

Building New Identities on Special Needs Education for Teachers through Open and Distance Learning

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Abstract : As a national level contribution to support the inclusive education to be implemented in the regular classroom setting, the Department of Special Needs Education developed and offers a Postgraduate Diploma in Special Needs Education (PGDSNE) programme to empower regular/special education teachers to cater the all children including children with SEN in the general education set up through ODL mode. Therefore, it is imperative to study the effectiveness of the ODL mode to build required competencies among teachers who cater to children with special education needs (SEN) in their classrooms. The overall aim of this study was to find out how teachers develop a new identity after completing the PGDSNE program in the ODL mode. The sample comprised all teachers who completed the PGDSNE program since year 2008. Data were collected through questionnaires, structure interviews, focus group discussion, student' feedback and peer reviewer's records and analyzed using quantitative and qualitative techniques. The findings show that the program developed skills to identify children with SEN, master teaching methodologies to teach in inclusive classrooms, conduct alternative evaluation systems, identify the educational needs of children, create a meaningful learning environment, plan and design teaching – learning materials for children with SEN, acquire skills to interact with children with SEN, and collaborate with teachers and parents of children with SEN. The finding of this study will be a base to build up comprehensive mechanism to empower regular education teachers in Sri Lankan education system through ODL mode.

Keywords - special needs education, inclusive education, student's diversity, regular education teachers

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I. INTRODUCTION

Teaching children with diverse needs in a regular classroom through inclusive education is “a process intended to respond to students' diversity by increasing their participation and reducing exclusion within and from education” (UNESCO, 2009 p.1). Inclusive education requires something more than the binary divide between teachers as the givers of knowledge and the students as receivers (Freire, 1973). The positive attitudes from the whole school community and changes to the concept of pedagogy, structure and policy are prerequisites for successful inclusion (Elkins & Grimes, 2009; Hooker, 2008; Loreman, 2007; Peterson, 2004; Sweetland, 2008). This affirms pedagogy or teaching skill is at the heart of special needs education. However, the studies carried out in Sri Lanka found that teachers in mainstream schools are unable to cater the needs of children with special educational needs due to the problems in competencies of teachers to address the diversity. (Alwis, 2012; Dhanapala, 2009; National Education Commission,2003& UNICEF,2003). Taking into consideration of the above contextual issues above The Department of Special Needs Education, developed and offers a Postgraduate Diploma in Special Needs Education (PGDSNE) Programme, for teachers to enhance the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to cater the diverse needs of students. Therefore, the main purpose of this study was to find out whether the teachers who followed PGDSNE programme have motivated and gained sufficient knowledge and skills in the field of special needs education and inclusive education. Moreover, this study focused on teacher's perceived preparedness as well as self-efficacy for inclusive education. It also attempted to identify the barriers for preparedness for inclusive education that may interfere with teachers who followed the PGDSNE programme.

II. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How effective has the PGDSNE programme been in developing attitudes, values and dispositions in the sample of teachers to create conducive environment for quality teaching and learning in their schools?
2. To what extent has the PGDSNE programme motivated the teachers to enable their students to fully realise their potential?
3. To what extent has the PGDSNE programme promoted inclusive education at different levels in the selected schools?
4. To what extent has the PGDSNE programme enabled the teachers to apply, extend and synthesise various forms of knowledge for inclusive education?
5. What are the factors that hinder teachers in effectively implementing strategies they consider as necessary to adequately prepare their students for effective participation in society?

III. MATERIAL AND METHODS

This study mainly used a survey research design with three components. First, a survey of all participants was conducted through a questionnaire. Secondly, focus group discussions were conducted with randomly selected participants from the above group. Thirdly, the interviews were conducted with randomly selected participants from among those who responded to the questionnaire survey.

1.1 Sample

Questionnaires were sent to 279 students who completed PGDSNE programme in all three media (Jaffna, Batticaloa, Kandy, Hatton, Ampara, Colombo, Regional and Study centres). However, only 240 had responded to the survey. Interviews were conducted in Jaffna and Batticaloa Regional Centres in Tamil medium and five (5) students were randomly selected from each Centre. Another set of interviews were conducted in the Colombo Regional Centre in Sinhala, English & Tamil medium. Three focus groups discussions were conducted in Jaffna and Batticaloa Regional Centres in Tamil Medium and Colombo in Sinhala Medium

3.2 Data Analysis

Questionnaire data was analysed using elementary statistics such as frequencies and percentages, using the SPSS package and interview and focus group discussions were analysed content analysis. This report presented only the quantitative data driven by questioners.

IV. FINDINGS

There were ten subtitles in the questionnaire focused on the research questions, and thirty-one statements organized under them

4.1 Foundation Knowledge and Skills

Questionnaire was consisted three statements under the above subtitle.

Table – 1: Support of PGDSNE Programme to Develop Foundation Knowledge and Skills on Special Needs Education

Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
Supported to have a comprehensive knowledge in relation to special needs education	51.30%	43%	6%	-
Supported to develop skills to teaching students with special needs	38%	48%	13%	1%
Supported to have positive attitudes about children with special needs	67%	28%	8%	0.30%
Average	52.10%	39.60%	8%	0.03%

According to the average responses of the statements related to the Foundation Knowledge and Skills, 52.1% of the participants strongly agreed the statements, while 39.6% participants agreed the statements, 8% participants were neutral with statements and 0,3% of participant disagreed with statements. However, no participant chose to strongly disagree. Altogether 91.7% of participant agreed and strongly agreed that PGDSNE programme supports to have foundation knowledge and skills on Special Needs Education.

4.2 Development and Characteristics of Learners

Questionnaire was consisted three statements under this subtitle.

Table – 2; Supports the Programme to Identify Developmental Characteristics of Learners

Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
Supported to identify different types of special educational needs in students	55%	43%	1%	1%
Supported me to explain developmental characteristics of students with special needs	39%	47%	14%	-
Supported to understand the impact of the ability of special needs to learn, to socially interact and develop emotional wellbeing	35%	55%	10%	-
Average	43%	48.3%	8.3%	0.03%

According to the average responses of the statements related to the Development and Characteristics of Learners, 43% of the participants strongly agreed the statements, while 48.3% participants agreed the statements, 8.3% participants were neutral with statements and 0.3% of participant disagreed with statements. However, no participant chose to strongly disagree. Altogether 91.7% of participant agreed and strongly agreed that PGDSNE programme supports to understand development and characteristics of learners who have SEN. Most of participants thus positively responded to the development of characteristics of learners through the PGDSNE programme to improve the skills of SNE students.

4.3 Individual learning differences

Questionnaire was consisted three statements under the above subtitle.

Table – 3: Supports the programme to Understand the Individual Learning Differences

Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
Supported to understand the influence of primary language, culture and family background on learning differences	46.3%	41.3%	11.3%	1%
Supported me to understand learning needs within and among exceptional conditions	30%	54%	14%	2%
Supported to practice variety of instructional methods for student with learning differences	42.5%	40%	11.3%	5.3%
Average	39.6%	46%	12.2%	2.7%

According to the average responses of the statements related to the Individual Learning Differences, 39.6% of the participants strongly agreed the statements, while 46% participants agreed the statements, 12.2% participants were neutral with statements and 2.7% of participant disagreed with statements. However, no participant chose to strongly disagree. Altogether 85.6% of participant agreed and strongly agreed that PGDSNE programme supports to understand individual learning differences of learners who have SEN.

4.4 Instructional Strategies

Questionnaire was consisted two statements under the above subtitle.

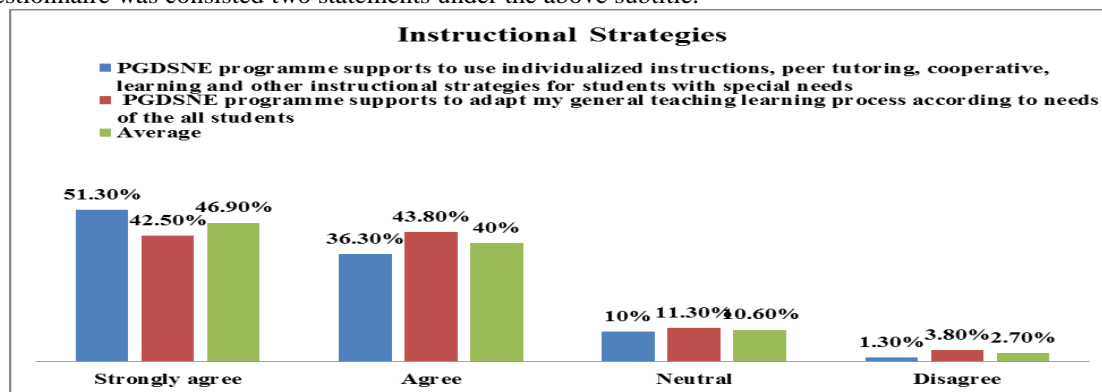


Diagram-1

According to the average responses of the statements related to the instructional strategies, 46.9% of the participants strongly agreed the statements, while 40% participants agreed the statements, 10.6% participants were neutral with statements and 2.7% of participant disagreed with statements. However, no participant chose to strongly disagree. Altogether 86.9% of participant agreed and strongly agreed that PGDSNE programme supports to use instructional strategies for who have SEN.

4.5. Learning Environment and Social Interaction

Questionnaire was consisted three statements under the above subtitle.

Table – 4; Support of PGDSNE Programme to Develop the Learning Environment and Social Interaction

Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
Supported to arrange the physical learning environment to suit the different learning needs	38.8%	47.5%	13.8%	-
Supported to create opportunities to develop interactions between students with special needs and without special needs.	45%	47.5%	5.1%	1.3%
Supported to use different instructional strategies to facilitate social interaction between students with special needs and without special needs.	35%	50%	13.8%	-
Average	39.6%	48.3%	10.9%	0.4%

According to the average responses of the statements related to the Learning Environment and Social Interaction, 39.6% of the participants strongly agreed the statements, while 48.3% participants agreed the statements, 10.9% participants were neutral with statements and 0.4% of participant disagreed with statements. However, no participant chose to strongly disagree. Altogether 87.9% of participant agreed and strongly agreed that PGDSNE programme supports to develop Learning Environment and Social Interaction for who have SEN.

4.6 Communication

Questionnaire was consisted four statements under the above subtitle.

Table – 5; Supports of PGDSNE Programme to Develop Communication Skills

Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Supported to encourage the students with special needs to use technology	35%	28.8%	27.5%	6.3%	2.5%
Supported to use different verbal and non-verbal methods	26.3%	36.3%	20%	16.3%	1.3%
Supported to encourage student-student interaction to clear communication with exceptional student	30%	47.5%	17.5%	3.8%	1.3%
Supported to use different teaching aids to communicate the subject matter for student with special needs	41.3%	37.5%	15%	6.3%	-
Average	33.1%	47.5%	20%	8.1%	1.2%

According to the average responses of the statements related to the Communication, 33.1% of the participants strongly agreed the statements, while 37.5% participants agreed the statements, 20% participants were neutral with statements, 8.1% of participant disagreed and 1.2% strongly disagree with statements. Altogether 70.6% of participant agreed and strongly agreed that PGDSNE programme supports to communicate learners who have SEN.

4.7 Instructional Planning

Questionnaire was consisted three statements under the above subtitle.

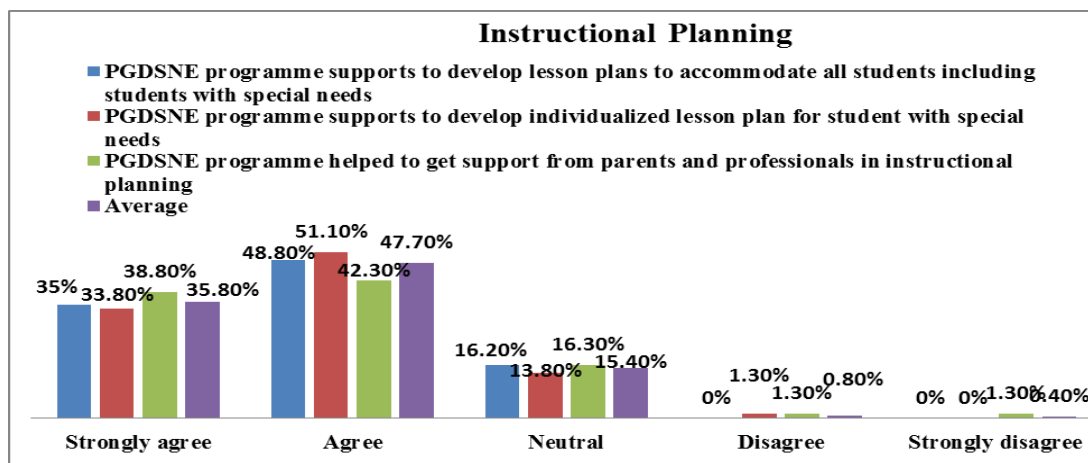


Diagram-2

According to the average responses of the statements related to the instructional planning, 35.8% of the participants strongly agreed the statements, while 47.7% participants agreed the statements, 15.4% participants were neutral with statements, 0.8% of participant disagreed and 0.4% strongly disagree with statements. Altogether 83.5% of participant agreed and strongly agreed that PGDSNE programme supports to instructional planning.

Inclusive education teachers have as a very responsible role in instructional planning. The teacher who completed the programme mostly answered positively to the above statement. Therefore, the programme would have helped them in the development of instructional planning.

4.8 Assessment

Questionnaire was consisted four statements under the above subtitle.

Table – 6; Supports of PGDSNE Programme to Improve the Assessment

Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Supported to adapt my teaching and learning for student with special needs after assessment of their condition	46.3%	52.5%	1.3%	-	-
Supported to use different assessment methods according to needs of the student	51.3%	43.3%	5%	-	-
Supports using technology in assessing students with special needs	38.8%	41.3%	16.3%	2.5%	1.3%
Supported to get support from parents, teachers and special education teachers in the process of assessment in order to gather data.	47.5%	38.8%	12.5%	3%	-
Average	45.9%	44.1%	8.8%	0.9%	0.3%

According to the average responses of the statements related to the assessment, 45.9% of the participants strongly agreed the statements, while 44.1% participants agreed the statements, 8.8% participants were neutral with statements, 0.9% of participant disagreed and 0.3% strongly disagree with statements. Altogether 90% of participant agreed and strongly agreed that PGDSNE programme supports to assess diverse children in classrooms.

4.9 Ethical and Professional Practice

Questionnaire was consisted three statements under the above subtitle.

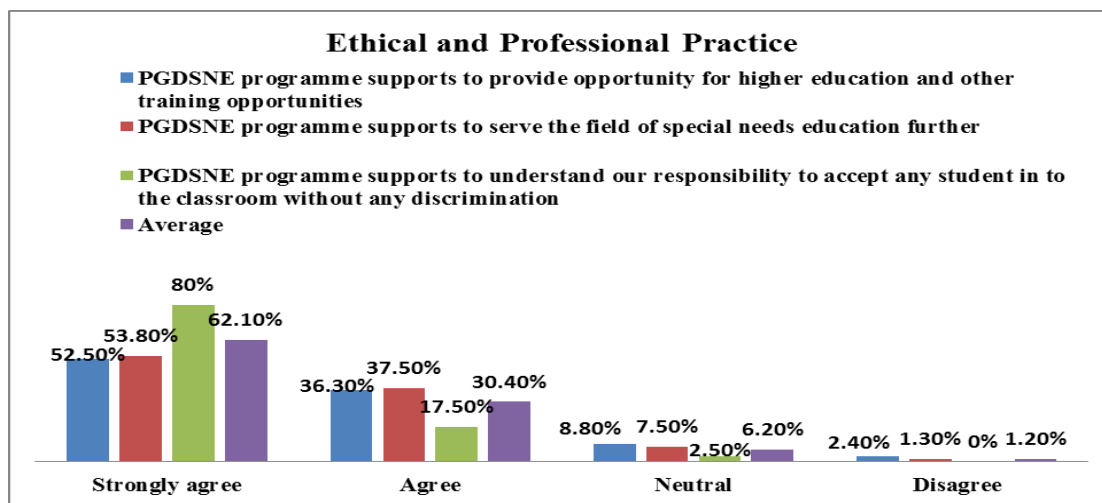


Diagram-3

According to the average responses of the statements related to the assessment, 62.1% of the participants strongly agreed the statements, while 30.4% participants agreed the statements, 6.2% participants were neutral with statements, and 1.2% of participant disagreed with statements. However, no participant chose to strongly disagree the statements. Altogether 92.5% of participant agreed and strongly agreed that PGDSNE programme supports to ethical development and professional development.

4.10 Collaboration

Questionnaire was consisted three statements under the above subtitle.

Table – 7; Supports of PGDSNE Programme to Develop the Collaboration among Stakeholders

Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Supported to plan and implement the instructional process with the collaboration of the family	38.7%	46.3%	15%	-	-
Helped me to have professional support	36.3%	47.3%	11.3%	5.1%	-
Supported to work with other teachers to help the student with special needs in their classroom through collaborative consultation	46.3%	43.7%	7.5%	2.5%	-
Average	40.4%	45.7%	11.2%	2.5%	0%

According to the average responses of the statements related to the assessment, 40.4% of the participants strongly agreed the statements, while 45.7% participants agreed the statements, 11.2% participants were neutral with statements, and 2.5% of participant disagreed with statements. However, no participant chose to strongly disagree the statements. Altogether 86.1% of participant agreed and strongly agreed that PGDSNE programme supports to work collaboratively.

All together responses to 31 statements were analyzed. According to the analysis, 43.05% of participants strongly agreed and 41.48% of participants agreed. However, 02.0% of participants disagreed while a lower participant (0.41%) strongly disagreed. Therefore, more than 84% of participants affirmed positively that the PGDSNE programme had supported to develop the new roles and identities as teachers of children with special education needs.

4.11 Analysis of Data from Focus Group Discussions and Interviews

In-depth focus group discussions and interviews were employed to collect more qualitative information from the past students of PGDSNE programme in order gain a better understanding of the identities they had developed after following the PGDSNE programme. The findings are presented the themes emerged from focus group discussions and interviews, namely; knowledge, attitudes, skills, collaboration and suggestions.

4.12 Knowledge

Participants of this study appeared to be concerned about the sufficient knowledge on various aspects of meeting the learning needs of various categories of students with disabilities in regular classrooms. They emphasized that, they gained knowledge on identification of students with disabilities. One of the participants stated that,

“More hands on practical experience is needed so that we can implement differentiated lessons”.

The majority of interviewees stated that they obtained knowledge on individual differences which were not considered in their prior practice of teaching.

“I carried on my teaching learning process with students who can go with me towards particular targets. But after this, I came to know there are other students in the class room who need our special help either short term or long term....”

4.13 Attitude

According to the reflection on their experiences related to attitudes, the majority of the participants reported that this programme helped them to cultivate positive attitudes towards special needs students. This indicated that the programme had a positive effect on past student teachers' attitudes for teaching in inclusive classrooms and that the positive attitudes had improved after going through the teaching practice component.

Participant stated that,

‘teaching practice is the best. We gained knowledge and skills on how to teach these children. If teaching practice was not there, we would not be able even to identify these children.’

‘I like to work with children with special needs in school, to develop the environment especially for children with special needs in general classrooms, and to develop equity between special needs children and normal children....’

According to the interviews, participants had changed their attitudes positively about special needs education, children with special needs, arranging the environment to suit special needs children in classroom, maintaining equity among students, to help children with special needs, adjusting teaching methods according to the educational needs of the children, changing the approach the children with special needs, sought assistance from charities for children with special needs, worked as a community in schools and reduced the bad attitudes towards children with special needs.

4.14 Skills

When asked about how they changed their art of teaching after following this programme firstly participants mentioned about the current situation in our school system thus.

‘The main problem could lie with school curricula and teaching methods. Our learning system...’

Later on, they mentioned that inclusive settings appear to provide a forum for teachers to experiment with different techniques and strategies to ensure that all students within this setting are achieving.

‘Every child is different so the ways we work with them, the different strategies we use, or should use, are all inclusive’

The findings of this study emphasized the need for including more practical component in to the curriculum of PGDSNE programme.

4.15 Collaboration

Collaboration with parents and other teachers is very important to provide meaningful learning experiences for children with special needs. Through the identity developed through this programme the student teachers were able to collaborate with teachers and parents of children with special needs that can be confirmed by the analysis of data obtained through focus group discussion and interviews.

It was found that the students found it difficult to collaborate with parents but finally they were able to make a dialogue with parents in order to support children's learning.

One student said,

‘There are 3 types of parents, some parents are positive but are not working on behalf of the child, some parents are totally negative and neglect the child and some parents are totally positive and work for the betterment of the child. These 3 types of parents I have met and finally, somehow, I have managed to get the support of the majority of parents’

The student teacher made the school administrators aware and had allocated a time to address the other fellow teachers regarding the importance of addressing the student diversity before approaching them due to attitudinal problems with them.

V. DISCUSSION

Reflecting on views and experiences of attitudes the majority of the participants attitudes are positive towards this programme. For successful educational practice for children with special needs whether they are placed in an inclusive setup, a special unit or a special school setup, the most important factor is attitudes which were inculcated within the students by the PGDSNE programme. Many participants have viewed that the most important impact of this programme was the development of attitudes among them. In order to create a positive inclusive practice, it is important to change the minds of the teachers by the school administrators.

It is evident that the PGDSNE programme had helped one of the students to make a model class room in a special school to address the individual differences with the help of other teachers. The respondents indicated that they used different instructional strategies which can be practiced in inclusive setups such as role playing, peer tutoring, teaching through real world experiences, group work etc. But the majority of teachers stated that they could not get specific skills to teach different categories of students such as children with autism, mental retardation and learning disabilities and specific skills such as sign and Braille. Some respondents stated that this programme should focus on developing specific skills.

It was evident that positive attitudes regarding inclusive settings may have urged teachers within inclusive classrooms to look again at their current practices so that they could be more accommodating of all ability levels after following PGDSNE programme.

The views regarding skills which were developed by the PGDSNE programme was different from the other findings. Some respondents stated that they were able to improve their skills to during the period of teaching practice. One participant who was not a teacher revealed that the teaching practice period had helped him immensely to develop his skills to cater to the needs of all students.

The respondents indicated that they used different instructional strategies which can be practiced in inclusive setups such as role playing, peer tutoring, teaching through real world experiences, group work etc.

Participants had obtained clear ideas on SNE and knowledge to identify differences in students' needs, to evaluate strengths and weaknesses, to adopt teaching methods according to the needs of students, advance their knowledge about SNE, to approach with children with special needs, enhance their knowledge, to adopt relevant teaching methods and evaluation methods, modify the classroom structure according to needs of subjects and to communicate well.

Many participants agreed that the programme has supported to create opportunities to develop interactions between students with and without special needs to develop the skills of the teachers to manage their inclusive classrooms well which will lead to the positive social relationship in future. Participants also agreed that the collaboration with parents and other teachers is very important to provide meaningful learning experiences for children with special needs. Through the identity developed through this programme the student teachers were able to collaborate with teachers and parents of children with special needs that can be confirmed by the analysis of data obtained through focus group discussion and interviews.

It was also found that the students found it difficult to collaborate with parents but finally they were able to make a dialogue with parents in order to support children's learning

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

The past students who followed the PGDSNE programme are perhaps the most relevant and suitable stakeholder group who have a strong sense about the programme to present the suggestion to develop it further. Therefore, the following suggestions of different aspects present as follows.

- Should increase the period of teaching practice in order to get more practical skills'.
- Better to introduce supportive courses on Braille and Sign language'
- Should introduce audio and video material in addition to printed materials.
- Should increase the number of day schools.
- Should conduct programmes for school administrators, teachers at district level and Provincial level aware to publicize the programme'

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