



Inclusive education a “rhetoric” or “reality”? Teachers' perspectives and beliefs



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HIGHLIGHTS

- The official rhetoric on inclusive education has only minimal effects on classroom practices.
- A recurrent theme in the study was the idea of a “special education teacher” for a “special education student”.
- Deeply ingrained social factors such as “religion” and “teaching to test” have hindered the implementation of inclusive education policies.
- Systematic structural barriers such as “lack of training opportunities” emerged as a major concern.

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this interpretive study was to examine the perceptions and beliefs of general education teachers in Delhi, India, about the inclusion of students with disabilities (SWDs) in regular education classrooms. In this study, with hermeneutic phenomenology as its methodological framework, 15 semi-structured interviews of public school teachers in Delhi were conducted. Each interview, lasting from 30 to 45 min, was recorded and transcribed. The data were analyzed using a constant comparative method. The following conclusions were drawn: (1) Sociocultural ideologies on disability have affected the education of SWDs, and (2) systematic institutional barriers have led teachers to accept inclusion only “in theory.”

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1. Introduction

People with disabilities comprise a marginalized group in society. In some countries, such groups are barred from the social institution of schools. In addition, students with disabilities (SWDs) have had limited opportunities for integration into general education classrooms along with their non-disabled counterparts. However, the gradual but steady ideological changes from “mainstreaming” to “inclusion” of SWDs have led to a global social

movement, spurring several national policies in favor of inclusive classrooms.

While mainstreaming allows SWDs to be part of a regular education classroom, inclusion ensures their full participation in regular classroom activities by providing certain services. Mainstreaming requires the child to meet the demands of the general education classroom, which can be difficult at times. However, the inclusive model of education ensures that SWDs fully participate in regular education classrooms by facilitating access to the general education curriculum to their full learning potential (Forlin, 2012; Hettiarachchi & Das, 2014; Shah, Das, Desai, & Tiwari, 2014; Tiwari, 2014). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2005) defined inclusion as “a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all

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learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from” a full array of educational opportunities. This model of education is based on the premise that SWDs would be socially and academically successful when participating in general education classroom activities.

During the last four decades, many countries have successfully implemented policies in favor of including SWDs in general education classrooms. SWDs are now increasingly considered an integral part of regular education classrooms in both developed and developing countries (Alur & Timmons, 2009; Forlin, 2012; Grech, 2011; Lei & Myers, 2011). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2000) has been instrumental in implementing inclusive policies for SWDs in general education classrooms. Some countries have followed suit by implementing legislative and policy measures to promote a social justice framework, leading to a shift in the worldview on education for SWDs.

This shift in ideologies on inclusion of SWDs has been accompanied by policy frameworks that promote inclusive practices in some countries. However, in many countries, the policy framework on inclusion is not always implemented (Croft, 2013; Mcconkey & Bradley, 2010). Often, the implementation does not translate into successful inclusion of SWDs in general education classrooms (Johansson, 2014; Singal, 2008, 2010). Moreover, in many countries including India, policy frameworks on education for SWDs embedded within Education for All seldom transform the teaching practices in schools. For example, in a study conducted in Cyprus, Symeonidou and Phtiaka (2009) concluded that teachers' perceptions of inclusive education in general schools are reflective of the practices of charitable organizations. Furthermore, they found that the majority of teachers believed that SWDs be taught by special education teachers. Similarly, in a study conducted in Sri Lanka, Hettiarachchi and Das (2014), Shah et al. (2014), Tiwari (2014) found that teachers perceived SWDs as “misfits” in the general education classrooms. These attitudes were reflected in the teachers' comments and narratives. In a phenomenological study on teachers in Finland, Mäkinen (2013) found that teachers perceive inclusive education as a “one size fits all” approach primarily because of the negative attitudes towards the education of SWDs. Finally, based on a survey study in the United Kingdom, Avramidis, Bayliss, and Burden (2000) concluded that inclusion practices were unsuccessful largely due to teachers' lack of training in special education instructional methods. However, one size does not fit all (Sharma & Das, 2015). Inclusive education requires instruction to be tailored to meet the unique needs of each individual child.

Ironically, inclusive education for all has not been realized in spite of the policy frameworks and legislation initiatives. While attitudes toward SWDs is key to the success of inclusive education programs, the lack of trained staff, resources, teaching tools, collaboration among professionals, and infrastructure also hinder inclusive education (Alur & Timmons, 2009; Singal, 2006). Researchers argue that educators will continue to resist inclusive education policies with no comprehensive support system to promote a broader understanding on inclusion including provisions of services and clarity of the policy provisions (David & Kuyini, 2012; Hettiarachchi & Das, 2014; Shah et al., 2014; Tiwari, 2014).

2. Theoretical framework

During the past four decades, researchers have examined the factors and strategies that lead to successful implementation of inclusive education policies and programs. Many educator-related factors have been implicated in the success and failure of inclusion. Classroom teachers' attitudes or beliefs towards including SWDs comprise one such factor. The research literature on this

factor suggests that negative attitudes “lead to low expectations of a person with a disability” (Forlin, Tait, Carroll, & Jobling, 1999, p.209), in turn leading to few learning opportunities, impaired performance, and further lowered expectations. Consequently, Tait and Purdie (2000) and Boyle, Topping, and Jindal-Snape (2013) highlighted the importance of teachers developing positive attitudes towards disability early in their professional development. Positive attitudes “can lead to higher expectations, increased learning opportunities and increased performance of learners” (Forlin et al., 1999, p. 209).

Several theories have been proposed to explain educators' approaches to the development of inclusive education. Some important theories include the tolerance theory (Huber, Rosenfeld, & Fiorello, 2001), the practical theory and action theory (Nixon, Martin, Mckeown, & Ranson, 1997), and the social cognitive theory (Slee, 2004).

The present study aims to examine teachers' perceptions and beliefs about inclusive education, in terms of the theory of reasoned action (TRA), as proposed by Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) and illustrated in Fig. 1. The TRA suggests that one's behavior is determined by his or her intention to engage in the behavior. For instance, classroom teachers in New Delhi will include SWDs in their classrooms based on the following factors: 1. Attitudes: One's beliefs on the attributes and outcomes of including (or not including) SWDs in one's classrooms, weighted by one's evaluations of these attributes or outcomes. 2. Subjective norms: one's high regard of others' approval or disapproval of inclusive education (normative beliefs), weighted by one's motivation to comply with others' important beliefs. 3. Perceived behavioral control: one's perceived control over the implementation of inclusive education (knowledge of strategies).

In general, the more favorable the attitude and subjective norm, and the greater the perceived control, the stronger the person's intention to perform the behavior in question. Therefore, according to this theory, the more favorable the attitude and subjective norms towards inclusion, and the greater the perceived control in terms of skills and strategies, the stronger the classroom teacher's intention to include a child with a disability in his/her classroom.

3. An overview of inclusive education in India

Inclusive education has been practiced in India for 40 years. It was originally implemented by the Government of India (GoI) as the Inclusive Education for Disabled Children (IEDC) scheme in 1974. Subsequent initiatives – most notably the 1995 Persons with Disabilities (PWD) Act and the 2001 *Sarva Siksha Abhiyan* (SSA) – ensured the right of all SWDs to regular education. This implies that children with special needs are placed in regular education classrooms and provided with the necessary services and support.

Although the education of SWDs was made an integral component of Indian education by the SSA in 2001, it was later solidified by the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE, 2009). The Right to Education (RTE) Act requires schools to provide free and compulsory education to all students including SWDs. Although RTE is not specifically targeted at SWDs, it has helped promote their inclusive education. Governmental legislations such as PWD (1995) or RTE (2009) have sparked public interest in and engagement with education reforms such as equal educational opportunities for SWDs.

However, in many ways, these legislations and policy initiatives have only brought about a symbolic change. Teachers tend to accept government policies only at the symbolic level due to the rigid bureaucratic hierarchy (Singal, 2010). However, a teacher's compliance with the policy in principle does not necessarily

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