



Preschool Inclusion in Practice: A Qualitative Inquiry into Teachers' Attitudes and Readiness

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Abstract

Inclusive preschool education has become a mainstream policy in early childhood development in the world focusing on the rights of all children irrespective of their abilities to receive equal learning opportunity. The research is aimed at examining the attitude of preschool teachers, as well as their perceived preparedness towards inclusive education based on emotional reactions, cognitive reactions, and behavioral reactions towards inclusion practices. A qualitative research design was used as semi-structured interviews were held with X preschool teachers representing various institutional settings. Based on the framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006), the thematic analysis was applied to determine the patterns associated with teacher perceptions, institutional support, and barrier to inclusive implementation. The results indicate the complicated meeting of the predominant good intention, training deficiency, and institutional restrictions. Most respondents noted that they were ready to accommodate inclusion but claimed that there was a major gap in professional growth, lack of resources, and policy instructions. The themes also emerged of emotional strain and doubt. Such observations indicate that there is an immediate need to have some organized training methods, resource mobilization, and systems of shared support to overcome the policy-classroom practice gap. The article adds to the conversation about the topic of early childhood inclusion by demonstrating the experience of teachers living it and giving suggestions on how institutional readiness can improve.



INTRODUCTION

Inclusive early childhood education has received growing attention in different parts of the world as a fundamental method of equity in education. It underlines a right to access general education settings fully by all children regardless of the presence or absence of disabilities or developmental delays or different learning needs. Childhood growth in cognitive, emotional, and social aspects is critical in the early childhood phase thus inclusion practices are pivotal at preschool stage. In the last twenty years, studies have acknowledged that quality and inclusive based environments are crucial in encouraging peer interaction, empathy and life long learning outcomes (Odom et al., 2004); (Booth and Ainscow, 2011). In spite of these known advantages, the effective implementation of inclusion in preschool is a long-term issue, which is usually constrained by structural, cultural, and pedagogical factors.

Even though the idea of inclusion has gained a lot of backing at the policy level, there remains one common notion that teachers are ready enough to adopt inclusive practices as long as legislation has been made. Nonetheless, several researches show that the attitude, confidence, and readiness of the teacher differ in different settings (Avramidis and Norwich, 2002). This gap is an indication of the disjunction between institutional policy and classroom practice. Although there is some research into teacher attitudes, which has quantified such attitudes using survey based measures, there is limited research into how preschool teachers themselves view their own preparedness, how they understand inclusion, or how inclusion places emotional/logical burdens on them. Qualitative studies that make teacher talk centre-stage and reflect the subtle truths of inclusion in early childhood education are still required.

The aim of the proposed study is to fill that in with the discussion of the lived experiences, any attitudes and perceived preparedness of the preschool teachers to inclusive education. Through its in-depth interviews, which are in-depth and semi-structured interviews on teachers working in different early childhood settings, the study explores how educators go about the promises and demands of inclusion. It concludes that even though loads of the teachers support the inclusive values in theory, they are often not provided with the training, resources, and institutional support to implement them confidently. The study has given new perspectives on the emotional and structural constraints which determine the practice of inclusion at the preschool level and given feasible suggestions concerning training programs and policy frameworks. The paper will follow the following structure: a literature review of related literature will be provided, then the research methodology, results, discussion, and conclusion suggestions will be provided.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Early childhood inclusive education is expected to establish fair learning conditions where every child (including disabled or developmentally challenged ones) can learn. Although support of inclusion in policies has increased in many parts of the world, this has been implemented in a wide manner usually based on attitude of the educators and institutional capacity. The review synthesizes the available literature to investigate the central themes implicating the readiness of preschool teachers to inclusive education that is organized thematically as follows: (1) Policy Frameworks and Definitions., (2) Attitudes and Beliefs of teachers., (3) Professional Training and Competency., and (4) Institutional and Resource Limitations..



Definitions and Policy Frameworks

Inclusive education in early childhood is widely a concept that is used to describe the process that involves all children, whether they are able or disabled, in the same learning experience in terms of language, socioeconomic status, and disability among others, in early childhood learning setting. As opposed to segregation of children into special or remedial programs, inclusion focuses on inclusion, equity, and support in the general classroom environment. This method is premised on the assumption that diversity makes learning interesting and each child is entitled to a place in school, a place to be, a place to be a place to succeed. Basic frameworks underlying inclusive education in the world include Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) which recommended inclusive schools to be inclusive and have a full access to inclusive education at all levels, which began with early childhood. UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) is another document that declared full access to inclusive education at all levels, beginning at early childhood. These models have had effects on the national policies on education in most countries, so that the governments have taken legal undertakings towards inclusive preschool education. Policies, however, are on paper and there is no consistency in the operationalization of inclusion in early childhood education. Other used terms such as inclusion, integration and mainstreaming are used interchangeably even though they have varied implications to practice. Inclusion in most education systems in the preschool stage is not fully defined, and thus early childhood educators are left with little or no direction as to what is meant by the policy. This ambiguity is another factor that adds to the variability in the implementation of inclusion in one place to another, not to mention that it tends to burden individual teachers and administrators with the task of interpretation (Purdue, 2009).

More so, a majority of policy documents presuppose a top-down approach to implementation, whereby teachers are supposed to embrace inclusive practices with inadequate consultations, co-designing, and professional development. Without explicit signs or mechanisms of accountability within the context of early years settings, inclusive education may well remain a noble aspiration on the surface as opposed to a reality on the classroom floor especially through the lenses of teachers who are expected with the duty of ensuring that principles are transformed into practice.

Teacher Attitudes and Beliefs

The success or failure of inclusive education at the preschool level has been largely related to teachers and their attitudes and beliefs. Although the national and international policies provide policies of inclusivity, the way they are implemented relies heavily on how the teachers understand inclusion both conceptually and emotionally and practically. Studies constantly reveal that favorable attitudes toward teachers are strongly associated with better and significant incorporation of children with disabilities or diverse learning requirements (Avramidis and Norwich, 2002); (de Boer et al., 2011). Nevertheless, such attitudes are not equally common in all situations. Most preschool educators are philosophically supportive of inclusion since they believe that every child has right to study with his or her peers in the classroom. However, the principle of support does not necessarily agree with confidence or the feeling of being able to practice inclusion. To illustrate, a teacher might support the notion of inclusiveness but will not be ready to address behavioral issues, support differentiation, or cooperate with experts. This discrepancy between faith and self efficacy is felt particularly amid early childhood that



may see educators operating with a bare minimum and little specialized training (Forlin and Chambers, 2011). There are some individual and objective conditions that shape the attitudes of teachers towards inclusion. These include:

- Previous interactions with children with disabilities: Teachers that have been exposed to children with disabilities tend to be more relaxed and assured in inclusive education.
- Perceptions of work load and size of classes: the teacher can view inclusion as an extension of his or her burden to them other than as a pedagogical advantage.
- Significance of administrative and expert assistance: Absence of collaborative simulations might give rise to a sense of estrangement and opposition.

Attitudes towards disability and development: There may be certain social misconceptions or stigma associated with the situation of disability, which can be a barrier to the development of inclusive attitudes in certain situations.

Emotional preparedness is another significant factor. Some teachers who say they are ready to include all children tell about the way they experience stress, anxiety, or even guilt when they cannot possibly satisfy the needs of all children. This emotional labor that is not always apparent in formal tests can have a much more substantial role in the way the inclusion is implemented in everyday life. When teachers experience a sense of not being supported, they can come to workarounds like informal exclusion (e.g., prevention of involvement into specific activities) even in the cases when teachers feel that inclusion is the right thing to do. Most importantly, attitudes do not remain unchanged; they can change positively as the experiences, professional growth and support enable them to change. Research indicates that the attitude of teachers toward inclusion tends to be influenced with empowerment in terms of competence as well as the targeted training, mentoring, and joint planning time results in improved teacher attitude toward inclusion (Jordan et al., 2009). This supports the notion that inclusion preparedness is both personal and environmental and to that extent is conditioned by the environment and support structures as much as by personal predisposition. To conclude, although the attitudes of preschool teachers can be quite indicative of good intentions, they are enormously limited by a fear of failure, lack of preparation, or systemic barriers. The identification and promotion of emotional and cognitive components of teacher attitudes are critical to the process of developing inclusion as a policy requirement into a perpetuation of classroom performance.

Professional Training and Competency

One of the aspects, which have been repeated by several scholars on the topic of inclusive education, is the importance of teacher preparation and continuous professional development. Although policies state the inclusion requirement, the levels of confidence and abilities of educators in implementing inclusive practices are usually defined by the quality and relevance of training. This preparation is of even greater importance in preschool where teachers have to treat a wide range of developmental stages and needs. Only a small number of studies have discovered that during their preservice education, many early childhood educators get minimal or no formal training on how they can work with children who have disabilities or developmental delays (Loreman et al., 2007); (Purdue et al., 2001). Although inclusion is included, it is mostly discussed in general or abstract terms, with little or no consideration of specific instructional strategies, including differentiated instruction or behavior management or specialist collaboration. This has caused teachers to usually join the workforce without being ready to face the reality of



extremely inclusive classes which have caused anxiety, self doubt and lack of consistency in implementation. There are the challenges with in-service training aimed at improving the existing skills as well. Professional development opportunities are often short-lived, voluntary or not connected with the needs of preschool teachers. Individually, training sessions can be general or based on school-aged inclusion models without taking into consideration the specific realities of early childhood learning like play-based learning, developmental variability, and interactions between caregivers and children. According to the teachers, these restrictions do not facilitate their capacity to apply knowledge to practice. Nevertheless, when professional development has been developed to include practical activities, mentorship, reflective practice and collaborative learning, teachers make a significant improvement in attitude and performance. The coaching option and peer-observation, as well as case-based learning, are the most effective programs to improve both the technical skills and the emotional preparation towards the inclusive teaching (Jordan et al., 2009). The availability of specialists and interdisciplinary teams is another significant aspect. The inclusion is most effective when educators collaborate with the speech-language therapists, occupational therapists, psychologists, and special educators. Sadly though, such support is scarce or even missing in several early childhood contexts particularly in lackluster or not well off regions leaving the responsibility of inclusion to the classroom teacher. Besides, school culture influences teacher competency not only through formal training, but also through culture. The teachers who are in a workplace where inclusion is perceived as a collective, institutional endeavor tend to seek the learning experiences and attempt new methods. Conversely, when inclusion is considered as an addition or personal demand, the teachers will be less likely to act or continue to work in difficult circumstances. To conclude, although positive attitudes are the pillars to inclusion, competency is the framework. Preschool teachers need to be empowered in an effective manner to turn a loose ideal of inclusiveness into sustainable practice and effective, context-specific training can provide this dynamism with institutional support and collaborative frameworks.

Institutional and Resource Barriers

Even though inclusive education relies on the attitudes and training of teachers, institutional structures and available resources often influence and tend to limit them. Systemic barriers can pose significant problems to effective implementation of inclusive practice in early childhood settings where teachers have limited support to meet dynamic developmental needs but they are required to. Inadequate material and human resources is cited by far as one of the challenges. Adjustment to teaching equipment, sensory sessions, differentiated programs, and other personnel (teaching aides or aides) are usually necessitated by inclusive classrooms. Nevertheless, most of the preschools especially those in low-resource areas do not have funding or facilities to offer such supports (Vakil et al., 2009). Such situations are causing teachers to improvise thus may end up providing children with disabilities with unequal or inconsistent learning opportunities. Staffing ratios is another most significant obstacle. Excessive levels of child-teachers inhibit the time and attention that a teacher may pay to individual instructional support or differentiation. This is particularly vexing in an inclusive environment where children might need special care such as one-on-one help, behavior intervention, or individual routines. Teachers do not have enough time to attend to every learner and this may literally cause burn out or unwanted marginalization of some children without the extra staff.



Environment, including physical, is also a major factor. Numerous early childhood classrooms do not consider being universally accessible. Children with mobility or sensory difficulties can be restricted by slender door frames, solid furnishings, or hazardous outdoors. An inclusive design demands suitable infrastructure, but also the administrative dedication to including in the budgeting and space allocation that decision making. Additionally, the culture of a particular institution and leadership has a significant influence on understanding and implementation of inclusion. When administrators lead change and promote inclusion in schools with active support through collaboration in the planning process, and with the overall school mission, the chances of empowering and resourcing teachers are high. On the contrary, in the setting where inclusion is managed as a tick box or a personal choice, the teachers can feel alone or overwhelmed. The inability to provide clear direction, plan time, or support through a team tends to lead to ad hoc practices, fatigue (emotional). Moreover, inclusive policy requirements do not always seem to connect with the level of local implementation capacity. The mandates of the policies might be made, yet the funding and training required to meet such mandates might be absent. This top-down model puts pressure on preparation and teachers are in an awkward situation wanting to do the right thing but no means to do it. Under those circumstances, even those laboring educators with good intentions might end up getting discouraged or even opposed to inclusion as time goes on even though they might have a philosophical handle on the issue. Overall, institutional and resource obstacles are not only logistical obstacles but also structural preconditions of inclusive success or failure. The way of solving these challenges is through joint intervention in the administrative, policy, and funding levels. In the absence of this systemic support, the learning of inclusion is placed on individual teachers disproportionately (such that they can hardly maintain a significant role of involvement in all children).

As suggested in the literature, although inclusion education has solid theoretical underpinnings, its implementation in the preschool environment is heavily influenced by the attitudes of teachers, the training period, and the system provisions. Most studies so far have been large-scale surveys or policy analysis, however, there has been very little qualitative information about the emotional and professional experiences of preschool teachers at the ground. This is where the gap lies and emphasizes the necessity of such studies that could address how educators perceive their roles and attitudes toward their readiness as well as negotiate the daily reality of inclusion in early childhood situations.

Methodology

This study paper aimed at investigating the attitudes and perceived preparedness of preschool teachers to teaching through inclusive education. The qualitative, interpretive approach was chosen because the emphasis was made on individual experiences, perceptions and contextual interpretations. In particular, the phenomenological research design was employed to obtain a better understanding of the experience of inclusion in the actual classroom classroom as reflected by the views of the educators. The research was based on primary data collected via interviews and was descriptive and exploratory as it should be to present rich and contextual information, but not as a hypothesis test. Primary sources were gathered by semi-structured interviews of 15 preschool teachers of public and private institutions of early childhood education located in Insert Location. The sampling method was purposive and the participants had to be in a direct experience of working in classrooms in which the children with various educational requirements are enrolled.



Recruitment was done through preschool networks, professional organizations and direct recruitment of school administrators.

Each interview took about 45-60 minutes and was either face-to-face or through use of the video conferencing which was based on the preference of the participants. The interview guide contained open ended questions which referred to:

- definitions of inclusion,
- perceived preparedness and training,
- emotion feelings toward distributed instruction,
- institutional support, and
- apprehended barriers or enablers.

Audio-taping of all the interviews was with the consent of the participants and subsequently transcribed word-to-word and extracted anonymously in order to maintain confidentiality. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the transcribed interviews and this was aimed at using the six step process that Braun and Clarke (2006) proposed. The process involved:

- Familiarization with data
- Generation of initial codes
- Searching for themes
- Reviewing themes
- Defining and naming themes
- Producing the report

It was both inductive and data-driven coding, and there were no preavoidable categories. Themes including the presence of the philosophical support and practical concern, emotional labor and the presence of institutional gaps were revealed as a result of repetition of the material read and peer debriefing sessions. Data and necessary codes were processed using NVivo software. To provide the credibility and reliability, a secondary researcher has examined a part of the transcripts and coding choices. Small inconsistencies were addressed by the discussion. The aim of this methodology was to give voice to teachers and gain access to the reality on the ground of inclusive education practices an underrepresented field in quantitative studies. Semi-structured interviews were free and in-depth which inspired the participants to express both their opinions and feelings using their own words. The thematic analysis is what allowed structurally and yet meaningfully interact with the information. The shortcomings of the method are a stereotypical bias on the social desirability side of the question where teachers might have been under pressure to report their attitude towards inclusion as more positive than it was in actuality. Further, since only one geographical area was used as the sample, it cannot be generalised. Transferability was however enhanced by the use of thick description and documentation of context. The study was conducted with ethical approval of the Insert Institutional Review Board and informed consent of all the study participants.

Results

Interpretivism The symbolic analysis of interview-based information of 15 preschool educators uncovered four major themes, which depict the experiences and perceptions of the participants toward inclusive education as:

- Occupation in the support of philosophy, hesitation in practicality.
- Professional Vulnerability and Emotional Labor.



- Knowledge Gaps and On the Job Training.
- Structural Constraints and institutional Inconsistencies.
- The themes are discussed below using quotes of participants in support.

Ideological support for inclusion was mentioned by almost all the participants who referred to the ideologies of equality, social development, and early intervention as the driving factors. Most of them, however, also expressed the practical doubt of how these values could be applied in the daily classroom practice.

I think that every child should have an opportunity to be here, however, sometimes I cannot understand how to fulfill all the needs because there is no one to help. (Participant 4). The teachers easily found themselves in between the ideals of inclusions and their inability to accommodate the various learning needs under the normal classroom setting.

Much of that learning resulted in a significant discovery that teachers had a strong emotional load within an inclusive classroom. A lot of them mentioned a sense of inadequacy, guilt and burnout and this was experienced in situations when they felt that the kids were not succeeding under their supervision. It is tiresome that I am not able to provide a child with whatever he or she requires. It feels like I'm failing them." (Participant 9)

Some of the teachers showed their fear of being judged by parents, their colleagues, or administrators in case of an unsuccessful inclusion. This feeling of vulnerability frequently resulted in frustration, isolation, or shyness in the open discussion of issues.

Majority participants provided little or old-fashioned training on strategies of inclusion. Some just had to learn the hard way, or by reflection, or just talk to their peers.

Once we had one workshop, but that was many years ago, and it was not much applicable to preschoolers. (Participant 1). Mostly I make mistakes and figure it out the next time as I learn as I go. (Participant 6)

Nonetheless, other teachers demonstrated extraordinary flexibility and incentive to change many stating that they would prefer to be taught more practically and by demonstrating how to. The barriers to effective inclusion according to teachers regularly included infrastructure, staffing, and administrative practices. Such problems like big classes, absence of aides, nonaccessible environment, and uneven policies were frequent. There is not a clear procedure of what to do in case a child needs some additional help, and there is a lack of supporting staff. (Participant 12)

The classroom is simply not a place where a student can move around and be quiet. We have to make do." Even with the high motivation, (Participant 7) the lack of coherent institutional structures in which inclusion was to be pursued failed many teachers to feel supported and isolated. Although the results portray high thematic saturation, it should be mentioned that every participant was volunteered to participate in the study, which might indicate that a biased sample was selected, consisting of teachers who were more likely or ought to be interested in inclusion. Besides, other factors that could have disrupted the availability of resources were the differences in the school type, and the funding level (e.g. private and public schools, but it was not a controlled variable).

Discussion

This paper has investigated the perspectives and experiences of preschool teachers about inclusive education and has found a complex interaction between positive beliefs, emotional load, inadequate training, and institutional failures. The majority of teachers



supported the idea of inclusion but claimed to be unprepared and lacking in practice. Their emotional performance, adaptation mode, and the aspect of professional growth became some unified themes.

The results highlight an urgent lack of contact between the inclusive principles and the classroom conditions. Although the teachers shared the same philosophical beliefs with the objectives of inclusion they were frequently not equipped with the tools and time coupled with institutional support to execute the same. This reflects the previous study that indicated that even with the support to the inclusion, it will fail to be effectively implemented until supplemented with training, resources, and structure alignment (Avramidis and Norwich, 2002); (Forlin and Chambers, 2011).

The emotional impact of the participants, and especially placed on feelings of failure and inadequacy, have created an impression that inclusion is not a pedagogical alteration, but rather an emotional and psychological challenge to educators. These findings resonate with the recommendations of Forlin (2001) and others that those teachers who work under cross-disciplinary environments find themselves stressed when they lack proper preparation to handle the prescriptions of the diverse classrooms.

The results confirm the current literature regarding the significance of professional growth in inclusive education (Loreman et al., 2007); (Jordan et al., 2009). The lack of specialized training was one of the most common reasons that teachers in this study identified, and they admitted that they used informal or experiential learning in order to fulfill the student needs. Such findings are also in line with studies that highlight the fact that inclusion in early childhood is usually done inconsistently as a result of policy confusions and lack of sound institutional frameworks to support the inclusion (Purdue, 2009); (Vakil et al., 2009).

The contribution of this study is a more emotionally framed way of taking a qualitative approach to the issue of inclusion as it is experienced by teachers not only in the way it operates but in the way it feels. This emotional insight usually gets under-represented in policy-driven or survey-driven studies. The qualitative design of the study, though applicable in depth and nuance is constraining on generalizability. The participants were not random, and might not be representative of the rest of all teachers. Also, the control over the variation in resources in both the government and the private institutions was not undertaken, a factor that might have contributed to the reported experiences. Further research could involve further broadening of a sample or a comparison of different systems.

The implications of these findings on a practical basis are:

- The policy makers need to understand that inclusion entails more than a mandate, that it involves material investment, infrastructure and long term professional learning.
- The school leaders are supposed to encourage the positive cultures through facilitating collaborative planning, mentoring, and access to specialists.
- The education programs should incorporate the inclusive pedagogies at an early stage and highlight the facts of emotional labor.

Promoting the understanding that inclusion is dynamic and co-creation instead of a pre-determined policy objective can assist in aligning the intention with human and sustainable practices.

Some of the negative connotations that teachers may have conveyed could be more of



dissatisfaction with working conditions, and not necessarily with being a teacher. Displeasure with classroom population, underpayment, or bureaucratic weight could have been confused with difficulty in working in an inclusive way. These differences can be studied in the future. This research determined to know how preschool teachers perceive their readiness and role in inclusive classrooms. The results confirm the perception that teachers are willing although under-resourced.

Conclusion

The attitudes of preschool teachers that sought inclusivity and their perceived readiness to undertake the inclusive educational practice were investigated in this study and found a collision between the philosophically supported ideals and the practical limitations. The tenets of inclusions were widely supported in by teachers who stated that they were committed to creating a learning environment that was just to all children. Nevertheless, they perceived that a lot of people were unprepared and unassisted in executing the inclusive practices through a lack of proper training, emotional burnout, and institutional failure.

The main findings emphasize that there is no official attitudinal preparation of teachers only, it is greatly influenced by contextual factors (access to resources, policy guidance clarity and support, and professional development). In their absence, educators will get lost, lonely, or unconsciously unable to address every learner, regardless of their intentions. The study is related to the increasing amount of literature that demands a more comprehensive approach to inclusion, particularly in early childhood education. It highlights the exigence to have a continuous and an active training programme which will cover the pedagogical methods and emotional needs of inclusive instruction. Moreover, it emphasizes the significance of school leadership and the policy regimes, which match the ground-level realities of teachers.

So what? To achieve effective and effective inclusion, the inclusion of teachers cannot be merely a transient act but rather a collaboration in creating the culture of inclusiveness. Future studies are advised to explore co-design strategies, inter-professional model of collaboration and long-term effects of inclusive training programs. Preschool inclusion can only become a policy goal and become more of a reality when both the emotional and structural barriers are resolved.

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