



Perspectives of Regular Peers Towards Children with Special Needs in Inclusive Schools: A Descriptive Study

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ABSTRACT

Despite numerous improvements over the last decade, millions of people still do not have access to the education that is rightfully theirs, and educational opportunities are still not evenly distributed. Approximately 40% of children lack access to education in a language they comprehend, and children with impairments persistently face a disproportionate level of exclusion from school (UNESCO, 2023). This inclusive approach is founded on the concept that every child possesses the ability to acquire knowledge and that each individual possesses unique abilities, requirements, and preferences for learning. Further, India's National Education Policy 2020 developed one of the most powerful features in the education system which is the replacement of the classic 10+2 framework with the 5+3+3+4 education system. The middle stage is from classes 6 to 8. In this journey of inclusion for a child with special needs, there are many factors which impact, however, the most important of them is the attitude of children, teachers and parents towards inclusive education. The majority of the time children with special needs are surrounded by other children in the class thus, their attitude towards them plays an important role in the efficacy of inclusive education. Thus, the current study aims to assess the attitude of children studying in the middle stage of schools towards children with special needs. This study employed the Chedoke-McMaster Attitude towards Children with Handicaps (CATCH) scale to collect data from a sample of 530 middle-stage children (6th to 8th grades) selected using the purposive sampling approach from Tricity. The collected data is analysed using the SPSS software by calculating the descriptive analysis that is mean and median and T-test. The study found that the middle stage children have a positive attitude towards children with special needs with female children having a higher positive attitude concerning their counterparts.

Keywords: Inclusive education, Middle-stage children, Children with Special Needs and Attitude.

Introduction

Inclusive education has gained prominence in the past decade, and the recent National Education Policy of 2020 has underscored the importance of establishing an inclusive educational framework and culture within the school system. This is to be achieved through infrastructural enhancements and modifications to the curriculum that integrate materials promoting human values such as respect for individuals, empathy, tolerance, and a non-judgmental attitude. This concept entails providing normal and exceptional students with education under one roof. It was formerly thought that enrolling kids with special needs in special schools would help them advance academically and develop their potential as per their abilities. However, the parents/caregivers of these children developed an inferiority complex as a result of their marginalisation and isolation. This unfastened the door for inclusive education, which seeks to blend special and regular education for students with special needs (UNESCO, 2023). In addition to the advantages, there were also obstacles encountered in the pursuit of inclusive education. These challenges encompass ensuring the provision of

essential facilities for special children, such as railings, ramps, braille, special educators, teaching and learning equipment tailored to the individual needs of each child, facilitating the integration of special children into regular schools, managing the attitudes of teachers and other children towards them, making transportation and sanitation facilities available etc (Loreman, T., Deppeler, J., Harvey, D., 2010). While most of the problems are been addressed by financial investment and physical construction, but one particularly difficult one is the attitude of others towards children with special needs. This factor plays an essential role in encouraging children with special needs to participate actively in the classroom and feel dignified and same among others. (De Boer A, Pijl S.J., 2012). Children are innocent beings they learn what they see and are taught by elders thus if they get regular exposure to children with special needs and they are taught not to look down upon anyone and to respect each other they will develop a positive attitude towards every individual irrespective of their abilities and special needs.

The term 'child with special needs' (Burke and Cigno, 2000) is used to refer to 'young people experiencing serious and persistent physical, psychological and/or social problems' (Mahon and Kibirige, 2004: 165). It is suggested that this term is acceptable to young people and their families (Department of Health, 2004a). In clinical diagnostics and functional development, special needs denote persons necessitating support due to medical, mental, or psychological problems. Inclusive education means providing equal access and equal opportunities for education and learning to all children irrespective of any discrimination based on abilities and special needs. It comprises a teaching-learning environment that is inclusive and accommodates all learners, irrespective of their learning styles, abilities, or disabilities. Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act, 2016 defines inclusive education as - "a system of education wherein students with and without disability learn together and the system of teaching and learning is suitably adapted to meet the learning needs of different types of students with disabilities." (UNESCO, Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2020). The National Curriculum Framework (NCF), 2005, posits that an inclusive school environment necessitates the elimination of beliefs rooted in the idea that inferiority and inequity are intrinsic to gender, caste, and physical or mental disability.

The American Psychological Association (APA) describes attitude as "a relatively stable and general evaluation of an object, individual, group, issue, or concept along a continuum from negative to positive." Attitudes provide brief evaluations of certain items and are often thought to stem from particular beliefs, feelings, and past behaviors associated with those entities. The ABCs of attitude refers to the elements that make up an attitude (Sutton, R. & Douglas, K, 2020). The three Elements of Attitude are the Affective Component: One's feelings about the thing, someone, problem, or occurrence; Behavioral Component: One's reaction to someone or something that causes you to experience a certain set of emotions and ideas. This might be a physical or spoken reaction, and Cognitive Component: One's understanding of the topic, as well as your thoughts and opinions.

India's National Education Policy 2020 introduced a significant reform in the education system by substituting the traditional 10+2 framework with the 5+3+3+4 structure. Under the 5+3+3+4 educational framework, students will engage in 5 years of foundational education, followed by three years in the preparatory phase, three years in the middle stage, and conclude with four years of the secondary stage. To simplify the playschool to class 2nd comes under the foundational stage, 3rd to 5th class comes under the preparatory stage, 6th to 8th are the middle stage and classes 9th to 12th are the secondary stage. (Acadecraft, 2023).

Rationale of the Study

Our country is focusing towards the development of inclusive schools. Inclusive education is about creating an environment within which every child irrespective of their abilities and special needs learn and grow together. For the better functioning of these schools, the attitude of teachers and students has to be welcoming and the major role is of the students as children spend more time together with each other and their nature towards each other influences the environment of the class. It can be assumed that Children who get exposure to inclusive school from early ages can help them normalise the presence of special children in the society. Thus, the research aims at highlighting the attitude of children studying in the middle stage towards children with special needs.

Review of Literature

Hegde A. M., Sheth P.P., et al. studied the attitude of school-going children toward inclusive education and showed that the success of inclusive education is greatly determined by the acceptance of children with Special Health Care Needs (SHCN) by otherwise healthy children. The survey clearly indicates a better acceptance of children with SHCN by their peers. Children do not consider their peers with disabilities as any different from them. The differences are brought about by society. Harnessing this indiscriminate attitude among SG children will not only help improve the quality of life of children with SHCN but also lead to improvement in the moral behaviour and conduct of SG children, instilling compassion and empathy in them.

De Boer, A., & Pijl, S. J. (2012) analyzed a summary of research that outlines student attitudes, the factors that influence these attitudes, and the relationship between student attitudes and the social engagement of peers with disabilities. The consequences were categorized as unfavourable, neutral, or positive based on three components of attitude: cognitive, affective, and behavioural. The findings indicate that pupils predominantly maintain neutral views towards peers with disabilities. Multiple characteristics were identified in relation to their attitudes, including gender, age, experience with and awareness of disability, and parental influence. Further, Qandeel & Abumariam (2022) examined the attitudes of elementary school students toward their disabled peers. The study's findings revealed that children exhibit more favourable opinions about this type of peers if the peer is a female student, if they attend a public school, if a family member has a disability, and if the student is older. Logistic regression analysis was employed to investigate the predictors of attitudes, revealing that gender and class grade characteristics might forecast students' views toward peers with impairments. Additionally, suggestions were made to employ organized interviews and observations to evaluate student attitudes in a more authentic environment. McGregor S. (2003) examined the attitudes of middle school students towards their peers with disabilities. A variance analysis of the pre-test data revealed that the frequency of participants' previous classroom interactions with children with impairments greatly affected acceptance. Gender discrepancies during the pre-test phase were significantly pronounced across many parameters. Although a repeated measures analysis indicated no statistically significant difference after one semester of the experimental inclusion program, data trends and focus group conversations implied an increased acceptance of students with impairments by their mainstream counterparts.

Objectives of the study

To assess the attitude of middle-stage children towards children with special needs.

To Find the difference in the attitude of male and females middle stage students towards children with special needs.

Hypothesis

There is no significant positive attitude of middle-stage children towards children with special needs.

There is no significant gender difference in the attitude of middle-stage children towards children with special needs.

Research Methodology

A purposive sampling technique is employed to select the participants. A total number of 530 samples were collected from middle-stage children of schools in Tricity. The research data was collected through interviews among the middle-stage students in Tricity schools. The Inclusive Criteria were children studying in the middle stage (6th to 8th) and the Exclusive Criteria were children studying in a class lower than the 6th standard and Children studying in a class higher than the 8th standard. Regarding the variable, the Independent Variable is Middle-stage students, Gender, and Type of school and the Dependent variable is the attitude towards children with special needs. The research employed the standardized Chedoke-McMaster Attitude towards Children with Handicaps (CATCH) scale, developed by Rosenbaum et al. in 1986, which is a self-administered instrument designed for children aged 9 to 13 to assess attitudes towards peers with disabilities. The instrument comprises 36 items, including 12 categorized into cognition, affect, and behaviour. The rating utilizes a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (0) to strongly agree (4). The twelve items for each attitude component— affect, behavior, and cognition—were aggregated (0-strongly disagree, 4-strongly agree), averaged, and subsequently multiplied by ten, resulting in a minimum CATCH score of 0 and a maximum of 40, where higher scores reflect more favourable views. In addition, all 36 items on the CATCH scale were also analysed similarly to obtain the total CATCH score for each participant. (Rosenbaum et al, 1986; Tirosh et al, 1997).

Result Interpretation

The results were presented in tables using descriptive statistics like mean. A T-test was applied to measure the differences in the mean of the result obtained. Typically, the statistical methods that are employed depend on the study questions and the type of data being examined.

Demographic Information

Parameter	Character	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	247	46
	Female	283	53.7
Age (Years)	10	35	6.6
	11	175	32.8
	12	154	28.9
	13	145	27.2
	14	24	4.5
Grades	6	220	41.3
	7	114	21.4
	8	199	37.3
Location of school	Mohali	376	70.5
	Chandigarh	59	11.1
	Panchkula	98	18.4

From the table 1.1, it is evident that the majority (53.7%) of the respondent are females and other 46 percent are males. Further in regard to the age of the children about 32.8 percent of students were 11 years, 28.9 percent are 12 years and 27.2 percent are 13 years old. Again, 6.6 percent and 4.5 percent students belonging to 10 years and 14 years of age respectively. In regard to grades of student's majority of students are from grade 6^t (41.3%) which was followed by grade 8 and grade 7 that are 37.3 percent and 21.4 percent respectively. Among the Tricity majority of responses are received from the schools of Mohali (70.5%), Panchkula (18.4%) followed by Chandigarh (11.1%).

Descriptive Statistics			
	N	Mean	Median
Total	530	26.48	26.67
Affect	530	31.88	32
Behavior	530	32.70	33
Cognition	530	30.74	31
Valid N (listwise)	530		

Descriptive analysis of the data

According to the table 1.2, the overall mean of the data is 26.48 with the median 26.67 indicating that the students have a positive attitude towards their peers with disability. Among the subscales the Behaviour has the highest mean score (M=37.33) in comparison to other subscales and cognition has the lowest mean (M=30.74).

Table : 1.2 Descriptive status

T-Test

Group Statistics					
	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
CATCH	Male	247	25.71	4.196	.267
	Female	283	27.15	4.317	.257

Independent Samples Test										
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
CATCH	Equal variances assumed	.056	.813	-3.881	528	.000	-1.440	.371	-2.169	-.711
	Equal variances not assumed			-3.888	521.911	.000	-1.440	.370	-2.167	-.712

According to the table 1.4, the significance of Levene's Test is greater than P-Value (0.05) i.e. 0.813 which shows that there is homogeneity of variance therefore equal variances are assumed. As the T- value is greater than the critical value thus there lies the significant difference in the attitude of male and female students towards the children with special needs. Also, as the significance value (2-tailed) is less than 0.05 indicating the statistically significant difference in the attitude of males and female students towards the children with special needs. But as the confidence interval of the difference in the mean value indicates that there is the no statistically significance difference in the attitude of both male and female as the upper and lower value both lie at the same side of 0. Lastly, to confirm the results the means of both males and females is compared (Table 1.3) which indicated the variation thus confirming that their lies statistically significant difference in the attitude of male and female students.

Group Statistics					
	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
AFFECT	Male	247	30.83	5.679	.361
	Female	283	32.79	6.241	.371
BEHAVIOUR	Male	247	31.72	6.698	.426
	Female	283	33.56	6.153	.366
COGNITION	Male	247	30.00	5.258	.335
	Female	283	31.39	5.540	.329

Independent Samples Test										
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
AFFECT	Equal variances assumed	1.921	.166	-3.749	528	.000	-1.954	.521	-2.978	-.930
	Equal variances not assumed			-3.773	527.070	.000	-1.954	.518	-2.971	-.937
BEHAVIOUR	Equal variances assumed	.864	.353	-3.291	528	.001	-1.838	.558	-2.935	-.741
	Equal variances not assumed			-3.272	503.538	.001	-1.838	.562	-2.941	-.734
COGNITION	Equal variances assumed	.070	.791	-2.955	528	.003	-1.392	.471	-2.318	-.467
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.966	524.295	.003	-1.392	.469	-2.314	-.470

According to table 1.5 and table 1.6, for affect the significance of Levene's Test is greater than P- value (0.05) i.e. 0.166 which shows that there is homogeneity of variance therefore equal variances are assumed. As the T- value is greater than the critical value (-3.749) and the significance value for 2-tailed (0.000) is also less than the P-Value, there lies the significant difference in the Affect of male and female students towards the children with special needs.

For behaviour, the significance of Levene's Test is greater than P- value (0.05), i.e. 0.166 which shows that variance is homogeneous therefore, equal variances are assumed. As the T- value is greater than the critical value (-3.749) and the significance value for 2-tailed (0.001) is also less than the P-Value, there lies the significant difference in the behaviour of male and female students towards the children with special needs.

For cognition, the significance of Levene's Test is greater than P- value (0.05), i.e. 0.791, which shows that variance is homogeneous; therefore, equal variances are assumed. As the T- T-value is greater than the critical value (-2.955) and the significance value for 2-tailed (0.003) is also less than the P-value, there lies the

significant difference in the Cognition of male and female students towards the children with special needs. Also, the mean value for both males and females indicate the same because the mean value for females is greater than for males in all the subscales. Thus, it can be noted that female students have more positive affect, behaviour and cognition towards children with special needs as compared to male students.

Discussion

This study aimed to evaluate the attitudes of middle-stage children towards peers with special needs and to examine the differences in attitudes between male and female middle-stage pupils. Attitudes towards children with special needs were found to be positive in the middle-stage children from Tricity, as the mean score was more than half of the total score obtainable on the scale (Olaleye A., 2012) indicating that children have become sensitised towards children with special needs. Initiation of inclusive education could be one of the reasons behind this as it provides opportunities for social interaction among the students. This goes along with many psychology-based theories arguing that proximity and positive interpersonal encounters can enhance liking and acceptance (Yuker, 1988). The study also indicates that middle-stage students have higher positive behaviour but lower positive cognition towards children with special needs this means children are yet not completely aware of the concepts related to children with special needs even though they have accepted them as their counterparts thus it could be concluded that interventions for changing attitudes of middle stage children towards children with special needs should target children's beliefs about special needs children rather than their feelings and intended behaviours (Armstrong, M., Morris, C., Tarrant, M et al., 2017). It was found in the study that female middle-stage children generally had more positive attitudes towards children with special needs in comparison to male children. This finding validates the previous research indicating the role of gender in defining the attitudes of people. (Krajewski & Hyde, 2000; Krajewski et al, 2002). Some studies also highlighted that men tend to have more negative attitudes towards people with special needs in comparison to women (McConkey et al, 1983). It could be said that a female's empathetic and caring nature could be the reason for this difference. Similar findings were highlighted by Tirosh et al (1997) in their study. In which they showed that on the CATCH scale, Canadian females had significantly higher scores than their male counterparts.

Overall, the results indicate that inclusive education can grow much higher in the education system in the coming years as more and more acceptance is being cultivated among children towards children with special needs. This will also create a positive environment in the schools and encourage more children with special needs to enrol along with the normal children in the inclusive schools. Thus, this would help in creating a more positive society in which each individual lives with dignity and equality irrespective of abilities and special needs.

Conclusion

The present study highlighted the attitude of middle-stage children towards children with special needs, considering its importance in promoting healthy inclusivity in schools. It was found that there lies the need of programmes to promote changes in the cognitive dimensions of the attitude of middle-stage children by providing knowledge regarding the misconceptions thereby promoting social integration and positive inclusion. Also, the gender difference in the attitude towards children with special needs requires to be acknowledged and equalised by promoting awareness in turn creating a culture of inclusive education with every child enrolled in the school in every part of the country.

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