

Inclusion of High School Learners in the Mainstream: Ecological Niche

Jacob M. Selesho

Faculty of Education, University Fort Hare, East London. South Africa
E-mail: jselesho@ufh.ac.za/jmselesho@webmail.co.za

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ABSTRACT The purpose of the study was to establish the knowledge and attitude of the student teachers in facilitating inclusive classroom. A sample of one hundred and twenty third-year B.Ed students from a university of technology participated in the study. A questionnaire was used to collect data in this study. The study found that student teachers have positive attitudes towards inclusive education. They agree that it enhances social interaction and thus minimises negative attitudes towards learners with special needs. The study also found that collaboration between mainstream and the special education teachers is important and that there should be clear guidelines on the implementation of inclusive education. More efforts are needed for teaching student teachers how to function in the multi-faced classroom with both normal learners and those with disabilities in the same class. The findings of the study have significant implications for the university lecturer, teachers, and other stakeholders who are directly and indirectly involved in implementing inclusive education.

INTRODUCTION

Teachers in South Africa deal with the remnants of an inherited education system based on segregation and the exclusion of the past (Eloff and Kgwete 2007). While the previous practices of segregation resided within the context of historical perspectives, exclusionary practices related to disabilities, academic abilities, and language competence are evident even today. Even though the lines of exclusion are more permeable today, the conceptual underpinnings that sustain segregation have a residual effect on support for inclusive education and subsequently, on the quality of teacher support.

The introduction of inclusive education in South Africa was a direct response to Act 108 of 1996 and also a national commitment to the 'Education for All' movement, as stated in the UNESCO Salamanca Statement (UNESCO 1994). The worldwide move towards inclusion also formed a fortunate parallel with the transition towards a fair and just South Africa. The first free, democratic South African elections that took place in 1994 coincided with the global proliferation of declarations on 'Education for All', as well as with conceptual shifts in providing access to education for all children. This convergence shaped opportunities for raising awareness, creating widespread support for inclusion, and easing the implementation of pilot projects in South Africa. The Education White Paper 6 (Department of National Education 2001) is the guiding document for the implementation of in-

clusive education in South Africa. It began as a standing policy. All nine provinces conducted awareness campaigns to educate and prepare communities for inclusive education; in addition, workshops and training were organised to prepare all stakeholders for incorporating this policy. First, the National Department of Education prepared the Draft Guidelines for the Implementation of Inclusive Education and made them available to all nine provinces, and then schools were selected in each province to start a national pilot project. The provincial governments were also mandated to provide continuous support in policy implementation in the selected schools. Teachers and officials received training before the implementation.

The present study explores to establish attitude of the student teachers in facilitating inclusive classroom. The study focused only on further education and training (FET) schooling as the third-year students were placed only for fifteen weeks at these schools.

With the continuing movement toward "inclusion" in the educational environment, it is imperative that an understanding concerning the attitudes of educators toward providing instruction to students with disabilities be assessed and fully understood.

Literature Review

Change is never easy; it involves a process that takes time, sometimes up to several years, rather than in a single occurrence (Pottas 2005:

58). For years, education systems worldwide have provided special education and related services to students with special needs.

Proponents of inclusion support a philosophy that all students, including those with disabilities, be placed and receive appropriate educational services in the general education classroom, with provision for all the necessary support and assistance (Howell 2006: 78-79). Numerous schools have implemented various instruction models promoting the education of all children regardless of the type or severity of their disability (Soodak and Podell 1996: 401). These models and subsequent different interpretations of inclusion philosophy and placement resulted in varying levels of acceptance and degrees of success.

Attitude towards Inclusive Education

Although there is no doubt about the importance of examining the attitudes of teachers towards integration of learners in the mainstream, one must be aware of the reality that attitudes are also being formed in the teacher education experiences of pre-service teachers. The importance of teacher attitudes toward inclusion is reflected in the numerous studies conducted in this area (Pace 2003: 26). Teachers should believe that their behaviours can affect the education of their students and that they have the capacity and power to make key decisions which will affect their role and their students' progress. Sze (2007: 12) posited that even when individuals perceive that specific actions will likely bring about the desired behaviour, they will not engage in the behaviour or persist after initiating the behaviour, if they feel that they do not possess the requisite skills. Mastropieri and Scruggs's (2004) meta-analysis of 28 studies conducted from 1958 to 1995 found that overwhelmingly, teachers endorse the general concept of providing support to students with disabilities.

A great deal of research has sought to examine teachers' attitudes towards the integration and, more recently, the inclusion of children with special education needs in mainstream schools. Teachers with a negative view of the process of inclusion seem to link their attitude to active experiences of inclusion. In a study conducted by Avramidis et al. (2000: 194), the majority of teachers who were not actively involved in inclusive practices, had strong negative feelings about

inclusion and they felt that "the decision makers were out of touch with classroom realities" (Avramidis et al. 2000: 196).

The attitude of teachers towards inclusive education studies have suggested that general educators have not developed an empathetic understanding of disabling conditions (Mdikana et al. 2007: 11). Center and Ward's (1997: 118) study of regular teachers indicates that their attitudes to integration reflected a lack of confidence in their own instructional or management skills. Sze (2007: 11) in a comparative study in Devon, England and Arizona, USA, found the balance of opinion was against the integration of children with intellectual difficulties in England and the educable mentally retarded (EMR) in the USA. Additionally, in this study attitudes were more positive towards integration when the contact special educator also demonstrated a positive attitude (Mdikana et al. 2007: 11). The above studies suggest that teachers, who are the prime targets of the implementation of the policy, are often not prepared to meet the needs of students with significant difficulties and are more reluctant than administrators and policy makers. However, a study by Mdikana et al. (2007: 12) supports a wider and more positive view of integration by those in the front line, the mainstream teachers.

There are two sets of qualities that characterise a successful professional teacher: professional characteristics and professional competencies (Howell 2006: 79). Professional characteristics include professional values, personal and professional development, communication and relationships, as well as synthesis and application. Professional competencies include knowledge and an understanding of children and their learning, subject knowledge, the curriculum, the education system, and the teacher's role.

Previous research concerning successful inclusion indicates that several teacher and learner variables have been found to be related to teacher attitudes (Richardson 1998: 77). Learners found to influence teacher attitude include the learner's grade level, as well as the type and severity of disabling condition. To date, results from studies of attitudes of educators towards teaching learners with disability have not been conclusive. The negative attitude of teachers has been documented in many studies (Lobosco and Newman 1992: 24). Much of this negativity re-

sults from a lack of knowledge. The success of instructional practice requires that the general education faculty be prepared to work with students with disabilities. As more and more districts implement inclusion, general education preservice teachers find themselves working with culturally and linguistically diverse populations of learners with different learning styles and disabilities. Many of these teachers have limited or no preparation in special education and feel inadequate to work with special populations. An applicable observation by Avramidis et al. (2000: 193) describes research that found educators varied greatly in their perceptions of which students should be included.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Data Sources

Sample

The sample of the present study was drawn from third-year students registered for the B.Ed undergraduate studies at the Central University of Technology in the Free State. The participants were mainly English speaking. The sample comprised one hundred and twenty students (73 females and 47 males) and all of them were registered on a full-time basis.

Questionnaires were distributed to third-year students from a list obtained from the information and technology system ITS. In total, 120 questionnaires were administered to all third-year students. The sample size was 120 and the response rate was 100%. This good response rate can be ascribed to the fact that the questionnaires were administered during the Introduction to research class periods. The questionnaire contained items to assess teachers' attitudes and concerns towards basic knowledge to facilitate classroom inclusive education.

Instrumentation

A three-part questionnaire was used to collect data from participants. The first section was designed to gather selected demographic details. The second section, the *Attitudes Towards Inclusive Education Scale* (ATIES), developed by Wilczenski (1995) contained 16 items and was designed to elicit participants' attitudes toward the inclusion of students with disabilities into

regular classes. A survey on the attitudes and knowledge of student teachers regarding inclusive education was conducted. It consisted of a 44-item scale, divided into four parts: a, b, c, and d with the disabled individual (10 items) (Chhabra et al. 2010: 223).

The purpose of this part was to establish whether the student teacher had any prior experience in dealing with the disabled individual, be it from the home environment or through the training that was provided. Section d dealt with the student teacher's ability, knowledge and attitude when dealing with inclusive education (5 items), an assessment of teachers' views, with the claim that children with disabilities are entitled to education together with their normally developing peers in inclusive classrooms; b) How well are student teachers prepared to deal with the inclusive classroom (5 items), which explored the relationship between the mainstream and special education teacher and c). Respondents had to react to statements, rating their responses on a Likert-type classification (1 = *strongly disagree*, 6 = *strongly agree*). The data were analysed using descriptive statistics in the form of percentages.

Procedure

Prior to the commencement of the study, permission was sought from the participants. The study did include ethical considerations in the form of signed consent forms. The student teachers were assured of anonymity and confidentiality as the research did not require their names. The researcher instructed participants not to put their names on the questionnaires. Owing to the scale of the study, the data were collected by the researcher himself. Informed consent forms were obtained from the student teachers in the class. The researcher distributed the questionnaire in the winter of 2010 and the students completed the participation information and the questionnaire. The participants responded to the questionnaires on a 1 to 6 Likert scale with 1 indicating "disagree strongly" and 6 indicating "agree strongly." It took approximately 30 minutes to complete.

Data Analysis

Descriptive analysis was used for the demographic characteristics of the participants and to

present the attitudes of teachers towards inclusive education and the types of support afforded to teachers. The experiences of the participants were compared and contrasted so as to search for patterns either made explicitly or implicitly by the teachers. The responses from the teachers were categorised and formed the basis of the results and subsequent discussion. The respondents' responses were then coded according to the emerging themes.

RESULTS

Table 1 depicts the student teachers' attitudes regarding learners with disabilities, and their prior contact with them either at school, or home and the training provided to them.

Table 1: Attitude of teachers' working relationship and training provided to teachers

<i>Items</i>	<i>Prior contact</i>			<i>Training</i>		
	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>None</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>None</i>
Visually impaired	38	67	15	55	27	23
Hearing impaired	29	72	24	51	25	16
Attention deficit disorder	37	57	26	70	14	16
Attention deficit disorder with hyperactivity	67	13	20	78	12	0
Behavioural problem	55	47	18	85	15	0

Table 1 depicts the student teachers' attitudes regarding learners with disabilities, and their prior contact with them either at schools or at home and the training provided to them. More than half of the respondents (60%) agree that they had never met learners who are visually and hearing impaired; however, they admit that training had been provided on how to deal with these types of learners. More than 70% agree that they have had training in learners with attention deficit disorder with hyperactivity and behavioural problems. Although the respondents agreed that they had never had a prior home experience with children who are visually impaired, hearing impaired, with attention deficit disorder and attention deficit disorder with hyperactivity, they finally had training in those disabilities mentioned. Fifty-five percent of the respondents have had prior experience in dealing with learners with behavioural problems.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to identify the attitudes of teachers toward the inclusion of students with disabilities in the mainstream classroom. The findings indicate that teachers have positive attitudes and are concerned with implementing inclusive education. Furthermore, the study indicates a positive attitude from teachers toward learners with disabilities, which may, in turn, increase learning opportunities for children with disabilities. One of the most important predictors of the successful integration of students with disabilities in the mainstream is the attitudes of teachers. The results confirm the existence of a significant link between teacher attitude and the facilitation of teaching and learning. The success of teaching and learning depends largely on the attitude of teachers' preparedness to work with students with disabilities.

Of particular concern is the fact that many teachers feel that the training provided by the university in their undergraduate studies was minimal and did not adequately prepare them to work with students with disabilities in the mainstream classroom. The current curricula indicate that themes on inclusive education are infused in the education modules. It is imperative that this subject should stand alone as a separate subject in the teacher education qualification.

Legislative conceptualizations of appropriate education for students with special needs have evolved, so too has the need for teacher preparation that is responsive to emerging mandates and initiatives become more pressing. If findings represented in the present study are at all generalizable, much remains to be done to ensure that regular and special educators are adequately prepared to implement current and emerging educational innovations.

The results of this study indicated that type of academic preparation appeared to have an impact on attitudes of undergraduate teachers in teacher education programs. Student teachers who participated in guided field experiences expressed significantly more positive attitudes than student teachers who only completed a course toward including students with special needs in inclusive classroom settings.

Moreover, the present study shows that experience in working with children with SEN did differentiate between teachers' attitudes towards inclusion. Studies have shown that the success

of inclusive education depends, to a large extent, on the willingness and the ability of teachers to make accommodation for individuals with special needs.

CONCLUSION

Findings of the study reveal that more efforts are needed for teaching learners with special education needs (SEN). Overall teachers show a positive attitude towards the inclusion of students with SEN. However, collaboration between mainstream and special education teachers is important. Workshops should be conducted regarding teaching student's teachers about special needs education. Student teachers indicated a lack of skills and competence to accommodate diversity in inclusive classrooms as one of their main challenges; an area in which teacher support can be crucial. They indicated that they did not have the necessary skills and competencies to handle inclusive classroom situations. It was mentioned that large numbers of learners in the classroom made it difficult to teach effectively in inclusive classrooms. It is difficult to complete a specified volume of work within a given period; more individual attention is needed to assist the learner with barriers to learning.

Teachers indicated insufficient support as one of the challenges of inclusive education, therefore the provision of adequate resources in inclusive classes is also recommended. Inclusion requires support by the Department of Education officials and by principals, parents, teachers and learners.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Teachers indicated a lack of skills and competence to accommodate diversity in inclusive classrooms as one of their main challenges and, therefore, an area in which teacher support can be crucial. The study has clearly demonstrated limited skills as an influencing factor of teachers' competencies in teaching inclusively in the mainstream classroom.

As teacher educators, we need to examine carefully our future candidates' knowledge and skills as they prepare to teach this nation's children and youth; however, we must also acknowledge the critical role that attitudes play in the

development of teachers. In addition, we must refigure course work and field experiences, all the while investigating the nature and influence of attitudes toward students with special needs.

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