Perspectives of pre-service and in-service general education teachers of the Faculty of Education on inclusive education: A phenomenological study

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Abstract

Inclusive education is an international trend. Globally, the move away from segregation to the inclusion of children with and without special educational needs in regular classrooms has evolved over the past few decades as one of the significant strategies to ensure the right to "Education for All". While high-income countries have envisaged living up to the ideals of inclusive education, this remains daunting for low-income countries, including Sri Lanka. On the general assumption that general education teachers must be equipped with relevant knowledge, appropriate skills, and favourable dispositions to effectively work with an increasingly heterogeneous student population in regular classrooms, and teacher education institutions must play a significant role in preparing them to serve this purpose, however, in practice the question that always arises is how adequately they are being prepared. This phenomenological, qualitative, transcendental inquiry sought to investigate the daily lived experiences of general education teachers about their inclusive teaching. More specifically, with four pre-service teachers enrolled in the Bachelor of Education (Honours) degree and four in-service teachers enrolled in the Postgraduate Diploma in Education programs conducted by the Faculty of Education of the University of Colombo, Sri Lanka, this study explored their knowledge and understanding of inclusive education, epistemological beliefs and attitudes toward accommodating children with special needs in their inclusive classrooms, and their concerns about and preparedness to implement inclusive practices. Data obtained from semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were considered the primary source for the inductive thematic analysis. Key findings, derived from four themes; i. Knowledge and understanding of inclusive education for special needs children; ii. Sentiments and concerns; iii. Behaviour management; and iv. Learning-support teachers were discussed for their implications for further research within the context of teacher education.

Keywords: Sri Lanka, inclusive education, pre-service teachers, in-service teachers, phenomenological study, general education teachers, perspectives

Introduction

Inclusive education (IE) is accepted internationally as the preferred option for educating children with special educational needs alongside typically developing peers in the least restrictive environment (LRE)[1]. Globally, over the past few decades, a significant move from segregation to the inclusion of children with and without special educational needs in regular classrooms has evolved as the key strategy to ensure the right to Education for All (EFA). Although high-income countries have envisaged living up to the ideals of inclusion, this remains daunting for low-income countries, including Sri Lanka[2,3]. There are long-standing concerns that enacting IE policy is difficult because general education teachers are inadequately and inappropriately prepared for inclusive teaching[4-8]. Combating exclusion to achieve greater inclusion of children who are different is challenging for teachers as their roles, responsibilities, and identities as inclusive practitioners, the kind of knowledge and training to offer, and competencies related to inclusive pedagogy remain unclear[9,10].

Inclusive Education – International: Teachers are mandated by the provisions of EFA to educate all children who are disabled, typically developed and non-disabled, which includes socio-economically disadvantaged children, gifted and talented, children displaced by natural and manmade disasters, street and working children, refugee children and children from minority groups (category of labelling of children with special educational needs may vary from country to country) in mainstream classrooms for as much of the day as possible by effectively meeting their diverse needs thereby to increase their presence, participation and achievement in learning while reducing exclusion from education[11]. IE is the most effective strategy to enact the goal of EFA[12]. Educating special needs children (SNC) in inclusive settings has progressively gained momentum with the advent of the Salamanca Statement, which endorsed the idea of inclusive schools while emphasizing special needs education to be an integral part of all education programs[13]. It further significantly contributed to the agenda for achieving EFA, reaffirming the rights of everyone to education, as proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 (Article 26) for making schools more effective.

This was to become a major influence in the development of inclusive policies and practices across the world in subsequent years[14]. Article 28 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), as well as Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) guarantees the rights of SNC to education based on equality of educational opportunity for every child[15,16]. By signing these Conventions, the majority of countries across the globe, including Sri Lanka committed to generating environments consistent with the goal of full inclusion that maximizes the academic and social development of SNC.

Through the signing and ratification of the CRC, the CRPD, and, more recently, the Sustainable Development Goals, various interpretations of the concepts associated with the mainstreaming of SNC - integration and, more recently, inclusion - originated in countries where reasonable efforts have been made to implement IE policies[15-17]. The terms integration and inclusion are often used interchangeably in the vocabulary of personnel working with SNC, albeit they have different meanings in philosophy and practice. At this juncture, it is useful to summarize the difference between these two concepts. In a review of a large body of research by Avramidis and Norwich to examine teachers' attitudes toward integration/ inclusion, the term integration was clearly distinguished from inclusion[18]. In integration, children with difficulties and/or disabilities are placed in the LRE, where the functional integration of these children is not warranted, but rather, they are integrated in a manner appropriate to their special needs and circumstances. In other words, through integration, SNC are expected to assimilate into a largely unchanged learning environment. Inclusion implies "a restructuring of mainstream schooling that every school can accommodate every child irrespective of disability ('accommodation' rather than 'assimilation') and ensures that all learners belong to a community"[18]. Another study about IE states "Inclusive education does not include special units or special classrooms (segregation), or placing children with disabilities in mainstream settings so long as they can adjust (integration). Inclusive education begins with the assumption that all children have a right to be in the same educational space"[19]. This rights-based philosophy calls for the responsiveness of education systems, schools, and teachers to the diverse needs of SNC, rather than forcing them to conform to a rigid, pre-determined structure.

Theoretically, two disability-inclusive models are used in understanding disability. One is the social model and the other is the medical model. In the social model, students with disabilities are seen as having special educational needs. Greater recognition by society is given to increasing their participation in activities on an equal footing with non-disabled peers by reducing or removing barriers. In contrast, disability in the medical model is seen as a disease that is inherently abnormal or pathological and must be cured, and ameliorated to the greatest extent possible[12]. The medical model is based on the premise that the effect of disability should be borne by the disabled

student without creating any discomfort to society. On the other hand, the social model expects a change in society, which disables a learner with impairments rather than adjustments. The inclusive classroom operates per the social model where adjustments are made in providing educational opportunities to ensure maximum participation of SNC[12].

Inclusive Education – Sri Lanka: The legal definition of disability, derived from the Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (No. 28 of 1996) as cited in the National Policy on Disability for Sri Lanka is as follows: "A person with disability means any person who, as a result of any deficiency in his physical or mental capabilities, whether congenital or not, is unable by himself to ensure for himself, wholly or partly, the necessities of life"[20]. This definition is typically broad and it encompasses both the medical and social models of disability. Sri Lanka has a long and proud history of special education since the 1900s. Missionaries began to institutionalize the SNC during the colonial period. These institutions are said to have performed more custodial functions by providing protective care to these children than by offering education. Nevertheless, it led to the establishment of the first special school in 1912, which provided specialized knowledge, expertise, and facilities to a wide range of hearing and visually-impaired pupils. Since then, more than 25 special schools for SNC have started functioning across the country[21].

The next major move towards special education was in 1939 when assisted special schools were allowed to enter the free education system as mandated by the Education Ordinance No. 31. According to Ordinance 30(1) in 1944, 75% of special education teachers in these schools were paid by the government. The Code of Regulation for Assisted Schools was amended in 1948 to provide compulsory education for children in the age group of 6-14 years. Consequently, in 1961 children who were with minor disabilities were admitted to these schools[21]. In 1965, the government became directly involved in educating disabled children. The Ministry of Education has attempted to increase educational opportunities by integrating these children into regular schools through special classrooms and more recently included them in regular classrooms[22]. Integrated education refers to the placement of disabled children in ordinary schools to support them by specially adapting instructions to cater to their different needs, for example, the Braille system for visually challenged children and sign languages for those who were with hearing impairments. This integration was first initiated with visually impaired children in 1968, followed by hearing-impaired children in 1973. Children with mental retardation were integrated into regular schools in 1976 (Examples of Inclusive Education Sri Lanka, 2003). Thus the decade starting from 1970 marked a transitional period towards disability-inclusion[21].

The momentum created by the experiences accrued through these initiatives along with international commitments to IE, especially the CRC in 1989 which asserts the rights of every

child and no child left behind on grounds of disability concerning access to education, and the Salamanca Statement Report in 1994, gave greater emphasis to IE in Sri Lanka[23]. In this context, in line with the Compulsory Education Ordinance of Sri Lanka No. 1003/5 of 1997 that asserts the compulsory education of all children including SNC between the ages of 5-14, the education system itself educates SNC in regular schools by recognizing and responding to the diverse needs and abilities of a heterogeneous student population through the use of child-centered teaching methods etc[12]. This inclusive model embraces the idea that a child with a disability should not be viewed as a "disabled child" but rather as a child with special needs and abilities as their non-disabled peers educated in the same classroom. The current status of IE in Sri Lanka involves a progressive move through educating SNC in Government schools by enrolling them in either regular schools or special units attached to regular schools. Apart from these provisions, special schools run by non-governmental organizations and private sectors also function to educate SNC. Parents of these children either prefer the schools of their choice or feel that their children cannot fit into either of these streams. These non-government special schools are governed by the Code of Regulations for English Assisted Schools (1948) with its subsequent amendments[20].

Teacher Education at the Faculty of Education, University of Colombo: Major responsibility in preparing teachers with appropriate attributes such as; commitment, tolerance, attitudes, and beliefs toward IE and the adequate IE knowledge and skills required for effective implementation of IE rests on teacher education institutions, including universities and higher education institutions. Most importantly, these institutions must prepare teachers by providing more opportunities to acquire competencies that enable them to teach inclusively without increasing their stress levels and concerns[24]. The Faculty of Education (FoE) of the University of Colombo (UoC), Sri Lanka conducts pre-service and in-service teacher education programs to prepare competent teachers for regular education classrooms. The four-year Bachelor of Education (BEd) degree is designed to offer pre-service training to those who have qualified from the G.C.E (Advanced Level) in Arts and enrolled in the Faculty of Arts (FoA) of the UoC in Arts stream. Aone-year Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDip) program is offered as in-service training for those already attached to the education system as untrained graduate teachers.

FoE has a national reputation for conducting B.Ed. (Honours) degree in three media; English, Sinhala, and Tamil, primarily to prepare Art teachers for primary and secondary regular education classrooms. Initially, students are enrolled in the Arts stream of the FoA of the UoC to pursue the academic component. In their first year of study, they must concurrently take a foundation course in FoE. Students' performance in this course and their performance in Arts subjects are considered eligibility criteria for pursuing professional courses in FoE from the second year onwards while pursuing academic subjects in

FoA. In the fourth and final year of studentship, students are fully attached to the FoE to follow only the professional component. The teacher education curricula of the undergraduate and postgraduate programs are designed in line with the national education goals of the country. Most of the syllabi of the professional courses are designed to meet the requirements of inclusive education policies and practices. For instance, some courses offered by the Department of Educational Psychology; Psychological Bases of Education, School Counselling, Educational Guidance and Counselling, and Early Childhood Education are specifically designed and developed intended to equip student teachers with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to become inclusive practitioners.

One of the distinctive features of the teacher education programs of the FoE is its ten-week, well-supervised teaching practicum. As an integral part of the teacher education curriculum, in the fourth and final year/second semester, after completing academic and professional components and two weeks of professional and orientation workshops, the student teachers should attach themselves to the schools in the Colombo regions to gain hands-on pedagogical experience. One noteworthy feature of the pre-service teacher education program (BEd) is that it is a prerequisite for student teachers to orient themselves to schools in their regions for two weeks before teaching practicum. This is intended to provide opportunities for student teachers to get to know the overall functioning of schools, including culture, administration, curricular activities, etc.

Teacher Attributes and IE: Successful implementation of inclusive practices depends to a large extent on teacher attributes. An emerging consensus is that general education teachers' attitudes, concerns, and beliefs toward working with a diverse range of learners, and how they perceive an inclusive environment are critical to the success of inclusion[4,9,25-28,30-32]. If teachers hold positive dispositions regarding their inclusive practices, they are more likely to perceive inclusive environments favourably and welcome the diversity of all learners to create favourable learning environments[29]. Although previous studies have shown that general education teachers generally display positive attitudes toward inclusion, recent studies have concluded that pre-service teachers hold positive and negative or neutral attitudes and beliefs and less positive attitudes toward inclusion of children with high support needs[7,33-36]. A recent study of 348 primary and 193 secondary school pre-and in-service teachers in an Australian context found that in-service primary teachers had more positive attitudes towards IE than secondary school teachers, however, this difference was not observed in the pre-service cohort whereas primary pre-service teachers showed more responsive to inclusive training[37]. Another study conducted in Spain with in-service teachers and teacher training students found that teachers had more positive attitudes toward inclusion[38].

General education teachers in Greece generally had more positive attitudes toward teaching children with social difficulties than toward teaching children with behavioural and academic difficulties. The study also found that these teachers perceived children with physical difficulties as less likely to be supported in inclusive classrooms. Furthermore, this study included teacher demographics as influencing factors and showed the effect of gender, age, training, and experience on teachers' attitudes[39]. Pre-service teachers evidenced ambivalent feelings toward IE and expressed a preference for special school placements for SNC. Teachers had welcoming attitudes to accommodate students with social or communication difficulties in their classrooms, however, they were not favourable to including students with physical disabilities, sensory impairment, learning disabilities, and behavioural problems. In a related study, Horzum and Izci presented mixed opinions of the attitudes of pre-service teachers and they concluded that the fear of an unfavourable impact on regular students might be the reason for unfavourable view of inclusion[40].

A plethora of studies documented pre-service teachers' attitudes and beliefs regarding inclusion, however, few studies have commented on teachers' daily lived experiences of educating SNC. A study conducted in India in 2015 using a hermeneutic phenomenology to examine 15 general education teachers' belief systems and perceptions of inclusion of students with disabilities in their inclusive classrooms reported that teachers were dissatisfied with the implementation of IE. Furthermore, teachers expressed a deficit view of students with disabilities, which was reinforced by various challenges including a high student-teacher ratio and inadequate teacher training and support system. The teachers indicated that special education teachers are solely responsible for the education of SNC[41].

Allison undertook a phenomenological study with four general and four special education teachers to explore their lived experiences in inclusive classrooms and found that most participants had positive views about inclusion where they accepted that the inclusion model provides equal educational opportunities for all students. Interestingly, both special and general education teachers believed that general education teachers need continuous professional development significantly because it is the group that is involved in inclusive instruction. Furthermore, this study found that awareness and understanding of children with disabilities and the challenges involved in implementing inclusive practices improved in the majority of participants as a result of lived experiences gained in inclusive settings. Overall, participants' lived experiences in inclusive settings impacted their attitudes and beliefs about inclusion. The study suggests that support from administrators, mutual understanding between general and special education teachers, favourable work environments, a welcoming approach to inclusion, and increased awareness of students with disabilities are important factors for the successful implementation of IE[42].

Another recent phenomenological study that explored eight general education preschool teachers' experiences and perspectives on inclusion, found that while all participants had positive attitudes toward inclusive teaching, they were of the view that they needed a better understating of their roles as preschool teachers to perform in an inclusive environment because the stakeholders perceived them as little more than babysitters and needed more formal and on-the-job training in inclusive practices[43].

Teacher Preparation to Inclusive Teaching: Teaching in inclusive classrooms calls for significant shifts and modifications in content and pedagogy with a common vision of achieving EFA[44,45]. The contribution of universities and their student teachers to this process is indispensable[29]. However, according to UNESCO "One of the greatest challenges for teacher education is posed by the demands of inclusive education but surprisingly little attention has been paid to this important topic"[46]. Universities should prepare regular classroom teachers to effectively implement IE "through their approach to learners, the methods and materials they use, their ability to welcome diversity and see it as strength and their capacity to adapt and respond to challenges and diverse learning needs"[8], which is critical and challenging. In addition to acquiring declarative and procedural knowledge about inclusive teaching, teachers need to develop attributes without increasing their stress levels and heightening their concerns[5,24]. This requires a significant restructuring, on the part, of teacher preparatory institutions including universities and higher education institutions to reform pre-and in-service teacher education curricula to ensure better focus on achieving this aim[47,48].

It is critical to investigate the views and perspectives of general education teachers on how they are prepared to address the diverse needs of an increasingly heterogeneous student population in regular classrooms. The importance of teacher education and training in shaping the attitudes, teacher efficacy, and beliefs of general education teachers is well documented. Several studies suggest that initial teacher training is an effective period for prospective teachers in fostering positive attitudes of acceptance and tolerance of differences among students and building confidence to face challenges in inclusive settings[9,49].

Considering the effectiveness of teacher preparation for teaching SNC in inclusive contexts, a survey-based content analysis was conducted from a large regional Australian university to explore pre-service primary teachers' (N = 101) views about inclusion and their preparedness to teach in inclusive classrooms. Results were obtained before and after participants experienced an inclusive education subject and a related practicum. Findings revealed that a significant number of pre-service teachers felt they were ill-prepared to teach students with diverse needs[6].

Over decades, teacher efficacy towards inclusive practices has been the major focus of most of the international studies that attempted to investigate how the course on IE and special needs education impacted pre-service teachers' self-efficacy. They consistently asserted that there is an influence of pre-service teacher training on improved levels of perceived teaching efficacy towards IE[31,32,50-55]. Casarez argued that in preparing pre-service teachers equipped with the required competencies to address and respond to the diverse needs of all learners, developing a sense of self-efficacy through an IE course is critical as these factors influence teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. Compared to other factors influencing teachers' perspectives on IE, these constructs are shown to be significant predictors of successful inclusive teaching[56].

Several studies have documented the means of acquiring IE knowledge of pre-service teachers during teacher preparation and its impact on their traits. Many of them focused on the influence of existing courses in the teacher education curricula whereas other intervention studies focused on the effect of completing developed courses on IE or special education on teacher attributes. A qualitative investigation by a group of researchers to explore the inclusive values and views of pre-service teachers concluded that both freshman and senior students show similarities in their values in that teachers should demonstrate congruence between personal and pedagogical values. Furthermore, this study explored the differences between final-year students who had undertaken an IE minor and those who had not. It was revealed that the students who did the inclusion minor favourably viewed inclusion and felt more confident about supporting these differences among children in their future classrooms, than those who had not completed this minor[57].

The importance of the effect of completing a course on IE has also been further supported by many other studies. A study using 125 pre-service primary education teachers found that completion of a 13-week IE course with a total contact time of 39 hours co-varied with an increased level of self-efficacy. However, the field-based placements provided with different levels that include 'mentoring', 'inclusive classroom support', and 'subject only' did not show any statistically significant effect on teachers' self-efficacy[58]. Forlin et al. and Sharma et al. concluded that the amount of training received in a special/IE course has significantly contributed to fostering positive attitudes towards inclusion[26,30]. Several other studies supported the effect of studying a module/subject on special education/inclusion and concluded that it was one of the important factors in improving pre-service teachers' attitudes, beliefs, and self-efficacy toward IE[28,31,32,36].

Several studies have emphasized the importance of practicum hours in developing favourable attitudes toward IE. A study was undertaken to investigate whether studying an IE subject influenced concerns about and self-efficacy toward IE. Ninety-seven junior-level primary pre-service teachers, selected randomly from an Australian university followed an IE subject consisting of four weeks of embedded practicum. The findings showed that participants' attitudes toward IE changed little over the five-month course period[58]. The findings revealed the significant contribution of increased hours of practicum to the improved level of self-efficacy. Similarly, a study conducted in a Canadian context with 60 pre-service teachers to examine their confidence, concerns and efficacy before and after introducing an IE course found significant gains in mean scores for post-treatment. Also, the study concluded that those who had experience in a practicum in an inclusive setting scored higher in classroom management efficacy than those without such experience[59].

While earlier study reported the importance of practicum in contributing to higher levels of knowledge and feelings of self-efficacy of teachers with personal experience in supporting SNC, a recent study using a sample of 56 pre-service primary teachers from three metropolitan universities in Australia, reported that after participating 112 days of professional experience placement in primary schools, these teachers attitudes have been strengthened across the training years[60,61]. This was further asserted by a study with pre-service teachers in Turkey, conducted to examine their views and perceived competence regarding IE, and it found that lack of training in experience with SNC caused pre-service teachers to exhibit a low level of perceived competence while experience with SNC has resulted in higher levels of perceived competence[40]. A South Korean study with 119 pre-service regular classroom teachers was investigated to examine whether their attitudes, intentions, concerns, and self-efficacy toward IE were changed after introducing a mandatory subject about special and IE, and the results showed positive changes in all key constructs. Also, high mean scores were obtained in attitude, intentions, and self-efficacy subscales whereas concerns subscale scores were drastically reduced on completion of this mandatory subject[62]. How continuous professional development training contributes to the development of favourable attitudes towards IE has been documented by the study of Dickens-Smith, based on regular (N=100) and special educators (N=100). Teachers' attitudinal level was measured before and after the in-service training session on inclusion and the results revealed that both categories of teachers showed the greatest change in attitudes towards inclusion as a result of training than they did before, while general education teachers showed the largest gain in the attitudinal scale[63].

When considering teacher education in Sri Lanka, recent studies suggest that despite the progressive move towards IE, there is still a policy practice gap[64]. Also, it was reported that current practices in education for SNC do not match the global trends in IE. One study concluded that regular classroom teachers face stress or dilemmas when balancing classrooms to meet the needs of both students with and without special educational needs[65]. Additionally, many teachers reported that they were not prepared to teach in classrooms that included SNC[65,66].

This may be due to participants' developed misconceptions about IE and integration, poor confidence in their capabilities, concerns about inadequate training, pressure to work in a school exam culture, and lack of knowledge about IE policies[67]. Although the mandate of the Ministry of Education is that SNC should be educated among their typically developing peers, they are more likely to be unattended to or excluded from regular classrooms due to these barriers. Since these factors are related to teacher preparedness, a great concern is whether teacher education institutions are capable of functioning in preparing competent inclusive teachers.

Hence, this study aimed to investigate the perspectives of student teachers of the FoE on IE. More specifically, using a transcendental phenomenological research approach, this study sought to explore the essence of daily lived experiences of teachers working with SNC in regular classrooms with the view to assess how they are being prepared with requisite competencies. The objectives guiding this study are (1) to explore the lived experiences of the pre and in-service teachers in teaching SNC in regular classrooms; (2) to compare the perspectives of these two categories of teachers towards IE; and (3) to discuss the educational implications of the findings of this study. A plethora of studies documented pre-service and in-service teachers' attitudes and beliefs toward inclusion, however, only a few studies commented on teachers' daily lived experiences of educating SNC. Hence, the present study is important to bridge the policy practice gap in teacher preparation. Furthermore, it would pave the way for teacher preparation institutions to consider revisiting the existing teacher education curricula in a manner to prepare teaching professionals with relevant knowledge, positive attitudes, and beliefs for working with SNC in regular classrooms.

Methodology

The current study employed a transcendental phenomenological approach, which describes the essence of the lived experiences of individuals in the phenomenon being investigated. The main purpose of this qualitative paradigm of research is to describe the commonalities of the experiences shared by research participants. A phenomenological study was initiated by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), the fountainhead of the phenomenological movement and transcendental phenomenology. Husserl proposed phenomenology as an "experimental method based on the conscience of phenomena in which the pure essences of the contents of consciousness stood out"[68]. Hence, the focus of this methodological framework is not on the phenomenon, but rather, on a person or a subject who is experiencing this phenomenon. The phenomenological study is best used when the research problem requires a profound understanding of human experiences common to the participants being investigated and they need to be able to articulate their lived experiences. Groenewald posited that "The more diverse the experiences of participants, the harder it will be for the researcher to find the underlying essences and common meanings attributed to the studied phenomenon"[69]. The use of phenomenology enables researchers to bring the lived experiences of the research participants to the fore from their own perspectives, which helps them to obtain an unbiased description of the raw data by bracketing his or her personal biases[70].

Participants: Four prospective teachers in the fourth and final year of Tamil medium B. Ed. degree and four in-service teachers from PGDE Tamil medium, selected from the cohort enrolled in FoE for the year 2018, took part in this study. Completion of a ten-week teaching practicum with hands-on experience in teaching SNC in regular classrooms was considered a criterion in the purposive selection of these participants. This sampling method helps to create a homogenous sample of participants who have experienced the same phenomenon being studied. The teacher sample consisted of only female student teachers with no male representation. This is because male teachers are under-represented in the faculty, which may be a reflection of the country's teacher population, where male teachers represent only about 30%[71].

Procedure: Data were gathered from September to December 2018. Participants voluntarily took part in this study. Before the interviews, each interviewee was clarified with the main purpose of this study. Written informed consent was obtained from each of them. One-on-one, in-depth interviews using a semi-structured interview protocol were conducted for approximately two to three hours using open-ended questions based on broad questions like: What experience do you have of teaching SNC in regular classrooms, and what contexts or situations typically influence your experience in this type of teaching? Experiences shared by the participants served the purpose of this study to understand their epistemological beliefs, attitudes toward inclusion, preparedness, and concerns while working with SNC in regular classrooms. All eight interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English by the trained transcribers and the author. Verbatim transcriptions and translations were checked for accuracy by professors. Each participant was given a copy of the transcribed text to validate if it reflected her perspectives on the shared lived experiences. As such, eight source files were prepared for thematic analysis. To maintain anonymity, each source file was assigned a code using letters to identify teacher candidates based on the type of training they followed. For example, pre-service teachers were assigned the interview code PS whereas in-service teachers were labeled IS.

Research and Discussion

Four major themes emerged from the thematic analysis of the transcripts, conducted using NVivo – 12 software, as findings from this phenomenological study were; (1) knowledge and understanding of IE and SNC; (2) sentiments and concerns; (3) behaviour management; (4) learning-support teachers.

The following sections describe the participants' inclusive teaching experiences under these four themes.

Theme 1: Knowledge and Understanding of IE and SNC: The participants in this study were well aware that IE was the right choice to educate SNC in their regular classrooms rather than in segregated learning environments such as special units or special schools to ensure their rights to education. However, when they were asked to conceptualize IE, almost all participants conceptualized it incorrectly and had little knowledge of IE policies. Also, when asked to describe how they became aware of the IE concept, three in-service teachers indicated that they became familiar with it through newspapers, television programs, and guidance and counseling teachers in their schools, while one in-service and all prospective teachers indicated that they learned about it through teacher education programs.

Regarding knowledge of SNC, it was found that most in-service teachers were much better than pre-service teachers in identifying SNC in their classrooms. They were able to name the disabilities of the students by observing their characteristics such as Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder, Down syndrome, Autism Spectrum Disorders, Dyslexia, and Dyscalculia. On the other hand, when describing SNC, pre-service teachers often describe them by their behaviour, for example; students who are slow learners, students who cannot see and hear, students who exhibit disruptive or noisy behaviour, students who have difficulty reading and writing, students who are late comers, students who show poor attendance, etc., to refer to a disability.

All respondents accepted that SNC have great potential and should be nurtured not in segregated classrooms but in inclusive settings. They further commented that although SNC do not prefer academic subjects that involve content difficult to concentrate, read, and write, they excel in extracurricular activities such as; aesthetic subjects, sports, practical & technical subjects, and excursions etc., that entail creativity. The ensuing expressions are representative of this view:

....I didn't know at first that a particular child in seventh grade needed additional support. She often disturbs the class while conducting the lesson. A few weeks later, when I learned that the child was suffering from Down's syndrome, which I recognized by her facial features, I began to interact more closely with her, giving her attention and recognition. As a result, her misbehavior decreased and her concentration in studies improved. One remarkable thing I noticed in this class was that all the students treated this child with indifference. I have been repeatedly amazed by her abilities, including improved social skills, creative artwork, and excellent command of English, which I didn't see among children with this syndrome attending special schools in my village. (PS 3)

...the sixth grader with learning difficulties loves to draw and she excels at it. Also, she is willing to participate in group activities rather than listen to my instructions. So instead of bothering her with my instructions, what I do is, after completing the assigned task at her level, I let her paint. So... every day she is happy to see my presence in the class. (IS 4)

It is worth noting from the preceding expressions that the outcome of student teachers' direct experiences with SNC is beneficial in two ways. First, when dealing with a child with a specific disability, teachers are more likely to develop positive attitudes toward that disability. Second, this experience will encourage students with other disabilities to be accepted in their classrooms as well.

Theme 2: Sentiments and Concerns: The study found that student teachers have positive attitudes towards teaching in settings that included SNC. They seemed to value the rights of all children to education and accepted IE as the most effective means of providing equitable and high-quality education to every child irrespective of their differences. Furthermore, they accepted that regular classrooms have a diverse population of learners, and they valued the importance of accommodating them in their inclusive classrooms alongside other children without such special educational needs to improve their academic achievement and social skills. Following are the reflections of two participants in this regard.

SNC are already in mental and physical agony, which will only get worse when they are treated separately. If they are included in general education classrooms, they will be content and happy. They will get the love and support of abled peers. IE is an opportunity for SNC to learn good habits from their non-disabled peers. (IS 4)

Every human being in the world should be educated. Although they have some disabilities they also have potentials and personalities that need to be identified and nourished. The society has to provide substantial education to the SNC. (PS 2)

The study further found that all but one participant had positive feelings about mainstreaming disabled students. As one in-service teacher commented, SNC's behavior can be imitated by gifted peers when included in mainstream classrooms. She further added that parents prefer to enroll their children with disabilities in special schools where special teachers can give individual attention to their children rather than general education teachers in mainstream classrooms. However, the majority stated that parents of SNC prefer to enroll their children in regular schools because their children are more likely to imitate the behavior of severely affected children in special classrooms, and in self-contained classroom settings, children lack opportunities to develop social skills.

One of the significant factors to be considered when working with SNC in inclusive classrooms is time management in

completing a lesson. All pre-service teachers reported difficulty in managing time while dealing with SNC individually. Pre-service teachers were very particular in teaching the content within the stipulated time as per the lesson plan prepared for the day. Their main concern is to show their supervisors that they are very keen in time management. The following quote expresses the concern of a pre-service teacher about time management.

I am not able to give adequate attention to SNC because teaching goes according to the timetable and I have to complete the syllabus within the due time. (PS 4)

Another pre-service teacher said; *I am not able to complete the syllabus on time due to the additional focus on the learning of the SNC in the class. And due to this, other students also get bored. This situation worries me. (PS 3)*

To avoid these difficulties, prospective teachers reported having a special teacher in the regular classrooms who could manage SNC teaching while they could spend time with typically developing peers. Regarding the increasing number of students with disabilities in regular classrooms, one prospective teacher said,
...of the thirty-two students in my class, three students need individualized support, which I cannot provide because of the increased number of students in my classrooms. If I had minimal knowledge of how to deal with these particular challenges faced in individualized approaches, or if I had an additional teacher to handle this matter, I would be happy. (PS 2).

Although teachers along with the government and other education stakeholders are attempting to lend their support to developing inclusive practices in schools, they are more concerned about inclusive pedagogy. Although participants were more likely to accept inclusive practices as strategies to address the needs of diverse learners, they were reported to be more apprehensive when working individually with SNC.

An experience shared by a prospective teacher is as follows:

...Even though a few students in my class need additional teaching support in learning, I have to teach them like I teach other students, with a common curriculum and a lesson plan. Sometimes I asked questions verbally to those who were unable to read and write. Although I knew it would be completely unfair to teach SNC using the same lesson plan prepared for the class, I wasn't sure how to modify the lesson to meet SNC's unique strengths and weaknesses (PS 1).

I prepared the lesson plan for 40 minutes and I am very conscious of completing it within the stipulated time and it is difficult to offer the general curriculum to students with special needs. I have to adapt the lesson plan according to the needs of SNC, for which I have less experience. (PS 4)

It was clear that many pre-service teachers had a low level of self-efficacy towards differentiating the traditional curriculum to meet the needs of SNC, although they knew various teaching strategies to apply in their classroom teaching. However, on a positive note, a pre-service teacher expressed her feelings;

....I know how important education is for students with disabilities to live in society. So, at most, what I do in my classroom is to allow these students to work in small groups with abled peers rather than whole group instructions. I believed this would help improve their motivation to learn while working amongst their peers on content at their level. I saw their progress. And their confidence is also increasing. (IS 3)

Theme 3: Behaviour Management: Participants were found to have a high level of concern about the behaviour management of students' inappropriate behaviour. For some student teachers, these skills are lacking, and the following quotes exemplify these points:

In my classroom, some students are constantly disrupting the class due to their hyper-activity and I am unable to control their behaviour. It seriously affects my teaching. (PS 2)

Sometimes I get angry and resentful because of the disruptive behavior of some students in my class. It affects not only my teaching but also my well-being. (IS 2)

Because I have to monitor and address students' inappropriate behaviour, I find that my teaching time per lesson is reduced, which affects my students' learning and achievement. (PS 4)

Compared to in-service teachers, pre-service teachers expressed a lower level of confidence in adopting various classroom management strategies to mitigate students' inappropriate behaviours for two reasons. First, they felt too apprehensive about implementing these strategies. Second, they felt that they would be better able to deal with student misbehaviour if they had adequate knowledge of how to implement various behaviour management strategies. This is reflected by the following comments shared by two pre-service teachers.

Although I use various behaviour management strategies to reduce student misbehavior in my class by providing reinforcement and punishment, I admit that they don't work. This is probably because I don't know how to effectively implement these strategies. (PS 1)

...I know it's really bad...but sometimes I am helpless...I wanted to depersonalize some students because of their constant inattentive behaviour. More often I send students to the back of the classroom or the principal's office for their misbehaviour. (IS 2)

These findings show that pre-service teachers were more inclined to adopt disciplinary strategies as reactive outcomes

that they may have learned from teachers or their parents during their schooling, rather than using accepted measures.

Theme 4: Learning-Support Teachers: While the IE policy highlighted stakeholder collaboration with regular classroom teachers as critical to ensuring positive outcomes for SNC education, including identification, prevention, and support for learning difficulties, this study found some mixed results. In many regular classrooms, teachers were found to work with a learning-support system with minimal collaboration. This aspect was reflected in most of the interview responses of the participants. Two participants anxiously shared their experiences;

....most of the time I am required to take care of the physically challenged children and those with learning difficulties in my class on my own. Parental cooperation is intermittent and specialized support is also minimal. So I have no idea about how such children learn despite my sincere efforts to educate them. (PS 3)

So far in my five years of teaching experience, no resource persons have been provided to support the learning of the SNC in my class. I think this is because the students in my class are mostly students with mild general learning disabilities. I would need an additional in-class support system to monitor the learning of students with perhaps severe physical disabilities. (IS 3)

This shows that there was little support and cooperation from school personnel and parents in identifying/diagnosing SNC and meeting their various needs. An in-service teacher working in a rural school said;

I teach in a backward school in a rural area. There are many special needs students in my class. Their parents are wage labourers. They have no understanding or concern for their children's disabilities. Most of the parents are not able to visit the school due to their work, even when they are invited to parent meetings. (IS 2)

It was found that teachers face a lot of challenges regarding the availability of resources and their allocation. All participants agreed that teaching and learning materials were insufficient for the effective implementation of inclusive teaching.

To summarize, student teachers felt that their knowledge of IE, the types, characteristics, and identification of SNC, and inclusive pedagogic skills such as differentiation and adaptation, was insufficient. Also, they reported having less confidence in working with SNC in their classrooms. They further expressed that behaviour management skills on how to deal with student inappropriate behaviour also need to be improved.

This study was primarily undertaken using a qualitative transcendental phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of eight student teachers who worked with SNC in inclusive classrooms. Findings show that all participants perceived IE as the principal vehicle for ensuring the improvement of achievement and social skills of SNC while respecting the rights of all children to education. Most participants were positive about accommodating diverse learners in their regular classrooms, which is consistent with findings from several international studies[35,36,42,72,73]. As the majority has accepted the mainstreaming of SNC in regular classrooms and did not prefer special schools, this finding should be treated in light of their perceptions of students with various disabilities. Many of the classrooms taught by the participants in this study included students with disabilities that ranged from mild to moderate, and therefore, these beliefs varied depending on the nature and severity of disabilities[74]. Because in-service teachers had prior knowledge and direct experiences with SNC, their perceptions of inclusive settings were slightly different from those of pre-service teachers. While the former viewed inclusive teaching as one of their routine activities, it is a novel experience for the latter, which did not have opportunities to practice inclusive teaching during their on-campus training and may not have experienced contact with SNC or even teach them until they have become full-fledged teachers[75]. As a result, pre-service teachers express apprehension in working with SNC during their first teaching experience[6].

It is noteworthy that participants identified SNC through mere observation, but not through any objective, formal student assessments or diagnostic measures. This may be due to a lack of collaboration of teachers with parents, school counsellors, and or outside experts in identifying/diagnosing types of disabilities. Because identifying students with mild to moderate disabilities is difficult, and it is important to avoid unnecessary negative labelling of children, student teachers must develop the knowledge and appropriate skills to determine whether a child with a disability is eligible for special education services in or out of schools or to be accommodated in general education classrooms[76].

This is evident in the referral systems of many regular schools, where teachers used to have practices of referring children, who, in many instances are identified as having no difficulties or disabilities, but with performance problems, which may or may not be related to the disability. Their performance problems may be the result of delayed development of self-concept, which can affect one's sense of self-worth, and make one feel dumb, damaged, weak, and vulnerable[92]. In school counselling services, it is not uncommon for regular classroom teachers to refer these students to external professional consultants with preconceived notions that a disruptive child is a 'disabled child'[77].

Some participants felt that their daily lived experience with SNC shaped their beliefs and attitudes towards IE. Although they came with a neutral attitude towards inclusivity, their

attitudes turned positive once they started interacting with SNC. This finding provides some support to Allison's findings that lived experience provides an enhanced understanding of students with disabilities[42]. In another study, teachers who had experience with SNC showed higher levels of perceived competence[40]. Nevertheless, the majority emphasized the need to gain more direct experience in dealing with SNC by visiting a range of school environments before moving into practicum. This will help them learn about different types of disabilities and how to work with these disabilities. This finding is complemented by findings from a study conducted with Australian pre-service teachers, where they felt the potential worth of experience gained beyond the grounds of the university[6]. Teachers should gain hands-on experience in teaching SNC through workshops conducted in-house before moving on to actual teaching experience or conducting demonstration lessons in schools to foster their beliefs and learn desirable lessons about how to deal with student diversity[74].

The preparedness of general education teachers for IE has been at the center of discussions in several studies conducted over the years in the context of teacher education to inclusion. A recurring point stated by the participants of this study was their preparedness to teach inclusively. This finding is similar to the findings of many international and local studies in which participants reported that they felt inadequately prepared for inclusive teaching[42,50-55,78].

The fact is that knowledge of SNC for student teachers is infused into the teacher education curricula. For example; various courses such as Psychological Bases of Education, School Counselling, Guidance, and Counselling, etc., offer contents that focus on identifying the nature of students' disabilities. However, teachers found that they were unable to apply the learned principles to practice. Also, they lack experience in how to differentiate teaching to meet the diverse needs of students with disabilities. With years of teaching experience with SNC in regular classrooms, in-service teachers can manage to a certain extent to meet the needs of children with mild disabilities by adopting lessons. On the other hand, pre-service teachers are more concerned with how to implement the lesson prepared for the day when working with SNC. Pre-service teachers lag far behind in-service teachers in their inclusive performances about adaptation and modification of instructions. As pre-service teachers are new to an inclusive learning environment, it takes some time for them to adapt to such environments. There are some arguments that it is not necessary to differentiate inclusion classroom pedagogical skills from non-inclusion classrooms[79]. However, preparing teachers with pedagogical skills related to practicing individualized education plans, personalized instructions, differentiated instructions, etc., is a prerequisite.

Another theme worth further attention is inclusive behaviour management. Because inclusive classrooms contain students with and without special educational needs, it is not unusual to expect inappropriate student behavior, which is inevitable in such classes compared to non-mainstream classrooms. Classroom management is considered critical to student achievement. Establishing order and control in classrooms is as important as instruction and learning[80]. Participants in this study often experienced students' challenging behaviour as stressful and frustrating and teachers appeared to be more reactive than proactive in using behaviour management techniques that were selected inappropriately to mitigate student misbehaviour. This finding is consistent with the findings of a study undertaken with pre-service teachers at an Australian university to specifically examine the effect of hands-on experience in teaching on their self-efficacy and knowledge of behaviour management strategies. Study shows that the knowledge of the range of behaviour management strategies is limited and that they were unable to deal with students with more challenging and persistent behavior problems[96]. Regular classroom teachers should have knowledge, skills, and beliefs in their capabilities to enact proactive rather than reactive decisions related to classroom management to establish a conducive learning environment for educating SNC[81].

A high level of concern expressed in both groups was about the lack of physical as well as human resources for IE, which is not new to this study as internationally lack of resources has been frequently identified as a significant barrier for effective implementation of IE[82]. As a general practice, inclusive classrooms have regular class teachers who act as the person responsible for undertaking the overall activities of the class, while taking additional support from special education teachers of the special units attached to those schools as and when needed. Allocation of specialized support to inclusive classrooms depends on a variety of factors, including the number of SNC in each class, the nature and degree of severity of disabilities, and the student-teacher ratio.

Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight two crucial factors of being valued that contribute to the empowerment of student teachers of FoE. Despite several broad issues faced by teachers in terms of training, facilities, classroom management, collaboration, etc., their positive attitudes toward IE and sentiments of including students with mild to moderate disabilities in their classrooms can be considered as a starting point for better implementation of IE. Furthermore, it is worth highlighting that when preparing student teachers for inclusive teaching, it is important to improve their positive attitudes without increasing their anxiety levels. It is recommended that teacher education programs should be revised or revamped to prepare student teachers equipped with requisite knowledge and competencies in line with the paradigm shift in the education system of the country. Also, it is recommended to embed a community service program in the curriculum to improve the positive attitudes of student teachers towards serving students with severe disabilities.

Limitations and future research: As this study is limited to Tamil medium student teachers of the FoE of the UoC, the generalizability of the findings is at risk. Therefore, it is imperative to extend this study to other universities/higher educational institutions across the country offering teacher education programs. Future research may focus on action-oriented to identify the factors influencing effective preparation of teachers to teach in inclusive contexts. Specifically, future studies could focus on examining the impact of inclusive education courses either stand-alone or embedded by mixed-method approaches on the development of teacher attributes and competencies of those who can teach inclusively.

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