



Preparation Of Pre-Service Teachers For Inclusive Classrooms: Challenges And Prospects

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Abstract. The current study sought to investigate the challenges and prospects associated with preparing pre-service teachers for inclusive classrooms. The study was comprised of all heads of teacher training institutions in Punjab. A total 15 heads were selected randomly as sample to participate in the study. Semi structured interviews were conducted with heads of teacher training institutions. Data were analyzed by using thematic analysis. Most of the heads perceived inclusion as good initiation and showed positive attitude towards inclusion, albeit with some reservations. Heads perceived outdated curriculum, length of course work, library resources, inadequate training of teacher educators, unavailability of infrastructure, and insufficient budget allocation as challenges in preparing pre-service teachers for inclusive classrooms. Moreover, the heads of teacher education institutions proposed strategies to address these challenges, including curriculum reform, training for teacher educators and administrators, adequate budget allocation, provision of necessary infrastructure and facilities, recruitment of teachers with special education specialisation, and pilot testing of inclusive education.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Challenges, Prospects, Pre-service Teachers, Heads of Teacher Training Institutions

I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of inclusive education has grown in popularity over the last two decades internationally. The basic philosophy behind this approach is the provision of equity, justice and quality education not only for all children but to all those who have not been the part of mainstream because of disability, ethnicity or any other discrimination (UNESCO, 2000). As a result, students who were previously labelled as "less able or special" were considered to be part of mainstream classrooms (Florian & Linklater, 2009). A commitment was made by the international institutions for promoting the concept of inclusive education in Salamanca in 1994. According to the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action, children with special needs should be accommodated in regular schools by using child-centered pedagogy to fulfill their needs (UNESCO, 1994). The emphasis was given on governments to seek the cooperation of international funding agencies such as World Conference on Education for All, the United Nation Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Children' Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Development Programme (UNPD), and the World Bank for endorsing inclusive education system in the institutions by making it an integral part of all educational programmes (UNESCO, 2003). Governments and international organizations adopted Education for All and the Millennium Development Goals for universal primary education in 2000. Then some initiatives were also taken by Dakar Framework for Education for All (EFA) and promotion of inclusive education. UN Convention also highlighted the obligation of governments for making the education system inclusive one. These four commitments made the concept of inclusive education as global agenda (Inclusion International, 2009).

Despite the importance of inclusion, this fact was also recognized that teacher education programs depict very weak position relating to preparation of teachers for inclusive classrooms (Antil, 2014; Cochran-Smith, 2012; Sarah et al., 2018). Due to this weakness, teachers face difficulty while dealing with diverse children. They do not feel themselves adequately prepared for the job and are unwilling to accept responsibility for the results of students with disabilities (Blanton et al., 2010; Brownell, 2005). Moreover, teachers find no relevance between the taught courses they studied during their teacher preparation programme and the prevailing situation. This challenging situation necessitates the preparation of general education teachers for inclusive classrooms as well as the reformation of teacher education programmes (Blanton et al., 2010; Pugach, 2005). Kurth and Foley (2014) stated that while preparing teachers for teaching in

inclusive classrooms, higher education faculty try to develop positive behavior towards disability in prospective teachers rather than a sense of commitment to dealing with diversity through appropriate knowledge and skills. This viewpoint was supported by Peebles and Mendaglio (2014), Sharma et al. (2015), and Stella et al. (2007) who stated that teacher training institutions should equip pre-service teachers with the necessary knowledge and skills to address the diversity of learners. In addition, the focus of a teacher training course should be on preparing regular classroom teachers to support students with diverse needs. Teachers can become good inclusive practitioners if they have the necessary knowledge, skills, and understanding of inclusive education. In this way, pre-service education can play a critical role in facilitating the process of inclusion.

Strasbourg (2009), and Sleeter (2008) elaborated that teachers' insight regarding children's access to education and rights can only be developed when teachers have adequate knowledge and understanding of basic international principles, legislation, and policy frameworks in the field of diversity. Therefore, it is critical for teachers to not only identify students' weak points but also to serve as a resource for creating a conducive learning environment. They should have a broad range of knowledge and skills for dealing with diversity. Hussain (2012) stressed on the need of strengthening the competencies of teachers for dealing inclusive classrooms and reformation of teacher training program.

Among 183 countries across the world, Pakistan was also a signatory country to achieve the target of inclusive education. Through Islamabad Declaration on Accessibility for Persons with Disabilities (2006), attempts were made to implement the inclusive education program in Pakistan, but these attempts could not achieve the goal of teachers' preparation for inclusive classrooms. Thus, the slogan of inclusive education could not get required success by becoming an integral part of all educational programs as committed by the government of Pakistan. By looking at the prevailing situation regarding implementation of the concept of inclusive education, heads of teacher training institutions play an important role in the entire teacher preparation process. Effective leadership with a positive attitude toward inclusion has the potential to transform the situation. Thus, the current study was an attempt to explore the perception of heads of teacher training institutions about inclusive education, as well as the challenges they face in preparing pre-service teachers for inclusive classrooms. Furthermore, what strategies they believe are appropriate for making the concept of inclusive education practical in the current situation.

II. Literature Review

The meaning and scope of the term "inclusion" is still a topic of debate (UNICEF, 2013). Governments all over the world, as well as individuals within a state, city, or school, define this term differently (Armstrong et al., 2010; Whitworth, 1999). Some consider it another word for mainstreaming that has been used for decades, while others do not accept it. For them, mainstreaming refers to the placement of students with disabilities in a pull-out programme in order to improve their skill level to that of their peers in the regular classroom. Consequently, by using this approach, students with disability might be able to settle in regular classroom settings once they have mastered those skills. Therefore, the emphasis was placed on changing the environment for these students in order to integrate them into the regular school system (Whitworth, 1999). Despite having some benefits, this approach could not satisfy parents. They perceived that the education through this approach has isolated their disable children from normal children. Furthermore, they perceived that learning was not taking place because their children with special needs and children without disabilities were not learning from each other due to a lack of friendship, which was required for their smooth functioning in the future.

The analysis of inclusive education in developing countries also reveals that the situation is worse in these countries, where a large number of disabled children are still not in school due to a lack of buildings and resources for educating such children. To address this parental concern, the goal of inclusion in education was changed to inclusive education (Inclusion International, 2009).

Furthermore, proponents of the inclusive concept argued for changes and flexibility in the educational system, structure, and practices to accommodate students with disabilities (Nguyet, 2010; Mcdiarmid, 1990; Whitworth, 1999).

Situation of Inclusive Education in Pakistan

Pakistan is also facing challenges like other developing countries such as India and Bangladesh (study results of Ahsan et al., 2012; Desai & Pradhan, 2017; Singal, 2019). UNICEF (2003) suggested Federal Ministry of Education in Pakistan to modify school environment, curriculum, and teacher training programs for capacity building and undertaking the challenge of inclusive schooling. It was proposed that sufficient financial support and new infrastructure with new vision of education can support the system to achieve the target of inclusion. Consequently, different governments, NGOs, INGOs, and UN agencies have launched numerous initiatives to address the needs of disabled children. As a result, some successful special and inclusive education models have emerged. However, no comprehensive analysis of these initiatives has been conducted in Pakistan. Public schools in Pakistan operate independently of special schools. The teaching methods used by these special institutions enhance the students' learning ability in a limited way. By utilising participatory methods, this system does not promote critical thinking or creativity among students. Private-sector inclusive schools demonstrating effective practices for disabled children are locating in urban areas. Children with disabilities who live in remote areas do not have access to these schools. There are also no special educational facilities in these areas. Furthermore, parents are hesitant to send their disabled children to school, fearing that they will not be able to adjust with their classmates and may be stigmatized. Sometimes, school directors and teachers also show resistance in admitting the children with moderate disability. Another issue that these children face is travelling to these schools. In addition, the concept of inclusive education could not become a reality at the federal level. There is a scarcity of comprehensive data on the educational status of disabled children. Efforts are restricted to a few small projects. Private institutions that work with an inclusive theme are also lacking in proper infrastructure, teacher training, and the use of appropriate teaching methods for educating special children. These institutions' teachers and employers are not prepared for change. They are waiting for the government to come up with a viable plan. There is insufficient coordination between the Ministries of Education, Social Welfare, and Special Education to meet the needs of disabled children and marginalized groups (Behlol, 2011; UNESCO, 2003).

Research objectives

The objectives of the study were to:

1. Explore the perception of heads of teacher training institutions about inclusive education?
2. Investigate the challenges perceived by heads of teacher training institutions in preparing pre-service teachers for inclusive classrooms.
3. Identify the strategies that heads of teacher training institutions do consider appropriate for handling the challenges regarding preparation of pre-service teachers for inclusive classrooms.

Research Questions

Following research questions were formulated for the study:

1. What are the perception of heads of teacher training institutions about inclusive education?
2. What challenges do head of teacher training institutions perceive in preparing pre-service teachers for inclusive classrooms?
3. What strategies do heads of teacher training institution consider appropriate for handling the challenges of preparing pre-service teachers for inclusive classrooms.

III. METHODS

The target population of study was consisted of all heads of public teacher training institutions in Punjab. Total 15 heads of teacher training institutions were selected randomly as sample to participate in the study. Qualitative approach was used to collect the data. Semi-structured interview was designed for the study as it allowed the participants to provide information with

more flexibility and depth that could not be possible through structured questions. Furthermore, it also provided the opportunity to the researchers to prepare the participants before responding to complex questions. The interview questions were based on investigating the perception of heads of teacher training institutions about inclusive education, challenges in preparing pre-service teachers for inclusive classrooms and proposed strategies that they perceive pertinent and workable for addressing these challenges. The responses gained through interviews with heads were analysed by coding procedure. The data were coded (key words assigned by the researchers for the identification of main themes), analysed and interpreted that helped the researcher to read it again and again for finding the main themes. After organizing the main themes into categories, data was divided into sub-categories that emerged through the process of coding in arranged form. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. The identification of emerged themes, categories of themes were made. Sub-categories were again assigned specific codes. At next stage, data were analysed by highlighting similarities and differences in the data (responses of participants regarding phenomena). At third stage, data were again verified for checking the validity of understanding by rechecking of transcripts and codes. Finally, data were interpreted with the help of main themes and sub-themes. The themes were identified by analysing the responses with the help of NVivo 11 plus software gained in form of interviews with heads.

IV. RESULTS

The findings of study were categorized into three major themes:

1. Perception of institution heads about inclusive education
2. Academic challenges
3. Strategies to address challenges

1. Perception of Institution Heads about Inclusive Education

The questions were asked in order to know about the heads' perception toward inclusion. Most of the heads showed positive attitude, while only few exhibited negative attitude towards the idea of inclusion. Heads also expressed their concerns about the inclusive approach. All heads perceived that inclusion was only possible by proper training of teachers, awareness regarding acceptability of this approach and by changing the attitude of normal persons towards persons with disability.

Positive Attitude

Most of the heads of teacher training institutions believed that inclusion should be the part of all educational programs because it is the basic right of every child. The children with disability should not be pushed towards isolation by excluding them from mainstream. This positive attitude was expressed by Head no 12 as:

"Through inclusion disable children would be able to interact with their normal peer and overcome the critical situation they might face due to their disability. Furthermore, inclusion will also help the normal students to understand the concept of diversity".

Head 1 elaborated

"The inclusion will also enable the students of mainstream to understand the problems faced by students with special needs. They can help them to enhance their confidence by giving them respect".

Negative Attitude

Two heads showed negative attitude towards inclusion. They also expressed some reservations about inclusion, they provided rationale behind their arguments.

Head no 9 expressed

"The concept of inclusion has always existed in Pakistan but it seems to be in vacuum. The inclusion of disable children into mainstream would be impractical as having no proper knowledge about dealing them. Thus, the students with disability should be the part of special education institutions".

Head 05 said

"The students with disabilities should be taught in special school because they need extra mentoring. The purpose of our teacher training program is to prepare teachers for general class rooms rather preparing teachers for inclusive classroom".

2. Academic Challenges

All heads perceived that teacher education programs do not fulfill the requirement of preparing pre-service teachers for inclusive classrooms. These challenges include the areas of curriculum, length of course work, library resources, training of teacher educators, lack of assessment procedures for disable students, unavailability of infrastructure and facilities, insufficient budget allocation, and gap between theory and practice.

Challenges in the Areas of Curriculum

All participants expressed that there is a lack of awareness about inclusive education in the curriculum of pre-service teachers. Curriculum has not been revised to correspond to the idea of inclusion.

Head 03 mentioned this challenge by indicating that:

“Curriculum has not been revised according to the requirement of the time. Same curriculum is being taught in teacher training institutions which was taught even 15 years ago. No change was introduced in the curriculum. That is the reason people have no awareness or acceptability regarding disable children into mainstream. Furthermore, in foreign countries where this approach is working successfully, they have changed their curriculum as per requirement”.

Length of Course Work

Most of the heads believed that the duration of course completion time for preparing pre-service teachers for inclusive class rooms is not sufficient as more practical work is involved.

Head 8 expressed this challenge as:

“More time is required to teach students with disability because they need extra mentoring and attention. The normal time duration for course completion is not sufficient to deal with these with proper attention”.

Library Resources

Most of heads did not consider the existing library resources sufficient for enhancing the knowledge the pre-service teachers about inclusive classrooms.

Head 06 expressed:

“There is unavailability of books in library as pre-service teachers are only prepared for teaching general classroom. Lots of books are available on general psychology which is not sufficient for teaching strategies related to disable students”.

Training of Teacher Educators

All heads highlighted the lack of training of teacher educators for preparing pre-service teachers for inclusive classrooms. They expressed that without having proper training in the field of special education or the recruitment of special education teachers, training cannot be given to pre-service teachers.

Lack of Assessment procedures for Disable Students

One of the head indicated that lack of assessment procedures is a challenge in the way of implementing inclusive education in institutions. He expressed this challenge as:

“There is no specific assessment for evaluating the performance of students with disability. The construction of assessment tests requires lots of efforts”.

Unavailability of Infrastructure and Facilities

All heads expressed that there is lack of infrastructure for providing training to pre-service teachers such as language labs, audio visual aids, and braille books.

Insufficient Budget Allocation

All heads also perceived insufficient allocation of budget as a big challenge in the way of teacher training.

Gap between Theory and Practice

Few heads believed that there was a gap between theory and practice on the part of the government in order to achieve the goal of inclusion. They stated that the government's lack of concern for providing adequate resources is a barrier to the implementation of inclusion.

Head 14 expressed this view by saying:

“The government is more concerned with theory than with the practical implications of the concept of inclusion. From 1947 to the present, no target has been set. Past indicators provide a foundation for trust in the government. Because no goal has been met thus far, there is no reason to have faith in the government”.

3. Proposed Strategies to Address Challenges

During interview, heads suggested various strategies to address the challenges they perceived appropriate for preparing pre-service teachers for inclusive classrooms. These strategies include reformation of curriculum, training of teacher educators and administrators, provision of proper budget allocation, availability of necessary infrastructure and facilities, recruitment of teachers with specialization in special education, inclusion on pilot testing basis, decrease in class size, and eradication of special education institutions.

Reformation of Curriculum

Most of the heads expressed that existing curriculum is unable to fulfill the requirement of preparing pre-service teachers for inclusive classrooms. Curriculum should be revised. The content related to dealing with special students should be included in curriculum. Information regarding psychology of special children should also be the part of general psychology. Special subject or chapters on special education should be included in the curriculum that may motivate everyone to work together.

Training of Teacher Educators and Administrators

All participants also highlighted the need of preparing master trainers who may train other teachers for inclusive classrooms. They proposed that workshops and seminars should be conducted to raise awareness about inclusive education. A few heads also suggested that administrators be sent to countries where inclusive education practices are working well so that they can learn how to change the current situation in their own country while keeping the context in mind.

Proper Budget Allocation

Some heads expressed that there should be proper allocation of budget for preparing pre-service teachers for inclusive classrooms. Government should provide funding for achieving the goal of inclusion.

Provision of Necessary Infrastructure and Facilities

Most of heads proposed that there should be appropriate infrastructure for preparing pre-service teachers. There should be language labs, audio visual aids, and braille books for the preparation of pre-service teachers.

Recruitment of Teachers with Specialization in Special Education

Some heads also suggested that teachers from the field of special education be hired to teach in inclusive classrooms.

Inclusion on Pilot Testing Basis

Most of the heads proposed that the idea of inclusion be pilot tested. It was stated that inclusion should begin in a few schools and then spread to the rest of the institutions after a successful implementation.

Decrease in Class Size

Some heads also proposed reducing class size to meet the needs of individuals with special needs in inclusive classrooms.

Eradication of Special Education Institutions

One head expressed that special schools should be eradicated for implementing the idea of inclusion. Head 11 said:

"There should be one system for all students including normal and disable ones. There should be no special institutions separately for successful running if inclusive schools".

V. DISCUSSION

The analysis of participants' beliefs about inclusive education revealed that institution heads have a positive attitude toward inclusive education. They also expressed some reservations about pre-service teachers' preparation for inclusive classrooms. Different studies of developing countries have also highlighted this mix type of beliefs (Ahsan et al., 2012; Behlol, 2011; Khan & Behlol, 2014). Most of heads perceived that inclusion was a good thing because it allowed disabled children to interact with their normal peers. Furthermore, ordinary students learn to accept such diversity. One of the major challenges identified by heads of teacher training institutions was curriculum that was unable to respond to diversity. They perceived that curriculum should be reformed. They expressed that separate subject on special education or chapters should be included in the curriculum to enhance the awareness among pre-service teachers.

This challenge of curriculum reformation was also uncovered by studies (Ahsan, et al., 2012; Bahlol, 2011; Forlin, 2014; Premier, 2010). These studies indicated that curriculum should be updated to correspond to the training needs of pre-service teachers. Moreover, training of teachers for teaching pre-service teachers was also found to be a big challenge. Heads of institutions perceived that without proper training of teachers, effective teaching about inclusion is not possible. The training need of teachers is also highlighted in the studies of Harvey et al. (2010), and Kurth and Foley (2014). Another major challenge identified by heads was the provision of adequate infrastructure in teacher training institutes for pre-service teacher training. The availability of adequate infrastructure can contribute to the successful implementation of teacher education programmes for inclusive classrooms.

The strategies proposed by heads for addressing the challenges are in line with prior studies (Forlin & Sharma, 2009; Sarao, 2016). Reformation of curriculum for teacher education, teacher training, and proper infrastructure are also reflected in different studies (Forlin, 2013; Behlol, 2011; Forlin & Sharma, 2009; Khan & Behlol, 2014). These studies highlighted the proposed strategies in developing countries where the acceptability and proper inclusion is still debatable. The provision of equity through quality education is only possible if governments not only show a keen interest in policies but also provide practical measures for implementation as indicated by Forlin (2014). She explained that like all regions, the needs of developing countries differ greatly. They require policies and practises that not only adhere to international conventions but also provide appropriate methodology for successful inclusion. This methodology must be appropriate for their local and regional context.

VI. CONCLUSION

Heads' perceptions of inclusive education and the challenges they perceive for preparing pre-service teachers are similar to those of other developing countries. These difficulties are present in developing countries where proper curriculum, infrastructure, and awareness of disability and acceptance of such change do not exist. The need of the hour is to face the challenge with appropriate measures. There is a need to transform the rigid system into a flexible one in which every child can receive quality education, which is his fundamental and basic right. The concept of inclusive education can be implemented in Pakistan by adopting proper measures to eliminate the barriers and with the help of government.

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