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Student Teachers' Perceptions of Some Moral and Social Issues in Special Education

CHUA TEE TEE

Introduction

One important aspect of special education or rehabilitation of disabled people is the question of ethical or moral issues. Ethics in special education touches on such controversial issues as abortion of disabled or high-risk foetuses, euthanasia of a severely disabled person, celibacy or even sterilisation of severely mentally handicapped people, integration or institutionalization and job quota system for the disabled. Although a special teacher's responsibility is not to impose her own moral standards on her students, it will be illuminating if one can identify the expressed moral stand of special educators on some of the ethical issues raised.

Purpose of the Study

The objectives of the study are four-fold, namely:

1. to gauge the general knowledge of the group as a whole on some of the moral and social issues involved;

2. to identify the moral stand of the group as a whole;

3. to identify significant differences, if any, in general knowledge and ethics in the pre- and post-test situations;

4. to arrive at some tentative implications arising from the study.
Methodology

A 30-item questionnaire was formulated and administered to second year Certificate-in-Special Education (CISE) teachers undergoing a three-year part-time special teacher education programme at the Institute of Education (now National Institute of Education). It was administered at the beginning of their 30-hour course on 'Ethical and Social Issues in Special Education' on September 19, 1990 and re-administered at the end of the 10-week course on November 14, 1990. The responses completed the questionnaire forms without indicating their names so that confidentiality was safe-guarded. The 'pre-test' and 'post-test' data were subjected to percentage scores and to a t-test to obtain significant differences (if any).

37 special education Teacher trainees responded to the questionnaire in the pre-test and 26 in the post-test. Scoring was done according to the number of items marked as 'Agree' or 'Disagree' against the statements concerned.

Results And Discussion

Item 1: Normal

In the pre-test, 28 (77.8%) respondees disagreed with the statement that 'intellectually disabled persons are not normal', whereas in the post-test, all 26 respondees (100%) disagreed with this statement. This appears to represent a healthy attitude of the majority towards the disabled, namely, that intellectually disabled people are generally considered 'normal' as human beings and are handicapped only in one aspect – intellectually.

Item 2: Normalization

In both tests, we have a 100% concurrence on the concept of normalization, which has been defined as 'the principle of educating and treating handicapped persons in and for the normal environment of the non-handicapped to the maximum extent possible.' The key phrase is 'to the maximum extent possible' because inspite of our
best intentions, there are some severely handicapped individuals who may be unable to benefit from the normalization process.

**Item 3 : Least Restrictive Environment**

In the pre-test, 22 student teachers (61.1%) appeared to fail to see that not all handicapped students should be educated with non-handicapped students in regular schools or classes, compared to 19 (73.1%) in the post-test, with no significant differences. For the same reason cited above, it is not possible to educate all disabled children in regular schools or classes.

**Item 4 : Integration/Mainstreaming**

10 respondees (27.0%) in the pre-test agreed that all handicapped pupils should be integrated or mainstreamed in regular classes, while in the post-test, as high as 48% thought so. Again, these respondees might not have been fully aware of the word 'all'. It is more realistic to say that handicapped pupils as far as possible should be integrated or mainstreamed. The pros and cons of integration have been amply documented (Chua, 1974; Gartner, 1986).

**Item 5 : Residential Special Schooling**

In the pre-test, 37.8% of the participants are of the opinion that 'in the Singapore context, there should be more residential special schooling for handicapped students', compared with 26.9% in the post-test. These student teachers reflected also the view of the Advisory Council on the Disabled (November 1988) which recommended the urgent need to establish four additional homes to cater for about 340 severely disabled persons on the waiting list.

**Item 6 : Abortion**

The vast majority of the student teachers are aware that abortion is legal in Singapore - 81.1% in the pre-test and 80.8% in the post-test. The Abortion Act, passed in 1970, legalised both abortion and sterilisation in Singapore (Shantheni, 1990).
Item 7: Morally Right

The vast majority of the responses – 88.8% in the pre-test and 96% in the post-test – are clear over the issue that what is legalized may not be morally right. They, therefore, did not agree with the statement that 'if abortion is legal (sanctioned by government), then it is morally all right to have an abortion.' This is the first item so far that shows a significant difference (0.0223) which seems to suggest that exposure to the course work has won over a few hearts on this issue.

Item 8: Aborting a Down Syndrome Foetus

The great majority of the respondents were against this stand – 80.6% in the pre-test and 92.3% in the post-test. This augurs well for would-be special educators-cum-counsellors of parents who have been diagnosed as carrying Down Syndrome babies through chromosomal investigation. Pro-life advocates argue that life begins at the moment of conception, and, therefore, abortion, bluntly speaking, is murder. The innocent baby in the mother's womb is unable to voice his objection to a violent termination of his life. Pro-abortion women maintain that they have a basic right to do with their bodies as they like.

Item 9: Euthanasia

Whether euthanasia of a very sick or disabled person should be carried out even with his consent is also controversial. In the pre-test, 28.6% of the student teachers thought so, so did 29.2% in the post-test! Pro-euthanasia individuals may argue that "the destruction of a useless life is preferable to unbearable pain and senseless misery ... and what matters is the 'quality of life'" (Yong, 1990). However, it is almost impossible to agree by what standards we can objectively assess the level of quality beyond which we can definitely conclude that life is 'useless'. Anti-euthanasia groups base their objection on the premise that killing of an innocent person is never permissible. Besides, euthanasia may reflect the unwillingness to care for someone whose life seems to be useless.
Item 10 : contraception

71.4% of the respondees in the pre-test were of the opinion that it was not wrong to use contraceptives, whereas a smaller percentage (61.5%) thought so in the post-test, with no significant difference. The use of contraceptives remains controversial, steeped in religious and personal beliefs.

Item 11 : Sterilization

While 62.9% of the respondees in the pre-test advocated sterilization of severely mentally handicapped persons, only 19.2% thought so in the post-test. This seems to suggest that after the 10-week course, a higher proportion of participants have acknowledged the right of any person to get married, bear children and be responsible for them.

Item 12 : 'Human' Foetus

There was a significant difference in perception regarding when a foetus could be considered human. In the pre-test, only 8.3% of the participants thought that the foetus took on human quality only after 14 weeks old, whereas 38.5% thought so in the post-test. According to John C. Hobbins, M. D., Director of the Yale Hospital and Professor of Obstetrics and Gynaecology of the Yale University Hospital, a foetus has to be at least 24 weeks old before he is able to continue to develop. Anti-abortion and some religious groups argue that human life begins at the moment of conception.

Item 13 : Beginning of New Life

More than 94% of the participants in the pre- and post-tests held the view that new life began at the moment of conception. This is the view also of pro-life groups and some religious sectors.

Item 14 : Abortion of a Foetus

50% of the respondees in the pre-test felt that a foetus might be aborted at 5-20 weeks old, and only 36% thought so in the post-test. They might not be fully aware of the fact that under Singapore's
Abortion Act, only women up to 24 weeks pregnant can obtain an abortion (Shantheni, 1990). Beyond that period, abortions may be carried out legally only on medical grounds.

**Item 15: Marriage between Handicapped People**

The vast majority of the special educators supported marriages between handicapped persons – 86.1% and 96% in the pre- and post-tests respectively, with a significant difference of 0.0053. However, special educators need to caution parents regarding the empirical risks of having retarded children of the multifactorial type. Where both parents are retarded, there is a 40% risk for their first child to be retarded, and if they have already one retarded child, the percentage risk for a sibling to be retarded is 42% (Reed & Reed, 1965).

**Item 16: Marriage between Handicapped & Non-handicapped Persons**

94.3% and 100% of the student teachers in the pre- and post-tests respectively did not object to marriages between handicapped and non-handicapped persons. In fact the risk of having retarded children from such marriages is less. If one of the parents is retarded, the percentage risk is 11% and following a retarded child, the percentage risk for a retarded sibling is 20% (Reed & Reed, 1965).

**Item 17: Provision of Family Life Education in Special Schools/Classes**

All the student teachers, with the exception of one, agreed in both the pre- and post-tests, that family life education should be provided in special schools/classes. This is a felt need because many special need students are either ignorant or have distorted views about sex education.

**Item 18: Family Life Education: The Sole Responsibility of Parents**

There was a significant difference in perception here. 27.8% of the teachers in the pre-test thought that family life education was the
sole responsibility of parents of handicapped children but only 11.5% in the post-test shared that opinion. It implies that the majority of special educators feel that this should be a joint responsibility between teachers and parents.

**Item 19 : Quota System for Employment of the Disabled**

Without demonstrating a significant difference, 54.3% and 50.8% of the respondees in the pre- and post-tests respectively were of the opinion that a quota system be imposed for employment of the disabled. Actually, there are pros and cons regarding job legislation for the disabled (Chua, 1984). The advantages of some legislation for the employment of the disabled include the following:–

1. an almost immediate increase in the number of employed disabled.

2. Proof that the government is genuinely concerned with the limited employment opportunities of the disabled.

3. all firms, both government and private, are being treated alike as they implement the quota system.

Among the dangers of legislation for the disabled, one may cite the following:–

1. it acts against those disabled workers who are holding jobs on their own merit.

2. disabled workers may perform at a level below that of non-disabled workers because they feel they have government protection.

3. some argue that any form of compulsion is wrong in principle.

**Item 20 : Sheltered Workshops**

94.4% and 84.6% of the respondees in the pre- and post-tests respectively feel that there is a place for sheltered workshops for the disabled. This is true especially of moderately or severely disabled
persons who cannot compete in the open market and therefore need some protection or insulation from the harsh competitive world of the non-disabled.

**Item 21 : Open Employment**

All the participants except one in both the pre- and post-tests agreed that disabled people should be trained as far as possible for open employment. This is the ideal one should aim for, failing which the disabled could go for self or sheltered employment.

**Item 22 : Opening Letters of Blind Persons**

As many as 28.6% in the pre-test and 24% in the post-test felt that they should open letters addressed to totally blind persons. This seems to imply little respect for blind persons. Letters should be opened only with the consent or at the request of the addressees.

**Item 23 : Management Committees for the Disabled**

It is encouraging to note the significant difference in attitudes of the participants in the pre- and post-tests. While as high as 19.4% of the former felt that intellectually disabled persons should not serve on management committees for the disabled, only one person (4%) in the post-test thought so. An intellectually disabled person (a relatively high-functioning one who is cognizant of the issues under discussion) has as much right as a non-disabled person to speak up on policy and other matters that are vital to the survival or development of his minority group.

**Item 24 : Mainstreaming**

Special educators appear to have a positive attitude towards mainstreaming. Only 2 (5.4%) in the pre-test and none in the post-test agreed with the statement that 'mainstreaming of disabled students into regular schools will retard the progress of non-handicapped students.' Individualization of lessons based on individual needs will eliminate this potential problem.
**Item 25 : Government and Family Support**

There seems to be a significant difference in attitude on this item. While as high as 20% of the special educators in the pre-test thought that government support for disabled senior citizens was better than family support, only 7.7% in the post-test thought so. Although we recognize the dual role of the government and private sectors in rehabilitation work, it is the family that will be able to provide the personal and loving touch.

**Item 26 : Morals are caught rather than taught**

Expectedly, participants were divided in their opinion. 45.7% in the pre-test and only 20% in the post-test believed that 'morals are caught rather than taught.' Nevertheless, the majority felt that morals could be formally taught, not discounting the importance of learning through example.

**Item 27 : Nature of Life**

There is divided opinion on the nature of life. 48.6% of the respondees in the pre-test and 38.5% in the post-test felt that they had saved the life of a person 'if we maintain all the life functions of a person with the exception of consciousness.' This partly explains the difficulty one faces on the question of euthanasia.

**Item 28 : Equal Rights**

The pre-test respondees were unanimous in agreeing that 'equal rights for intellectually disabled persons means the same opportunities for them' and this was also reflected in the 96.2% of the post-test respondees. They might have been too simplistic in equating 'equal rights' with 'same opportunities.' Strictly speaking, 'equal rights' should be interpreted as 'equal chances' to develop to the full. If a non-disabled child is given $S$ by the Ministry of Education, 'equal rights' should not be equated with the same amount of $S$. Because of his disability, e.g. spasticity which usually implies a host of learning difficulties like speech defect, limited or uncontrolled gross and fine motor movements, mental retardation, hearing and visual problems, equal rights of a spastic child should
include the provision of speech therapists, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, special education teachers, vision specialists, and audiologists, including special instructional aids and appliances not normally provided to the non-disabled child so that he has an equal chance to the best education possible.

**Item 29: Comparable Value of Life**

The student teachers have demonstrated the value, dignity and sacredness of human life rather than its utilitarian value when the vast majority in the pre-test (88.6%) and 100% in the post-test held the view that 'the life of a severely mentally retarded human being is of comparable value to the life of a non-handicapped human being.'

**Item 30: An Infant with Gross Mental Defects**

That the vast majority of special educators are against euthanasia are reflected in their response to this item. 68.6% in the pre-test and 80% in the post-test agreed that 'a baby born with gross mental defects should be kept alive, despite wishes of his/her parents to the contrary.'

**Implications Arising From The Study**

The diverse views of special education teachers on some of the moral and social issues in special education are a reflection of the difficulty in measuring especially the affective domains of instructional objectives. Out of the 30 questionnaire items that the teachers responded to, in the pre-test and post-test situations, seven items showed significant differences in perceptions. In each case, a significantly higher proportion of special educators at the end of the 10-week, 30-hour course believe in the following:

1. If abortion is legalised through legislation, it is not necessarily morally right to have an abortion. (Item 7).

2. It is not right to abort a Down Syndrome foetus. (Item 8).

3. A foetus is not a human being until 24 weeks old. (Item 12). As pointed out earlier, this viewpoint is still controversial.
4. Handicapped people should marry one another. (Item 15). This does not mean that they should not marry non-handicapped people. In fact, as stated above, a much higher proportion of respondents agreed that handicapped people should also marry non-handicapped individuals. (Item 16).

5. Family life education is not the sole responsibility of parents of handicapped children. (Item 18).

6. Intellectually disabled persons should serve on management committees for the disabled. (Item 23).

7. Government support for disabled senior citizens is not necessarily better than family support. (Item 25).

Furthermore, the moral stand of the majority of special education teachers surveyed appears to be positive in the following areas:

1. Intellectually disabled persons are 'normal'. (Item 1).

2. Euthanasia should not be carried out even with the consent of a very sick or a severely handicapped person. (Item 9).

3. New life starts at the moment of conception. (Item 13).

4. There is a place for sheltered workshops for the disabled. (Item 20).

5. Disabled people should be trained as far as possible for open employment.

6. Mainstreaming of disabled students into regular schools will not necessarily retard the progress of non-handicapped students.

7. The life of a severely mentally retarded human being is of comparable value to the life of a non-handicapped human being.

8. A baby born with gross mental defects should be kept alive despite wishes of his/her parents to the contrary.
On the other hand, parents of handicapped children and disabled children themselves need to be wary of those special educators who subscribe especially to the following ideas:–

1. **All** handicapped pupils should be integrated or mainstreamed in regular classes. (Item 4).

2. Severely mentally handicapped people should be sterilized. (Item 11).

3. A foetus may be aborted at 5-20 weeks old. (Item 14).

**Conclusion**

This is the first attempt at studying the perceptions of special educators on some moral and social issues in special education in Singapore. The divergent views of the respondees testify to the difficulty of teaching ethics either at a teacher education or even at a school level. Neither is claim being made that any changes in the teachers' perceptions on some of the moral and social issues are due to having been exposed to the brief 30-hour CLSE course as one's moral standing is influenced by a multitude of factors in and outside of an instructional setting. However, it is hoped that professionals, educational, medical and legal, will be able to work out some solution protecting the rights and those unable to decide for themselves, while preserving the dignity of all human beings (Sassaman, 1983).

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References


