclusion; nevertheless, they continued to demand more experience, training, and support to improve their preparedness for teaching students with exceptional needs. Additionally, in another study conducted by Forlin and Chambers (2011) with 67 pre-service teachers in the USA, the researchers discovered that a unit of study in inclusive education, when combined with applied experiences with a person with disabilities, increased pre-service teachers' knowledge while also increasing their levels of stress in teaching students with disabilities.

The review by European Agency for Special Needs Education (EADSNE) on teacher education for inclusion in Europe, found that teacher educators lacked "knowledge, understanding, commitment and experience" to teach about inclusive education, yet there is generally no formal induction for teacher educators on this subject. Forlin (2012) highlights this point and states that it is unrealistic to expect teacher educators to use innovative approaches when they have had no preparation themselves. Similarly, reviewing the Indian literature on training for inclusive education, Singal (2005) found there was an over-emphasis on conceptual theoretical models and not enough on practice in schools.

Pre-service teachers who have had regular and systematic course contact with persons with disabilities are more likely to feel positive about including students with disabilities (Sharma et al, 2008). If teachers leave training with negative attitudes towards inclusion, these attitudes can be very difficult to shift (Al Zyoudi et al, 2011). Studying policies and knowledge about inclusion does not necessarily address teachers' apprehensions about inclusion (Forlin and Chambers, 2011), but being exposed to people with disabilities would help.

Hodkinson's (2005) critical analysis of newly-qualified teachers' knowledge and understanding of inclusion explored whether one year's experience of the practicalities of inclusion had altered the participants' conceptualisation of inclusive education. The study suggests that NQTs' conceptualisation of inclusive education is mediated by prolonged classroom exposure to the harsh realities of educational practice. A conclusion forwarded by this research is that a teacher's first year of employment has the potential to negatively affect the teacher's support for the policy of inclusion. However, it is important to note that despite many problematic experiences of inclusion, NQTs do not, in the main, consider that the policy of inclusive education should be withdrawn.

Objective

The purpose of this paper was to explore how the perceptions of associate teachers might differ in relation to their knowledge and understanding of the concept of inclusion at different stages of the teacher training programme. The researchers believe that different understandings of inclusion should be seen, to a large extent, as expressions of different views of what schools should accomplish. The research objective was to find answers to three questions:

- 1) How do associate teachers and newly qualified teachers (NQTs) define inclusive education?

- 2) What are the concepts of inclusion held by associate teachers at different stages of their teacher training programme?
- 3) What are the opinions of associate teachers (ATs) about their preparedness to work with children from diverse backgrounds?

METHOD

Sample

In order to explore the possible change in perceptions of associate teachers in relation to their knowledge and understanding of the concept of inclusion at different stages of the teacher training programme, qualitative research method was adopted to gather data from newly-qualified teachers and Inclusion Teacher Education (ITE) students of the Faculty of Education and Children's Services, at the University of Chester, UK.

ITE students of the first, third and fourth years, as well as newly-qualified teachers (NQTs) were included in the study. Questionnaires were distributed to 125 first-year students, 86 third-year students' and 95 fourth-year students at Chester University and to NQTs who came to attend a two-day workshop. However, only 69 questionnaires from first-year students, 57 from third-year students, and 2 from NQTs were received. There were none from the fourth-year students. Thus the study sample numbered 126 respondents at the final count.

Tool

A questionnaire was developed to get answers from the ITE students on the three research questions.

There were some open-ended questions and a few questions about their concept of inclusion.

Data Collection

A research application was first submitted for approval to the Faculty's research Ethics Committee, along with a copy of the questionnaire, participation sheet and consent form.

Subsequently the printed questionnaire was distributed to all the three groups of students. The students were briefed about the research project and were

provided with a participation sheet that contained additional information about the research and mentioned the implications of participation. A consent form had to be signed by those who decided to fill in the questionnaire.

Analysis

The responses to the questionnaire were analysed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke (2006) who developed six phases of thematic analysis. All the responses were read and re-read to familiarise the researchers with the data.

Phase 1: Familiarisation with the data

Phase 2: Generation of initial codes

Phase 3: Search for themes

Phase 4: Review of themes

Phase 5: Defining and naming themes

Phase 6: Producing the report

RESULTS and DISCUSSION

Frequency and percentages were calculated and results are interpreted question-wise.

1. Definition of Inclusion

The definition of inclusion for 43.47% of first-year participants was that everyone is included regardless of race, gender, creed, ability or disability, while 36.23% defined it as being involved in group activities. A small 5.79% of participants also defined inclusion as providing equal opportunities to all, irrespective of race, gender, ethnicity, to feel involved in community; and they reportedly did not understand inclusion as they had just joined the course. Furthermore, around 53.62% did not answer / did not understand the meaning of inclusion, of which 34.78% justified that they were newly enrolled in the programme and had no idea of inclusion. The results are inconsistent with the findings of Clough and Garner (2003), according to which there was no understanding of inclusion due to lack of knowledge, lack of will, lack of vision, lack of resources and lack of morality.

Third-year participants defined inclusion in wider ways. More than half of them or 57.89% stated that inclusion means everyone included in education under the same roof and, according to 22.8%, catering to individual needs. Furthermore, 19.3% also stated that inclusion means everyone given equal rights and opportunities.

2. Which aspects of your course enabled you to develop your understanding about Inclusion?

Majority of the first-year participants (88.4%) had no idea about inclusion as they had recently joined the programme, and their concept of inclusion was not the result of their course and was not relevant to the course (13.04%).

The third-year participants learnt the concept of inclusion in the course of training / studying modules, discussion in classroom situation and research (70%). Majority of them (85%) also gave credit to school-based learning which clarified their concept of inclusion. A good percentage of respondents (22%) also gave importance to lectures and seminars during the course of their training, which had helped to develop the concept.

3. Is inclusion important?

It was stated by 24.63% of first-year participants that inclusion is important as it ensures equal treatment opportunities and equality. No child feels segregated and unwanted, but feels included in class, according to 18.8%. It also boosts equality, self-esteem and independence (15.78%). It also strengthens social feelings/ sense of belonging in society or community (14.49%).

The third-year participants elaborated on the importance of inclusion. About 42.1% reported that inclusion is important as it provides equal opportunities for all children, and according to 29.8% every child has the right to learn. Children feel included as part of the class and community stated 28.07%. Only 3.5% stated that inclusion is important due to policy and law.

4. Do you feel you need additional knowledge and understanding to be confident in your future as primary teacher?

Majority of the first-year participants or 81% desired additional knowledge and understanding of the concept of inclusion as they did not have a good enough idea. A miniscule 7% reported that they were already knowledgeable and hence had no need of additional knowledge.

A large number of third-year participants or 68% also desired additional knowledge and understanding of the concept of inclusion, but 23% reported no need for additional knowledge.

CONCLUSION

On the basis of results, it may be concluded that the training of general teachers at pre-service and in-service levels should address the issue of education of children with disabilities, so that teachers are better equipped to work in an inclusive environment. Some of the issues that need to be addressed in training include the methodology to be adopted for identifying children with disabilities; classroom management; use of appropriate teaching methodologies; skills for adapting the curriculum; development of teaching–learning materials that are multi-sensory in nature; evaluation of learning, etc.

Results of the present study clearly revealed a shift in conceptualisation of inclusion at different levels during the training, as the participants had no concept of inclusion prior to joining the course. Furthermore, a shift was also observed from SEN to diverse needs of children. Therefore, based on the findings, it is recommended that orientation training of policy-makers and education department officials, both at the state and blocks levels, is essential. In addition, there is a need to develop on-site support systems for teachers. Grassroots workers, parents, special school teachers, para teachers and other individuals can be shown how to provide the required support.

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