

Teachers' Perception Towards Inclusion of Special Educational Need Students in Mainstream Schools, Gender's Perspectives

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Abstract

Study intended to investigate the understanding, acceptance and attitudes of male and female teachers at secondary level about teaching of students with special needs in mainstream schools. Design of the study was multiple case study therefore; qualitative data was collected. Semi structured interviews from mainstream teachers, principals and focused group discussions with SEN students studying at 9th and 10th grades were conducted. Study revealed that there is no difference in overall perceptions of male and female teachers towards inclusion of students with special needs in mainstream schools. Both genders were willing only for the inclusion of students having fever level of special needs, however they preferred separate special education for students with severe problems. School heads had difference in their acceptance, as the female school head showed willingness, but the male school heads were not in favor of inclusion of SEN students in mainstream schools. Teachers of both genders were lacking in knowledge, understanding and support required to promote inclusive education. However, male teachers had better understanding of inclusive education as compared to their female counterparts.

Keywords: Inclusive education, mainstream secondary school, attitudes, Mainstream teachers.

1. INTRODUCTION

The idea of Inclusive education (IE) is premised on the philosophy of educational reform that call for the equal right of education for all irrespective of their differences based on abilities, circumstances, ethnicity as pronounced in UNESCO's Salamanca Declaration (Ainscow, 2005). Despite being a signatory of several international legislations such as Education for

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All -EFA 1990 (UNESCO, 1994), Salamanca Framework of Action (UNESCO, 1994), Daakar Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2000) and Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2000) and including IE in the targets of National Education policy of 2017, Pakistan is facing challenges in implementation of the IE policy like many other developing countries. One significant aspect that deserves the attention in this regard is to promote understanding, acceptance and professional development of teachers.

1.1 Teachers role in inclusive classroom

No one can deny the fact that teachers are creators of any nation and can bring reform in any society. With the emergence of the philosophy of inclusion it creates great challenges for educators. Students with diverse needs, multiple type of socio-economic status, interest, abilities and educational level of students pose challenges for teachers.

Quality education needs efficient ways of teaching along with support (Landsberg, Kruger & Swart, 2011). This means that teachers' responsibility should be shifted from knowledge transferring to students' centered teaching for IE (Chauke, 2017).

As a moderator of learning, teachers are expected to show positive behavior and effective knowledge of strategies that are appropriate for a diverse learning environment. Teachers should have knowledge about to adjust and select the content according to the needs of students (Chauke, 2017).

Teacher significant role, appropriate and relevant teaching practices and to meet the diverse leaning needs in order to promote inclusion, it all depends on the perception and attitudes of teacher toward teaching of special needs students. Ali et al. (2006) highlighted on this fact that teacher's level of knowledge and attitude about inclusive education are important and act as a predictor of teachers' willingness towards inclusive education.

1.2 Attitudes of school teachers and school heads toward inclusion

Teacher's level of perceptions towards mainstream classroom affects the development of inclusive education. Through the understanding of teachers' attitude and perceptions, we can identify the need of teachers' professional development in facilitation of special need students to make the practices of inclusive education better.

Research highlighted multiple perspectives regarding teachers' attitudes and perceptions towards inclusive education. Research conducted by Avramidis and Norich, 2000; Smith and Smith, 2000; Danane, Beirne – Smith and Latham, 2000 concluded the positive attitudes of teachers' while Hammond and Ingallas, 2003 and Bruno, 2019 highlighted negative attitudes of the teachers towards IE.

Bruno (2019) highlighted that teachers are less prepared in dealing with special need of students therefore, negatively affect teachers' perception towards the inclusive education. Meighem et al., (2018) asserted that attitudes of the teachers are impacted by their knowledge of disability and their experiences and involvement with the SEN students.

All the stakeholders which include: teachers, students, parents, administrative staff and community members should reinforce school wide change related to inclusive education. School leader has to play important role in establishment of a combine purpose among all the personals (Joanne A. Valk, 2013). It is proved that teachers' attitude and beliefs towards inclusion are important for its implementation. Research highlighted that majority of

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teachers indicated difficulty regarding the implementation of inclusive education due to lack of knowledge and awareness about inclusive practices. They also have lack of awareness about barriers relevant to environmental and professional factors.

Although change in attitudes is highlighted as difficult goal to achieve however, school leader plays significant role in promotion of inclusive education in school by making change in the mind set of people (Dowson et.al, 2003). Barry (2010) highlighted that administrators should provide support to the teachers through equitable adjusting caseload, allocation of appropriate resources, professional support and adequate time to plan and instruct.

Geleten (2019) emphasized that positive attitudes of all stakeholders including teachers, parents, as well as school heads are significant for the successful inclusion practices. Titrek, BAYRAKÇI & Nguluma, (2017) conducted a study on attitude of school administrators about inclusion of disable children in mainstream classroom. The study found that attitudes of general school heads were positive towards inclusive education in general. However, they were affected by multiple factors which include special education training, job experience and inclusive practices.

1.4 Problem Statement

Emergence of inclusive philosophy has posed many challenges for teachers specially in developing countries where they do not have favourable conditions most importantly knowledge and skills required to run inclusive practices. Inclusive education is limited to remain in policy drafts and initiation of few pilot projects in Pakistan. Moreover, majority of the teachers at secondary level mainstream schools are lacking understanding and consequently acceptance of IE. IE starts with the teachers understanding the significance of being inclusive with students, parents and their willingness to find and create means to accept the individual needs of students in mainstream setting (Lindsay, 2007). Therefore, current study intended to explore understanding, beliefs, and acceptance for SEN students in both genders teaching in mainstream secondary schools of Pakistan.

1.5 Research Questions

1. How do male and female teachers and school heads perceive inclusion of special need students in mainstream secondary schools?
2. How is the inclusive education conceptualized and understood by the male and female mainstream teachers and school heads?
3. How do they view teaching students with special educational needs in mainstream schools?

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Design of the Study

Nature of the research problem demanded a multiple case study design to investigate and involve multiple units of analysis within a case. The Study design was useful to understand teachers' perspectives (beliefs, understanding) and acceptance regarding IE within the available contextual and complex multivariate conditions. Yin, R. K. (2003) suggested that case study method is suitable when researcher intends to (i) explain the topic in broad way (ii) cover the complicated context conditions (iii) collect multiple evidences instead of single.

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Moreover, nature of the design allows the researcher to combine the different data sources in order to triangulation of the study results. Furthermore, collection of data from multiple sources allow to triangulate the findings.

2.2 Case Selection

Stake (2005) highlighted case as specific thing. He further elaborated to consider while select a case, “to maximize what can we learn” (p.4). case refers to individual. It can be group of people or can be institute which include: school, factory or a community (Gillham, 2000).

Three secondary schools of Rawalpindi city including 1female and 2 male schools emerged and purposively selected as possible cases were selected after field visit. Selection was made based on maximum number of the students, having special needs in the schools. Through purposive sampling a researcher selects an individual and location for research as researcher came to know about and understand the problem purposively (Creswell, 2013).

2.3 Participants' selection

Secondary school teachers teaching core subjects (English, Urdu, Mathematics, Pakistan studies, Islamiat), SEN students studying at secondary level (9-10th grades) and the school principals were the participants of the study.

Table: 2.3.1 Teachers' Demographics

| School | Particip ants | Gende r | Academic Qualificatio n | Professio nal Qualificat ion | Subject teaching to Secondary level | Job Period |
|--------|------------------|------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------------|---|---------------|
| A | P1 | Femal e | M.Phil. Education | B. ED, M. ED | Pakistan Studies | 32years |
| | P2 | Femal e | M.A Urdu | B. ED, | Urdu | 10 years |
| | P3 | Femal e | M.A Education | PTC, CT, B. ED, M. ED | Islamiat | 27 years |
| | P4 | Femal e | M.Phil. Education | B. ED, M. ED | English | 12 years |
| | P5 | Femal e | MSc. Math's | B. ED, | Math's | 8 years |
| B | P1 | Male | M.A Urdu | B. ED | English/Urdu | 33years |
| | P2 | Male | MSc. Math's | B. ED | Math's | 11years |
| | P3 | Male | M.sc Chemistry | B. ED | English/ Chemistry | 30 years |
| | P4 | Male | M.A Arabic | B. ED | Urdu/ Pak. studies | 19 years |
| | P5 | Male | M.A Political | B. ED | Islamiat | 18 years |

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| Science | | | | | | |
|---------|----|------|------------------------|-------|------------------------------|----------|
| C | P1 | Male | MSc Physics | B. ED | English | 3 years |
| | P2 | Male | M.A | M.ED | Urdu/English | 15 years |
| | P3 | Male | M.A Islamic Studies | B. ED | Pak.Studies /Islamiat | 28years |
| | P4 | Male | M.sc Chemistry | B. ED | English/Chemist ry/Math's | 26 years |
| | P5 | Male | M.A | B. ED | Islamiat/PAK.ST UDIES | 28 Years |

Fifteen secondary school teachers including 10 males and 5 females from three selected schools working under provincial government of the Punjab in Rawalpindi district participated in the study. Five teachers from each school teaching the core subjects of Urdu, Islamiat, English, Mathematics and Pakistan Studies were purposively selected to investigate about their concepts, understanding and acceptance to implement IE in mainstream secondary schools.

Table highlighted that 2 teachers have M.Phil., 11 have B.Ed. and 4 have B.Ed. as well as M.Ed. And the duration of jobs ranges from 3 to 33 years. It is depicted from the demographic information of teachers that they were teaching core subjects without having socialized degree in the subject. It is indicated that teachers have to teach any given subject for 2 years so that the session ends. Identity codes were given to the teachers to distinguish them. Codes includes: P1-P5. Letters A, B and C.

Three school Principals including one female and 2 males as well as 19 SEN students studying at secondary grades at the 3 selected schools were also the respondents of the study. Their selection was made on purpose to cross check the teachers' perceptions regarding IE.

2.3.2 Table: Demographics of SEN students

| Group | School | Number of students | Gender | Special need area included |
|-------|--------|--------------------|--------|---|
| A | 1 | 5 | Female | 2 hearing impaired, 1 physically handicapped, 2 with learning difficulties |
| B | 2 | 7 | Male | 1 with speech issues, 4 with learning difficulties, 1 with Behavioral issues, 1 Epileptic |

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| | | | | |
|---|---|---|------|--|
| C | 3 | 7 | Male | 2 with visual impairment, 1 with hearing impairment, 1 with psychological issues, 3 with learning difficulties |
|---|---|---|------|--|

SEN students included 5 female and 14 male students from all 3 schools. Type and nature of the were varied based SEN students on different physical, mental, behavioral state. A total of 19 SEN students included 1 student with physical handicap, 9 students with learning difficulty, 1 with speech difficulty, 1 with epilepsy, 2 students with visual impairment, 1 with behavioral problems, 1 with psychological issues and 3 with hearing impairment. Their age range was between 14- 17 years.

To keep the students anonymous, they were also given identity codes. As the maximum number is 7 therefore, P1-P7 refers to students numbered 1-7. To keep distinguish schools Letters A, B and C were assigned next to numbers. For example, P1 A refers to group A student number 1. Themes extracted from the FGDs are described below to answer the research question. They were explained to understand fully (Patton, 2002). Verbatim quotes were used with quotation marks.

2.4 Data collection tools and analysis

School teachers and heads were asked about their perception and acceptance of inclusive education. Open ended interviews were conducted with teachers and head teachers which gave freedom to dig deep, ask and add any question where need during the interview (Cresswell, 2007). To cross check the teachers' perspectives along with the interview, focus group discussion was held with students (one from each school).

All the individual interviews with teachers and school heads as well as discussion with special need students were recorded and transcribed. Qualitative data gathered through the interviews were analyzed using the thematic analysis. To verify and correct the transcribed data it was sent back to the study participants. Thorough reading was given to transcription so that codes, sub themes and themes were generated and maintain the context of themes with reference to research question (Mason, 20022; Maree, 2007; Cresswell, 2007).

Codes were assigned to transcribed data and themes were extracted. Data collected from participants were then analyzed and triangulated to answer the research question.

2. Findings from teachers' interview

2.2 Conceptual confusions about Inclusive Education:

This subsequent segment deliberates whether the mainstream teachers have an understanding of the concept of inclusive education. When they were asked 11 out of 15 teachers expressed their complete unfamiliarity to the specific terminology of Inclusive Education. Flowing quotes substantiated this:

"I don't understand this term I." (P1- B)

"Please explain the word inclusion first." (P5- B)

"Can you please explain this term, so that I may add in it?" (P1-A)

Only 4 male teachers showed some understanding regarding the concept. Their comments

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are quoted below:

“For me, inclusion mean to get prepared to treat the learners as per their individual needs and to teach them in better way.” (P4-B)

“I guess bringing and teaching to slow learners in mainstream setup is called Inclusion.” (P1-C)

“I know individual differences matters for inclusive education and we cannot bring together in the same place without considering those differences.” (P2- C)

3.3 Acceptance for mild SENs

Thirteen teachers were having some acceptance and positive attitude for the learners with mild special needs. But they all were favoring the separate special education set up for SEN students who have severe problems. As a female participant stated “it is not that much simple to accept or reject the inclusion, it entirely depends on the level of support and their need.” (P1-A)

Based on the diverse experience she had with SEN students, her colleague however, told “here we not only have disabled, impaired or dull students; there are Hindu and Christians girls as well.” (P2 -A)

However, she also emphasized that separate educational set-up is appropriate for them

A male teacher showed his acceptance only for slow learners and students with high IQ in the below mentioned paragraph:

“as an emerging need, we have to include the mixed ability students in the classroom either they are below average or above average.” (P2-C)

However, he also showed his disagreement for the inclusion of certain type of SEN students as hearing impaired, emotionally disturbed, or wit speech disorders.

Two teachers who completely rejected the idea of Inclusion. A female teacher expressed:

“if government has established separate schools for them, of course they have some purpose. It will be disastrous for the normal students to bring the SEN students in the mainstream classrooms.” (P5-A)

By completing rejecting the concept of inclusion, a male participant said:

“Inclusion is not possible; it will disturb the whole teaching and learning environment.” (P4-C)

3.4 Need for Inclusive education

All male and female participant teachers were agreed on the potential benefits and need of the Inclusion despite their partial or complete disagreement to bring the SEN student in the mainstream classrooms. As a male participant articulated “we cannot deny the positive impacts of inclusion” (P1-B)

A female teacher mentioned positive effects of IE for normal students “I can see that inclusive practices are good not only for SWSN as they learn socialization but it is also beneficial for normal students as well as they learn to help and cooperate.” (P1- A)

Another female participant added “we need to accept them (SEN students) and their equal rights of education.” (P2 - A)

However, both aspects of IE, positive as well negative were highlighted by a male participant

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“actually it has advantages as well as disadvantages, inclusion practices work well only when the teacher has a through command on the subject area as well as the pedagogy but there will still arise the problems when you do teach multiple subjects as we have to in the mainstream classrooms.” (P2-C)

3.5 Lack of professional training

Teachers pointed towards the lack of professional training as a major hurdle to implement inclusive practices in mainstream classrooms. They mentioned that in-service professional trainings are lacking in current times as a male teacher describes “professional training for teachers is severely lacking in our system, if I share my experience, I took just one in-service training in my 22 years’ job.” (P1-B)

A male participant highlighted on the complete absence of special or inclusive pedagogical training “inclusive teaching is totally a separate discussion that never happened.” (P1 School B)

However, another participant agreed that they are provided with the basic knowledge on the individual differences of the students in professional training courses during B. ED but a single topic do not cater the teachers’ need to run inclusion in the mainstream schools. Most of the participants were agreed on the same point.

4. Findings from the school heads’ interviews

4.1 Perspective about Inclusive Education

Only one (female) school head among the three showed positive attitude towards the IE despite all three were having a clear understanding regarding the concept of IE. The one, who agreed upon the idea of IE said:

“I think the concept of inclusion is a fantastic concept and we do celebrate the difference as we already have Christian and Hindu students in our classrooms and we do celebrate their events (Diwali etc.).” (Principal A).

Principals at school B was in favor of separate education system for SEN students though he accepted to have variety of students having different needs and acknowledged that the schools cannot refuse the SEN students as per policy.

On the other hand, The Principal at the school 3 was completely opposing the idea of IE by arguing that those policy recommendations are applicable where the separate special schools do not exist. He articulated:

In special schools, SEN students may form the community with other SEN students, here in mainstream schools they may get wasted.” (Principal C)

4.2 Teachers inappropriate behavior and practices

Female Principal mentioned the positive approach and practices of many of school teachers but she also highlighted their inability to cope up with the special needs of students due to their lack of understanding and knowledge as well as unrealistic expectations and approaches for the SEN students.

By criticizing the typical methods of the teachers she said:

“They do not bother about their issues, either emotional, psychological or behavioral” (Principal A)

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By appreciating the level of commitment and dedication of some teachers she shared:
“while recognizing the few topics in the Pakistan studies may hurt the emotions of Hindu students, one of my teacher decided to exempt it.” (Principal A)

However, she pointed out some unfriendly and stubborn behaviors of teachers as well by stating:

“But there is another mindset, despite taking trainings they have not shown any change in their behavior.” (Principal A)

Mixed kind of thought regarding teachers’ behavior and practices were shared by the principal at school B as:

“there are few teachers who make lame excuses to escape from their responsibilities but some teachers are really committed to their jobs”. (Principal B)

4.3 Need of Professional training

Female head teacher highlighted professional in service training gap “To learn the emerging trend and new methods, teacher need continuous in-service training which is severely lacking.” (Principal A)

To meet the target of inclusive teaching and learning practices, she emphasized the trainings needs.

“Training is important to increase the responsibility of the teacher if he/she has varying level of students including SWSN. Many Teachers are dedicated and enthusiastic to teach but they need new and appropriate methods obviously.” (Principal School A)

Other two leaders were holding the opinion that the provided trainings for teachers merely cater the leaning needs of normal students and training courses do not have part for the special needs of students. “Our teachers are not trained to teach SEN students; they can teach only normal students.” (Principal School 3)

5. Finding from FGDS with SEN students

Total three FGDS the were conducted with the SEN students to cross check the teachers’ classroom behavior.

Focused Group Discussion (FGD) was held with the SEN students to dig deep about the school life and to cross verify teachers and school principals’ responses. Following verbatim Participants verbatim reflect upon the teachers’ behavior towards SEN students and their classroom practices:

Teachers’ behavior

SEN students shared their experiences and the following expressions from the FGDS show highlighted their teachers’ behavior and the classroom practices of mainstream secondary school teachers:

“I become paralyzed after losing one of my legs due to an infection and I was unable to walk after entering the school because I had no walking stick at that time. I remember how my school principal took me in her arms and placed me in my classroom.” (P1-PHC)

Furthermore, she added, “my class mates and teachers are always helpful for me whenever I needed them.”

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One more girl shared her positive response “my teachers always show welcoming behavior whenever I asked my queries as I face difficulties in certain subjects.” (P2A-LD)

A boy student elaborated “I always found them very kind, they call emergency service and took me to hospital whenever I met with a sudden attack.” (P7B-Epileptic)

However, a Christian student shared her stance ‘I found no discriminations in behavior but I cannot express my religious opinions as do the Muslim girls., I don’t find such freedom.” (P5A-Christian).

A boy shared his problem “sometime when I need extra time to memorize the lesson but I could not express it because there is always a fear that he may get angry” (P6B-LD).

6. Discussion and conclusion

Based on triangulation of findings of teacher’s interviews with interviews of school head as well as FGDs with SEN students, it is concluded that teachers in the mainstream set up have not sufficient clarity of the concept of IE which is a basic requirement for successful inclusive teaching and the learning practices. These findings are in alignment with the Scott et al., (2019) highlighted that teachers in regular schools are lacking that can impact negatively on their perceptions about them. However, male participant was having some better understanding as compared to their female counterparts. Except few males, rest of the male and female participant teachers were found confused and nervous when they were inquired about the concept of inclusive education and all of them posed question back to the researcher to define the term of inclusion.

Teachers attitude towards teaching SEN students in mainstream were not positive in overall. Out of 15, two participants (one male and one female) teacher completely rejected the idea of inclusion arguing that available special education institutions are suitable for their education. Hassan and Parween (2012) concluded with the similar finding that mainstream teachers argued for the placement of SEN students in special educational institutions which are established on the purpose.

In all 3 sites, male and female mainstream teachers were only willing to teach SEN students having mild learning difficulties or students with physical or visual impairment, students with mild behavioral issues or with different ethnic or religious groups. Kim, J. R. (2011) found that teachers who have experience or professional training positively effects on the formation of teachers’ attitudes. But this finding is not completely supported by the interview findings of teachers as well as school heads. Although all 3 school heads appreciated their teaching staff for their generous behavior to provide financial help to the needy students but 2 of them (school heads of School A & B) clearly mentioned that majority of teachers do not exhibit dedicated and responsible attitudes towards teaching of SWSN. Female school head highlighted on the biased and discriminatory behavior of various teachers towards students with different ethnic and religious background. These discriminatory practices were also depicted from the views of students from Christian minority group at the same school.

Despite accepting the potential benefits of inclusion, mainstream teachers do not support the idea of IE for SWSN having hearing, mental and other special needs of swear nature due to lack of equipment and facilities and the most important pedagogical knowledge required to run inclusive practices. Except one female, all male and female teachers and all three school heads highlighted on the professional in-service training gap for teachers. It was found by the

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interviews with both gender that professional training related to teaching of special needs is completely missing for mainstream teachers and a single topic in individual difference in pre service course content does not fulfill their professional needs to run inclusive practices. The fact is supported by the literature that regular teachers are agreed on the importance of inclusion but found it difficult to implement to lack or absence of knowledge and professional guidance (Scott et al, 2019; Geleton, 2019). This finding was same across the 3 cases and there was no gender disparity found in the teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of special needs students. Malinen (2013) highlighted this fact that the teachers' attitudes are less positive for students having special impairments. It is also verified from findings of principals' interviews that except one or two example, mainstream teachers do not have the supported attitudes, sense of responsibility and dedication to run inclusive practices. This finding is supported by the study results of Hussain, Parveen & DE SOUZA (2015) that general school teachers do not support to include SEN students in their classrooms. This is in alignment with the findings of Scott et al., (2019) as well, who reported the negative attitudes of mainstream teachers regarding inclusive education.

As well as the willingness of school heads is concerned, gender difference exists as out of 3, only female school principal showed her positive attitude and highlighted on the needs of continuous in-service training for teachers to make them ready for inclusion by providing awareness, understanding of the concept. She emphasized the role and spirit of school leader to motivate teachers to initiate the inclusive practices. Whereas male school heads at both schools simply rejected the idea of inclusion. These findings are in contradiction with the study of Hassan (2015) who found that there was no significant difference between the male and female school heads in Punjab towards IE.

Male school head at school B tried to justify his refusal for inclusion by mentioning the contextual barriers and highlighting the non-positive attitudes of teacher as well as their professional incompetencies required for IE. Titrek et al., (2017) pointed out the professional training as the most important factor influencing on the attitudes of school heads. Male school head at the school 3 strongly rejected the inclusion concept. He was holding the perspective that inclusion of SWSN in mainstream schools is not needed in the big cities where special education institution centers are built with the proper facilities required for SWSN that are not present in mainstream education sector. Furthermore, he argued that IE is implementable merely in those areas where the special education institutions are not established and SWSN have no other choice other than to go to regular schools. This specific finding is in contrast with the study conducted by Geleta (2019) on principals and teachers' perceptions toward IE who found the school principals and teachers have positive perceptions toward IE.

7. Conclusion and recommendations

Present study concluded that both male and female mainstream secondary school teachers were not holding positive perspectives regarding IE in general though male teachers have better understanding of the concept as compared to female teachers. Mainstream teachers have varying level of acceptance towards the inclusion of students with learning difficulties and with the mild impairments, but they were not positive to include students with serious impairments and due to the absence of facilities, support and the most importantly limited

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awareness and knowledge related to relevant instructional strategies. Despite having the understanding of concept in all 3, only female school head supported the idea of inclusion, but male school heads were not in favor of inclusion of SEN students in mainstream schools. Major hurdle in the way to promote IE is the lack of teachers' knowledge, understanding and support for mainstream teachers that is needed to be removed by providing the professional training regarding the inclusive pedagogy in pre and in service programs. As the teachers were convinced on the potential benefits of inclusion, the study recommended for the fulfillment of their professional needs in order to change their perception in positive direction.

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