

How to equip teachers for classroom diversity and inclusion

Teachers must be supported with adequate skills and knowledge to cope with the heterogeneity of modern classrooms if we are to create a truly inclusive society

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There is an urgent need for course correction with regard to teacher education programmes in our country. | Photo Credit: Getty Images/iStockphoto

Lakshmi became a teacher to fulfil a childhood dream. She loved being in a classroom filled with energetic, curious young minds. Since she was fulfilling her passion, she thought being a teacher would be easy. In a few months, she realised how inadequately prepared she was despite her teacher training and love for the job. Teaching a class of 40 or more children from diverse social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds with varied interests and abilities, at different levels of readiness to learn, is no mean task.

This situation is not unique to Lakshmi's classroom. Across the world, not just in India, classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse and heterogeneous. That heterogeneity is a norm and not an exception is a reality that we must embrace and prepare our teachers for, if we want to provide quality education for all our children and create a truly inclusive society.

Under-prepared

There is, however, growing evidence that teachers in mainstream school systems feel under-prepared with the knowledge, skills and dispositions required to work in inclusive classrooms, particularly those with children with different abilities, such as children with disabilities and gifted children. It is also well-established that teachers in mainstream classrooms are the key players in ensuring effective inclusion and that their feelings, attitudes and apprehensions must be addressed.

There are both curricular and systemic reasons why teacher education (TE) programmes in the country have failed to prepare teachers adequately for inclusive classrooms until now. There is an urgent need for course correction in this regard.

India's commitment to inclusion received a major impetus in the form of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and the Rights of Persons with Disability Act 2016. The National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE), while still working on a new curriculum framework for TE, has launched the much-awaited four-year Integrated Teacher Education Programme (ITEP). It remains to be seen if this programme, through its theory and teaching practice component, will be able to equip teachers with the competencies required to practise inclusive education effectively.

Strategies

While these systemic changes and recommendations are underway, it is worthwhile to understand the direction that we need to take to prepare teachers for inclusion at the pre-service and in-service levels.

Inclusion is a collaborative effort: While teachers are key to creating inclusive classrooms, school leaders, parents, non-teaching staff, peers and the community play an important role and they need to be sensitised and adequately prepared to play their part. Special educators can play an important role in extending support to teachers in mainstream classrooms by providing resources for teaching and assessment when needed, as opposed to taking on the primary responsibility of teaching children who face learning difficulties in segregated settings. There are no 'specialised' pedagogies that teachers need to learn to work with diverse learners. Instead, we need to focus on breaking attitudinal barriers and offering non-traditional, innovative teaching skills that can benefit all children.

Focus on differences, not deficits: It is important to recognise that differences in children's learning abilities as part of a human condition and teachers and other stakeholders need to shift their focus from a bio-medical approach that underlines a child's deficits to the sociological and psychological aspects of disability, forms of marginalisation and disadvantages. Teacher educators need to embrace inclusive teaching practices in their classrooms to teach aspiring teachers, and teachers in every

classroom must be prepared to embrace the principles of inclusive pedagogy that focus on differences.

Equipping teachers is key: Importantly, the role of in-service teacher professional development programmes in inclusive education must be recognised. Teachers should be encouraged to attend such programmes and be nominated by their school boards and management. TE programmes must also have teaching practise components with significant opportunities to observe, interact with and teach children from diverse backgrounds. Such programmes should become opportunities for career advancement. Institutions such as universities, private entities and non-governmental organisations offering such programmes in innovative formats, such as blended or online, with flexible structures should receive due recognition and support from state governments.

Teachers like Lakshmi, who enter the teaching profession with enthusiasm and passion, must be supported with adequate skills and knowledge to meet the challenges of contemporary classrooms in India.

The views expressed are personal

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