Information Needs and Information Seeking Behavior of Teachers of Special Education in Shillong, India

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Abstract

Teaching itself, though noble, is a challenging profession. Such a profession calls upon not only the intellectual capacities of the teacher, but the physical and emotional as well. In short, it is a unique profession. Teaching differently- abled students (special education), is even more challenging. By virtue of their teaching a special group of people, the special education teachers' information needs and information seeking behavior are quite different from those of other teachers. This study tried to explore these unique needs of Special Education teachers in three Special Education schools in Shillong, Meghalaya and found that there do exist information needs and information seeking behaviors that distinguish Special Education teachers from other types of teachers, such as, for example, the need for information on the medical conditions of students and the teachers' seeking information from medical professionals. Special education teachers in Shillong are not very different from those in other parts of the world with regard to their qualifications, work culture, teaching methods and information issues.

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Teachers have a strong influence on children and are important in shaping their lives. Hence, ensuring that all students have a highly qualified teacher in every classroom is of vital importance.   A special education teacher is an instructor who is specially trained to work with students who experience a wide range of disabilities as specified in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (2004). Such teachers need a good knowledge of special education; they need to have good interaction skills in order to engage in consultation. Special Education is that component of education which employs special instructional methodology (Remedial Instruction), instructional materials, learning-teaching aids and equipment to meet educational needs of children with specific learning disabilities.

The term Special education has been used to denote those aspects of education which are applied to handicapped and gifted children but not usually used with the majority of average children. (Kirk, 1962) Special education is also defined as "the profession concerned with the arrangement of education variable leading to the prevention, reduction or elimination of those conditions that produce significant defects in the academic, communicative, locomotor or adjustive functioning of children" (Smith and Neisworth, 1975). Special education teachers work with children who have a variety of disabilities. They are involved in the student's behavioral, social, and academic development, helping them develop emotionally and interact effectively in social situations. A special education teacher usually forms part of a team of people who deliver special education services. Special education teachers use various techniques to promote learning depending on the students. Special education teachers spend their days providing assistance to students who most their help. These teachers not only educate students; they make education possible for children and youth who may not otherwise be able to learn.

Special educators mostly work in public and private educational institutions. A few work for individual and social assistance agencies or residential facilities, or in homebound or hospital environment.

According to James (2000), special education is provided to students with-

- Visual impairments
- Hearing impairments
- Mental retardation
- Learning disabilities
- Emotional disturbance
- Speech /Language impairments
- Multiple disabilities
- Orthopedic impairments
- Autism

The field is challenging but rewarding, and talented special education teachers are always in demand. Individuals who dedicate themselves to this career will enjoy job security in most any state. (etoolseducation.com)

How is special education different from general education?

- Special education is the education of student using different teaching methods, techniques and equipments to promote learning.
- General education is the standard curriculum presented with standard teaching methods without additional support.

Special and general education remain two essentially separate systems. A variety of forces have kept them apart — from separate legal mandates and funding streams to the historical tendency for schools to sort students by ability.(R&D Alert, 2010)

Special education is distinguished from usual educational provisions in terms of specific objectives, assessment, specialized content, instructional materials and methods of instruction and evaluation procedures (Venkataiah, 1993).

Related Studies

In Malouf's (1989) study, forty special education teachers rated usefulness and preferences concerning software evaluation information. Highest usefulness ratings were given to information on hardware compatibility, appropriateness for students, and software operation and use. The most preferred information source was software tryout, followed by software documentation/manuals and written descriptions from reviews. Special education teachers must possess a unique set of skills and knowledge to teach students with disabilities successfully (Plash, 1997).

According to Whitaker (2003) special education teachers needed the most assistance in (a) learning special education policies, procedures, and paperwork, (b) receiving emotional support, (c) learning system information related to the school, and (d) learning about available materials and resources. To a lesser extent they needed assistance with curriculum and instruction, discipline, management issues, and interactions with others. Beginning special education teachers received significantly less assistance than they needed in all areas, but particularly in learning special education policies, procedures, and paperwork; materials and resources; and curriculum and instruction. They reported receiving the most assistance from other special education teachers, than from their assigned mentor and from the building administrator, and lastly from general education teachers and special education administrators.

IDEA 2004 directly defines the "highly qualified teacher" as one who is "appropriately and adequately prepared and trained" and has "the content knowledge and skills to serve children with disabilities." A special educator may take on roles such as developer and coordinator of student programs, designer and provider of instruction to students, and director of the work of paraprofessionals, (York-Barr, Sommerness, Duke and Ghere, 2005).

Oliver and Williams (2005) conducted a research study on the special nature of special education and the experiences of teachers with regard to the challenges they faced in teaching the mentally handicapped child. The participating teachers stated that special demands were made on them by the specific nature of special education. The problems with regard to the teaching of children with disabilities are the different levels of potential and ability of the learners, communication problems (language difference) and disciplinary problems that they faced in the class. Special education teachers involve in additional work and responsibility.

Marjatta and Minna (2009) studied the work of special education teachers where they revealed that the work of the special education teachers consists of three elements-teaching, consulting and background. Special education teachers have to be experts twice over. A special education teacher has to hold discussions with parents and with other teachers before starting to teach the children.

Ference, (2010) found that the role and responsibilities of special educators in Pennyslvania are unique and that these roles differ highly depending on their employment position. Many special educators see their roles primarily as professional ones and they refer to themselves as teachers, consultants, administrators and parents.

Communication and cooperation are essential skills because special education teachers spend a great deal of time interacting with students, parents, and school faculty and administrators (U.S. Bureau of Labor, 2010-11).

Objectives of the Present Study

As more and more institutions for the differently-abled are being set up in the North-Eastern Indian city of Shillong, the researchers felt it was the right time to explore the issues that Special Education teachers have to grapple with. The approach of this study was finding the information needs and information seeking behavior of such teachers in order to appreciate their situation and perhaps help better the lot of both the teachers and their special students. Hence the objectives of the study can be spelled out specifically as follows:

   i.   To identify the information needs of teachers of special education in Shillong.

  ii.   To examine the information seeking behavior of teachers of special education in Shillong.

 iii.   To investigate the sources of information consulted by teachers of special education in Shillong.

  iv.   To find out how information is used by teachers of special education in Shillong.

   v.   To find out what problems are faced by the Special Education teachers in Shillong in seeking information

The Teachers

The investigator had taken 30 teachers from the institutions of special education. The selected schools were:-

Jyoti Sroat –Jyoti Sroat means "source of light" in Sanskrit language. The school started its services in a borrowed dhobi house belonging to St. Edmund's School, Shillong of the Christian Brothers. Later the latter donated the land where the building stood to the Bethany Society which, subsequently with the aid of Government of Spain constructed three buildings on the site. One of the buildings is used by the school and the other two by the Divine Flame Hostels, Bethany Society. The hostels accommodate only 120 children and young people of a cross disability nature studying in the campus.

Thus JSS remained a special school with an enrolment of 70-80 till 2005. By now education for Children With Special Needs (CWSN) had long since taken a turn for the broader world of an inclusive nature. As opposed to residential schooling, CWSN remained in their own home and communities whilst attending their local schools. This is main streaming of education for CWSN. It provides opportunities for CWSN to excess learning and schooling along with other children at a larger scale. Realizing the benefits of children with special needs studying together with other children in general class rooms and such a system not yet in place in Meghalaya, the need was strongly felt that JSS itself should take on the task of a model of inclusive educational programs for ALL CHILDREN. In 2006, the step was taken on an experimental basis and as of date, the system is functioning satisfactorily. In 2009 the school has an enrolment of 170, half of which are children with no special needs. Further complying with the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005, the school admits children:

- with special needs because of disability; from difficult circumstances, orphaned and abandoned, street, slum and abused children.
- from disadvantaged groups – semi rural, families in BPL category. (http://jyotisroat.in/who-we-are/)

Dwar Jingkyrmen (the"Gateway of Hope")- started on August 1, 1986, is a School for Children in need of Special Education, located in Stonyland, Shillong under the aegis of Ladies and Children Recreation Centre . The school at present has more than 100 students with 8 special educators. The Services Dwar Jingkyrmen offers are: Centre For Special Education; Pre Vocational Training Unit; Out Students Division; Unit For Autistic Spectrum Disorder; Home Based Rehabilitation Programme; Parent Involvement Programme; Respite Care Services; Referral Services; Awareness Programme; Stonyland Inclusive School for Pre Nursery, Nursery and Kindergarten; and Human Resource Development. Out of these the Respite Care Service which was completely funded by Johnson & Johnson Ltd, Mumbai has accommodation for four students for overnight stay in case the parents need to be out of station.

School & Centre for Hearing Handicapped children

The Society for the Welfare of the Disabled, Shillong was registered in 1990, with the aim of providing services to, and promoting rights of persons with disability in Meghalaya. It caters to the needs of over 600 persons with Disability, Cross Disability, Cross age, IBR, CBR, Urban and Rural. The School offers facilities such as:

1. Special Education - Group & Individual. 2. Physiotherapy & Occupational Therapy. 3. Vocational Training.4. Formation of Self - Help Groups. 5. Parent Counseling. 6. Assessment. 7. Early Intervention. 8. Transport Facilities. 9. Follow up of Social Work Issues. 10. Follow up of Medical Health Work.
(http://www.carencureindia.org/maryricecentresped.asp)

Findings

The technique adopted in the present study was the questionnaire method. A total of 30 questionnaires was distributed to the teachers of the three selected schools. The questionnaire for the present study had been constructed with suggestions and advice from the supervisor keeping in view the objectives of the study. The questionnaire was constructed in such a way as to motivate the respondents and obtain necessary information from them. Out of the total 30 questionnaires distributed, only 25 questionnaires were returned. Therefore the response rate is 83%.

Number of Respondents
- Jyoti Sroat
- Dwar Jingkyrmen
- School & Centre for Hearing Handicapped children

Personal Profiles of the Respondents

Of the 30 respondents, 23(92%) were female and 2(8%) were male. The acquired data show that a large number of the respondents were females. Of the 25 respondents, 8(32%) had a Master's degree, 17(68%) had a bachelor's degree. The highest number of respondents had less than 5 years teaching experience. Seven (28%) had 5-10 years experience, Four (16%) had 11-15 years experience. Only one (4%) respondent had 21 and above years experience. Most of the respondents were between 26-30 years old. Five (20%) respondents were between 21-25 years old .Six (24%) respondents were 25-40 years old. Only one (4%) respondent was more than 40 years old. Sixteen (64%) respondents were permanent employees and Nine (36%) respondents were part-time teachers.

Tabular representation of the received data

The data that were received through the questionnaire are represented in the tables that follow:

Table 1
Types of students taught

Types of students taught	No. of respondents	Percentage
Students with Visual Impairments	9	36%
Students with Hearing Impairments	2	8%
Students with Mental Impairments	16	64%
Students with Speech and Language Impairments	14	56%
Students with Orthopedic Impairments	12	48%
Students with Learning Disabilities	15	60%
Students with Emotional Disturbances	9	36%
All of the above	4	16%
Any other	7	28%

Table 2
Nature of work

Nature of work	No. of respondents	Percentage
Classroom teaching	22	88%
Counseling	4	16%
Assisting the children physically	4	16%
All of the above	1	4%

Table 3
Working hours

Working hours	No. of respondents	Percentage
One hour a day	1	4%
Two hours a day	_	_
Three hours a day	_	_
Four hours a day	_	_
More than four hours a day	24	96%

Table 4
Whether teaching individuals with disabilities is different from other types of teaching

Whether teaching individuals with disabilities is different from other types of teaching	No. of respondents	Percentage
Yes	25	100%
No	_	_

Table 5
Difficulties faced in teaching children with disabilities

Difficulties faced in teaching children with disabilities	No. of respondents	Percentage
Yes	10	40%
No	15	60%

Table 5.1
If yes, types of difficulties

	No. of respondents	Percentage
Violence	2	20%
Indiscipline	2	20%
Lack of understanding	10	100%
Their Unwillingness	3	30%
Any other	2	20%

Table 6
Feeling of isolation being a teacher of children with disabilities

Feeling of isolation being a teacher of children with disabilities	No. of respondents	Percentage
Yes	23	92%
No	2	8%

Table 7
Purpose of information search

Purpose of information search	No. of respondents	Percentage
To keep up-to-date	21	84%
To write article or book	_	_
General knowledge	4	16%
Reading purpose only	_	_

Table 8
When is the information needed?

When is the information needed?	No. of respondents	Percentage
Before the school session starts	14	56%
During the school session	3	12%
Before a project	5	20%
All of the above	3	12%

Table 9
Whether information search by special educators is different from that of other types of teachers

Where do they search for information?	No. of respondents	Percentage
From colleagues	14	56%
From experts	7	28%
From parents of children	8	32%
From the Internet	8	32%
From the library	10	40%
All of the above	4	16%

Table 10

What happens if information is not available?	No. of respondents	Percentage
Change my information needs	3	12%
Change the way in which I search for my information	14	56%
Give up	8	32%
Any other	8	32%

Table 10.1

Table 11
Contribution of discussions with parents of children

Contribution of discussions with parents of children	No. of respondents	Percentage
Child's Health	_	_
Child's Behavior	_	_
Child's Improvement	_	_
All of the above	25	100%

Table 12
Contribution of discussions with Medical professionals

Contribution of discussions with Medical professionals	No. of respondents	Percentage
Yes	19	76%
No	6	24%

Table 12.1
Medical professionals contacted

Medical professionals contacted	No. of respondents	Percentage
Neurologist	5	26%
Orthopedist	2	10%
Pediatrics	2	10%
Ophthalmologist	2	10%
Audiologist	2	10%
Psychiatrists	4	21%
All of the above	2	10%
Any other	2	10%

Table 13
Contribution of discussions with colleagues

Contribution of discussions with colleagues	No. of respondents	Percentage
Yes	25	100%
No	_	_

Table 13.1
Areas of discussions with colleagues

Areas of discussions with colleagues	No. of respondents	Percentage
Teaching methods	5	20%
Students' behavior	4	16%
Share problems	6	24%
All of the above	8	32%
Any other	2	8%

Table 14
Contribution of Seminars/ conferences

Contribution of Seminars/ conferences	No. of respondents	Percentage
Yes	25	100%
No	–	–

Table 14.1
Ways in which seminars contribute

Ways in which seminars contribute	No. of respondents	Percentage
Exposure to new ideas and methods	18	72%
Interaction with experts	2	8%
All of the above	5	20

Table.15
Access to the internet

Access to the internet	No. of respondents	Percentage
Yes	9	36
No	12	48

Table 15.1
Use of internet

Use of internet	No. of respondents	Percentage
Yes	17	68%
No	9	32%

Table 16
Search engine used

Search engine used	No. of respondents	Percentage
Google	13	76%
Bing	_	
Yahoo	4	24%

Table 17
Account in social networking sites

Account in social networking sites	No. of respondents	Percentage
Yes	8	47%
No	9	53%

Table 17.1
Social networking sites used

Social networking sites used	No. of respondents	Percentage
Facebook	6	75%
Orkut	_	_
Twitter	_	_
Blog	_	_
Both Facebook & orkut	2	25%

Table 17.2
Usefulness of social networks

Usefulness of social networks	No. of respondents	Percentage
Share information with others	2	25%
Update myself	_	
Share problems with others of the same field	1	12.5%
Learn from others	_	
All of the above	5	32%

Table 18
Satisfaction with the information from the internet

Satisfaction with the information from the internet	No. of respondents	Percentage
Yes	10	58.8%
No	5	29.4%
Sometimes	2	11.7%

Table 19
Hours spent on the internet a day

Hours spent on the internet a day	No. of respondents	Percentage
Half an hour a day	6	35.2%
One hour a day	9	52.9%
Two hours a day	1	5.8%
Three hours a day	_	_
More than three hours a day	1	5.8%

Table 20
Use of library

Use of library	No. of respondents	Percentage
Yes	25	100%
No	_	_

Table 21
Type of library used

Type of library used	No. of respondents	Percentage
School library	20	80%
College library	–	–
University library	–	–
State Central library	3	12%
Special library	2	8%

Table 22
Frequency of visit to library

Frequency of visit to library	No. of respondents	Percentage
Daily	–	–
Weekly	12	48%
Monthly	4	16%
Sometimes	3	12%
Not at all	6	24%

Table 23
Satisfaction with the library visited

Satisfaction with the library visited	No. of respondents	Percentage
Yes	12	48%
No	13	52%

Table 24
Personal library

Maintain personal library?	No. of respondents	Percentage
Yes	20	80%
No	5	20%

Table 25
Personal library collection

Personal library collection	No. of respondents	Percentage
Fiction	5	20%
Books related to my work	16	64%
Spiritual books	8	32%
Self help books	7	28%
Newspaper/Magazine	10	40%
Journals	6	24&
Braille	6	24%
Ceiling books	1	45%
Audiovisual materials		
Television	6	24%
Internet	7	28%
Radio	3	12%
Tapes/Film	5	20%

Table 26
Dependence on personal library

Dependence on personal library	No. of respondents	Percentage
To great extent	1	4%
To some extent	22	88%
Not at all	2	8%

Table 27
Membership of other library

Member of other library?	No. of respondents	Percentage
Yes	2	8%
No	23	29%

Table 28
Dependence on other library

Dependence on other library	No. of respondents	Percentage
To great extent	_	_
To some extent	2	8%
Not at all	_	_

Table 31
Format preferred for information source

Format preferred for information source	No. of respondents	Percentage
Print	20	80%
Electronic	5	20%

Table 32
Constraints/difficulties experienced while collecting your information

Constraints/difficulties experienced while collecting your information?	No. of respondents	Percentage
Yes	23	92%
No	2	8%

Table 32.1
Types of constraints faced while collecting information

Types of constraints faced while collecting information	To great extent	To some extent	Not at all
Shortage of resources	4 (17%)	12(52%)	_
Inability or unwillingness of information providers	_	10(43%)	_
Non availability of information source	_	14(60%)	_
Lack of time	3(13%)	15(65%)	_
Non-cooperation from staff	1(4%)	4(17%)	_
Ineffective service of library	_	8(34%)	_

Table 33
Keeping up with the advances in their work

Keeping up with advances in their work	No. of respondents	Percentage
Through literature	10	64%
Through interaction with colleagues	9	60%
Through the media	6	24%
Through the internet	3	36%
All of the above	6	24%

Table 34
Membership of professional group

Membership of professional group	No. of respondents	Percentage
Yes	3	12%
No	22	88%

Table 34.1
Usefulness of professional groups to the field of activity

Usefulness of professional groups to the field of activity	No. of respondents	Percentage
To great extent	_	_
To some extent	3	100%
Not at all	_	_

Discussion

The questionnaire garnered a wide variety of information that presents a fairly good picture of the information needs and information seeking behavior of Special Education teachers. In the light of the data received and analyzed, the findings can be summarized as follows:

Work Culture in Special Education

The result of the study shows that teaching children with disabilities is very different from other types of teaching (Table 4). It was also discovered that ninety-two percent (92%) of the respondents experience a feeling of isolation being teachers of children with disabilities (Table 6). Many of the respondents say that the information search by them is different from that of other types of teachers (Table 9). A majority of the respondents teach the mentally impaired students and the Learning disabilities students and their main activity is classroom teaching. (Table 1)

Purpose and timing of Information Search

For many respondents, the purpose for information search (Table 7) was to try to keep them up-to-date since teaching children with disabilities requires lots of ideas and techniques. Search for information takes place mainly before the school session starts (Table 8)

Information Seeking Behavior

Fifty-six (56%) percent of the respondents mainly search for information from their own colleagues (Tables 13, 13.1). The respondents agreed that discussion with colleagues also contributes a lot in issues related to teaching methods, student behavior etc.

1. If information is not available, 52% of the respondents change the way in which they search for their information. (Table 10.1)
2. All respondents felt that discussion with parents of children contributes a lot to their solving their information needs (Table 11).

3. The study also found that 76% of respondents feel that discussions with medical professionals (Tables 12, 12.1) contribute to their meeting their information needs.
4. Attending Seminars/Conferences (Tables 14, 14.1) contribute helps respondents get exposed to new ideas and methods, a point all respondents wholeheartedly agree on.
5. Professional groups don't seem to have much significance for Special Education teachers in Shillong. Only a small percentage (Twelve percent – 12 %) of the respondents were members of such groups and even these found professional groups useful to a little extent only (Tables 34, 34.1).

Use of Computers and the Internet

The study found that 80% of respondents have computers in their personal library where 36% respondents have access to the internet (Tables 15, 15.1) and 48% do not. Some of the respondents use internet for their information needs where 8 respondents also have accounts in social networking sites (Table 17). Such sites help the respondents to learn from others and also to share their problems with others of the same field (Tables 17.1, 17.2).

Use of Libraries

Many respondents think that the library is a necessity to fulfill their information needs and most of the respondents visit the library weekly. The study reveals that some of the respondents have personal libraries which mostly contain books related to their work. Eighty-eight percent (88%) of the respondents depend on their personal library to some extent only, four percent (4%) to a great extent and eight percent (8%) not at all. Only a dismal percentage (2%) of respondents are members of other libraries and they depend on such libraries only to some extent. (Tables 20, 21, 23, 24, 26)

Information Sources Used

The study found that a majority of the respondents use books related to their work to a great extent. Seventy-six percent (76%) of the respondents depend mostly on foreign sources and twenty four percent (24%), on Indian sources (Table 30). A majority (eighty percent -80%) preferred using information sources in Print format rather than in electronic format (Table 31). Constraints/difficulties are experienced by ninety-two percent (92%) of the respondents while collecting information. The problems arise mainly due to non-availability of sources, shortage of resources and lack of time (Tables 32, 32.1).

Keeping up with advances

A majority of the respondents keep up with the advances in their work through literature and through interaction with colleagues. (Table 33)

Suggestions

The following suggestions (from the research scholar and respondents) have emerged from the study:

- Since most of the respondents depend on the library to some extent due to shortage of resources and non-availability of sources, it is suggested that the institutional library should provide enough resources in their related fields.

- Conferences and seminars are the main communication channels for information, so authorities should encourage the teachers in conducting and attending such programs.

- Books on disability need to be published in India as good books are available only from abroad and are not easily accessible.

- Much effort should be made by the government to assist special education since the information regarding disability is very limited locally.

- Librarians must be aware of how the teachers of special education seek information and librarians should focus on assisting such users to develop a better image for the library.

Conclusion

Just as their students are unique, Special Education teachers too are unique in their qualifications, qualities, and work culture and especially in their teaching methods. This uniqueness needs to be understood by information providers such as government departments, libraries and information centers in order that the right kind of facilities are provided to this special community. Meeting the information needs of the teachers would in turn meet the information needs of the students. This study had set out to discover what those information needs were and how the teachers were meeting them. Despite the small sample and low response rate, the results of this study can, to some extent, bring to the fore the issues Special Education teachers face in connection with information and perhaps help alleviate their situation.

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