

Issues related to Teacher Training in the Education of Children with Hearing Impairments in Sri Lanka

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(Received October 1, 2009)

The purpose of this research is to investigate the past and present status of, along with future prospects for teacher training for the education of children with hearing impairments (CWHI) in Sri Lanka. Along with the trends towards inclusive education, the content of teacher training also needs to be changed. However, when some disability categories such as hearing impairments are concerned, there is a need to develop teacher training which is fitted to the real needs of the present learners, former students who are now adults. First, development of teacher training for CWHI in Sri Lanka was reviewed. It was revealed that teacher training for CWHI began as a Teacher Training College (TTC) for untrained teachers in the 1970's and later short-term training was added. Recently, some changes have been implemented in teacher training in special education: (1) training pre-service teachers by the Colleges of Education (CoE) became the mainstream; (2) a university joined into the teacher training for the first time; and (3) CoE started teacher training for the first time in Tamil medium. To identify the effects caused by the changes above, a semi-structured interview was conducted with seven experienced teachers. The results revealed the tendency of decline in the quality of teacher training for CWHI and decreased opportunity of training for teachers in schools for the deaf. Finally, four points were raised related to the teacher training for CWHI: there is still a need for CWHI to learn in a separate settings and training of teachers professionally for CWHI is essential even under the trends of inclusive education; (2) providing opportunities of professional development for lecturers especially in the Tamil medium CoEs is urgent, (3) it is essential to make use of the potential ability of experienced teachers even in the schools for the deaf; and (4) it is also important to train teachers who are ready to provide adequate assistance to CWHI who do not have access to education after dropping out.

Key words : Sri Lanka, Education of Children with Hearing Impairments, Teacher Training, Inclusive Education

I. Introduction

The purpose of the research is to investigate the past and present status, along with future prospects of teacher training for the education of children with hearing impairments (CWHI) in Sri Lanka.

After the adoption of the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action for Special Needs Education by UNESCO in 1994, international trends have been towards inclusive education. Along with these trends, the content of teacher training also needs to be changed.

As Dyson (2004) pointed out, there are quite different issues raised in systems that have well-resourced and highly developed special school systems as compared to those in systems that have little special schooling and where regular schools are poorly-resourced. Consequently, there is a need to think about teacher training towards inclusive education according to the context of the particular country or area.

Also, when some disability categories such as hearing impairments are concerned, there is a need to develop teacher training which is fitted to the real needs of the present learners, past students who are now adults of the disability category. In other words, in the case of education of CWHI, parents and educationists need to be attuned to in the educational needs of some CWHI, that is, the need to learn through their own language medium, sign language, most probably in schools for the deaf, with their peers who are also CWHI¹⁾.

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The present study gives a particular focus to Sri Lanka which has shown higher basic indices in education compared with other developing countries. This may imply a certain accumulation of infrastructure and educational experiences of special education, including education of CWHI, in the country. Education of children with disabilities started in 1912 when a school for the deaf and blind opened while Sri Lanka was a colony under the British Empire. There had been a few Christian missionary schools for the deaf and blind before some special schools were started by Buddhist organizations in the 1960' s. In 1975, the first special unit for CWHI in the regular school was begun in a regular school. From the 1980' s, the number of special units for children with disabilities, i.e. visual impairments, hearing impairments, mental handicaps was increased by the Ministry of Education along with special schools which were under the Social Service Department.

In 2006 there were 17 special schools which serve CWHI among 25 Assisted Special Schools, with teacher salaries contributed from the Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education, 2006). Among them there are special schools run by the Buddhist NGOs, Christian NGOs, and some other NGOs. Other than that, there are special schools which cater to CWHI and which are not Assisted Schools, such as a school for the deaf run by the famous domestic NGO called Sarvodaya. Regarding the special units in regular schools, there were 39 special units for CWHI among the total 82 special units which are established in the 323 National Schools in 2001²⁾. However, the number of special units for CWHI among the total 770 special units in the 9564 Provincial Schools, were not known. The best estimate can be that there are around 350 special units for CWHI at present. In conclusion, it can be said that education of CWHI has developed in quantity. On the contrary, it has been pointed out that it has not yet been satisfactory in quality (Perera, 1993; Furuta, 2006).

II. Development of Teacher Training for CWHI

In 1972 a teacher training college (TTC) was started with courses of education for children with visual impairments and for CWHI. The TTC is located in a suburb of Colombo, the Western Province. It was a two-year in-service teacher training institute. In 1986, a course of education for children with mental handicaps was added.

The number of teachers trained in the TTC has been around 30 for all three courses in a year. The number was far less than needed to fulfill the demand for teachers of children with disabilities in the country. Therefore, in the early 1990' s, an alternative method of teacher training was started, short-term teacher training conducted by each province. Those in-service teachers trained in primary education who completed the short-term course went back as teachers of the special units in the regular school (Furuta and Sethunga, 2000).

In 2002, a College of Education (CoE) in the Western Province (CoE-A) which trains pre-service teachers for three years, started a teacher training course to train teachers for children in all disability categories. Students who could be enrolled in the CoE are selected from the qualified students who had passed the A-level examination at the end of higher secondary education, with certain scores.

Teacher training was thus shifted from the training of untrained, in-service teachers at the TTC to pre-service training at the CoE. This shift was related to the fundamental change that also occurred in the whole teacher training in the country. Furthermore, this change was related not only to the training but also to the adoption, placement of teachers of children with disabilities.

The curriculum of the CoE was different from that of the TTC. In the curriculum of the CoE, education of children with special needs was the focus. All disability categories were covered in the curriculum unlike the TTC. In the TTC the courses focused on one single disability category, such as hearing impairments. The curriculum of the CoE was newly produced based on the concept of special needs education advocated by UNESCO.

In 2004 the TTC minimized its functions drastically but has continued to play a role in conducting teacher training for teachers in the schools for the deaf or special schools.

In 2005, there was an epoch-making event in teacher training for teachers of children with disabilities. Two Colleges of Education in the Tamil Language medium, one in the North (CoE-B) and another one in the Western provinces (CoE-C) begun teacher training courses to train teachers for children in all disability categories. After that, for the first

time, teacher training for teachers of children with disabilities was opened to people who are Tamil speakers who comprises 18 percent of the population in Sri Lanka.

Another very recent change has occurred in a university that has never conducted teacher training for children with disabilities before. In 2004, the Open University of Sri Lanka started undergraduate and postgraduate courses for training teachers for children with disabilities or special needs.

III. Effects of Recent Changes in Teacher Training for CWHI

As shown above, teacher training for CWHI has changed drastically recently. Of these changes, the most radical change is supposed to be the one from the in-service disability categorized training in the TTC to the pre-service non-categorized one in CoE. What kind of effects has this change caused in the education for CWHI? By analyzing this, some issues would be raised for the future tasks of teacher training for CWHI in particular and for children with special needs in general.

To help identify the effects caused by the changes and needs for the further development in teacher training for CWHI, a semi-structured interview was conducted in 2007 to collect experienced teachers' views. Interviewees were asked to give their comments on teacher training for CWHI which they received themselves, the present system, and their suggestions for improvement. These interviewees were selected from different categories of stakeholders, one principal in a school for the deaf, one Zonal Education Director in Special Education, one In-service Advisor, four trained teachers, all of whom had experiences in the field of education of CWHI ranging from 15 years to 30 years. All were Sinhala speakers except one who was fluent both in Sinhala and Tamil, and all were engaged in their work in two west coast provinces, namely Western and North Western.

It was found that the effects of the change in teacher training were two-fold.

First, the quality of teacher training declined in the area of education for CWHI. In fact all seven interviewees pointed out that the teacher training, not only in the TTC but also CoE, was not up to the required standard. One reason for this was related to the curriculum used there, which was developed by the National Institute of Education (National Institute of Education, 2002). As noted before, the teacher training in CoE is conducted to train teachers for children with all disability categories. In the curriculum, the same time span is allocated to the identification of special needs of CWHI as children with learning disabilities, communication disorders, mental retardation, severe behavioral problems, visual impairment, deaf and blindness, health impairment, physical disabilities and multiple disabilities. One interviewee described the training conducted in the CoE as "The teacher training there is touching the surface. It is not sufficient to teach deaf children." Another reason for the decline of the quality of teacher training in the area of education for CWHI was related to the professionals there, specifically the quality of the teacher trainers. Two interviewees pointed out that the decline of the quality of teacher training in education for CWHI is caused by the staff. There are three lecturers appointed at the CoE-A and all of them are specialized in the category other than education for CWHI and thus teacher training in the CoE-A tends not to have a specialty in education for CWHI. Problems related to the quality of the staff is more severe at the CoE-B and CoE-C since there has not been any teacher training in the Tamil medium until recently. Consequently and there are an extremely limited number of professionals in the field, so it is very difficult to find a qualified personnel to teach in these courses.

Second, the decreased opportunity for teacher training for teachers in schools for the deaf. Schools for the deaf in Sri Lanka are semi-governmental schools. Even though the majority portion of teacher salary is paid by the Ministry of Education, schools for the deaf are non-governmental organizations under the Social Service Department in each province. Therefore, after the change of the teacher training mainstream, there are fewer chances for teachers in the schools for the deaf to be enrolled in the College of Education since teachers in the school for the deaf are appointed directly by the Board of Education in each school, even though they have the choice to be trained at the TTC.

IV. Future Tasks of Teacher Training for CWHI

The provision of a new type of teacher training in the CoEs which produces teachers who can cater to children with special needs in the context of inclusive education raises a few issues related to education for CWHI and there is a need to seek effective solutions in Sri Lanka. Four points can be made here.

(1) Under the governmental policy on inclusive education which requires taking steps to adopt the concept of inclusive education for special education (Ministry of Education, 2008), it is the task for teacher trainers or professionals in teacher training of children with disabilities or special needs, to develop teacher training to support inclusive education in regular school. At the same time, when thinking about the educational needs of some CWHI who are deaf, there is a need to provide quality education for learning totally supportive, signing and student-centred environment, according the World Federation of the Deaf (World Federation of the Deaf, 2007). Also, when thinking about the educational needs of some CWHI who are hard of hearing, there is a need to provide quality education in which manner of instruction teachers use in the regular classrooms, and improved audiological environments, such as the condition of hearing aids or noise reduction in the classroom to be suited to their needs. For example, hearing aids are useful for some children but a tricky instrument creating difficulties for many parents and teachers (Furuta and Yoshino, 1998), but it is reported in a pre-school level, 88 % of CWHI wore one or two hearing aid (Furuki and Washio, 2002). As a result, teacher trainees need to have a very basic knowledge both about sign language and hearing aids.

Even though adequate assistance to CWHI in the regular classrooms is expected for teachers (Alwis, 2000), there is still a need for CWHI to learn in a separate setting such as special units in the regular school or schools for the deaf to fulfill their educational needs when we consider the examination-centered education system in Sri Lanka.

Although CoEs has been the mainstream for teacher training for children with disabilities or special needs so far, teacher training in the CoEs has not yet achieved the level needed to provide quality education to CWHI. It is urgent to place at least one lecturer, either full time or part time, who has good knowledge and experience in education for CWHI in all three CoEs.

(2) There is a problem of finding eligible lecturers of special education in the Tamil medium CoEs since professional development in Tamil has been far behind that for the majority Sinhala medium. Under these conditions, training teachers who are well prepared to teach the special units for CWHI in the regular school is just unrealistic at present. To provide adequate opportunities to lecturers for their professional development is urgent.

(3) To improve the level of teacher training in the area of education of CWHI, it is essential to make use of teachers who have years of experience and have developed their professional abilities. According to Furuta (2006), schools for the deaf have provided educational opportunities for children, even to those who were delayed in getting an education, or to those who for some reasons dropped out of the special units. It is necessary to utilize potential ability of teachers not only in the regular school but also in the schools for the deaf beyond the administrative borders. It is also necessary for the present TTC to work in cooperation with the schools for the deaf.

(4) There are many children with disabilities including CWHI who dropped out from formal schooling either in the regular classrooms or special units in the regular school (Furuta, 2009). To train teachers to be ready to provide adequate assistance to CWHI who do not have access to education after dropping out is needed from the viewpoint of Education for All, which is the key issue in the global educational development.

Further research will be necessary to clarify the effects of teacher training in education for CWHI in the university in the future.

Notes

- 1) Organizations of deaf adults such as the World Federation of the Deaf have insisted on the supporting "the right of Deaf children to acquire full mastery of their sign language as their 'mother tongue', as well as to learn the language (s) used by their family and community" (World Federation of the Deaf, 2007). http://www.wfdeaf.org/pdf/policy_child_ed.pdf

(Updated July 2007) .

- 2) The data was compiled by the authors from the data collected at the Non-formal and Special Education Branch, Ministry of Education in 2001.

Part of this manuscript was presented at the 9th Asia-Pacific Congress on Deafness and 40th Annual Conference of the Japanese Deaf Education Association, Tokyo, 10th October, 2006.

Acknowledgements

This research was supported in part by the Grants-in-Aid from the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (# 18330204) .

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