

Scope of Inclusion from Teacher Educators' Perspective

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Abstract- The main aim of this paper was to analyse the scope of inclusion in the Teacher Education program from the teacher educators' perspective, and identification of the training needs for the education of students with disability (SWD). 20 Educators from two teacher education colleges volunteered in this study. Applying qualitative methodology, the data were collected through Focus Group Discussions (FGD) based on an open-ended questionnaire. The narrative data were analysed using an inductive system of categorization and coding. Three objectives were analysed with respect to (i) the Profile of teacher educators according to their previous training; (ii) the importance of inclusive education for teacher educators and the reasons for the training of teacher educators; and (iii) the identification contents on inclusive education considered essential for teacher education. In conclusion, the need to re-design the curriculum of the teacher education programs and implementation of that. In addition, the participating educators have stated that they have become more sensitive and more prepared to address the SWD learners (DAL) they received specific knowledge and training skills on disability-related issues. A clear conclusion of this study was that institutes of teacher education should involve everyone including SWDs in the process of implementing inclusive education in the Teacher Education programs.

Keywords: teacher educator, students with disability, inclusive education, focus group discussion, differently-abled learners, universal design for learning.

1. INTRODUCTION

According to the educational stages, the inclusion of learners at the teacher education level is especially needed to provide quality education for all types of learners at different stages of education, including those having different types of disabilities (Messiou et al., 2016¹). According to Lourens and Swartz (2016)², inclusivity is related to the feeling of being an included member of a student community who truly belongs and participates in the mainstream education process, like any other student with their respective potentialities. Teaching for inclusivity entails embedding the practices of universal design for learning (UDL) in the classroom teaching-learning processes on a prescribed curriculum (Griful-Freixenet et al., 2017)³.

Globally, as well as in India, there is an ongoing movement towards an all-inclusive tertiary education system towards the effective access of all groups of students who are not traditionally represented as is the case of SWD (Lika et al., 2019⁴). However, ensuring admission to teacher education programme is not enough in ensuring an inclusive education process, it affects school education, and also in other educational stages. In recent years, some authors (Kilpatrick et al., 2017⁵) claimed that new policies are needed to prioritize the admission of SWD students for the continuation of their respective studies, and their success (Kilpatrick et al., 2017⁵). In fact, although the number of SWDs enrolled in universities and in teacher education programs has been increasing, though retention is not focused on. The main reason to explain this situation is the lack of educational activities which respond adequately to the needs of those students (Gibson et al., 2016⁶). In addition, these students have much probability of higher dropout risk than the rest of the regular students (Lombardi et al., 2016⁷). Such policies are particularly relevant considering that achieving a university degree or diploma can improve the access to the job markets for people with disabilities (Järkestig-Berggren et al., 2016⁸). In higher education, it has been acknowledged in various studies as an opportunity for these students to improve their quality of life (Papay & Griffin, 2013⁹).

In recent years, in addition to the development of educational policies for the inclusion of students with disabilities, some actions have been adopted and resources have been introduced to favour the inclusion of SWDs with disabilities. For example, the creation of support offices for SWDs or the incorporation of technologies for inclusive learning. Despite that, as Gale et al. (2017¹⁰) pointed out that providing resources to colleges and universities is not enough to achieve total inclusion of the SWDs. The efforts must focus on knowing more about the educational processes and actions developed by the academics and their improvement, to walk towards more inclusive classrooms.

1.1 Learning Barriers for Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities usually encounter significant barriers in their university trajectories (Anderson et al., 2018¹¹; Bell et al., 2017¹²). Mostly those are architectural and organizational, whereas others involve accessibility to the subjects (aspects that hinder the regular teaching-learning processes). In some studies, students with disabilities identify academics as the main barrier, referring to their negative attitudes and lack of training to meet the student's educational needs. As Hopkins (2011¹³) concludes, that the curriculum is frequently rigid and non-inclusive and can exclude certain students. For example, some academics refuse to adapt their methods of teaching, examination procedures, and teaching-learning materials, nor do they use a total learning environment that does not promote inclusivity (Mutanga, 2018¹⁴). Moreover, various studies have highlighted that the knowledge, attitudes, and goodwill of academics to offer curricular adaptations are the critical factors for the success of SWDs (Langorgen & Magnus, 2018¹⁵;

Leyser et al., 2011¹⁶; Zhang, et. al., 2019¹⁷). Considering these situations, SWDs demand more trained, informed, sensitive, and empathetic academic support for their learning.

1.2 Training Needs on Inclusion Education in Teacher Education

Although most studies have shown the students' perspectives, other researchers have given voice to academics to know their experiences and their training needs on inclusive education and disability (Kendall, 2017¹⁸). Several studies have pointed out the limited experience, the lack of training to deal with SWDs, and even the instructional practices of academics have been found very poor. Academics usually recognize their little experience in teaching SWDs. Moreover, they explain that they do not have enough knowledge about inclusive educational practices and teaching methods to attend the student diversity (Langorgen et al., 2018¹⁹). Despite that, academics show a willingness to make all the adaptations that students may need (Collins et al., 2018²⁰), and they display a high interest in receiving training on inclusive education from the Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI) or any other apex body. In fact, they sometimes demand more training experiences from National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE)/Universities. In addition to the topic of inclusive practices, academics ask for more training and information on support services for SWDs, and the legislation governing their rights of them. In short, academics need to know what the RCI/ NCTE/ University/ society expects of them and what to do when they have SWDs in their classrooms.

1.3 Training of Academics on Disability and for Inclusive Education

In India, as in most countries, academic training in higher education is voluntary, and pedagogical training is not mandatory to become a teacher (Gunersel & Etienne, 2014²¹). Teaching at the university requires a Ph.D., which qualifies to be a researcher, but no specific training is needed for the teaching activities, especially for SWDs. Moreover, research is the most relevant area in an academic's career. So they normally prioritize the development of their curriculum transaction as a researcher over the improvement of their teaching skills through continuous training. Thus, academics pay less attention and time to their teaching activities. It has been a problematic area when we talk about faculty training. Despite that, all the regular universities in India offer a variety of courses and programs for acquiring academic qualifications and the improvement of their teaching-learning processes. However, pedagogical training should not be left behind to the goodwill of the academics, and support staff rather it should be mandatory in higher education too (Moriña, 2019²²).

The new training programs show that teacher training on disability, inclusive education, or universal design for learning (UDL) may have a positive impact on every student (Cunningham, 2013²³ Murray et al., 2014²⁴). Some studies have concluded that the training received by academics produces better outcomes in knowledge and sensitivity toward SWDs, and improves their positive attitudes (Davies et al., 2013²⁵). Thus, training on disability and inclusive practices are necessary and hence recommended. Moreover, considering that many students may decide not to disclose their disabilities (Grimes et al., 2018), so, academic staff should design for wide accessibility and inclusive syllabi beforehand.

1.4 Training Needs in Teacher Education

Regarding training needs in higher education, the following aspects of curricular content for teachers are found important according to the academics – (1) knowledge about legal obligations, learning techniques to design the syllabus, (2) providing an adequate environment for students in the classroom, (3) receiving information about available resources for SWDs, (4) effective instructional practices, (5) knowledge of the characteristics about the disability, or information about how SWDs can have access to the learning processes to achieve skills of teaching (Gelbar et al., 2015²⁶).

Considering the barriers that students with disabilities may encounter during their education, and their academic training needs, devoting more effort to training educators should become a key task for teacher education. As Doughty and Allan (2008²⁷) claimed, higher education must take responsibility for meeting the needs of all learners.

2. METHODS

2.1 Methodological Framework

The study aimed to design, develop, and evaluate a teacher training program on inclusive education and the attitude of academics. Before designing the program, an initial evaluation has been carried out to know the training needs and previous knowledge of the participants. Through this phase, it was planned to ensure that the program was tailored to the real characteristics and needs of the participants that would receive the training.

2.2 Participants

A total of 20 teacher educators from two teacher education Colleges, namely, RKM Sikshanmandira, an autonomous PG College, and SPR PG College of Education of West Bengal participated in this study. The one-day training program was organized by the author on inclusive education. In addition, the training course discussed that participants should commit themselves to make changes in their classrooms into inclusive ones.

In the first instance, a set of criteria for the selection of participants has been followed:

- Participants having experience working with SWD.
- Both genders have represented the content for the teachers as they sampled.
- Diversity regarding participants' experience of teaching as faculty in Higher Education with SWDs, is considered.
- Participants who showed a strong commitment to introducing changes towards inclusion in the classroom.
- Availability of faculty to participate in the program session.

The sample was defined by the educators' willingness to participate. Finally, 20 academics participated, as two of them did not start the program and a third one dropped out after starting. Some of them had never taught SWDs in their classes. Nevertheless, other criteria like diversity in gender and in years of experience could not be met. Regarding their commitment to putting into practice the knowledge and skills learned during the teacher education, faculties informed that it was a fundamental key to participate after the training, an evaluation was made, and monitoring was made throughout their practice session.

In relation to the gender of academics, 13 were women and 16 were men, and with respect to prior experience with SWDs in the classroom, 14 participants had at least one student with a disability in their classes.

2.3 Questionnaire

This paper focuses on analysing the training needs of academics with respect to inclusive education, and disability. An initial evaluation before starting a training program on inclusive education has been conducted. The purpose was to know the answers to the questions – (i) What was the profile of academics according to their previous training? (ii) Why is there a need for training on disability and inclusive education? and (iii) What training topics did they consider essential?

2.4 Techniques of Data Collection

The methodology of the study was qualitative. The data were collected through group semi-structured group interview narration and open-ended discussions. The technique of data collection was Focus Group Discussions (FGD) with individual interviews due to the existence of the diversity of intersubjective ideas and approaches that were generated from the interactions among the participants. They had wide opportunities to share their experiences, previous knowledge, and training expectations. Moreover, it was a chance for participant academicians and the researcher to get to know each other and to learn about the needs of the group. However, three of the participants were unable to attend the FGD. In those cases, it was decided to conduct individual interviews, in addition, the open-ended questionnaire was used to know participants' knowledge and skill about some concepts of inclusive education that would be studied in the research and to collect personal information. First, each participant filled in the questionnaire individually. Second, the participants were divided into four groups for FGDs of each of the groups.

Some of the questions that guided both techniques were as follows:

- (i) Why are you interested in participating in this training program?
- (ii) Do you think it is necessary to receive training on disability and inclusive education at the higher education Level? Why?
- (iii) What training do you consider essential to attend to students with disabilities?
- (iv) What are your expectations from this training?
- (v) What do you expect to learn?
- (vi) What prior knowledge about disability-related issues do you have?
- (vii) Was it already known to you? How?
- (viii) What are your current needs for drawing attention to students with disabilities?
- (ix) What are the possible benefits of the training you are going to undertake?

The duration of the group interviews was approximately 1 hr 30 mins each, and the individual interviews lasted between 40 to 60 min. All the information was gathered through audio recording and transcribed verbatim with narrations.

Following the proposal of Miles and Huberman (1994)²⁸ for the analysis of qualitative data, a technique of inductive system of categorization and codification was used to compare all the information, which was previously transcribed. For the thematic and structural analysis of the narration derived from FGD, this system was made up of different categories of themes, viz., motivations, expectations, previous training, training importance, and training needs.

2.4 Ethical Issues

Finally, regarding the ethical issues of the study, the confidentiality and anonymity of the information were guaranteed. In addition, the participants were intimated that if they like may withdraw from the study at any time and the related information would be deleted from the analysis.

3. RESULTS

The findings are organized into three areas:

3.1 Profiles of Teacher Educators According to Their Training

Three different profiles of teacher educators were identified according to their previous training. On one hand, it was found that educators who had never participated in a training program related to inclusive education and who lacked experience in meeting the needs of SWDs. These academicians were not only unaware of anything concerning curricular adaptations and the institutional rules on disability-related matters, but also admitted a lack of training in pedagogical practices in general.

On the other hand, there were some educators who had received basic training through academic programs and/or workshops on disability. Despite participating in this training, they thought that their knowledge was scarce and focused exclusively on theory, without any practical orientation. Many of these activities were based on introductory training sessions that did not provide them with the necessary tools to attend the SWDs. In other cases, prior training in this topic consisted in the field of Psychology or Education. Even with this preparation, they considered that this did not enable them to adapt their teaching in the teacher education institutes because, they had learned about inclusive education from their common sense, not at the teacher education level.

Finally, the profiles of the faculty were identified, without much training in inclusive education, had to teach the content in the teacher education program, so they become self-taught to perform their inclusive teaching activity.

3.2 Training as the Key to Inclusion in the Teacher Education Program

The teacher educators who participated in this study stated that the situation in a classroom with the SWD was not easy, especially when they had no prior experience. Their lack of knowledge and training on disability was identified as one of the biggest obstacles to their student's learning and inclusion. They said that such training was essential and could benefit them because they often felt social pressure or fear in new situations related to students' needs. The training could help them to feel confident about what they could encounter in the teaching-learning process. Therefore, the participant educators recognized the need for training on disability and inclusive education. Those who had students with disabilities acquired experience on the topic and were sensitized, although they did not know how to meet the student's special needs.

In general, according to educators, training is the solution to many of the barriers in their teaching practices including the inclusion of SWDs. They were aware that improving their teaching implies a commitment to their professional development through in-service training. These participants acknowledged that if they were better trained and knew how to meet the student's needs, people with disabilities could enjoy their experience and participate normally in the learning processes, just like their classmates. They considered that academic staff should first be sensitized, and subsequently be trained in inclusive education. Thus, the compulsory nature of training in inclusive education would be justified, as it is a vehicle to promote the change of attitudes and to become a better professional teacher, and, thereby, be able to teach all the students with equity, from the viewpoint of diversity, respecting their heterogeneity.

On the contrary, the participant educators are found already aware that teacher education has been changing as it is becoming more rights-based, and student-friendly and thus more SWDs are enrolling in the field of education. Therefore, academics should need to be better prepared. However, they had informed that there was hardly any training program aimed at the inclusion of SWDs at the teacher education/ higher education level. Teacher training/education was found scarce and there was a lack of information about it, and it was also observed that the participants who were more sensitized and more trained in inclusive education were sensitized through such training programs.

3.3 What to Train from Theory to Practice

The participants indicated the areas and aspects of the training that they considered crucial. Legislation on disability. Accordingly, one of the prime issues was the need for RCI approved sufficient experts on disability legislation, which they considered essential. They had absolutely no knowledge about the university legislation on the rights of students with disabilities, or about the obligations of academics toward this group.

3.4 Support services

The participants also indicated the need to know the counselling services and specialists in higher education from whom they could seek support and learn the protocol on how to treat these SWDs fairly. They did not even know that there was a support office in the University for such students from which they could request help. Therefore, they requested more information about the functioning of this service to seek aid that could guide their teaching practices.

3.5 Practical knowledge

However, their greatest concern was how to apply the rights-based laws to SWDs. For the participants, knowing the RCI regulatory framework meant that they would know what to do and how to behave in specific situations, as they were currently unaware of the protocols to be followed with SWDs. Participants realized that the RCI regulations could tell them what to do but not how to do it. Therefore, their interest was focused on acquiring useful and applicable knowledge, rather than just memorizing theories and laws. By useful knowledge, they meant those abilities, skills, and resources that they could acquire and use to deal with students with an SWD in the classroom, such as curricular adaptations. Indeed, there were many types of adaptations that academic staff could carry out in the classroom with students having specific needs. Among these, the one that was repeated the most in the interviewees' discourses referred to modifications of the exam times and formats, study materials, classroom activities, presentations with PPTs, technological resources, and the infrastructure of the classrooms. These were their main concerns because they thought that, in some cases, the students could not pass the course without these necessary adaptations.

3.6 Information and institutional support

Participants also noted the need for specific plans at the faculty level that are committed to inclusive education, informing about the available services, considering the importance of developing inclusive courses, and helping the academics to understand how to apply the university regulations that regulate the interventions and protocols for inclusive education to be followed. This would be possible if the information is made accessible, and the resources to address the difficulties are available at higher education institutions.

3.7 Types of disability and specific educational needs

Among the skills that they would like to learn was the capacity to identify students with disabilities in the classroom, as well as to differentiate the types of disabilities to know what adaptations they could need. This related to the educator's lack of information because he/she was not informed in advance when there was a student with disabilities enrolled in the course. This was due to the student's right not to disclose their disability if they so wish. Therefore, the participants thought that if they knew how to identify specific cases during the first contact, they could gain time to design the relevant adaptations for inclusion in education.

A controversial aspect for educators was the difficulty of applying the tools and skills acquired to all SWDs, regardless of any specific disability. It was found very difficult because each student was unique and presented specific and different needs, this reality was also recognized by the participants. Thus, the solution to this concern may be found in the more generic study guidelines and specific adaptations for different types of a specific disability, which would serve as a starting point.

3.8 Developing personal skills.

The participating academicians also highlighted the importance of certain personal skills in their functions. They pointed out the need to acquire the knowledge required by the inclusive situation, and to know how to communicate with and treat these SWDs appropriately. For this purpose, they needed to develop personal skills that would allow them to use all their knowledge within a normalized and egalitarian relationship with the students in general, without having to interact in a special way with SWDs.

In summary, there were several areas in which they were found interested in training. Teacher educators wanted their knowledge acquired to be applicable, so they would not only get to know situations or specific cases of SWDs but also, they could work in simulated settings in which they could analyze the types of adaptations made to be able to reproduce or learn from them. The theoretical knowledge they expected to learn was directly related to the need to identify disabilities that are invisible or difficult to detect (e.g., mental disorders, which could be recognized through a technical diagnosis), or to know the type of disability, related needs, and possible actions derived from it.

4. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSIONS

The participants in this study recognized their training needs and expressed their desire to receive training in how to provide inclusive education to students with disabilities. Some studies have achieved the same conclusions, and, in addition, they study how to train on disability-related matters (Debrand & Salzberg, 2005²⁹; Hockings et al., 2012³⁰). In fact, training of academicians to meet the needs of students with disabilities is critical for higher education (Love et al., 2015³¹). In some of the studies carried out, it is concluded that the attitude of academics improved after they have been trained and had more experience in satisfying the needs of students with disabilities (Hong, 2015)³².

All faculty participants agree, regardless of their previous training, that they do not have sufficient skills to adequately meet the needs arising from disability. Works such as Cook et al. (2009³³) or Kendall (2017³⁴) reached the same conclusion. This is a worrying fact, as it shows that training policies are not working properly. Universities, rather than proposing annual courses without evaluating whether they are really working or not, should analyze whether they are succeeding. They should evaluate what kind of training is really working and what are the academic training needs.

However, colleges/ universities should not only be concerned about training, but they should also design a strategy for the dissemination of information to academics. These actions should make visible the information about students with disabilities. Formal mechanisms of access to the information about the available services to help the students could be established, such as disability support offices, the existing rules that regulate the rights, and possible curricular modifications for the SWDs in higher education programs.

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