

Perception of Readiness for Implementing Inclusive Education among Primary School Subject Teachers: Implications for Teacher Education in Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to examine teachers' perceptions of readiness for teaching in inclusive classrooms using a survey design. It also explored teachers' views on factors that hinder them apply inclusive education. A questionnaire consisting of open and close-ended items was administered to collect data from participant teachers. The close-ended questions measured teachers' perceptions of readiness and open-ended questions solicited information on factors that hinder teachers to implement inclusive education. Data collected from 80 sample teachers were analyzed. Findings indicated that teachers had lower levels of readiness for teaching in inclusive classrooms. While variables such as participants' gender and grade level taught do not generate variations in teachers' perceptions of readiness, teaching experience seemed to generate variations. It is revealed that the lack of short-term pieces of training and knowledge and skills teachers gained in teacher training programs which were insufficient and were not quite useful for teaching in inclusive classrooms were factors identified by teachers that affect inclusive education implementation. In general, teachers lack the readiness to teach in inclusive classrooms. So, to make inclusive education a success for students with special needs, it is high time to revisit the teacher education program in Ethiopia.

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INTRODUCTION

Educating typically developing individuals began in early history when adults trained the young in the knowledge and skills they believed necessary to sustain their existence (Aron & Loprest, 2012). This implies that in pre-history, education and training is meant only for the typically developing individuals, and people with disability were not recognized as individuals who can be educated and trained. In the modern world, however, education is recognized as significantly vital to any individual irrespective of that individual's capability or disability. As a result, there have been several attempts made by governments and different organizations in delivering education to all people with and without disabilities for the past few decades in inclusive settings (Peters, 1999; Winzer, 1993). Of course, the history of educating children with a disability has passed through tribulations and triumphs. Children with disabilities were educated in separate classes or separate settings and that special education has been practiced by specially trained teachers in a separate setting for a long time (Winzer, 1993).

Throughout the 20th century, however, perceptions of equitable education were considerably changed as innovative events of the 1900s formed what it meant to offer an equitable education (McLaughlin, 2010). In this regard, the Ethiopian Government has shown commitment to educating children with disabilities and special educational needs in the least restrictive learning environments as part of an endeavor to meet one of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)-Education For All (EFA) by ratifying several international conventions (e.g., Convention against Discrimination in Education, United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability, UNCRPD) and incorporated them in domestic laws, policies, strategies, and programs. One of the manifestations of the efforts made by the government is that it has formulated special needs and inclusive education strategies over the years to provide children with special educational needs relevant and equitable education in mainstream schools in 2012. Though progress was made in policies and strategies, the reality on the ground shows limited progress in implementing these legal provisions to realize inclusion (Tefera et al., 2015) and children with disability and special needs in this country are still among the most disadvantaged in terms of obtaining equitable and quality education in inclusive settings.

Currently, there is growing evidence that has led to an agreement on the significance and benefits that inclusive education has for students with disabilities and

special educational needs (Molina Roldán et al., 2021). Consequently, to improve the academic performance of children with special educational needs, inclusion in the general education classroom has become one of the primary methods of service. But, simply placing children with and without special needs together in regular classrooms does not produce improved academic achievements. Inclusive education will help improve children's performance when there is ongoing advocacy, planning, support, and commitment on the part of teachers. If inclusive education is implemented properly, it is proven successful in enhancing the academic achievement of all students with and without special educational needs (Burstein et al., 2004; Hawkins, 2007).

It is indicated that well-prepared teachers are key to ensuring effective inclusive education practices, for pupils in primary school (Shevchenko et al., 2020). Once children with special educational needs are included in inclusive classrooms, need to have a good deal of sense of readiness and self-confidence (Pit-ten Cate et al., 2018) and shoulder the responsibility of supporting children to access grade level curriculum (Abery et al., 2017). Studies for example (Ploessl et al., 2010) indicated that teachers were confronted with several difficulties and struggle with the strangeness of making inclusive classrooms comfortable for children with and without special needs. Particularly, when teachers perceive that they are less/unprepared for inclusive education practice, they may be frustrated and unwilling to teach in a classroom where pupils with disabilities and special educational needs are included (Pit-ten Cate et al., 2018).

Inclusive education needs dedicated and capable teachers, however, numerous teachers in different parts of the world stated that they were not ready for meeting the needs of pupils with special needs in regular classrooms (Benedict et al., 2014; Zion & Sobel, 2014). Subject teachers face numerous challenges when they try to provide meaningful educational opportunities for pupils with special needs (Feustel, 2015; Keefe & Moore, 2004). In addition, teachers may lack knowledge and understanding of what inclusive education is and how to implement it (Idol, 2006). Lack of preparedness for inclusive education also adversely influences confidence and perceived self-efficacy to meet the needs of pupils with special needs in regular classrooms (Forlin & Chambers, 2011).

Rationale and Objectives

Teachers are acknowledged as persons who play a substantial role in the process of implementing inclusive education. It is asserted that the process of providing education

to all children can become challenging and difficult to succeed, even with the most accurate plan, if teachers are incompetent to accomplish their duties with sincerely good intentions and commitment towards students with special educational needs (Šmelová et al., 2016). This is because teachers are generally expected to have the knowledge and skills to manage the diversity of various learning styles of their students in the inclusive classroom.

The increased number of students with special needs from time to time has demanded regular school teachers to provide quality and equitable instruction in regular classrooms (McNulty & Gloeckler, 2011). Teachers may become under additional tasks to ensure that all students with and without special needs have meaningful access to and participation in inclusive classrooms (Shepherd et al., 2016). Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine whether primary school teachers were prepared to teach and meet the needs of students with special educational needs in inclusive classrooms. Conducted in Bahir Dar town primary schools, this study, therefore, has aimed at examining perceptions of teacher preparation for inclusive education. It also examined whether there was a significant difference in teacher preparedness across gender, teaching experience, and grade levels taught. Teachers' views on the factors that hinder them implement inclusive education were also explored.

METHOD

Design of the Study

A survey design was employed to examine the level of teachers' preparedness for implementing inclusive education. This design is appropriate when investigating specific variables of a proposed study and when seeking to discover possible relationships between groups of independent and dependent variables (Brink, 1998). Thus, using this design perceived preparedness of teachers across gender, grades taught and teaching experience was examined. The factors affecting teachers' preparedness for inclusive education were also explored.

Population and Sample

First and second-cycle primary school teachers who were teaching in five primary schools constituted the population of this study. In these schools, there were 300 (160 males and 140 females) teachers in the year 2020/2021. Of this population, 80 teachers (42 males and 38 females) were selected using a stratified random sampling technique. Sample schools were purposely selected based on the presence of students with special needs.

Instruments

To determine teachers' perceptions of preparedness for implementing inclusive education, a survey was developed and used. The survey instrument was developed based on a detailed review of related literature and feedback got from experts in special needs education and psychology. Before administering the survey instrument to the sample, the researcher conducted a pilot test and obtained helpful feedback. Amendments were made to establish the validity and reliability of the survey instrument.

The survey instrument has seven close-ended items and one open-ended question. Besides, the researcher developed close-ended items for gathering information on participants' demographic variables such as participants' gender, specific grade level taught, and year of service. Then, participants were requested to respond to seven statements focused on teacher perceptions of preparedness. They were asked to rate each item using a Likert-type scale with options of Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, and Strongly Agree.

Procedures of Data Collection

After the completion of pre-data collection preparations, permission was obtained from five primary school principals. Then two data collectors were recruited and trained in data collection procedures. The training included content on rapport creation, respecting the respondent, and distributing the questionnaire without exerting an influence on response selection by the participants. The survey was administered in a paper and pencil format with the participants given the freedom to fill out the survey at their convenient place and time. Fortunately, all the participants were able to return the questionnaire survey.

Data Analysis

To analyze data, both quantitative and qualitative data analysis methods were employed. The quantitative data analysis was done using SPSS (Version 22). Before starting the analysis, scale scores were generated. The significance tests were examined at alpha 0.05 or 95% confidence interval level. Statistical techniques such as descriptive and inferential were employed. The perceptions of teacher preparedness were descriptively analyzed based on the data obtained from the survey questionnaire. Independent Samples t-test was employed to examine the presence of a significant difference in the perceptions of preparedness for inclusive education between male and female teachers as well as first and second-cycle teachers. One-way ANOVA was applied to find out a significant

difference in the perceived preparedness of teachers across their teaching experience. The qualitative data obtained through open-ended questions were analyzed using the thematic analysis technique.

RESULTS

Perceptions of Preparedness for Inclusive Education Practice

To examine the levels of teachers’ perceived preparedness, descriptive statistics were computed. The results are presented in Table 1. This provides the range, minimum and maximum values, as well as the mean and standard deviation for the perceived preparedness scale in which the participant teachers scored themselves concerning their preparedness status.

The descriptive statistics result (Table 1) showed that the minimum score (9), maximum score (19), and perceived preparedness mean score (13.85) with a standard deviation of 2.147. It was expected that the closer the perceived preparedness mean scores toward the maximum possible score (35) would disclose desirable results. However, the result falls below the median score (17.5) of the perceived preparedness scale. The minimum and maximum scores also indicate that no outlier scores were showing higher perceived preparedness.

Concerning teacher preparedness for inclusive education, participant teachers were asked to reflect on their views on the factors that hinder them in the process of implementing inclusive education. One of the factors participant teachers identified as barriers to properly implementing inclusive education is a lack of knowledge and skills that help them meet the needs of learners with special educational needs in the regular classroom. During the completion of their higher education, all the respondents indicated that they received little knowledge and skills on special needs and inclusive education practices for pupils with special needs. Participants pointed

out that only one introductory special needs education course was taken in their college education. This is indicated in the curriculum of colleges and universities in Ethiopia that only one introductory course are given for those who would join the teaching profession.

Participant teachers stated that they were only introduced to the presence of children with disabilities and special needs and their characteristics while they took the course introduction to special needs education. They stated that they lack the knowledge and skills regarding inclusive teaching and learning strategies. Furthermore, they stated that the course they took was insufficient for teaching in the inclusive classroom. One of the participant teachers in describing her belief on the adequacy of the course for teaching in inclusive classrooms said that:

I do not believe that the course I took in college can help me to meet the needs of children with special needs in inclusive classrooms to the expected level. Frankly speaking, I need education and training as well as practice in special needs and inclusive education.

Participants have indicated the lack of in-service short and long-term training that are specific to children with disabilities and special needs as well as inclusive teaching practices. Participants indicated that they have never taken in-service training on special needs and inclusive education. They believe that in-service training on inclusive education practices should be given to all teachers that are to be assigned to teach in inclusive classrooms.

Comparison of Teachers’ Perceived Preparedness by their Gender

One of the objectives of the present study was to see if there was a statistically significant difference in teachers’ perception of preparedness for inclusive education across their gender. Independent samples t-test was conducted by using teachers’ gender as independent variables and total perceived preparedness score as the dependent variable. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 1. Descriptive scores of teachers’ perceived preparedness (n = 80)

	N	Range	Minimum score	Maximum score	Median score	Mean	SD
Teachers’ perceived preparedness	80	10	9	19	17.5	13.85	2.147

Table 2. Results of t-test for comparison of Teachers preparedness across their gender (n = 80)

Groups	Mean	SD	T	Df
Male	13.36	1.918	.224	78
Female	14.44	2.286		

*p < .05

As the t-test result showed (Table 2), there was no statistically significant difference in the mean perceived preparedness scores of male and female teachers. The perceived preparedness mean scores of male teachers were not significantly higher than those of female teachers $t(78) = -2.30, p = .224$.

Comparison of Perceived Preparedness by Grade Levels Teachers Taught

Independent-samples t-test was computed to see whether the mean scores for perceptions of preparedness differed between first-cycle (grades 1-4) primary school teachers and second-cycle (5-8) primary school teachers. Perceptions of preparedness were taken as the dependent variable and grade category (first cycle and second cycle) of teachers were taken as independent variables. The result is shown in Table 3.

As the t-test result revealed (Table 3), there was no statistically significant difference in the mean perceived preparedness scores of first and second-cycle primary school teachers. The perceived preparedness mean score of second-cycle teachers was not significantly higher than those of first-cycle teachers $t(78) = -2.70, p = .056$.

Comparison of Teachers Preparedness across their Teaching Experience

One of the issues this study aimed to examine was to see if there was a difference in perceived preparedness among teachers across their teaching experiences. To answer this question, teachers were categorized based on their service years in teaching as shown in Table 4.

Then, one-way ANOVA was computed by using service years/teaching experience as independent variables and total scores of perceived preparedness as dependent variables. The results are presented in Table 5.

Since, the F ratio was found to be significant at a 0.01 level, to examine which of the pairs of groups differed among themselves, Post Hoc pairwise comparison was computed. The results are shown in Table 6.

The results (Table 5) revealed a statistically significant difference in teachers' perceptions of preparedness mean scores concerning their teaching experience ($F(4, 75) = 40.066, P < .01$). Further, Post Hoc test results (Table 6) showed statistically significant perceptions of preparedness mean differences of eight out of ten pairs of comparisons made was found. This result further revealed a pattern that as teachers teaching experience increases, their

Table 3. Results of t-test for comparison of teachers preparedness across grade levels taught (n = 80)

Groups	Mean	SD	T	Df
First Cycle	13.86	1.679	.056	78
Second Cycle	14.04	2.028		

* $p < .05$

Table 4. Teachers preparedness scores across their teaching experience (n = 80)

Service years	N	Mean	SD
5-10	14	11.71	1.490
11-15	17	12.35	1.967
16-20	20	16.60	2.088
21-25	16	19.38	3.442
>26	13	22.77	4.438

Table 5. Result of ANOVA of teachers perceived preparedness across their teaching experience (n= 80)

Source	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1255.603	4	313.901	40.066	.000
Within Groups	587.597	75	7.835		
Total	1843.200	79			

* $p < .01$

Table 6. Results of Scheffe Post Hoc Test of teachers preparedness across their experience (n = 80)

Level of income	Level of income			
	11-15	16-20	21-25	>26
5-10	-.639	-4.886*	-7.665*	-11.055*
11-15		-4.247*	-7.022*	-10.216*
16-20			-2.775	-6.169*
21-25				-3.374*

*p < .01

perceptions of preparedness also increase. For instance, statistically significant perceptions of preparedness mean differences were obtained between teachers who had teaching experience of 5-10 years and greater than 26 years, MD = -11.055, p =.000.

DISCUSSION

Teachers’ Preparedness for Implementing Inclusive Education

The mean perceived preparedness score of 13.85 on a possible score range of 1 to 35 invariably implies lower preparedness and hence an undesirable position for any teachers expected to work in an inclusive classroom. Though a score of 35 could be considered ideal and unrealistic, especially for teachers teaching in classrooms of third world countries, a mean score closer to 35 or significantly above 17.5-the middle value of the possible score range, would have been an encouraging result. Indicating a lower status of preparedness, the sample’s mean score fell below the median scale value. Teachers teaching in an inclusive classroom would require a stronger and higher level of readiness than other teachers teaching in non-inclusive classrooms as the demands placed on teachers teaching in an inclusive classroom would require higher levels of preparedness to meet the diverse learning needs of students with special educational needs in the inclusive setting. Why is the level of teachers’ preparedness so low? An answer to this question is of paramount importance as that can guide policies and practices designed to enhance teachers’ readiness for inclusive education. A clearer and well-informed answer to this question can emerge only if it is answered after exploring the factors that affect teachers’ perceptions of preparedness for teaching in inclusive classrooms.

As to the factors that affected teachers’ level of preparedness, the present study vividly depicts that teachers’ low level of preparedness was due to teachers’ lack of knowledge and skills of inclusive education, poor admin-

istrative support, and lack of resources in schools. This highlights the presence of problems in teacher training programs and the lack of attention at different levels of the education system. The existence of these problems in the education systems in Ethiopia may be a surprising result in a country where disability issues and the education of children with disabilities have been addressed for several years. Two pertinent questions emerge here: (1) why the attention of people working in the education system is so weak in a country where significant efforts are on to better the quality of life of PWDs? And (2) how do teacher training programs relate to the perceived preparedness of teachers? A definite answer to the first question is beyond the scope of this inquiry. However, the myths and misconceptions held by persons without disabilities about disability and people with disability, the commitment of the concerned bodies to address disability issues at the grass root level (e.g. schools), the availability of inclusive infrastructure in schools where adolescents routinely operate, etc. need to be thoroughly pondered into to identify accurate answers. While looking at the impacts of teacher training programs on teachers’ perceptions of their preparedness for teaching in inclusive classrooms, it can be read from the results of the interview that all the respondents reported that the knowledge and skills they received from the teacher training program are insufficient to help them meet the diverse learning needs of students with special educational needs. This finding goes well with a previous study which indicated that the lack of knowledge of teachers has been one of the most important barriers to implementing inclusive education (Shady et al., 2013). The finding of this study is also in line with previous research which suggested that training and preparation have not adequately equipped subject teachers for providing instruction to students with special needs in the inclusive classroom (Abery et al., 2017; DeSimone & Parmar, 2006; Shepherd et al., 2016)

The most important area of concern for teachers was a lack of training explicitly designed to develop teach-

er skills that help them meet the needs of students with special educational needs in the regular classroom. Teachers express their concern that their coursework in their teacher training program had not prepared them well for inclusive education. Teaching in inclusive classrooms is a recent phenomenon for existing teachers as they have experienced teaching in non-inclusive classrooms where children with special educational needs are absent. Moreover, teacher preparation programs in Ethiopia can be described as non-systematic and inadequate to prepare teachers for inclusive education. Subject teachers over several years have mainly graduated from colleges and universities by taking only one course in special needs and inclusive education. As the result indicated, the current teacher training program is inadequate in disciplinary knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge in inclusive and special needs education. This shows that less emphasis was given to preparing teachers for inclusive teaching.

In general, it was identified by participant teachers that knowledge and skills about instructional strategies, inclusive classroom management, students' performance assessment, education provision, and individualized education plans gained in their pre-service teacher training and education were insufficient.

Perceptions of Teacher Preparedness and Demographics

Perception of preparedness may vary based on one's possession of resources such as knowledge and skills as well as support provisions available for a person. These resources may not be equally held and available for male and female teachers across schools. In a culture where gender inequality was once a norm, females may be expected to feel inferior in several activities including teaching in inclusive classrooms. Unexpectedly, the results of the present study revealed the absence of a statistically significant perceived preparedness mean in the difference between male and female teachers. It is an interesting result in that in many aspects when men and women are compared, the result is almost always showed male superiority. This is because in Ethiopia, though women are respected and protected, they are placed far below men in their social significance. Women here traditionally have been considered as child bearers and homemakers and not to contribute to the economic resources of the family and society. As a result, women rated themselves as weak and inferior to men.

Another demographic that was hypothesized to influence perceptions of teachers' preparedness was the grade

levels they taught. It was assumed that teaching in the first cycle (1-4 grade) and teaching in the second cycle (5-8 grades) levels will not have the same impact on the perception of preparedness teachers hold for teaching in inclusive classrooms as the psychological and day-to-day demands and challenges generated by the first and second cycle primary school levels are different. With this presumption, when first-cycle primary school teachers were compared with second-cycle primary school teachers, a statistically significant difference was absent in the level of perceptions of their preparedness for inclusive teaching. Contrary to this finding, previous studies for instance (Bender et al., 2008) found that perceptions of unpreparedness were particularly strong in teachers who taught at the middle school level.

The role of teaching experience in maximizing teachers' readiness for inclusive education is unassailable across contexts. With this view in mind, the association between the perceived preparedness of teachers and their teaching experience was examined. The results showed a clear association between teachers' perceptions of preparedness and their teaching experience. In this case, a near-perfect trend exists, that is, when teachers' teaching experience increases, the level of teacher preparedness for inclusive education also increases. What are how teaching experience influences teachers' perceptions of preparedness? Since this study did not try to answer this question, future investigations in those lines appear imperative. However, the existing research evidence indicated that teachers with better teaching experience provide better support and expect their students with disabilities to obtain better grades and encourage them to proceed to the highest level of education that they can whereas less experienced teachers provide lesser support and have lower academic expectations for their students with disability (Berry, 2012; Buell et al., 1999). It is also indicated that teaching experience helps teachers feel more comfortable and competent in the classroom (Ryan & Gottfried, 2012). What changes in teachers' preparations for inclusive education, provision of disability-specific knowledge and skills for teachers, principals, and educators' involvement in the education of children with disabilities, and teachers' expectations about academic achievement and progression would be brought about by teachers' education and teaching experience are pertinent questions which need to be answered to capitalize on teacher inclusive education in raising teachers readiness for inclusive education. Such insights would invariably inform teacher education programs in the country.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study found a comprehensive picture of the status of teacher preparedness for inclusive education in the present context of Bahir Dar, Ethiopia. Teachers currently teaching in public primary schools in Bahir Dar town are less prepared for inclusive education. The coursework offered in the teacher training program had not equipped them well to meet the learning needs of students with disabilities and special educational needs in inclusive classrooms. Gender has not a significant influence on perceptions of teacher preparedness for inclusive education. There was no statistically significant difference in the level of perceptions of teacher preparedness for inclusive teaching across grade levels taught. Teachers with more teaching experience are more prepared for inclusive education than those teachers with lesser teaching experience, indicative of the influence played by the number of years working in the teaching profession for teaching in inclusive classrooms.

The findings of this study highlight the tremendous influence that the knowledge and skills teachers obtain from teacher training programs exert on the perceptions of teachers' preparedness for inclusive education. Though there may be certain positive perceptions of teachers about their preparedness for teaching in an inclusive classroom due to their rich teaching experiences, the huge role of knowledge and skills in special needs and inclusive education that should be acquired in teacher training programs is well established in this inquiry. This has strong implications for teacher training institutions. Producing teachers who can be able to meet the needs of students with special needs in inclusive classrooms as much as possible is the ultimate objective of any teacher training efforts. The philosophy of quality inclusive education underpins such efforts too. This can be achieved only when special needs and inclusive education courses are offered with the required depth and breadth. Here comes the contribution of this investigation. Since lack of knowledge and skills in inclusive education impedes teachers' ability to meet the needs of students with special needs in inclusive classrooms, enhancing inclusive education knowledge and skills to the fullest possible extent would go a long way in strengthening teachers' readiness for implementing inclusive education.

The positive contribution of knowledge in special needs education and teaching experience for several years for meeting the needs of students in inclusive classrooms imply that the school administration and concerned educators as well as teacher training efforts should place extra thrust on developing and /or introducing proper and relevant courses in inclusive and special needs education in teacher training programs.

The result also suggests that inclusive education is not just about the placement of children with special educational needs into regular schools but about the delivery of educational services customized to their needs and the provision of adequate materials and human assistance to eliminate all challenges and barriers to inclusion and inclusive education. An integrated effort to meet the learning needs of students with disabilities in the regular classroom by enhancing teachers' competence to teach in an inclusive setting is the pertinent implication of this study. Students with disabilities who learn in inclusive classrooms with competent teachers would naturally be more successful academically.

The findings further imply that teacher training is as a major factor that directly relates to and contributes to the process of producing and training teachers who can be well-equipped and professionally qualified to competently teach both students with and without special educational needs in inclusive classrooms. The results indicated a need to revisit the teacher training and education programs of Ethiopia. Hence, some of the issues that need to be addressed in teacher training courses include the methodology to be adopted for identifying children with special needs, classroom management, use of appropriate teaching methods, skills for adapting the curriculum, development of teaching-learning materials, and evaluation of academic performance.

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