

EMPOWERING THE PRE-SERVICE TEACHER CANDIDATES TO TEACH CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATION NEEDS (SEN) IN AN INCLUSIVE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM.

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Abstract

This small scale project ‘Voicing the Wise for the Voiceless’ attempts to empower the teacher candidates of a National Colleges of Education in Sri Lanka to address the needs of children with special education needs in an inclusive English language classroom to bridge significant contradictory practical issues existing between pronouncing of equal education for all documentarily, and its practical implementation at the classroom level. My aim is to spell out means, changes and needs desired by the teacher candidates in the pre-service teacher education system to empower them with necessary skills, knowledge and attitudes related to children with SEN. The study employs a qualitative methodology using interviews, observations and focus group discussions and pronounces what teacher candidates felt, knew and did with children with special education needs and what they really need to know to empower themselves to address the needs of children with special education needs. The results impact on the changes needed in the prevailing pre-service teacher education system in designing and implementing a curriculum to assess teacher candidates to empower them with proper skills, knowledge and attitudes regarding children with special education needs. To add a practical value to the implementation between systems: education provided at National Colleges for application at schools to reach the desired learning outcome as a whole.

Problem

Every classroom consists of diverse learners. They could range from the gifted to the children with learning difficulties (LD) or special education needs (SEN). As a teacher educator of the Mahaweli National College of Education (MNCoe) with many years of experiences, I have experienced how our teacher candidates overlook the needs of children with SEN during their practicum. Despite many acts, conventions, the world declaration on ‘Education for All’ and local educational reforms

that emphasize the equal rights of these children (SEN) for education there is little done to address the needs of these children.

Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006)-CRPD defines persons with disabilities include those who have long term physical, mental intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others. Regarding education it emphasizes that state parties recognize the rights of persons with disabilities to education by ensuring the support they required, within the general education system, to facilitate their effective education.

This study intends to explore how teacher candidates can be assisted to help address the needs of children with special education needs in an inclusive ELT classroom.

The objectives of the study are

- to help the internees to detect children with SEN.
- to find out what they feel about teaching the children with SEN.
- to encourage the internees to prepare suitable activities for children with SEN.
- to find out what the internees need from the system to develop their knowledge, skills and attitudes regarding children with SEN.
- to share the findings of the study with local and international colleagues and policy makers.

Intervention

The study was carried out with 10 teacher candidates who were doing their internship in 5 Tamil and Sinhala schools in Kandy and Kurunegala districts. With the permission of relevant authorities the study was conducted during teacher candidate's internship. As a supervisor of final year interns, I was entitled to visit the teacher candidates in their schools once a week for two and a half months .The 10 teacher candidates were in the final year of the pre-service training to teach English language (ELT) and represented Tamil and Sinhala speaking communities from different parts of Sri Lanka.

The following data collection tools were used to collect the data needed to answer the research questions

Data-collection tool	The nature of data collected
My reflective journal(RJ)	<p><u>Before the intervention process-</u></p> <p>Teacher candidates did not pay any attention on children with SEN and their attitudes of teaching them is negative</p> <p><u>After the awareness raising of researcher's on children with SEN (dysgraphia/dyslexia)-</u></p> <p>Teacher candidates informs the gradual progress taking place in children with SEN, the involvement of students in the given activities and the slow progress witnessed in activities and teacher candidates feel they can work with children with SEN.</p> <p><u>Towards the end of the research-</u></p> <p>-Teacher candidates began to observe their own peers to learn from each other regarding teaching the children with SEN. Their attitudes regarding children with SEN are changing positively. Teacher candidates are becoming innovative.</p>
Teacher candidates 's RJ	<p><u>Before the intervention process of research-</u></p> <p>Repeatedly stating about children who do not write at all in lessons and wondering what to do.</p> <p><u>After the awareness raising of researcher's on children with SEN (dysgraphia/dyslexia)-</u></p> <p>Teacher candidates stating the gradual progress taking place in children with SEN, their involvement in the given activities and their slow progress witnessed in activities and what they feel about working with children with SEN.</p>

<p>Researcher 'observation check list</p> <p>.</p> <p>.</p> <p>Questionnaire 01-</p> <p>-Given to teacher candidates before the intervention process to confirm the validity of the selected problem of the study. To check teacher candidates' prior knowledge, skills and attitudes regarding the children with SEN that was audio recorded to gain further details.</p> <p>.</p>	<p><u>Before the process-</u></p> <p>Observing student teachers neglecting children with SEN in teaching by excluding them from other student groups and allowing them to idle.</p> <p><u>After researcher's awareness raising on children with SEN (dysgraphia/dyslexia)-</u></p> <p>Teacher candidates were paying more attention on children with SEN who cannot write English letters properly. Children with SEN were included in inclusive student groups. Simple instructions were given .Students' work was appreciated and encouraged .Activities selected were suitable The teacher candidates seem happy working with the children with SEN and indicates development in knowledge selecting suitable innovative activities to train them for writing</p> <p>Almost all the teacher candidates do not know how to help the children with SEN, their attitude of helping them is negative since other teachers too, ignore them. All the teacher candidates stated that they were not made aware of how to teach them during before starting internship.</p>
<p>Questionnaire 02-</p> <p>Given to teacher candidates as the Pre-test and the Post-test-</p>	<p>At the end of the process of working with children with SEN (video record and transcribed) –</p>

<p>To assess the attitudes, skills and knowledge the teacher candidate possess before and after the intervention process regarding children with SEN and to identify what they need in teacher education to help children with SEN (video record and transcribed).The pre-test was done individually while the post- test was conducted in focus group discussion.</p>	<p>All the teacher candidates have realized who children with SEN are. They liked to work with children with SEN. They believe if the limitations and potentials of children with SEN are recognized appropriate activities can be used and commented it is their right for equal treatment in education. Three teacher candidates have got to know the difficulties of these students from other teachers and parents while others have observed and detected them on their own. All the teacher candidates commented that class teachers ignore the children with SEN while one said her teacher accepts these children. All the teacher candidates agree that they need to learn about children with SEN during college years to gain better knowledge skills and attitudes and to apply them in teaching practicum before starting internship. Many teacher candidates are not aware where to find materials to teach children with SEN while a few mentioned the internet and the British council web sites.</p>
<p>Questionnaire 03- Given to interview the 5 parents- to know what they know and feel about their children with SEN. Almost all the teacher candidates do not know how to help the children with SEN, their attitude of helping them is negative since other teachers too, ignore them. All the teacher candidates stated that they were not made aware of how to teach them during before starting internship.</p>	<p>The 5 mothers are not aware what the real difficulty their children have and two of them said their children refuse school as they are not recognized in the class and no work is given to do while 2 mothers said their children like the English period and the new teacher candidate.</p>

At the beginning of the study questionnaire 01, entries of my reflective journal done with the observation checklist and the reflective journal of teacher candidates were taken to confirm the importance of researching the selected problem of the study. Based on data found at the initial step of the process of intervention, I conducted an awareness raising discussions with teacher candidates regarding the children with SEN particularly on dysgraphia since it was the problem teacher candidates complained about. I discussed about characteristics of dysgraphia and how to help them in learning with different activities. Some videos were made available to watch. This was followed by getting the teacher candidates to prepare activities according to priority needs identified in children with SEN under my guidance. I observed teacher candidates implementing the activities in the inclusive ELT environment. I encouraged teacher candidates to provide the

children with SEN with variety of activities to train their fine motor skills and hand-eye coordination almost for 50 days before starting letter writing (annex 06: attached photographs). Introducing directions of shapes and letters on sand, running finger on sand paper letters, molding shapes with clay, tracing letter formations, drawing pictures and coloring on free space and controlled space to manipulate letters between given lines are some of the activities used by teacher candidates (evidence attached). I observed how teacher candidate's work with children with SEN selected from primary grades and made journal entries. The written reflections of teacher candidates were scrutinized (annex 06) to detect they experienced and changes taking place in all three domains of teacher candidates along with the findings of my check list. The focus group discussion (annex02) or the final data collection tool was employed using the same questionnaire administered to interview teacher candidates at the beginning of intervention process. It was video-recorded and transcribed to triangulate data with entries of reflective journals and check lists to measure any changes in knowledge, skills and attitudes of teacher candidates and was considered as the Post-test findings for the discussion of the research.

Findings

The most significant finding of the study was the positive attitudinal change of the teacher candidates. The focus group discussion responses included statements such as:

“-I am happy, I have changed my own judgment now, Earlier we craved for marks ignoring them but no more and now I know they can learn what we need is to learn that, My thinking has changed, Now we have extra time with them to support them, They need it, One parent told me the child likes my teaching I am happy We tried to be innovative, We discussed with peers, thought of doing something new, If we ignore them they will never learn, Teacher's attitude should change, Mine is changed now-”

Statements such as these prove some evidence to confirm their attitudinal change.

The teacher candidates detected the children with SEN whose learning needs are unique. Statements such as:

“Their learning needs are different from one to another due to their defect ,We took dysgraphia and under that many problems were there like spacing letters, words ,sentences, What about mirror writing?, Exactly sometimes in spelling, Even in punctuation, What about writing on lines?, Then capitalization, They can't hold the pen properly”

Responses such as these prove some evidence to confirm if the teacher candidates are given prior knowledge regarding children with SEN detecting them in the classroom practicum becomes easy and exploring the uniqueness of each individual under the same learning disability may broaden teacher candidates 'deeper understanding regarding individual learning needs of children with SEN.

In addition, teacher candidates have realized sometimes within the inclusive class for children with SEN individualized instructions are necessary. Comments such as:

“In the inclusive class as ELT teachers our objective for children with SEN was simple but within the same lesson, Yes, with simple activities to suit their capacity. I got verbal answers in the lesson, I prepared simple and short timed activities, we tried to be innovative with what we planned and some activities really worked , ;”

These comments prove if the opportunity is provided to teacher candidates to work with the children with SEN practically, the teacher candidates can use their creativity and reflective thinking to prepare activities to suit the needs of children with SEN.

They also acknowledged the importance of the inclusive learning environment in order to promote interaction and to gain support of others. Responses such as:

“Yes. I put them to inclusive, mixed groups and friends support them, really happy to see how children with SEN became wanted members within their groups. I saw others helping them. Good interaction, what I saw before was different, when teachers recognize them other student too accept them”

Statements such as these establish the idea teacher candidates accept the importance of an inclusive learning environment to teach the children with SEN.

All the participants stated the importance of integrating knowledge, skills and attitudes regarding children with SEN in the curriculum. This was well substantiated with responses such as:

“At the college we must have a separate subject for this. In other subjects it is discussed little. It is not enough, Certainly during pre-service training and specially, in teaching practice, At the college before coming for internship, True we need more details ,knowledge and skills, so it is certainly in college, , Yes, at college ,While going for teaching practice”

This foregrounds the need of a curriculum to learn about children with SEN to have a proper knowledge, skills and attitudes and practical experiences to gain confidence in dealing with the children with SEN with the guidance from lecturers.

Further, the findings revealed the need for learning and working with children with SEN should be done from the college curriculum to gain proper understanding and should be applied practically to develop skills and proper attitudes before coming to teach in schools.

These ideas were established with comments such as:

“I think it is better if we can get the knowledge from our course before coming to schools, It is important we conduct extra classes at college regarding children with SEN, We should get the practical experience, knowledge, training from the college, what we learn for Guidance and counselling is not sufficient, it is not practical, limited to notes, we need to get practice through dealing with them under the guidance of lecturers without that we can't do it alone , We didn't get any practical knowledge, Internship period is not the time to practice teaching children with SEN we have to learn it at the college, if we do lessons

during teaching practice while in the college then we know how to interact with children with SEN under the guidance of our lecturers”

The Salamanca statement -41-suggests that in teacher-training practice schools, specific attention should be given to preparing all teachers to exercise their autonomy and apply their skills in adapting curricula and instruction to meet pupils’ needs as well as to collaborate with specialists and co-operate with parents. The argument is ‘does the present teacher education curriculum and the practices prepare the teacher candidates to face the challenges related to children with SEN?’

The teacher candidates still possess mixed feelings regarding the attitudes of in-service teachers who can be a role model for the teacher candidate in schools regarding children with SEN with their remarks such as;

“If the parents are not bothered why should we? They told me to ignore the children with SEN and work with others to cover the syllabus, class teachers have branded the children with SEN as incapable children in learning”

It depicts the attitude of in-service teachers towards the SEN or is it really their incapacity to teach them but that attitude can have a negative impact on teacher candidates as senior teachers are the role models in a school? Then the contribution of college curriculum to develop positive attitudes, appropriate skills and knowledge regarding children with SEN is very important. The problem is not with the children with SEN but the barriers imposed on them by society to learn. As stated by Grant Carson, (2009, pg.20) “disability is a particular form of social depression and focusses on the barriers (attitudinal, environmental and organizational) which prevent disable people from having equality of opportunity in education ...”

Furthermore, it was encouraging to find how teacher candidates have become reflective researchers themselves during my research. They were planning innovative and suitable activities with available resources and were using their autonomy and applying their skills in adapting instructions to meet pupils’ individual needs. They responded;

“We discussed with peers ,we thought of doing something new, sometimes using songs ,I heard one murmuring the song while trying to write his name, I am happy .We tried to be innovative with what we plan and some activities really worked, I am happy, I feel very proud .I became a researcher to start exporting what we should do. We observed our peers what works well and why, Children with SEN have improved their letter formations, that is our work and their ability to do that if we had ignored them they ‘ll never learn, teacher’s attitude should change and, mine has changed now”.

These statements indicate if learning opportunities are provided to teacher candidates to work with the SEN their reflective thinking, innovation and creativity could be promoted to take appropriate decisions, develop knowledge, skills and attitudes regarding children with SEN.

The findings of the interview with parents revealed the unawareness of the learning difficulties their own child possess.

“He can’t learn, I don’t know what the exact problem is, different doctors say different things, my daughter can’t learn, teachers too say that, our fate! I don’t like to send them to school, everyone neglects them because they can’t learn, some days my child refuse to come to school”

These statements prove the fact it is not only the school authority but the community, the parents too need to change their attitude and to have a positive understanding regarding children with SEN and their rights for learning. This is a responsibility of education and all the members involved in it.

Finally, it was interesting to find how the teacher candidates have been involved and interested in learning how to teach the children with SEN observing each other’s lessons in my absence.

‘We observed our peers and learned what works well and why, we thought of doing something new, we tried to be innovative with what we plan and they worked’

Such responses prove the need of peer observation strategies in teacher education curriculum to provide practical learning opportunities for teacher candidates to explore the children with SEN in to gain practical knowledge and appropriate skills.

Discussion and future action

The findings of the study revealed the changes needed in pre-service teacher training curriculum in Sri Lanka regarding children with special education needs. It should be proposed as a policy decision if we are to provide the maximum benefit for the children with special education needs through teacher education. The study informs us, the need for the teacher educators to change their present practices in order to provide adequate knowledge, skills and attitudes towards children with SEN and in order to do that teacher educators need a training. Moreover, teacher candidates need to be evaluated on how they manage children with SEN, so that they will have a reason and pay more attention. As Salamanca (1994) states, the skills required to respond to special education needs should be taken into account during assessment of studies and teacher certification’. Should this requirement be ignored by accountable authority in teacher education? An issue to be critically reflected on. Currently only the Hapitigama National Colleges of Education prepares special needs teachers that is insufficient to the school system. According to Salamanca statement on Special needs Education by UNESCO(1994), ‘Pre-service training programmes should provide to all student teachers, primary and secondary alike, positive orientation toward disability, thereby developing an understanding of what can be achieved in schools with locally available support services’. I will focus on learning about children with SEN and equipping student teachers with relevant knowledge, skills and attitudes to work with children with special education needs to help each and every child in this country to have equal right for education which is the ultimate aim of teacher education too. It is an education right of children with SEN declared by United Nations Convention of Rights of People with Disabilities (2006) that was ratified in Sri Lanka in 2016.

It is important to encourage teacher candidates to learn from the peers to reflect and analyze what type of activities works best with their children with SEN in addressing the learning needs and to be innovative as individual needs of children with the same learning difficulty are different.

The study reveals how teachers in schools neglect their children with SEN and a study done in Sri Lanka under UNICEF (2012 pg. 2) points out that 97% of children in classrooms have some sort of difficulty to learn and that almost 100% teachers have declared that they need support to teach children with SEN. Teacher education institutes need to concentrate more on this issue and work towards producing a generation of teachers to the school system to address these needs.

It is important to teacher educators in all the colleges to discuss and develop curriculum to address these needs and study how other countries are addressing this issue in their teacher education curriculum and bring suitable changes. Not only that teacher educator community must do more research on this area to find further needs and barriers and share with others. I intend to share my finding with local and international community and discuss their experiences to adapt possible changes within our context after discussions with stake holders.

Reflections on the research process

Observing and assessing the progress of TCs continuously was a challenge since as I was able to visit them once a week. However, I was able to observe how student candidates had begun to observe their own peers daily to improve themselves. This peer observation strategy is a powerful technique to be given recognition in teacher education for student teachers to solve many issues themselves. Observing and learning from peers for continuous professional development is also needed in teacher development. It is not only the interns who had changed, I too, as their teacher educator began to recognize the value of peer observation that would help us in teacher education.

Based on the findings I began to reflect on gaps in the curriculum. I looked at what I can do to bring a change in the preparation of new teachers to address the needs of children with SEN in the teacher education system. As a teacher educator, I can visit schools and observe peers working with children with SEN in order to gain practical knowledge and work with academics in universities and other professionals in the related field to bring a change in teacher education curriculum to train student teachers to address needs of children with SEN. Though interns had no experience in teaching the children with SEN during college training, except for the brief awareness received at the beginning of the study it was interesting to see how they observed peers, used innovative ideas and applying with time when they discovered what works best with their students practically that I respect. The student teachers need to be given freedom to decide on activities to be used which they see and feel are most appropriate to address the needs of children with SEN. The performance of the teacher candidate in their internship would have been better if that had been more guided and structured.

Finally, I hope to share the findings of the study with my colleagues to empower future teacher candidates to address the needs of children with SEN who has no power to voice their needs; to 'Voice the Wise for the Voiceless'.

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