Teaching Visually Impaired Students in Inclusive Classrooms at Early Childhood Level: Early Childhood Development Teachers' Perceptions in the Context of Gilgit

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore the teachers' perceptions about teaching visually impaired students in inclusive classrooms and challenges they face at Early Childhood Development (ECD) level. This research was conducted at one of ECD schools in Gilgit Baltistan using a qualitative case study approach. Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews. The results revealed that teachers have basic understanding regarding inclusive education, its importance and the teaching strategies to teach in an inclusive setting (where all mainstream and visually impaired learners are given opportunity to learn). However, teachers still need to have more knowledge regarding inclusive education to better help visually impaired students. Shortage of special needs teachers, time limitations, rigid curriculum and crowded classes are some of the major challenges. It is recommended that teachers should be facilitated with an advanced level of training in the domain of inclusive education. Additionally, facilities such as enough classrooms full of required resources and special needs of teachers would be ensured to enable both mainstream learners and visually impaired students in inclusive ECD classes.

Keywords: *Inclusive education, ECD, visually impaired students, adaptive teaching strategies*

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Introduction

An inclusive classroom is a learning environment in which the intellectual, physical, and social needs of all students, including those who have different learning abilities along with mainstream learners, are met in a single setting (Brown, Packer, & Passmore, 2011). Inclusive education has become a global initiative, and many nations have enacted policies that support inclusive teaching strategies in their education systems at ECD level (Furlonger, Sharma, Moore, & King, 2009).

In developed countries, inclusive learning has been practiced for a very long time (Furlonger, et al., 2009). However, in Pakistan, it was introduced around the last two decades (Basit, et al., 2022). Article 26 of the 1973s Constitution of Pakistan lays out a comprehensive framework for the elimination of discrimination in education. Additionally, compulsory and free education of all children between ages 5-16 is guaranteed by Article 25-A of the Constitution irrespective of their special needs. Being a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), UNESCO's Salamanca Statement, and Dakar Framework of Action for achieving the goal of Education for All, Pakistan has worked to enact laws that are in line with their respective aims (Rafique, & Hameed, 2022).

Children with disabilities is one of the key elements of Pakistan Vision 2025 (UNESCO, 2017). Enhancing social safety net and systems of protection; improving governance to effectively implement the plans of action designed for children; supporting inclusive education for children with disabilities; enforcing a special education and employment quota for persons with special needs; and encouraging sports activities for disabled persons are among the strategies to be implemented (Chen, 2014). Nationally, a broad framework for inclusion of disabled persons in educational settings has been developed by the government through policies (UNESCO, 2017).

The federal government enacted the first National Policy for differently abled People in 2002 in response to the Biwako Framework, which was followed in 2006 by a National Action Plan. This policy establishes objectives to empower disabled people without discrimination. The federal government and all provincial governments, in 2005, signed Islamabad Declaration on Inclusive Education. Inclusive education was defined according to this declaration as, a process of treating all children with dignity and respect and have equal access to education, irrespective of gender, abilities and disabilities, socioeconomic, cultural or ethnic backgrounds. Children who have impairments were referred to as "handicapped" children in the National Education Policy (NEP) of 2009.

National Education Policy (NEP) 2017 also emphasizes inclusive education by highlighting the needs for educational reforms and settings targets to promote inclusion for all children.

The growth of inclusive educational practices is very slow in Pakistan despite the endorsements of international conventions and the integration of inclusive education into national policies. There is a dearth of qualitative studies in literature that focuses on the teachers' opinion towards inclusive education. It is important to explore the perceptions of teachers regarding inclusive education (Rafique, & Hameed, 2022)

Visually impaired children, being a part of an inclusive classroom, also need to enjoy and benefit from all the facilities that are provided through the strategy of Education for All (EFA). Additionally, they require special attention owing to their special learning needs and challenges they face while learning with mainstream children. Teachers play a central role in classroom settings and their perceptions significantly influence the quality and inclusivity of education provided to children at the foundational stage. Hence, the current study provides insights into the perceptions of ECD teachers who teach visually impaired students in the context of a private school in Gilgit.

Significance of the Study

The findings of this case study will be significant in an ongoing development of the culture, policies and practices of inclusive education of the targeted institute and contribute to the improvement in teaching strategies and practices of school administration to meet the needs of learners.

Problem Statement

Early educational experiences for children are crucial for laying the groundwork for future academic achievement and learning (Pelatti, Dynia, Logan, Justice, & Kaderavek, 2016) Pakistan Disability Act, article 15, 2005 suggests that equal education should be provided to disabled children in inclusive learning environments with the normal children by considering special educational needs and differences, such opportunities of learning are limited for visually impaired students in the context of GB. Numerous methodologies are introduced for effective teaching in formal classrooms. Still, it is a challenging task for teachers to teach both mainstreem and visually impaired students in inclusive classrooms at ECD level (Rieser, 2012). However, most visually impaired children are still out of the school settings and very few are enrolled in inclusive classrooms at ECD level (Jahanzaib, Fatima, & Nayab, 2021). A few schools in the

context have come up with an inclusive concept of teaching. Therefore, investigating teachers' perceptions of teaching visually impaired students in inclusive ECD classrooms in Gilgit is crucial to understanding and addressing these educational challenges.

Objectives of the Study

- To explore the perceptions of teachers about teaching visually impaired students in inclusive classrooms at Early Childhood Development Level.
- To identify the ways teachers, use to identify the learning needs of visually impaired students at ECD level.

Research Questions

- Major Research Question
  What are the perceptions of teachers regarding teaching visually impaired students in inclusive classrooms at ECD level?
- Subsidiary Questions
  1. What are the perceptions of ECD teachers about Inclusive education?
  2. How do teachers identify the learning needs of visually impaired students in an inclusive classroom at ECD level?

Literature Review

Klibthong and Agbenyega (2020) defined the term inclusive education as an effective schooling approach where students with disabilities and diverse learning needs are addressed and valued in the same class with normal students. This means that, to educate all children who were excluded previously, in regular schools from the mainstream learners (Terzi, 2014). The concept of inclusive education, initially introduced by Salamanca Statement that terms it as, the right of education in formal schools particularly for the differentiable children having difficulties and different learning needs. The purpose was to establish an inclusive society (UNESCO, 2017).

The adoption of the principles of inclusive education was made in the World Conference on Special Needs Education Access and Quality, and at the World Education Forum it was reaffirmed (Ng'andu, 2023). Currently, inclusion is a recognized field in the sector of education, with a huge body of literature and with diverse perspectives and policy initiatives (Constantin, Johnson, Smith, Lengyel, & Brosnan, 2017).

Inclusive education as a developmental approach seeks to meet the learning needs of all children, youth, and adults, with a specific emphasis

on vulnerable, disadvantaged and excluded groups of society (Jacob & Olisaemeka, 2016). The concept of inclusion has been further promoted by the rules of the UN Standard on the Equality of Opportunities for disabled persons, it proclaims equality and participation for all. The Dakar Framework for Action 2000 has declared that education should be a fundamental part of the overall school systems globally for weak children (Jacob & Olisaemeka, 2016; Ng'andu, 2023). UNESCO 2005 suggested that inclusive education to be an essential philosophy of EFA follow-up efforts for the successful achievement of the goal of 'Education for All' historically (Farooq, 2012).

Studies demonstrate that children with disabilities do better in academics in inclusive environments than they do in special education settings, therefore inclusion seems to be beneficial Inclusion also provides the opportunity to develop friendship and relationship and understand and respect each in order to prepare them as a responsible community member (UNESCO, 1994; Jacob & Olisaemeka, 2016).

Visual Impairment (VI)

According to Naipal & Rampersad (2019) visual impairments (VI) is decreased visual condition to perform, and cannot be treated with medical procedures like surgery, or refractive correction (glasses or contact lenses). As a result, it causes functional limits in the visual system that may be considered irreversible loss of vision, a limited visual field, decreased contrast sensitivity, increased sensitivity to see, as well as a declined capacity for daily activities like reading and writing.

The World Health Organization (WHO) action plan (2006-2011) added the definition of VI by including a functional factor. The definition stated that: a person with very limited sight is one who has visual function impairment, even after the treatments and/or refractive corrections, and has Visual Acuity (VA) of less than 6/18 to the perception of light, or visual field less than 10 degrees from the fixation point of fixation, but uses or is potentially capable of using vision for the planning and/or execution of a task that is referred as the visual acuity (VA) of the better eye with possibly the best refractive correction (Naipal & Rampersad, 2019).

A student who is considered visually impaired is the one who faces difficulties in learning things effectively (Malik, et al., 2017). The term "completely blind" refers to those people who are handicapped by malfunctioning vision permanently, caused by genetic defect, ailment or injury (Saleem, Ain, Nizami, Saleem, & Sarfaraz, 2021; Jahanzaib, Fatima, & Nayab, 2021). This spreads from those who have relatively minor difficulty of vision to those who are described sometimes as having low vision (Department for Education and Skills, DFES, 2001).

Vision impaired person has limited social engagement with his/her surroundings. He/she might not be able to completely understand facial expressions, might not be able to mimic social actions, and might not always be aware of other's existence unless a sound is produced (Brown, Packer, & Passmore, 2011). Blind people can only learn about the unique characteristics of items through tactile observations, where kin-esthetic experiences are vital (Jahanzaib, Fatima, & Nayab, 2021).

In general, adapting the teaching and learning environment is core to a successful inclusive education of effective inclusive education. If environment does not support the students with different learning needs difficulties, then their learning will be interrupted automatically (Ainscow, 2018). The inclusive education system welcomes all the students regardless of their disabilities and helps in continuous transformation of their culture and practices for the provision of opportunities to those who might have experienced educational difficulties and segregations previously (Pelatti, et al., 2016).

The term "early childhood inclusive education" refers to a program's ability to help all children feel included and comfortable, through competent leadership skills, while also encouraging them to use their time in preschool to build important life skills (Klibthong & Agbenyega, 2020).

Inclusive classrooms comprise children with a variety of learning needs and skills, the inclusive learning environment should be distinct from the regular learning environment (Simon, Echeita, Sandoval, & López, 2010). Certain characteristics and criteria must be followed for the effective learning of visually impaired students such as services of specialized teachers, helping devices (braille and magnifying glasses) special services from specialized teachers, teaching/learning materials, flexibility in methods of teaching (Fyssa, Tsakiri, & Mouroustou, 2022). Therefore, an inclusive learning environment is the kind of environment that encourages and supports learning abilities of all children irrespective of diverse learning needs they possess in the classroom (Simon, et al., 2010).

Educational needs of differently abled students may face different learning difficulties and challenges in early childhood educational settings. However, equity and quality base, continuous and effective decision-making can enhance the processes of teaching and learning in ECD settings for all special needs children (Jordan & McGhie-Richmond, 2014). The method of teaching depends on the culture of collaboration and consultation developed in an educational setting where the purpose is to provide resources and support and to develop the abilities of all children (Jordan & McGhie-Richmond, 2014). When upgradation of professional expertise to the pedagogical leadership level made by teachers the schools will improve the effectiveness of inclusive practices

(Jahanzaib, Fatima, & Nayab, 2021). Therefore, stakeholders and teachers of all educational institutions need to consider restructuring of the systems and practices of education and to assist children with disabilities in learning (Fraser & Maguvhe, 2008).

Research Methodology

Keeping in view the exploratory nature of the study, qualitative research design was employed to investigate the perceptions of teachers about teaching visually impaired students in the inclusive classroom at the ECD level. Additionally, a case study approach is considered important for this study, due to its ability to elicit comprehensive information from the participants of the research. The inclusive classroom where the teaching and learning process occurs is considered the natural setting of this study to find out how teachers teach visually impaired children and challenges, they face.

Research Context

For an in-depth case study, one of the ECD schools of District Gilgit was purposely selected where inclusive education is encouraging.

Sampling

Purposive sampling was used within the selected school to select participants and ECD classrooms appropriate to provide relevant information (Seidman, 2013). Only those teachers were included in the sample who have at least three years' experience of teaching visually impaired students in inclusive settings at ECD level. Furthermore, only those ECD classes were included in the sample that has some visually impaired students.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

In order to get in-depth information, semi-structured interviews were used for data collection. The original data of the study was preserved on a tape recorder.

Interim data analysis was conducted immediately following each interview. The transcribed data was then systematically organized using Creswell's (2013) recommended steps: transcribing interviews, generating codes, writing descriptions, scrutinizing and generating themes, and interpreting the findings. The discussion was presented using the major themes and findings of the relevant literature. Finally, the conclusion and implications were presented.

Instrumentation

In order to guide the semi-structured interviews, an interview protocol was developed. The reliability and validity were ensured by using the expert judgment of 3 experts.

Ethical Consideration

Permission in writing was taken from the school principal, and the purpose was shared through a written informed consent. Pseudonyms of teachers and the school were used to ensure anonymity. The data was safe during collection and was destroyed after the completion of study.

Results and Findings

Teachers' understanding about Inclusive Education

All the teachers have a clear understanding of the term differently abled children. Teacher B elaborated that: "*Normal students are those who have no disabilities such as mental and physical disabilities*". Teacher D added "*Differently abled children mean those who have some disabilities, such as: mentally disabled and physically disabled*" (Interview: July 2022).

All the four teachers have similar views and responses regarding inclusive education. According to them, inclusive education is about mixing and including a kind of acceptance and welcoming and friendly attitudes towards differently abled students. Teacher B said: "*Inclusive education means to accommodate and teach both special and normal children in the same class and to facilitate every student according to their learning needs and interests.*" Teacher D responded that, "*Inclusive education means teaching both normal and differently abled children together in the same classroom according to their learning needs and styles*". Teacher A said "*combine and teach both normal and abnormal students under the same learning environment i.e., classroom.* (Interview: July 2022)

Teacher C explained that *"A system of education in which all the students with and without any kind of physical or mental disabilities are taught together within the same classroom".* (Interview: July 2022). Teacher A said that *"Teaching the same curriculum and lesson in the same classroom to both children with various disabilities and without disabilities students is known as inclusive education."* (Interview: July 2022)

The teachers elaborated that inclusive education is essential for character building and confidence building of a child regardless of differences. It also develops a feeling of belonging to the society. Teacher-C believed that inclusive education is important as it helps to develop a

feeling of belonging in deprived and marginalized students and also consider themselves as a member of society. It ensures the provision of opportunities to develop and enhance friendship and social development (Interview: July 2022). Teacher-D highlighted that "*Inclusive education is important for all students because it provides opportunities for differentiable students to learn from normal peers and they feel they are also members of society. Furthermore, visually impaired students should also be educated in inclusive education systems* (Interview: July 2022).

According to Teacher A: *"Inclusive Education is beneficial because integrating children with disabilities enables them to acquire valuable life skills."* (Interview: July 2022). Teacher-B said that *"inclusive education prepares students with disabilities to work and interact with members of the community after the completion of their studies."*

All teachers faced similar challenges in inclusive classrooms. The shortage of teachers for crowded ECD classes, improperly implemented methods of teaching and maintaining balance among differentiable students are the key challenges. Teachers B claimed that she lacks the knowledge to deal with visually impaired students in inclusive classes at ECD level. In this regard, Teacher B narrated that:

> *There is a lack of proper guidelines to teach in inclusive classes. Teachers on their part, use their creativity to cope with the diversities in inclusive ECD classes specially with visually impaired students. So, proper guidelines should be provided to teach visually impaired children in inclusive classrooms. (Interview: July 2022)*

Teacher A supported the argument of teacher B and further elaborated by focusing the knowledge about braille writing and reading, she said that:

> *ECD level is the most important phase of children for their holistic development including their mental, physical, social etc. Along with this, to develop reading and writing skills are also very important. However, most of the teachers including me lack the knowledge of using braille through which we can teach visually impaired students. (Interview: July 2022).*

Teacher D further added that, *"The lack of Braille knowledge, may cause some children to fall behind in learning reading and writing skills and fail to enhance academic knowledge they were meant to learn."*

Identifying the Learning Needs of Visually Impaired Students at ECD Level

To implement suitable adaptive and modified teaching strategies, it is pivotal to find the ways teachers identify the learning needs of visually impaired students. The teachers indicated four major ways to assess the learning needs and styles of visually impaired students in inclusive ECD classes. These include direct interaction with students to know about their life history, contacting parents, contacting a special needs teacher and observing the performances of students during class lessons.

All four teachers mentioned that they directly contact a student to know about their difficulties of learning. They also mention some difficulties while identifying learning needs of visually impaired students through direct communication with them. Teacher A said that "*When I observe or feel some learning difficulties in visually impaired students, I directly contact students and ask them about their life history and difficulties in learning to assess and identify their learning needs. Direct communication with children is quite difficult because ECD children cannot respond properly. That is why, I mostly prefer to consult with special needs teachers for visually impaired students and I contact their parents in order to find solutions to the problems that visually impaired students face while learning. (Interview: July 2022)*

Teacher B mentioned that she observes classroom performance and directly contacts students to know about their learning difficulties while teaching.

During lessons or teaching in the classroom, I observe the participation and performance of students in the class through different activities that include group work, peer work, presentations and tasks. If any student does not perform well in class activities, then I contact the particular student immediately about the reason for the weak performance in different activities. (Interview: July 2022)

She also mentioned *the difficulty in assessing the learning needs of visually impaired students and added that "Mostly I feel difficulty in contacting children as they do not convey things well, therefore, I prefer to contact their parents. I also share the problems with the special teacher for visually impaired students."* (Interview: July 2022).

The response of teacher C was quite the same as teacher A and B. She responded:

I directly interact and ask the students about their learning problems. I share with other teachers and seek help from them. Moreover, I ask for help from a special needs teacher for visually impaired students, to solve the learning problems of students in order to plan the activities and

implement them effectively for all students including visually impaired" (Interview: July 2022).

Teacher D also highlighted the ways of assessing learning needs of visually impaired students.

Different students have different needs and capabilities of learning that are very important to be addressed. Due to these differences, we cannot use or apply the same methods to all students. Our classes are crowded with a number of these differently abled students, which creates a problem to identify the learning needs of every student properly. (Interview: July 2022).

Teacher D further added that, "*Sometimes these crowded ECD classes with a number of differently abled students, makes me fail to meet the learning needs of every student. However, I try my best to facilitate all students by consulting their parents and other teachers."* (Interview: July 2022)

Discussion

Findings of the current study reflect that the teachers show some basic level of their understanding of inclusive education, and they need more skills and expertise to deal with visually impaired students in inclusive classrooms at ECD level. However, there was lack of consideration of adaptive methods of teaching as mentioned in Salamanca statement. For teachers A, B, C and D inclusive education means to put students with and without disabilities together under the same roof and teach the same lesson to all children regardless of their disabilities (Crockett, Gerber, & Landrum, 2017). In this regard, the principle of inclusion is to create conducive learning environments for both special needs children and mainstream learners and use of adaptable and flexible teaching strategies in inclusive classrooms. Just put together does not involve changes and flexibilities that are needed rather it is just physical activity (Lee, Tracey, Barker, Fan, & Yeung, 2014).

Inclusive education is complete participation of children with varying abilities. Inclusive education is defined as the full inclusion of children with diverse abilities in all areas of schooling irrespective of their abilities and disabilities (Derzhavina, et al., 2021). Salamanca Statement & Framework of Action (1994), and Jacob & Olisaemeka, (2016) also elaborates that, regardless of their specific learning requirements, all disabled children should have access to a high-quality education that will help them to become a contributing member of society and boost the local economy.

Prior to the commencement of a course of study, it is important to assess the learning needs of the students. Due to their varied experiences,

life backgrounds, and social interactions, students have different levels of cognition, learning needs, and learning styles (Tosuncuoglu, 2018; Kirmizi & Komek, 2016). Assessment helps teachers understand students' learning abilities, methods, and needs, so they can accordingly plan lessons and teaching. It is important to know beforehand whether a student requires the use of group discussions, question/answer method, big printing, magnifiers and lenses, braille, etc. Individualized Education Plan (IEP) should also be shown for further implementation (Jacob & Olisaemeka, 2016).

Teachers seemed to recognize the significance of assessment in their discussion and talked about the methods of assessing learning needs of students. All teachers talked about direct interaction with students and with their parents to find out their life history/backgrounds and learning problems. Kirmizi & Komek (2016) also emphasizes that, teaching inclusive classrooms and identifying and meeting every student's learning needs is most difficult and challenging all the time because the aim of inclusive education is to identify the learning needs of every student and address them accordingly. They also observe students while performing classroom activities.

Additionally, the findings also reflect that teachers face difficulties in identifying students' learning needs by directly contacting them because ECD children are too young to give proper responses. Also, lacking knowledge among teachers and crowded inclusive classrooms suggested such planning and implementation of teaching methods that do not address the learning needs of all students. Due to disability nature, students with visual impairments are likely to be affected mostly.

Ainscow (2018) further states that, in order to find out the exact learning needs and problems, it is vital to make both formal and informal assessments of a student during classroom activities, however, the crowded classes and lack of knowledge among teachers, interrupts the process of assessing learning needs of visually impaired students during classroom activities. These two reasons not only create hurdles in the way of assessing learning needs of students but also impedes the teaching processes in meeting diversified learning needs of students. If the learning needs of visually impaired students are not addressed for any reason mentioned in this research, then there is no meaning of teaching visually impaired students in inclusive classrooms and the goal of EFA remains far away from the reality (Brown, Packer, & Passmore, 2011).

Conclusion

Teachers have enough understanding of inclusive education using the Salamanca statement's concept of inclusive education as a benchmark for judging the perception and knowledge of teachers. Teachers also understand its importance. However, they lack the knowledge of practicing the adaptive strategies of teaching in an inclusive classroom. The sense of awareness regarding the purpose and the practice of inclusive education was shown in the statements of teachers.

The results demonstrate that teachers recognize how much it is to assess the learning needs and styles of visually impaired students in an inclusive classroom before they start teaching. Although teachers narrated that they are not satisfied with the knowledge they have regarding assessing the learning needs of visually impaired students in inclusive classrooms, it is still suggested by the findings that they possess some techniques that help in assessing learning needs and styles of visually impaired students in inclusive ECD classes. The main challenge was to implement the methods of teaching to address the assessed learning needs of visually impaired students. Undoubtedly, the crowded classes make them intentionally or unintentionally neglect the assessment and teaching to meet learning needs of visually impaired students.

Teachers acknowledged the importance of identifying learning needs of visually impaired students before the teaching process begins. Identifying learning needs of visually impaired students, observing participation in the classroom and contact with the parents were the three main strategies of assessing learning needs. Klibthong & Agbenyega (2020) emphasized on the importance of direct contact with students to discover their learning problems and needs because he is the one who better knows about his problems. But ECD level students were too young to respond properly, which creates hindrance in identification of learners' needs.

There is a lack of collaboration between ECD teachers and special needs teachers due to the shortage of special needs teachers. It is argued that co-teaching is important to deal with students with different learning needs because it is not possible for a teacher to possess all the skills that are necessary to address the students' different needs (Brendle, et al., 2017). Therefore, absence of implementation of co-teaching means to not properly meet the learning needs of visually impaired students.

Recommendations

- *Recommendations for improvements*
  It is recommended for the institute to conduct specialized training for teachers in order to enhance their competencies in inclusive education methodologies and approaches for visually impaired students.
  Foster a culture of collaboration between mainstream educators and specialists in special needs education to implement collaborative teaching models efficiently.

  To address challenges of overcrowded classrooms and educator knowledge disparities, implement effective classroom management and provide ongoing professional development. Allocate additional support staff and resources, like teaching assistants and assistive technologies, for personalized learning. Foster collaboration among educators and advocate for policy reforms prioritizing smaller class sizes and inclusive education initiatives.
- *Implications for Future Research*
  Future research should investigate the role of collaborative partnerships between mainstream and special education teachers in enhancing inclusive practices. Additionally, evaluating classroom management strategies and addressing challenges within inclusive settings will contribute to the improvement of inclusive learning environments.

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