The Visually Challenged Student's Journey towards Inclusion: Teacher's Perspective

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ABSTRACT: This research paper studies the teacher's worldview about inclusion of visually challenged students into the mainstream schooling process. The paper is based on an exploratory study conducted across varied school settings. The perceptions of teachers regarding inclusive education and their experience of inclusion in the classroom form the mainstay of the study. The tools of data collection were school observations and open-ended interviews. Subsequently, significant themes were identified from an in-depth study and collation of substantive narratives. The findings which emerged from this analysis allow us to peek into the day-to-day school experiences of teachers as they face the challenges of providing meaningful education to visually challenged students in their classes. It is enlightening to discover the various creative ways that many teachers propose in order to cope with this challenge. The study highlights the need to listen to the voices of the teachers who are one of the main protagonists in the visually challenged student's journey towards meaningful inclusion.

KEYWORDS: Inclusion, visually challenged student, school experiences, teacher perceptions

Introduction

In order to understand the concept of inclusion, UNESCO (2006) provides an insightful point of reference. It states the following about inclusion, "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 within and from education. It involves changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures and strategies, with a common vision which covers all children of the appropriate age range and a conviction that it is the responsibility of the regular system to educate all children." The above statement highlights the key focal areas regarding inclusive education. It situates the idea in terms of the broader canvas of diversity and explains how each and every school needs to respond to this diversity. As we move towards an inclusive society, the responsibility of an enabling network of inclusive schools to usher in such a society is immense. Considering the above, the traditional bifurcation between mainstream and special schools disappears as we begin to acknowledge that all schools are essentially inclusive schools and should cater to all categories of learners.

Other salient documents that showcase the journey from segregated settings to inclusive schools include, the Jomtien Declaration on Education for All (1990) and the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (1994). They have unequivocally placed inclusive education at the centre stage of efforts aimed at achieving 'education for all'. Ainscow, Slee and Best (2019) discuss the impact that the Salamanca Statement has had on the inclusive education landscape in the last twenty-five years. They argue that it has been a major influence on the development of policies and practices worldwide. It offers an educational, social and economic justification for establishing inclusive schools. In the Indian scenario, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 is a recent effort towards incorporating the new developments in disability research and practice. The modifications have been necessitated by India's ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2007 (Narayan and John, 2017). The Act emphasizes the conceptualization of disabilities as a part of the spectrum of human diversity and provision of opportunities to effectively participate in society. The expanded and progressive provisions of the Act envision a life of dignity and self worth for persons with disabilities.

The Research Canvas

The medical approach has been used extensively for research in disability. It positions the disability against the 'normal' thus highlighting the 'deficiency' that the individual has. The National Curriculum Framework position paper on special needs education (2006) talks of the charity model and the bio centric model, both of which are based on disempowering assumptions about disability. As a result of these frameworks, people with disabilities have traditionally been seen as recipients of charity who need to be kept segregated from mainstream schooling. However, as policy formulations and societal considerations have increasingly emphasized the importance of human rights and dignity, the social model has emerged as an alternative to the above. It challenges long standing prejudiced notions about disability and looks at it as a social-cultural construction. Ainscow and Miles (2008) encourage us to visualize educational failure from a new lens. Educational failure is not about the perceived failure of individual students to cope but rather the inability of a system to accommodate the needs of diverse learners in a manner that each and every learner can participate and develop.

Some of the significant studies related to the teacher's perspective about inclusion have been mentioned here in order to understand the nature of research informing the present study. Parasuram (2006) investigated the importance of teachers' attitudes for inclusive education. He found that one of the variables which impacted teachers' attitudes towards disability and inclusive education was prior acquaintance with a person with disability. Sikes, Lawson, and Parker (2007) carried out an investigation of mainstream teachers and teaching assistants' experiences and understanding of inclusion. They demonstrated the tensions and resistances between systemic and personal elements of participants in their understanding of inclusion. They also realized that understandings of inclusion are not fixed and definite but rather are 'becoming' developing and changing as they are articulated and lived. Gill and Chalmers (2007), in their article on documenting diversity, chronicled a two-year journey of developing and implementing a teacher education programme that required pre-service teachers and teachers in six schools to address issues of diversity, inclusion and social justice. They generated important implications for teacher education partnerships.

Zagona, Kurth and Macfarland (2017) studied teachers' views of their preparation for inclusive education and collaboration. They found that there was a need to provide inclusive education for students with significant disabilities. Teachers' preparedness for this task was related to whether they had received training for inclusive education. Bansal (2018) explored teachers' opinions towards inclusive education and found that many teachers were of the view that children with severe disabilities should be educated in special settings. Although they acknowledged the positive effect of inclusive education on the socio-emotional development of learners with disabilities, they also reported various challenges that impacted the teaching learning process.

Research Methodology

Since the research focused on the teacher's worldview about inclusion of visually challenged students into the mainstream schooling process, it qualitatively explored the perceptions of teachers belonging to varied school settings regarding inclusive education. In this context, twenty teachers were chosen through random sampling. They were equally distributed across government and private schools. The tools of data collection were school observations and open-ended interviews. Once a broad understanding of the field was developed through school observations, themes such as, classroom ethos, diversity, presence of visually challenged students in the class, implications of their presence, adaptation, coping and pedagogic strategies were explored through the interviews with teachers. Subsequently, significant themes were identified

from an in-depth study and collation of substantive narratives. The interpretation of data is presented in the next section.

Data Interpretation

The findings which emerged from the interpretation of data allow us to peek into the day-to-day school experiences of teachers as they face the challenges of providing meaningful education to visually challenged students in their classes. Teachers' responses have been collated under different themes. The differences in the perceptions and experiences of teachers from government and private schools have been discussed at appropriate junctures in the relevant themes.

Perception about Inclusive Education

It was found that inclusive education had varied meanings for teachers, with many of them identifying it with special education. Sixteen teachers were in favor of inclusive schools, albeit conditionally. Four teachers thought that special schools would be more beneficial for learners with disabilities. Their views did not show significant difference across school categories. Some of the reasons given by teachers who had a positive outlook towards inclusive education include equality of opportunity for all learners, feeling of being in the mainstream of society, better learning opportunities, sense of identity and self-worth amongst students with visual challenge, ability to negotiate the challenges of the real world. Some responses embodying the perceptions of the teachers are interspersed with the text that follows:

"Education aims to reach out to all children. Children with special needs show tremendous improvement and grasping when in mainstream since they observe many things and get exposure. They feel 'we can do, we can try', for example, on teachers' day, they also teach. They want to be part of all activities."

"When the blind child comes to a normal school, he gets a feeling that there is nothing lacking in me and I am as good as the others."

"They feel a spirit of competition when they see normal children. We can also succeed."

However, various issues and difficulties regarding inclusive education also emerge from the teachers' narratives. These relate to the inability to provide the required attention to learners with visual challenge due to lack of specialized training, as well as lack of time in a regular classroom. Teachers also feel hesitant to interact freely with such students since they are unaware of their academic and socio-emotional needs. Thus, the students are largely considered the responsibility of the special education teacher. Some of these narratives have been exemplified below:

"We barely have time for completing the course. The time-table is so packed. How can we devote extra time to the blind children?"

"I am not sure of what they feel or what kind of attention they require. So, I give their responsibility to the special teacher."

"We have to be very careful. We can't let them go to the playground. They might fall and get hurt."

Pedagogic Concerns

The pedagogic flow consisted of explanation of key concepts with the help of the textbook. Identification of important question and answers was the next step, which was followed by writing them in the notebook. There was a significant difference in how students with visual challenge negotiated the class routine. While students in government schools either read from Braille books or listened to the teacher, most private school students used laptops or tablets

equipped with talking software to keep in sync with the class. Another difference in both categories emerged in terms of written work. Government school students used Braille slates for completing their work and private school students used computers to type out and submit their assignments in printed form.

Many teachers demonstrated a great deal of concern about the students with visual challenge and tried to accommodate these students by modifying their classroom strategies. They would read out whatever they were writing on the blackboard, asked them to sit in the front row for clarity of hearing and in order to help them make use of visual cues in the case of students with partial sight. Another observation showed teachers trying to include the child in the development of the lesson by periodic questioning. Some narratives in this context are the following:

"She reminds me that she is in the class. I make my pace slow. If she raises her hand, I show interest and if the answer is correct, I appreciate - only that much I can do."

"I am always busy with the regular students, so I need to check myself and ask him, 'Do you need help'?"

Assessment is a critical part of the pedagogic process and brings with it its own unique challenges in the case of students with visual challenge. A large portion of the continuous assessment throughout the year was done through oral interaction. For projects, presentations, assignments etc. these students were allowed to prepare and explain it orally to the teacher. Involvement in group tasks appeared more problematic with many of the 'regular' class students displaying reluctance to include them in their group. Formal tests were either conducted orally or with the help of writers. However, given the shortage of writers, usually they were reserved for the term-end exam. Both students and teachers had to make a concerted effort to locate writers during examination time.

Discussion

The study brings to light a varied interpretation of inclusive education. Most of the teachers perceive inclusive education with optimism. They see it as a positive development for students with disabilities. Benefits in terms of life skills, self-esteem, increased confidence, mutual respect and understanding, as well as, integration with the mainstream of society have a common echo amongst the teachers who participated in the study. This finds resonance in other researches as well. The positive outcomes of inclusive education have been documented by many researchers. Rea, McLaughlin and Walther-Thomas (2002) found from an analysis of attendance data that students in inclusive schools were more regular in attending school, when seen in comparison to students from special education programmes. Cosier, Causton-Theoharis and Theoharis (2013) examined the relationship between hours in general education and achievement in reading and mathematics for students with disabilities and found that there was a strong positive relationship between the two variables. Cologon (2020) brings forth a forceful argument for the realization of the right to inclusive education for all in the context of children and young people labeled with 'severe and multiple' disabilities.

However, ground realities brought forward challenges in implementation. Although teachers were willing to include students with visual challenge in their classes, they felt constrained due to reasons such as, large class strength and lack of awareness about addressing academic and developmental needs. Positive views of a few teachers were linked to having known a person with a disability at close quarters. Parasuram (2006) studied teacher attitudes towards education of children with disabilities and reported similar findings. His analyses revealed that while some of the variables of interest such as age, gender, education levels did affect teachers' attitudes towards disabilities, the only variable that affected teachers' attitude towards inclusion was prior acquaintance with a person with a disability. Many teachers felt apprehensive because they were interacting with a person with disability

for the first time. This could be addressed by having planned contacts with students and adults with disabilities before a student is included in the classroom for greater acceptance.

The study also revealed that technological adaptations for classroom transactions are commonly used in private schools while government schools relied more on the traditional ways of teaching students with visual challenge. Teachers' narratives exhibit an inclination towards inclusive education, which is reflected in pedagogic adaptations at a personal level. Yet, they feel inadequate in providing the required support to students due to limited exposure to disability research and practice. Assessment tasks were largely orally conducted, while term-end examinations were in a written format. An organized system of providing writers to students is the need of the hour, as demonstrated by the shortage of volunteers. With increasing availability of technology-based solutions in the sphere of disability, it is imperative that these be made available on an urgent basis to all schools and students with visual challenge be oriented in their use for their day-to-day school tasks.

In conclusion, teachers are one the vital stakeholders for ensuring a welcoming environment for students with disabilities in schools. In order to do this, they need to be oriented in the curricular adaptations required for students, both in terms of daily living skills and specialized pedagogic strategies. Awareness about Braille, tactile aids, Taylor frame and text-to-speech software would develop their confidence in tailoring the classroom ethos to these students. Sensitization and empathy are equally important in this regard. The teacher is the bridge between students with visual challenge and the rest of the class. She is responsible for creating a meaningful atmosphere for interaction in the class. This has been ratified by Naraian (2008) who examined peer interpretations of significant disability and found that students require effective mediation in the classroom to engage with each other. The study highlights the need to listen to the voices of the teachers who are one of the main protagonists in the visually challenged student's journey towards meaningful inclusion. If teachers' experiences are incorporated in decision making, perhaps we can navigate the gap between theory and practice in inclusive education.

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