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Inclusive Education in Kolkata - How the Parents View It

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Abstract

The present study investigated the sentiment, attitude, concern and opinion of parents towards inclusive education. A comparison was made between the parents having a normal child and a parent having a special educational needs (SEN) child. The sample comprised of 50 parents. The sample was drawn by purposive sampling technique from schools of Kolkata. The *Attitude toward Inclusion / Mainstreaming Scale* (Leyser & Kirk, 2004) and a structured questionnaire on Sentiment, Concern and Opinion towards Inclusive Education (prepared by the investigator) were administered. The responses were coded and tabulated for statistical analysis. Analysis of the data was made by calculating the frequencies, means, standard deviations, t-tests and chi-square. The results revealed that there was a significant difference between the two groups of parents on the sentiment, attitude, concern and opinion regarding inclusive education. The different demographic factors considered in the study - age, educational qualification, significant interaction with the disabled, number of children of respondent and age of SEN child and level of severity of disability of SEN child (only for parent having SEN child) were found to be influencing the parents' sentiment, attitude, concern and opinion towards inclusive education. Findings have implications for future programme implementation.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Parents, Sentiments, Attitudes, Concerns, Opinion.

1. Introduction

From time immemorial, exceptionalities, whether genius or creative, mentally or sensory disabled have a long history of being intimidated, harassed, isolated and segregated. In the past differently abled children were treated as unwanted and were segregated from other children by being forcibly placed in special schools where though their educational needs were met but they lacked behind in their social and overall personality development. But in the last three decades there has been a paradigm shift in the way the society looks at the needs of the differently abled children. The society has changed the direction of the way in which it educates the differently abled children who are also referred to as the SEN (Special Education Needs) children. With changing time the need to provide equal opportunities in regular (mainstream) schools within communities is now seen as a priority rather than necessity. This trend which has gained momentum since 1970s is the merger of regular or general education with special education. The principle of **Inclusive Education** was adopted at the "World Conference on Special Needs Education: Access and Quality" (Salamanca, Spain 1994) and was restated at the World Education Forum (Dakar, Senegal 2000). The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action emphasizes that schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions. The Statement affirms: "those with special educational needs must have access to regular schools which should accommodate them within child centred pedagogy capable of meeting these needs". India was a signatory to the Salamanca Statement.

Following the adoption of the Salamanca Statement, in the last few decades there have been efforts internationally to include children with disabilities in the educational mainstream. Now, the schools have to accommodate all children and arrange education according to their needs. Geoff Lindsay (2007) ^[10] suggests that, "inclusive education or mainstreaming is the key policy objective for education of children and young people with disabilities". The philosophy of inclusion has its roots in the ideas and principles governed through equity and equality of opportunities to all without differentiation and discrimination. "Inclusive Education means that schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social,

emotional, linguistic or other conditions. This should include disabled and gifted children, street and working children, children from remote or nomadic populations, children from linguistic, ethnic or cultural minorities and children from other disadvantaged or marginalized areas or groups” (UNESCO, 2003) [12]. It is the act of ensuring that all children despite their differences, receive the opportunity of being part of the same classroom as other children of their age, and in the process get the opportunity of being exposed to the curriculum to their optimal potential” (Handbook on in-service teacher education on inclusive education, DEP-SSA, 2008) [5]. Inclusive Education programmes do not focus on the accommodation of these children into a general educational setting (i.e. integration) but are focused on the restructuring of schools to accept and provide for the needs of all students. The feeling of belongingness among all community members – teachers, students and other functionaries is developed through inclusive education and thus it leads to the development of social skills and better social interactions because learners are exposed to real environment in which they have to interact with other learners, each one having unique characteristics, interests and abilities. The non-disabled peers adopt positive attitudes and actions towards learners with disabilities as a result of studying together in an inclusive classroom. In inclusive programmes special instruction and support are provided to any student who is in need of support without labelling him as disabled or exceptional. Thus, no discrimination is made among the disabled and non-disabled children. In simple words, it means that all children with or without disabilities learn together (Advani and Chadha, 2003, cited in Nanda, 2008) [11]. The ultimate goal of education for children with special needs is their social inclusion, to reach this goal; inclusion in education is one aspect.

A review of previous studies suggests that parents’ perspective is a crucial factor for the successful implementation of Inclusive Education as parents are a primary stakeholder of the whole process of inclusion and they are solely responsible for choosing the correct placement option for their children. Research till date has tried to explore parents’ attitudes (Boer *et al.* 2010; Kalyva *et al.* 2007) [1, 7], their perceptions (Leyser & Kirk, 2004; Kasari *et al.* 1999) [9, 8] and factors influencing parents to choose placement options for their SEN child (Jenkinson, 1998) [6]. A close look at the previous studies reveal that parents held positive attitudes (Boer *et al.*, 2010; ElZein, 2009; Elkins *et al.*, 2003) [1, 4, 3] and identified and emotional outcomes as benefits of inclusion (Leyser & Kirk, 2004) [9].

Though internationally there have been efforts to study parents’ attitudes and perspectives towards the concept of Inclusive Education, very few substantial efforts have been taken in India in this regard. Against this backdrop, the present study attempted to investigate the parents’ perspective towards inclusive education in schools of Kolkata. The study focussed on assessing four domains viz. **attitudes** (an emotionally toned pre-disposition to react in a certain way toward a person, an object, an idea or a situation), **sentiments** (a body of thought or feeling influenced by extreme emotion), **concerns** (that which is involved by interest) and **opinion** (beliefs or views of a large number or majority of people about a particular thing) towards inclusion of **SEN** (Special Educational Needs) **children** in mainstream schools of Kolkata.

Objectives

1. To study parents’ sentiments, attitudes, concerns & opinion towards inclusive education.

2. To find out if any significant difference exists between the parents having a normal child and parents having a special educational needs (SEN) child regarding their sentiments, attitudes, concerns and opinion towards inclusion of SEN children in regular schools.
3. To find out the factors influencing parents’ sentiments, attitudes, concerns and opinion towards inclusive education.

2. Materials and Method

Hypothesis

Two main hypothesis of the present investigation were as follows:

¹H₀: There exists no significant difference between the sentiments, attitudes, concerns and opinion of parents having a normal child and parents having a special educational needs (SEN) child towards inclusion of SEN children in regular schools.

²H₀: There exists no significant association between the demographic factors and the sentiments, attitudes, concerns and opinion of the parents towards inclusion of SEN children in regular schools.

Sample

The sample consisted of total 50 respondents - 25 parents having a normal child and 25 parents having a child with special educational needs (SEN). The parents having a child with special educational needs (N=25) identified the child's type of disability in the following categories: visual impairment (N=3), hearing impairment (N=2), mental retardation only (N=5), speech impairment (N=1), multiple disabilities i.e. cerebral palsy (N=4) and autism (N=7). Some parents (N=3) checked more than one disability type. The co-occurring disabilities (i.e., the disabilities identified together) found to be were mental retardation, specific learning disabilities, emotional disturbances and speech impairment. Purposive sampling technique was used and the essential criteria was male and female belonging to the age group of 20-60 years having either a school going normal child or a school going special educational needs (SEN) child.

Tools

An Information Schedule, a standardized questionnaire and a structured questionnaire was administered.

- i. **Information Schedule** - It contained questions regarding demographic factors (age, gender, marital status, educational qualification, occupation), and factors relating to persons with disabilities (significant interaction, personal contact, area of contact, knowledge of legislation). For parents having a special needs child some additional information relating to the SEN child (age, specific disability, level of severity of disability, extent of special education received, experience with mainstreaming) was collected.
- ii. **Standardized questionnaire** - *Attitude toward Inclusion/Mainstreaming Scale* (Leyser & Kirk, 2004) [9] was used for the present investigation. The scale has total 18 items selected and adapted from the revised “Opinions Relative to Mainstreaming Scale” (ORM) by Antonak and Larrivee (1995) and an earlier version of the scale by Larrivee and Cook (1979). Eight items are in favour of inclusion and ten items express negative attitudes about inclusion, which are reverse-coded during the analyses so that low ratings can be interpreted as favourable to inclusion. The scale has four factors viz. “Benefits factor”, “Satisfaction with Special Education factor”, “Teacher

Ability and Inclusion Support factor” and “Child rights factor”. Cronbach alpha reliability was reported to be .86, .74, .70 and .63 for the four factors respectively. Cronbach alpha for the total scale was .83.

iii. **Questionnaire developed by the investigator** - A structured questionnaire measuring Sentiments, Concerns and Opinion towards Inclusive Education was prepared by consulting the related literature in the area. The draft schedule was checked and rated by the experts and the final questionnaire was prepared on the basis of their ratings. There were 32 closed- ended questions – 5 for sentiment, 5 for concern and 22 items for opinion. In this structured questionnaire the fifth category of Likert scale i.e. ‘undecided’ was purposefully not kept. The Cronbach’s alpha for the sub-scales was found out to be .67 for sentiment, .52 for concern and .68 for opinion. The reliability of the total scale was .76.

The information schedule and the questionnaires were translated in Bengali by experts. The respondents could choose between English and Bengali to record their answers. This was done to facilitate the understanding of the respondents as many of them were not familiar with English terms.

Procedure

The data were collected from the parents through the questionnaire method at the selected schools. After the data were collected the responses in the Information Schedules were all coded. In case of the *Attitude toward Inclusion/Mainstreaming Scale* the responses ‘strongly agree’, ‘agree’, ‘disagree’, ‘strongly disagree’ were scored as 4,3,2,1 respectively for all items except ten items (i.e. item no. 6 - 8, 10 - 14 and item no. 16 and 18) as these were reverse coded. The third likert category i.e. “undecided” was purposefully not kept for the present study to obtain forced responses from the participants. In the other questionnaire the response categories were – ‘strongly agree’, ‘agree’, ‘disagree’, ‘strongly disagree’. The scoring was done in the same way. Finally the scores were summed up to obtain the scores for the individual domains –attitude, sentiment, concern and opinion.

After scoring the responses, the scores were tabulated for statistical analysis. The means and standard deviations for the domains were calculated, and t-test was computed to find the significance of difference between the mean scores on the domains (i.e. attitude, sentiment, concern and opinion) between the two groups (i.e. parents having a normal child and parents having a SEN child). Chi square tests were performed to analyse the influence of the independent variables (demographic factors, factors related to persons with disabilities etc) on attitude, sentiment, concern and opinion of parents.

3. Results and Discussion

Table I: Descriptive statistics of the domains

| Domain | Parents having a normal child | | Parents having a SEN child | |
|-----------|-------------------------------|-------|----------------------------|-------|
| | Mean | S.D. | Mean | S.D. |
| Attitude | 48.96 | 5.272 | 43.04 | 4.523 |
| Sentiment | 14.28 | 2.475 | 11.40 | 5.598 |
| Concern | 11.52 | 1.828 | 13.08 | 2.676 |
| Opinion | 64.88 | 7.523 | 64.04 | 9.325 |

The result shows that both the groups fall under the “average” category in the attitude scale (i.e. mean score within 40 to 52). The mean value of attitude of parents having a normal child was slightly higher than the mean value of attitude of parents having a SEN child. This result was significant at 0.01 level, t-calculated was 4.26 with a df of 48.

For sentiments sub-scale both the groups fall under the “average” category (i.e. mean score within 8 to 17). The parents with normal child scored higher than parents having a SEN child. This difference was also significant at 0.05 level, t-calculated was 2.35 with a df of 48.

Both the groups fall under the “average” category in the concern sub-scale (i.e. mean score within 10 to 15). The parents having a SEN child have a higher concern level in comparison to the parents having a normal child. The results of the t-test indicates that t-calculated was 2.41 with a df of 48, which is significant at 0.05 level.

For opinion sub-scale, both the groups fall under the “average” category in the sentiment subscale (i.e. mean score within 56 to 73). The mean score of parents having a normal child was slightly higher than that of the parents having a SEN child. However, this difference was not statistically significant.

It is evident from the result that overall the parents having a normal child were more in favour of inclusion than the parents having a SEN child. This difference was statistically significant at .05 level for the domains of attitude, sentiment and concern and statistically non-significant in case of opinion. Therefore, the null hypothesis (H_0) was rejected which means that there exists a significant difference between the sentiments, attitudes, and concerns of parents having a SEN child and parents having a normal child towards inclusion of SEN children in regular schools. However for the domain of opinion, the null hypothesis was accepted i.e. there exists no significant difference between the opinion of parents having a SEN child and parents having a normal child towards inclusion of SEN children in regular schools.

Table II: Chi-square values between domains and factors for Parents having normal children

| FACTORS | DOMAINS | | | | | | | |
|--|----------------|----|----------------|----|----------------|----|----------------|----|
| | Attitude | | Sentiment | | Concern | | Opinion | |
| | X ² | df | X ² | df | X ² | df | X ² | df |
| Age | 5.053 | 6 | 8.586** | 3 | 2.273 | 3 | 9.889 | 6 |
| Gender | 0.416 | 2 | 1.077 | 1 | 1.077 | 1 | 1.974 | 2 |
| Marital Status | 0.329 | 2 | 0.142 | 1 | 0.142 | 1 | 0.260 | 2 |
| Educational Qualification | 4.899 | 8 | 11.585** | 4 | 1.872 | 4 | 4.765 | 8 |
| Occupation | 4.444 | 8 | 6.061 | 4 | 5.535 | 4 | 7.471 | 8 |
| Significant interaction with disabled | 0.702 | 2 | 0.063 | 1 | 5.114** | 1 | 0.139 | 2 |
| Extent of personal contact with disabled | 9.912 | 8 | 3.299 | 4 | 6.061 | 4 | 9.774 | 8 |
| Knowledge of legislation for disabled | 11.842 | 8 | 3.562 | 4 | 3.693 | 4 | 9.554 | 8 |

Here * denotes significant at 0.10 level and ** denotes significant at 0.05 level

The result table shows that in case of parents having a normal child, the age of the respondent and their educational qualification was found to influence their sentiments. The

concern levels of parents having a normal child varied with significant interaction of the respondent with a person with disability.

Table III: Chi-square values between domains and factors for Parents having SEN children

| FACTORS | DOMAINS | | | | | | | |
|---|----------------|----|----------------|----|----------------|----|----------------|----|
| | Attitude | | Sentiment | | Concern | | Opinion | |
| | X ² | df | X ² | df | X ² | df | X ² | df |
| Age | 10.125 | 6 | 3.981 | 6 | 1.935 | 3 | 5.263 | 6 |
| Gender | N/A | | N/A | | N/A | | N/A | |
| Marital Status | 0.260 | 2 | 0.490 | 2 | 0.198 | 1 | 0.329 | 2 |
| Educational Qualification | 7.125 | 8 | 6.704 | 8 | 1.332 | 4 | 16.646** | 8 |
| Occupation | 5.852 | 6 | 1.604 | 6 | 5.772 | 3 | 8.174 | 6 |
| Knowledge of legislation for disabled | 2.978 | 8 | 4.524 | 8 | 6.618 | 4 | 11.739 | 8 |
| No. of children of respondent | 12.104** | 4 | 4.107 | 4 | 3.175 | 2 | 2.361 | 4 |
| Age of child with SEN | 11.375** | 4 | 2.903 | 4 | 2.466 | 2 | 4.15 | 4 |
| Severity level of disability of SEN child | 1.958 | 4 | 8.260* | 4 | 1.521 | 2 | 1.501 | 4 |
| Extent of special education for SEN child | 10.125 | 6 | 6.912 | 6 | 5.159 | 3 | 7.222 | 6 |
| Experience with mainstreaming | 1.864 | 4 | 2.057 | 4 | 1.350 | 2 | 3.094 | 4 |

Here * denotes significant at 0.10 level and ** denotes significant at 0.05 level

In case of parents having a SEN child, the no. of children of the respondent and the age of the SEN child was found to influence the parents’ attitudes. The parents’ sentiments varied with severity level of the disability of the SEN child. Educational qualification of the respondent was found to have a significant influence on parents’ opinion towards inclusion. Inclusive education has become almost mandatory in India with the adaptation of “zero rejection policy” in Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (2002). Continued parental involvement, support and positive parental attitudes are crucial for its successful implementation. Results of this study, conducted after almost two decades after India signed the Salamanca Statement (1994), have shown that parents in the city of Kolkata (West Bengal) are not negatively disposed towards the concept of inclusive education. The findings are in corroboration with earlier research in the field which suggests that majority of parents hold positive attitudes (Boer *et al.*, 2010; ElZein, 2009; Elkins *et al.*, 2003) ^[1, 4, 3] and give strong support to the concept of inclusion from a legal and philosophical standpoint and identified social and emotional outcomes as benefits of inclusion (Leyser & Kirk, 2004) ^[9]. The main benefits recognised by the parents were the social acceptance stressing on the fact that students without disabilities are likely to become more accepting and sensitive to the student with disabilities which would enhance the social development of both. Yet, many parents especially those having a SEN Child are concerned whether inclusion would hurt their child emotionally or hinder their academic performance. This finding is supported by an earlier study by Jenkinson (1998) ^[6] who reported that child’s welfare is of paramount importance to parents. Parents are also concerned and uncertain about the quality of instruction, availability of resources and time given by general educators. The parents having a SEN Child are mostly of opinion that special educators are better at teaching students with special educational needs than regular ones. Leyser & Kirk (2004) ^[9] has reported similar parental concerns. Wong *et al.* (2015) ^[13] has found that parental perspective on inclusive education is not only about classroom support but also reflect a deeper concern about whether their children with disabilities will emerge from school as contributing individuals in society and there are disparities in their understanding of disabilities, expectations of school

support, and expectations for their child with disabilities. Earlier studies report that variables such as socio-economic status, education level, experience with inclusion and type of disability were found to relate to parents’ attitudes (Leyser & Kirk, 2004; Boer *et al.*, 2010) ^[9, 1]. In the present study educational qualification of parents has been found to influence their sentiments and opinion. However, experience with inclusion and type of disability of SEN Child is found to be non-significant. The parents having a normal child are more positive about inclusion than the parents having a SEN Child. This finding is in contrast to the earlier studies which report that parents of children without disabilities mostly resent inclusion (Chireshe, 2011) ^[2]. Further no significant association is found between gender and parents’ attitudes, though Kalyva *et al.* (2007) ^[7] suggest that fathers hold more positive attitudes towards inclusion than mothers. The result of the present study is also consistent with the finding of Kasari *et al.* (1999) ^[8] and Leyser & Kirk (2004) ^[9] that parents of younger children were more positive towards inclusion than parents of older children. From the findings of the present study we can infer that the programmes organized by the Government have served to change the outlook of the parents to positive. But these are not enough to implement inclusion in reality because most schools lack proper infrastructural facilities, adequate learner support material, resources etc. and the teachers lack training to cope with diverse learning in the classroom.

4. Conclusion

It may be reasonable to conclude that with the provision of more pre-service and in-service training, adaptation of curriculum to develop skills required for inclusive settings, provision of more resources and support, inclusion can be successfully implemented in reality in schools of Kolkata. A few of the strategies that could be implemented to promote better inclusion, as identified by the parents who were surveyed were : sensitization and counselling of students without disabilities and parents having a normal child, create more support groups, arrange for positive-living initiative programmes, holistic approach, collaborative efforts of professionals, caregivers & facilitators in the field and benefits in forms of rewards and reduction of fees to the parents of the

SEN children so that they admit the child in mainstream schools.

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