

Relationship between Knowledge, Attitudes, Concerns and Competency Skills of Regular Teachers about Inclusive Education

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ABSTRACT

The present study explored the relationship between knowledge, attitudes and competency skills of regular school teachers (n=149) pertaining to children with special education needs (CSEN) and Inclusive Education (IE). The knowledge about CSEN and IE were measured using a 4 point rating scale and an informal questionnaire that were specifically modified for this study. The attitudes, concerns and competency skills were measured using 4 point rating scales. Results of the study indicated significant correlations between knowledge about CSEN and attitudes towards disability and teacher efficacy for inclusive practices; attitudes towards disability and attitudes towards inclusive practices and attitudes towards inclusive education and concerns about inclusive education and teacher efficacy for inclusive practices. The findings offers insight into preparation of training programs for teachers for successful implementation of inclusive education.

Keywords: *Children with Special Education Needs, Inclusive Education, knowledge, attitudes, concerns, competency skills.*

Children with Special Education Needs (CSEN) in India have so far been mostly educated in the 'segregated' model. Integrated education has been in practice in some schools for children with milder forms of impairment. However, following The Salamanca Statement and Framework of Action on Special Needs Education (1994), the Education policy in India has been moving towards Inclusion model. The Right to Education Act and Sarva Shiksha Abhyan are two key policies that have brought about a lot of awareness among the varied stakeholders involved in the education of CSEN.

Inclusion and inclusive education are concerned with the quest for equity, social justice, participation, and the removal of all forms of exclusionary assumptions and practices. It is based

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Relationship between Knowledge, Attitudes, Concerns and Competency Skills of Regular Teachers about Inclusive Education

on a positive view of difference and has at its heart the principle that all pupils, including those who are 'different', are considered to be valued and respected members of the school community. (Zoniou-Sideria & Vlachou, 2006).

Inclusive education differs from its predecessor 'integrated education', where the latter can be described as "the process of moving children from special education settings into regular classrooms where they undertake most, if not all of their schooling" (Ashman and Elkins, 1998). Here the students are required to and prepared for adapting and accommodating to the existing normal curriculum (Carrington and Holm, 2005) and the special education system is A PART of the of the general education. However, the inclusion model requires the school community and its stakeholders, the parents, teachers, management and staff including the education system to be restructured to meet the needs of the diverse learners, including the CSEN. The needs of the diverse learners are met within the same roof as their non-disabled peers and within the school hours. Here the special education is an INTEGRAL PART of the general education system. Both these are different from the most prevalent 'segregated' special school concept where the special education component is APART from the general education system.

Inclusive education can be very effective in combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all. It provides opportunity for co-operative learning and team work at a very young age, ultimately resulting in a holistic learning of academic and life skills including social skills within the curricular framework. It makes education cost-effective by including all stakeholder's participation and involvement (Gillies and Carrington, 2004). The benefits of such inclusive education for CSEN include positive social, communication and personal development. It may bring about moderate improvement in their academic skills as they may lack the more individualized support. However, positive peer interactions and inclusive experiences can boost their self-esteem and confidence levels and prepare them for the realistic inclusion in future. For children without disabilities, when inclusion is part of their development from early childhood, it teaches them to respect diversity and inculcates positive attitudes and perception towards persons with disabilities. It also teaches them ways to works as team with their counterparts with disabilities and to be their spokespersons and stand alongside them in times of need (Frederickson & Cline, 2002).

The process of integrating the special education systems with the general education system requires making significant changes pertaining to reconstruction and realignment of the educational components of 'curriculum, instruction and assessment'. In addition to modifications in curriculum, instruction and assessment, rethinking and modifications are required in the other components of program evaluation, professional development and accountability of the teachers.

Relationship between Knowledge, Attitudes, Concerns and Competency Skills of Regular Teachers about Inclusive Education

The success of the inclusive model is dependent upon such an overhaul involving both the system and the stakeholders responsible for it (Trueba et al., 1997, Smith, 1998).

Restructuring of the education system involves modifying the thoughts, beliefs, concerns and skills of the educators who are the primary stakeholders in the implementation and success of the inclusive model. Such restructured thought and practice can only be possible if the differences in knowledge and experiences are recognized, respected and represented (Carrington, 1999; Carrington and Robinson, 2004; Moss, 2003). Understanding the Knowledge-attitude-behavior continuum is key to such reconstructions. In general, better knowledge influences positive attitudes and when equipped with appropriate and accurate knowledge and a positive attitude towards the task, efficacy and competency in performing it increases. Knowledge is directly associated with social-emotional factors as in a person's perception of self and in relation to others (self-esteem, self-confidence, self-awareness etc.). As for Inclusive Education, Awareness and knowledge about the various disabilities, their signs and symptoms, causes and effect of certain behaviors can shape or reshape our attitudes towards CSEN. Sentiments, attitudes and concerns are key factors that determine the teacher's participation and lead to the success or failure of the inclusive education program. The amount and extent of exposure of the teachers to the world of disabilities and CSE Along with their personal or professional experiences related to the same bears a significant influence in their participation and contribution to the inclusive education model.

The success of the inclusive education depends on the regular teacher's support to inclusion. Their perspective and perceptions of CSEN and inclusive education influences the instructional implications. Hence understanding of the regular teacher's knowledge, their attitudes and competency skills is crucial to bring about appropriate changes to their acceptance of diverse learners in their classes and in their instructional strategies (Janney, Snell, Beers & Raynes, 1995; Bender, Vail & Scott, 1995; Stanovich & Jordan, 1998; Soodak, Podell & Lehman, 1998; McLesky & Waldron, 2002). Across the globe, there have been positive changes in inclusion following many legislative acts, publications and awareness programs and training programs (Blanton, Blanton & Cross, 1994; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996; Stanovich & Jordan, 1998; Soodak et al., 1998; McLesky & Waldron, 2002). Special educators due to the nature of their specialized training where they have gained knowledge and have experience in teaching CSEN have reported better understanding of inclusion and are better able to motivate such students better than their general education counterparts (Buell, Hallam, Gamel-McCormick, & Scheer, 1999).

Teacher attitude is one of the essential factors in determining the effectiveness of inclusion (Weiner, 2003). Teachers who are guided by their beliefs and values about the importance of inclusion, are able to effectively implement it and also have been able to enhance the classroom

Relationship between Knowledge, Attitudes, Concerns and Competency Skills of Regular Teachers about Inclusive Education

performance of CSEN (Campbell et al., 2003; Forlin et al., 2011; and Winter, 2013). Negative attitudes towards CSEN has been observed to be resulting in low expectations of a person leading to reduced opportunities for them to learn. This results in a cascading effect on their impaired self-concept, esteem, confidence further leading to a deficit cycle (Palmer, 2006, Campbell et al, 2003). Comparatively positive attitudes have resulted in higher expectations with enhanced effect of their performances leading to better self-esteem and expectations (Angelides, 2008; Woolfson et al, 2007). Some of the factors that contribute to teachers' attitudes are their age, gender, work experience, previous education and experiences or exposure to CSEN. The type of disability by itself does either bring about a positive or negative attitude (Engelbrecht et al., 2015; Forlin & Chambers, 2011; Oswald & Swart, 2011, Bradshaw and Mundia, 2006).

Regular school teachers' in principle are in favor of inclusive education, however their commitment to the same is limited due to significant concerns. Many teachers are conflicted in their opinions too. Many regular school teachers were concerned that inclusion might interfere with their ability to teach in the traditional manner i.e. deliver classroom instruction via a didactic approach (Jangira, Singh, & Yadav, 1995). Individualizing lessons, collaborating with other teachers, modifying lesson plans, inadequate training, huge class sizes, lack of assistive devices and equipment and support personnel, the lack of specialized training and support for child care providers to provide inclusive child care have been some of the most commonly expressed concerns with regards to teaching CSEN in inclusion settings (Sharma, Forlin and Loreman, 2008; Jung, 2007; Leatherman & Niemeyer, 2005; Auxter et al., 2001; Grove and Fisher, 1999, Fewell, 1993). Apart from these physical resources, the negative attitudes from other stakeholders as peers and their parents about the effect of inclusion on the quality and standard of education on their "normal" children was also expressed (Rafferty and Griffin, 2005).

A teacher's behavior in class is likely to be influenced by their own efficacy expectations and their belief that what they do will be effective (Palmer, 2006). Teaching efficacy is another potentially important variable with regard to teaching learners with learning support needs. Teaching efficacy relates to a teacher's feelings of his/her own capacity to successfully facilitate learning (Brady and Woolfson, 2008). It has been found to be related to student outcomes such as achievement (Ross, 1992), and to motivation (Midgley, Feldlaufer, & Eccles, 1989). Other reasons that might contribute to the lower self-efficacy and attitudes toward inclusion include the insufficient working conditions inside the classroom, lack of physical equipment, class density, teachers' burnout because of stress and lack of motivation, lack of professional and qualified personnel in general education settings which embrace IE.

Relationship between Knowledge, Attitudes, Concerns and Competency Skills of Regular Teachers about Inclusive Education

METHOD

The aim of the present study was to explore the relationship between knowledge, attitudes, concerns and competency of regular school teachers about children with special education needs and Inclusive education.

The final study sample (n=149) consisted of both male (n=3) and female (n=146) regular school teachers. Majority of the participants (n=72) were in the age range of 26-35 years and 92 teachers were teaching primary section (KG to class 5). 76 teachers had undergraduate and 50 teachers had post graduate degree. However there were 14 teachers who only had a diploma or had completed secondary school. Only 68 of them had either a B.Ed, M.Ed, D.T.Ed or pursuing a teaching degree. The majority of 81 teachers did not have any teaching degree or diploma. Majority of teachers (108) reported having 0-5years of teaching experience. Of the teachers who participated, only 5 teachers had more than 16years of teaching experience. 96 teachers reported having no experience teaching any kind of children with disabilities. However 88 of them reported have average level of confidence in teaching/handling diverse learners. 73 teachers did not have any knowledge of policies or legislations pertaining to children with disabilities.

The participants were asked to fill out likert type scales to measure their knowledge about Inclusive Education and CSEN in the domains of concept of disability, causes and characteristics, identification and assessment, teaching and training methods and guidance and counseling. Other tools with likert type scales were related to attitudes towards disability and inclusive education, Sentiments, Attitudes and Concerns about Inclusive Education and the Teacher Efficacy for Inclusive Practices.

RESULTS

Table 1: Correlations of Knowledge, Attitudes, Concerns and Teacher Efficacy

		Knowledge CSEN	Knowledge IE	Attitudes towards Disability	Attitudes towards IE	Concerns about IE	Teacher Efficacy for Inclusive Practices
Knowledge CSEN	Pearson Correlation	1	-.108	.247**	.092	-.118	.181*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.188	.002	.263	.152	.028
	N	149	149	149	149	149	149
Knowledge IE	Pearson Correlation	-.108	1	-.016	-.003	-.062	-.018
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.188		.845	.970	.455	.828
	N	149	149	149	149	149	149
Attitudes towards	Pearson Correlation	.247**	-.016	1	.239**	.074	.095
	Sig. (2-tailed)						

Relationship between Knowledge, Attitudes, Concerns and Competency Skills of Regular Teachers about Inclusive Education

Disability	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002	.845		.003	.370	.248
	N	149	149	149	149	149	149
Attitudes towards IE	Pearson Correlation	.092	-.003	.239**	1	.196*	.206*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.263	.970	.003		.017	.012
	N	149	149	149	149	149	149
Concerns about IE	Pearson Correlation	-.118	-.062	.074	.196*	1	-.108
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.152	.455	.370	.017		.188
	N	149	149	149	149	149	149
Teacher Efficacy for Inclusive Practices	Pearson Correlation	.181*	-.018	.095	.206*	-.108	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.028	.828	.248	.012	.188	
	N	149	149	149	149	149	149

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

To have an overview about the relationship among the variables, an inter-correlation was done and their results are portrayed in the above table. From the table, we can observe that statistically significant correlations were found between the following variables:

(a) Knowledge about children with special education needs and attitudes towards disability and teacher efficacy for inclusive practices (b) Attitudes towards disability and attitudes towards inclusive education (c) attitudes towards inclusive education and concerns about inclusive education and teacher efficacy for inclusive practices. No correlations were found between knowledge about children with special education needs and attitudes towards disability and teacher efficacy for inclusive practices; attitudes towards disability and attitudes towards inclusive practices and attitudes towards inclusive education and concerns about inclusive education and teacher efficacy for inclusive practices.

The findings of the present study are similar to similar studies conducted previously by Kuyini and Desai, 2007, Sharma et al., 2008 & 2012, Srivasatava et al., 2015. Correlation between knowledge and attitudes have been reported previously by many studies indicating better knowledge results in more positive attitudes and lack of knowledge is related to negative attitudes. This has been reported where teacher's equipped with knowledge about available support services for students with special needs held more positive attitudes towards including them in mainstream classes and also provided adaptive instruction (Pinar & Sucuoglu, 2011; Philpott et al, 2010). Schools having principals with better knowledge of inclusion made more provisions for inclusion and hence were more supportive of teachers for inclusion. The present study is also similar to that of Lumpe et al. (1998) who found that attitude and perceived

Relationship between Knowledge, Attitudes, Concerns and Competency Skills of Regular Teachers about Inclusive Education

behavioral control were significant influences on the use of cooperative learning in science instruction.

Studies have indicated that training and professional development have an impact on teachers' attitude towards inclusion as they enhance and update the knowledge component. Enhancing of knowledge component by preservice training, regular professional development, increasing practical exposure to teaching in inclusive classes have also reduced teacher concerns towards inclusive practices. Previous knowledge and experience in teaching an inclusive class, adequate administrative support, and support from resources as in different professionals providing services to these students and support from other teachers have also been reported in a positive attitude with enhanced teacher efficacy in handling these students in a mainstream class. (Bradley & West, 1994; Colling, Fishbaugh, & Hermanson, 2003; Hastings & Oakford, 2003; Smith & Smith, 2000; Forlin, 1997; Lambert, Curran, Prigge, & Shorr, 2005; Beacham & Rouse, 2012; Swain, Nordness, & LeaJanssen, 2012; Guzman, 1994; Heflin & Bullock, 1999; Villa, Thousand, Meyers & Nevin, 1996; Irvine et al., 2010; Martin, 2010; Freytag, 2001; Lee and Low, 2013).

While enhancing knowledge results in positive attitude changes and better teacher efficacy it is also reported that teachers who have confidence in their skills and strategies, and believe that their input, ideas and contributions are valued, tend to have a positive attitude towards inclusion (Hodkinson, 2006). Though teachers and administrators supported inclusion in principle, their lack of knowledge resulted in their unpreparedness for implementation of the program (Garrison-Wade, Sobel and Fulmer, 2007).

CONCLUSION

Knowledge has been seen to be correlated with both attitudes and teacher efficacy. Lack of knowledge does influence negative attitudes, increased concerns and inadequate teacher competency to teach students with special educational needs in the regular classrooms. To make inclusion successful and to make lives of students with special educational needs more productive, it is necessary to primarily enhance the knowledge of general education teachers. Knowledge enhancement can be done through various programs as in modifying the existing teacher training curriculum to include topics on Inclusive education and provide more practical exposure during the training years. For teachers who are already working in the regular schools and other stakeholders as in the school management, peers and parents of children without any special education needs, knowledge can be provided through awareness programs as in seminars and workshops and through professional development programs. Interaction with students with special education needs and showcasing their talents can also enhance knowledge and modify attitudes. As teachers are equipped with knowledge through such programs and “hands on”

Relationship between Knowledge, Attitudes, Concerns and Competency Skills of Regular Teachers about Inclusive Education

training, their competency skills can be increased. With increase in knowledge and skills and a positive attitude, their concerns towards inclusive practices can be reduced.

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Relationship between Knowledge, Attitudes, Concerns and Competency Skills of Regular Teachers about Inclusive Education

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Relationship between Knowledge, Attitudes, Concerns and Competency Skills of Regular Teachers about Inclusive Education

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**Relationship between Knowledge, Attitudes, Concerns and Competency Skills of Regular Teachers
about Inclusive Education**

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Relationship between Knowledge, Attitudes, Concerns and Competency Skills of Regular Teachers about Inclusive Education

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