Inclusion, Special Needs and Reflective Teachers

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Introduction

Teachers are the first responders to support the well-being of every child in the classroom, be it emotional, or related to health or rehabilitation. In the modern classroom, the term, 'diversity' includes children with special needs and disability, migrant children, children living in poverty, children of single parents, adopted children, children with parents who are seriously ill and many others with unique needs that require special attention. Pre-service teacher preparation should consider the multidimensional roles during teacher training as a preparation for inclusion.

Inclusion and diversity

According to UNESCO, Inclusion is a process that helps to overcome barriers limiting the presence, participation and achievement of learners. Children from the poorest homes, those belonging to distinctive religious, cultural or ethnic groups, indigenous communities, or having special needs and disabilities, are the most likely excluded learners (UNESCO). Barriers that limit participation may be physical, technological, financial, or attitudinal, or lie in a school's inability to keep children in school.

Aniscow and Booth also describe Inclusion as a process with a strong commitment to the appreciation of human diversity. However, according to them, when schools appreciate the diversity of their students, they begin to recognise the value that children bring with them. Valuing student diversity would mean that schools actively enable students to learn together and collaborate in mixed learner groups. The process of inclusion involves schools in extending this diversity to include all students within their communities and to refute all forms of selection and exclusion that discriminate (Ainscow, Booth & Dyson, 2006).

The term, 'Inclusive Education', which has gained currency lately, is commonly associated with special needs education in regular schools and has evolved from the realisation that segregated education was irrelevant in the face of the burgeoning disability movement for equal opportunities and rights.

Along with this has emerged the demand for schools to adapt and has heightened expectations for teacher education. Today, the broader definition of inclusive education includes all children who have been historically marginalised from diverse cultural, economic, and ethnic backgrounds; it is no longer just about ability.

Pre-service teacher education can be reconceptualised to enable teachers to function confidently in an inclusive classroom. From a nuanced perspective, this preparation should provide the trainee with opportunities to practise self-reflection and develop a sense of self-efficacy or belief in their own effectiveness. Opportunities to interact with children from diverse backgrounds, including children with disabilities and their families certainly open the windows of the teachers' mind to consider *in-child* factors and other barriers in their own belief systems. Innovation should be at the heart of teacher education, where interactions with 'self-advocates', like those who lead the disability movement in different regions, which are bound to have far-reaching positive effects and at the same time, bring alive real challenges in education today.

In recent decades, there have been several role models among persons with disabilities who have established themselves as changemakers and leaders working for an inclusive society. Disability rights advocates unrelentingly demonstrate efforts to create bridges of understanding in the mainstream. For two and a half decades, the legendary **Javed Abidi** provided leadership to the disability rights movement; his indefatigable campaign led to the passing of a new disability rights law, namely, *Rights of Persons with Disability Act (2016)*. Another disability self-advocate worthy of mention is **Anjali Agarwal**, who led a long-drawn advocacy campaign on accessible environments with the Government of India. More recently, **Smitha Sadasivan** has

worked closely with the Election Commission of India on accessible elections and on making sure that the votes of persons with disability also count. Finally, there is **Bhavana Botta**, who publishes an online newsletter, 'Connect Special', to disseminate the latest ideas to those who are interested in disability-advocacy issues.

There is a case for all teachers, not just pre-service teachers, to learn from the success stories of these role models. Considering the all-encompassing nature of education, can pre-service teacher training be enriched from the life experiences of people with special needs?

Self-reflection and teaching in the 21st century

When one thinks about thinking, there is awareness of one's own thinking process and not about thoughts alone. Descartes's famous quote, 'I think, therefore I am', shows that he took his own thinking as proof of his existence. Such reflective thinking is central to the concept of self and all that goes to make one essentially human. Can this essentially human aspect of thought be harnessed in the classroom in real-time? Given a deck of cards with multiple combinations of students, teachers should look beyond chance and probability to reflect on the situation they are presented with.

Today, the essential idea of teaching practice as classroom learning and the teacher as the bearer of all knowledge is challenged by the extensive use of cell phones and internet technology. Even the littlest of tiny tots can turn on a smartphone and log on to YouTube to watch a video of their choosing. As students get more adept at accessing information from the internet, teachers have begun to talk of the *student-centric flipped classroom*, which incorporates information learnt from digital resources at home. These trends show a changing world where learner diversity is the norm.

Can teacher self-reflection be the way forward? Ongoing work with teachers engaged in action research in their classroom in the 1990s showed that for a teacher to develop a detailed understanding of her role, she needed a self-critical perspective that involved a process of ongoing reflection and introspection. Even as early as in the 1980s, Eisner pointed out that teachers have a unique and central role to play in creating knowledge about teaching (Eisner, 1985). The central role of self-reflection in knowledge creation includes both reflection in action and reflection on action. The first of these is reflection on one's spontaneous ways of thinking and acting, while engaged in action. In short, reflection leads to better action (Schon, 1983).

Reflective teaching is a process whereby teachers analyse their lessons, methods and outcomes and use the insights to evolve a practice that enhances the learners' experience. Hobson describes the process as, 'teacher's story of her own journey'; in other words, an experiential insight into one's life as a teacher (Burnaford, Fischer & Hobson 2001). Hence, a teacher's self-reflection process is cyclical and recursive where one comes back to critically examine oneself and act again and again.

Inclusion and the reflective teacher

Every reflective teacher in an inclusive classroom is a learning facilitator, rehab counsellor, life coach and motivator. Being constantly in the limelight as a reference point, a teacher who is an inclusive practitioner has to maintain a high level of authenticity. Not only is she or he a role model who guides the development of the student, but the teacher also shares a moral responsibility to facilitate learning along with inclusion.

Here are some success stories of children who represent the diversity seen in a typical urban school in India. All of these real-life stories highlight the high acceptance the children enjoyed with their teachers and the courage demonstrated by their parents to ensure their children have a brighter future.

Saroj, six-years-old, is a son of a Nepali migrant worker. He has just joined UKG in a government-aided school where he is being taught to read and write English, Tamil and Hindi. He has the unique problem of children of migrant workers – none of these languages are spoken at home, as his mother tongue is Nepali. He likes his teacher and smiles brightly when he takes her name.

Ram and Arjun are four-year-old twins. Adopted by their parents as babies, they are now placed in two different sections in a private school. Both parents work, but the twins, though embedded in a large, secure family network, face frequent changes of caregivers. They struggle with problems of attachment and bonding with their parents. The teachers play an important role in offering them the much-needed stability.

Keertana, seven-years-old, was diagnosed with cerebral palsy at birth. As soon as she began to walk with support, her mother admitted her in grade 1. The fact that she cannot speak clearly did not stop her from participating in classroom activities. With her teacher's encouragement, she was involved in all the extracurricular activities, such as art, drama and dance and represented her class on stage during the school annual day programme. She thrives with the support she receives in school. However, she has her own unique rehabilitation needs and has to attend regular occupational and physiotherapy sessions after school hours.

Sumanth, six-years-old, is a carpenter's son. He was three when his mother had to undergo mastectomy; the mother is now a cancer survivor. The family's meagre income was diverted to pay for her treatment. When he was four, his father, a person with physical disability suffered a stroke, which affected his memory and further weakened him, rendering him unfit for any daily-wage work. Sumanth now happily goes to LKG in a government school, and says his teacher is kind. His teacher is understanding of his family situation. He is fortunate to have her support.

In all these stories, without it explicitly being said, there has been a collaborative team comprising the child, teacher and parent working closely together. Every one of these parents talked about the teachers' warmth and willingness to consider their concerns and also their ability to advise on issues according to the stage of development. These teachers were listening to the parents and responding with reassurance.

For every success story, there is also a story of struggle and disappointment. Nisha's story is one such example where school inclusion has failed. Nisha, six-years-old, has recently been diagnosed with autism. She was admitted to an expensive private school that practised inclusive education. Unable to handle her individualised needs, the school wanted her to leave despite the support she gets from her parents and grandparents. Sadly, such schools are ill-prepared to face the challenge of children who have high-support needs.

Inclusion and self-reflection in pre-service teacher education

Is there a need to include teacher reflection and research in teacher education programmes? Are we are going to open our hearts and minds to handle the many new situations never described in a textbook of education?

The traditional approach to teacher education gives the pre-service teacher all the subject matter knowledge she needs to eventually transfer to her students. In the West, however, in recent times, the aim is to prepare teachers to function as facilitators of learning. This follows what is known as the *constructivist approach*. The teacher supports or *scaffolds* the child's learning through guiding rather than teaching (Sailor and Skrtic, 1992).

Scaffolding is also used in the differentiated classroom where learners are of different levels and abilities but access the same curriculum. The pre-service teacher learns to develop lesson plans, instructional strategies and evaluation techniques that will consider the diverse learning profile of an inclusive classroom.

Yet, a pre-service trainee teacher – or any teacher, for that matter – cannot be expected to facilitate the learning of units of knowledge absent in her belief system (Bakker et. al, 2002). The learning of the heart lies beyond the subject matter of textbooks. Exploring attitudes, opinions, beliefs and values exist in this realm. Beyond one's awareness, each individual is also influenced by one's family and community norms, cultural and religious values. Oftentimes, there is a clash of these values and ideals, which opens up the invaluable process of reflection. Using visual arts, music and drama, the challenges of collaborating in a multi-cultural group can lead to a reflection on the joys and struggles, differences and similarities between friends and classmates. And in this way, young pre-service teachers can be encouraged to appreciate and respect the diversity that is visible and invisible.

Further, it is to be said that there is great value in research relating to teachers' beliefs and attitudes about educating students with disabilities in the general classroom. Not only will teacher preparation programmes gain, but schools, too, will gain from an understanding of the current challenges and find ways to improve pre-service and in-service education. In fact, pre-service training is increasingly promoted as being the best time to address teachers' concerns and possibly modify their negative attitude

toward students with disability and their perceptions about inclusive education. Innovative programmes that encourage pre-service teachers to work with students with disabilities, to collaborate with self-advocates or through social interactions get to know people with special needs, help to soften attitudes and increase comfort with diversity.

Self-efficacy of students

In the case studies cited above, each of the first four children enjoys the support and encouragement of their teachers at school. Each child perceived her or him teacher as having accepted her or him as a valued member of the class. These children are growing and maturing in the reassurance that they will succeed under the teacher's guidance. Each of them is gaining a sense of self-efficacy in the world as a student. But the story of the fifth child shows that the situation is not all that simple, highlighting the necessity for teachers to also consider the inclusion of children who need health and rehabilitation support. Home-schooling cannot be an option as that would deprive the child of the company of same-age peers.

Self-efficacy is quite different from self-esteem. The difference lies in one's belief in one's ability to succeed and one's judgement about oneself. Self-efficacy acts like a driver encouraging one to succeed, eventually changing an individual's opinion about the self.

Self-efficacy is better defined as the person's belief in their own effectiveness in specific situations. If we believe in our ability to perform an action, we are more motivated to do so. Moreover, we are more likely to imitate a model performing in areas in which our sense of self-efficacy is high. Self-efficacy is a learned pattern of thought and not based on genetics. The ability to imitate begins in babyhood and carries on throughout one's life. According to Bandura, self-efficacy develops in children through exposure to role models and their own positive experience of success (Bandura 1977). Hence, a confident teacher with high self-esteem with the ability to develop and believe in her effectiveness will develop confident students who will also believe in their effectiveness (Law et. al. 2010).

Self-efficacy research also shows the relevance of interventions that boost self-esteem, self-confidence and well-being among students. Self-esteem is the attitude one holds towards oneself. Even though self-esteem is relatively stable, success and failure can affect it. Reflecting on our own experiences as adults shows us that we feel good about our achievements and hurt by our failures. For a child, being excluded, stigmatised, ignored or chastised is a very painful psychological experience that can reduce self-esteem.

Conclusion

Pre-service teacher education can play an important role in preparing trainee teachers in the self-efficacy needed to practice inclusive education. The supporting values and belief systems, when explored under the guidance of experienced teacher-educators and practitioners using the creative arts, allow for deep thinking and reflection. Furthermore, interactions with self-advocates, especially persons with disabilities, also build relationships and friendships that eliminate attitudinal barriers based on fear and ignorance. Engaging in self-reflection leads to the attitude of inquiry that inclusionary practices require. Considering that such an inclusionary practice will need a teacher to be a learning facilitator, a motivator and a rehab counsellor all in one, there is a case to go beyond the subject knowledge for the pre-service teacher curriculum and consider self-efficacy training. Without a doubt, the inclusion of children with high support needs in regular classes must be considered through the reflection process that leads to self-efficacy. To refer to Bandura's work, people with a strong sense of self-efficacy develop a deep interest and a commitment to the activities they participate in are unlikely to be overwhelmed by challenging problems and quickly recover from their setbacks. Self-efficacy is the most important condition to enact behavioural change.

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