

Teaching Students with Special Educational Needs in an Inclusive Educational Setting in Sri Lanka: Regular Class Teacher's View

Hiroko Furuta

Kumamoto University, Japan

K. A. C. Alwis

Open University of Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka

Abstract

This study examined how regular class teachers view teaching students with special educational needs (SEN) in Sri Lankan government schools. Three types of schools in three education zones were visited and 36 teachers were interviewed. The results revealed that all the participants recognized the presence of a student with SEN in their classes, and majority of them were aware that they had given some sorts of accommodations/modifications to teach them. In addition, it was found teachers felt they were supported especially from the school administrators. Results also indicated that teachers face stress or dilemmas when balancing classes to meet the needs of both students with and without SEN. However, there was a pitfall in coordination between teachers of regular classes and special units. More training and seminar need to be introduced on inclusive education strategies and philosophy that reinforces teachers' professional ideas of accepting students in need.

Introduction

Inclusive education is a process of strengthening the capacity of the education system to reach out to all learners and can thus be understood as a key strategy to achieve Education for All (EFA), adopted in Jomtien, Thailand (UNESCO 2009). Inclusive education is thought of as an approach to serve children with special educational needs (SEN) within mainstream classrooms. The concept and practice of educational inclusion has become the prevailing initiative in education systems throughout Western Europe, and elsewhere (Garner 2009).

However, as Dyson (1999) suggested, we should think in terms of a series of discourses or varieties of inclusion instead of thinking about inclusion as a single reality. In most of the developing countries with poorly-resourced regular schools, simply placing students with disabilities into mainstream classes together with their peers without disabilities constitutes its implementation (Lamichhane 2015).

On implementing inclusive education, with the majority of students who were historically excluded from mainstream schooling now being able to access their local

schools, teachers are regarded as one of key persons (Forlin 2010). In fact one of the crucial issues regarding access and continuity in inclusive education for children with disabilities is whether mainstream school teachers are able to meet the individual needs of students with SEN (Lamichhane 2016).

De Boer, Piji & Minnaert (2010) conducted a literature survey on regular primary school teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education. They showed that the majority of teachers were undecided or negative in their beliefs about inclusive education and did not rate themselves as very knowledgeable about educating students with SEN. They also found variables such as gender, teaching experience, experience with inclusive education, training, type of disability of teachers may affect teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education.

This paper explores the regular class teacher's view in teaching students with SEN in an inclusive educational setting in the social and educational context of Sri Lanka.

Education in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is one of the better performers among developing countries, with an adult literacy rate above the expected value for its level of per capita income (World Bank 2011). As a result of the priority given to human capital development, the Universal Free Education Policy was introduced in 1945 by the government, which was designed in order to provide education facilities free to all students from Kindergarten to University education (Liyanage 2014).

However, as Arunatilake (2006) pointed out the education participation rates are not equitable across the country. One of the challenges of the Sri Lankan education system is that the proportion of children aged 6-10 who do not attend school and those who do not complete primary school have been fairly constant over the decade (Institute of Policy Studies 2010). Children with disabilities were among those who were excluded from education. Further, the Millennium Development Goals country report 2014 pointed out the following: although the primary completion rate is over 99 %, and 98 % of primary school students continue in school until age 14, the percentage declines with increasing age and as a result, overall, only 86 % of children aged 15 to 16 are at school, and 60 % of those aged 17 to 18 (United Nations, Sri Lanka 2015).

Schooling is compulsory for children from 5 to 14 years of age in Sri Lanka. The general education system in Sri Lanka provides 13 years in three cycles. Children from 5-10 attend primary school (Grade 1-5), from age 11-14 junior secondary school (Grade 6-9), from age 15-16 senior secondary for General Certificate Examination Ordinary Level (GCE O/L) (Grade 10-11) and from age 17 -18 collegiate or General Certificate Examination GCE Advanced Level (GCE A/L) (Grade 12-13).

Four types of schools exist in Sri Lanka. Firstly, 1AB schools have classes from Grade 1 to 13 and GCE A/L courses are offered with science streams. Secondly, 1C schools have classes from Grade 1 to 13 and GCE A/L courses without science streams.

Thirdly, type 2 schools have classes from Grade 1 to 11 and finally, type 3 schools have Grade 1 to grade 5 (or 8).

The government plays the predominant role in providing education. In 2016, there were 10,012 government schools and 105 private schools, and only about 2 % of the school population was in private schools (Ministry of Education 2016).

The most popular schools in the country are known as National Schools which are administered by the Central Ministry of Education. In 2016, 803,499 (19.4%) of the total student body went to National Schools and the rest 3,339,831 (80.6%) went to Provincial Schools. According to the Ministry of Education (2016), there were 352 National Schools (3.5%) and 9,809 Provincial Schools (96.5%). It is clear that a small number of National Schools attract more students than Provincial Schools.

Table 1 shows the distribution of schools by functional grade and number of students (Ministry of Education 2016). It suggests that there are fewer schools with more functional grades and resources such as 1 AB schools which attract more students, while there are more schools with less facilities such as Type 3 schools which are less popular.

Table 1. Distribution of Schools and Number of Students

	1AB	%	1C	%	Type 2	%	Type 3	%	Total	%
Number of Schools	1,016	10.0	1,805	17.8	3,408	33.5	3,933	38.7	10,162	100
Number of Students	1,626,565	39.3	1,034,743	25.0	826,255	19.9	655,767	15.8	4,143,330	100

Source: Ministry of Education (2016), compiled by authors

As for the medium of instruction in schools, there are 6,338 (62.4%) Sinhala only schools, 2,889 (28.4%) Tamil only schools and the rest are mixture of these two languages and English (Ministry of Education 2016).

In addition, there are wide disparities in facilities between urban, rural and estate schools. A majority of secondary schools in remote areas do not have qualified teachers and other facilities (Liyanage 2014). The geographical distribution of schools continues to be inequitable and a correlation is clearly seen between deprived family background and disadvantaged schools. (Jayaweera & Gunawardena 2007). The estate or plantation sector comprises the tea and rubber plantations established during the British colonial administration and has been disadvantaged educationally. The plantation children still remain at a disadvantage with respect to infrastructure at secondary education level (UNICEF Sri Lanka 2013). Central Province has a high concentration of estates and plantations.

Sri Lankan school studies mainly target the primary examinations, Grade 5 scholarship, GCE O/L and GCE A/L examinations as Liyanage (2014) called the "Examination Hell." As a results, it is very common to see students going to private tuition classes even from Grade 1.

There are 92 educational zones across the eight provinces and they serve as the administrative and support centers for government schools. Each education zone is divided into 298 education divisions. Each education zone appoints a Director of Education and an Assistant Director of Education (ADE). One of these ADEs is in charge of special education. Also an In-Service Advisor (ISA) in special education is placed in each education division to give teachers suggestions for their teaching.

Inclusive Education in Sri Lanka

Special education commenced in 1912 for children with visual and hearing impairments. Later on it was expanded to cater to children with other categories of disabilities. These special schools are still prominent in special education today.

The first integrated education started in 1979 in a special unit of a government school in Sinhala medium in an education zone in Colombo District in the Western Province.

In 1997, the Compulsory Education Act was passed and the Education Reform of 1997 had an impact on the delivery and quality of educational services to students with SEN.

Up to now, the number of children with SEN, such as children with learning disabilities as well as autism who learn in regular classes, has not been identified. Most students who are identified as having SEN are children with intellectual disabilities, hearing/ visual impairments or physical disabilities.

Teacher training in special education commenced in the 1970's in Sinhala. Since 2002 a National College of Education (NCoE) has trained teachers in special needs education in Sinhala and another NCoE in Tamil from 2006. In 2004, professional development programs in special needs education were offered for teachers in the Open University of Sri Lanka.

The National Institute of Education (NIE) has provided short-term training programs on inclusive education for regular class teachers and for ISAs in conjunction with the Ministry of Education from 2000. In addition, the Ministry of Education provided basic knowledge of inclusive education through an island wide network of Teachers' Centers.

Previous studies on inclusive education in Sri Lanka are divided two-fold; Stake holders' roles and awareness towards inclusive education, and analysis of the situation of children with disabilities not attending school.

Regarding the stake holder's roles, Gunawardena & Ekanayake (2009) conducted questionnaire surveys and found out the extent to which inclusive education is being implemented in schools in urban, rural, estate and conflict-affected areas. From the results, it was suggested that the Zonal Education Directors played an important role in creating an inclusive culture.

Preparedness of regular and special education teachers to teach students with disabilities in an inclusive educational setting was examined by Hettiarachchi & Das

(2014). They highlighted the fact that perceived competence among regular/inclusive teachers declined compared with special education teachers. However, this research was limited by to mixing special education teachers in both special units in regular schools and special schools that are mostly run by NGOs and under the Social Service Department in each province.

Alwis (2005, 2015) concluded that most primary school teachers in Sri Lanka were not adequately trained to teach in a regular classroom, and further emphasized the lack of mandatory teacher training to use adaptations and accommodations for students with SEN. According to Alwis (2012), a teacher helper model is crucial for effective implementation of inclusive education in Sri Lanka.

Abeywickrama, Jayasinghe & Sumanasena (2013) examined the experiences of children with disabilities, their parents and teachers at the special education units in three government schools in Kandy District, Central Province and concluded that impairment-centered views regarding disabilities expressed by both teachers and parents dominated the learning environments in these schools.

Regarding children with disabilities who are out of school education, Furuta (2006) raised concern on admission to special units in regular schools with 35 % of caregivers reported denied access. Furuta (2009) also reported on providing educational services to school-age children with disabilities which were conducted by a provincial social service department in preschools for children with disabilities.

The aforementioned studies have mainly focused on teachers' roles and awareness towards inclusive education. However, little is known about how teachers recognize the presence of students with SEN and how teachers cope with them individually or as a team, as well as the difficulties faced by teachers when handling these students. Through this qualitative study, we intend to increase our knowledge of the present situation of inclusive education, given the recent increase in awareness in Sri Lanka.

At the same time, the studies on inclusive education cited above show that there has been little research that considers the diversity in government schools by region, managing government, or type of school as mentioned before. It is imperative to take these distinctive features of schools into consideration when we investigate inclusive education in Sri Lanka.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research is to find out how regular class teachers view teaching students with SEN in Sri Lankan government schools. It also aims at providing suggestions for wider acceptance of inclusive education among regular class teachers. The following research questions were the focus of this study:

1. To what extent do regular class teachers recognize the presence of students with SEN?
2. How do regular class teachers cope with students with SEN?

3. What are the difficulties faced by regular class teachers when teaching students with SEN?

Methods

Research design

This research was conducted in four phases. In the first phase, information on areas, where inclusive education is implemented in somewhat advanced way by the ADEs, was collected from relevant personnel in the NIE and Open University of Sri Lanka. Also the interview guide was tested in three pilot interviews and adjustments to the interview guide were added. In the second phase, three education zones were selected considering the type of community; urban, rural and estate. Also permission from local education offices was obtained. In the third phase, nine schools were visited and semi-structured interviews were conducted. In the final phase, data was analyzed by both qualitative and quantitative methods.

Selection of education zones and schools

Three education zones, P, Q and R were selected for this research. P zonal education zone in the Kurunegala District, North Western Province, located in a dry climatic zone represents Sinhala dominating agricultural community. Q zonal education zone in the Kalutara District, Western Province, located on the coastal area, represents suburban Colombo's multi-cultural community. R zonal education zone in the Nuwara

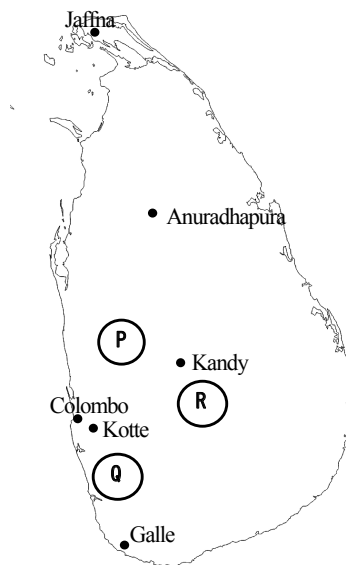


Figure 1. Locations of Selected Education Zones

Note: Figure created by authors

Eliya District, Central Province, located at an elevation of 1200 to 1500 meters in hills, represents the estate sector where Indian Tamils are the majority. Figure 1 shows the locations of the three selected zones.

In each education zone, three schools of the three types, one 1AB (National school), one 1C, and one Type 3 school, were selected by each ADEs. There were 1AB National schools in P and Q education zones but not in R education zone. Therefore, one provincial 1 AB school was selected in R education zone. All type 3 selected schools were primary schools which had grade one to five. Table 2 shows the outline of the total nine schools. All, schools except for Q-1 school (an all girl's school) were mixed.

Table 2. Outline of the Schools

Education Zone	District (Province)	Schools	Controlling Body	Type of the School	Number of Teachers	Number of Students	Special Unit
P	Kurunegala (North Western)	P-1	National	1AB	80	1,250	ID
		P-2	Provincial	1C	39	663	ID
		P-3	Provincial	Primary	5	38	-
Q	Kalutara (Western)	Q-1	National	1AB	143	3,800	ID
		Q-2	Provincial	1C	40	800	-
		Q-3	Provincial	Primary	5	115	-
R	Nuwala Eliya (Central)	R-1	Provincial	1AB	46	1,089	Mix
		R-2	Provincial	1C	47	1,091	Mix
		R-3	Provincial	Primary	9	174	-

Note: ID refers to intellectual disabilities. Mix refers to disabilities irrespective of categories.

Prior to the school visits, interviews with the three ADEs were conducted to collect information on the implementation strategy of inclusive education in each education zone.

Survey on school visits

At the school visit, firstly, basic school information and ideas on education of students with SEN was collected from school administrators (nine principals, two vice-principals and an acting principal). In the schools with the special unit, basic information on the unit was collected from the unit teacher.

Next, interviews with four regular class teachers were conducted. Those teachers who participated in this study were chosen by either the school administrators or ADEs of the zonal education offices. Each teacher was interviewed for 20 - 40 minutes. All total 36 regular teachers responded to the interview.

Among these teachers, twelve were male and 24 were female. Thirty-three were class teachers and three were subject teachers who did not have a particular class. There were 19 teachers in the primary level, 10 in the junior secondary level, and four in the senior secondary level. There were no teachers who taught the collegiate level.

Table 3 shows the outline of the participants. Average teaching experience of these

teachers was 16 years.

Table 3. Outline of the Participants

Number	Years of Teaching	Gender	Teaching Subject	Class Grade	Number of Students in the Class	
					Total	with SEN
P-1-1	22	female	Primary	5	40	2
P-1-2	6	male	Geography	11	33	0
P-1-3	22	female	Primary	3	33	0
P-1-4	10	male	Primary	5	37	1
P-2-1	7	female	English	6	26	3
P-2-2	12	female	Sinhala	8	30	1
P-2-3	22	female	Dance	subject	-	0
P-2-4	7	female	Sinhala, Geography	6	29	2
P-3-1	22	female	English	4	7	0
P-3-2	22	female	Primary	3	11	1
P-3-3	16	female	Primary	3	14	2
P-3-4	19	male	English	subject	-	0
Q-1-1	34	female	Primary	3	46	0
Q-1-2	18	female	English	1	42	1
Q-1-3	20	female	Science	10	47	0
Q-1-4	7	male	Tamil	7	47	0
Q-2-1	22	female	Primary	1	33	2
Q-2-2	7	female	Sinhala	9	22	1
Q-2-3	36	male	Science	11	37	1
Q-2-4	20	male	Primary	5	11	1
Q-3-1	20	female	English	4	9	2
Q-3-2	1	female	Primary	5	15	3
Q-3-3	6	female	English	3	11	1
Q-3-4	23	female	Primary	2	38	1
R-1-1	7	female	Math, Sinhala	9	36	1
R-1-2	6	female	Math	6	39	0
R-1-3	6	female	Agriculture	subject	-	0
R-1-4	13	male	Primary	6	36	0
R-2-1	25	male	Primary	4	38	0
R-2-2	15	female	History	10	27	2
R-2-3	16	male	Math	9	34	1
R-2-4	24	female	Hindu	8	39	1
R-3-1	24	male	Primary	2	36	1
R-3-2	24	female	Primary	2	24	0
R-3-3	14	male	Primary	4	18	1
R-3-4	10	male	Primary	4	18	0

Average number of students in the class of the participants in each school ranged from 11 students in P-3 school up to 46 in Q-1 school.

Interview schedule

Table 4 shows the interview schedule used for regular class teachers.

Table 4. Interview Schedule for Regular Class Teachers

No.	Item
1	Basic information about the teacher (teaching experience, training, teaching subject and grade)
2	Experiences of teaching students with SEN (number and category of students with SEN)
3	Accommodations/ modifications they provided to teach students with SEN
4	Difficulties in teaching students with SEN
5	Support from others (principal, teachers, parents, ADEs) in teaching students with SEN
6	Knowledge on the term 'inclusive education'
7	Personal ideas on the placement of students with SEN (regular or special settings)
8	Personal ideas about diverse needs in the classroom other than disabilities
9	Comments to the interview

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in Sinhala in P and Q and Tamil in R education zones respectively. The first author interviewed all the participants. In P and Q zone schools, the second author played the role of interpreter between Sinhala and English. In R zone schools, a special education teacher played the role of interpreter between Tamil and English. Interviews were recorded on an IC recorder. The literal notes were transcribed into English after the interview.

The school visits were conducted in both 2013 and 2014.

Data analysis

Data was analyzed manually using the thematic analysis method. All transcripts were coded and categorized thematically. The first and second author coded and reviewed the themes.

Findings**1) Experiences of teaching students with SEN in the class**

Among 33 class teachers, 23 (70%) answered that they had at least one student with disabilities or SEN in their class. Six (18%) teachers answered they had a student with SEN not in their class but in their subject teaching classes. Also, four (12%) teachers answered there was no student with SEN in the current year but there had been in some previous years.

In addition, all three subject teachers answered they had a student with SEN in their teaching classes. There were no teachers who claimed he or she had never a student with SEN in their class.

Without exception, all participants, including teachers in the National Schools

were seen to have recognized the presence of students with SEN in their classrooms. The reason of this awareness of teachers might be partly because of the training and seminars on inclusive education for the principal and teachers in these education zones which were regarded to some extent as being advanced.

Among 23 teachers who answered that they had a student with SEN in their class, it was revealed that three class teachers had significantly higher percentage of students. Those were, P-2-1, who had three (12%) with SEN among 26 students; P-3-3, who had two (22%) among 14 students; and finally Q-3-2, who had three (20%) among 15 students. Teachers, such as P-3-3 and Q-3-2 were teaching in small-size classrooms in the type 3 schools.

P-2 and Q-3 schools are located in rural areas, and P-3 is in a more remote area. The education quality of these small rural schools are generally lower and do not attract middle class parents who want their children to survive and win in the competitive education system. Under the cover of lower quality education, students with SEN in these schools do not necessarily face the risk of exclusion especially before the year 5 exam. This is the situation similar to the scenario of a casual integration noted by Miles (1997) or unconscious inclusive education reported by Lee and Low (2012).

Regarding the category of SEN students, among 23 teachers who answered that they had a student with SEN, nine stated they had students with physical disabilities, five with intellectual disabilities, four with autism and emotional disorders, two with hearing impairments, one with low vision, and one with learning disabilities (multiple answers). Also four teachers said they had slow learners. One teacher did not mention the category of the student.

Two teachers mentioned they had students with SEN of some other sort; One noted a child of deaf adults, another noted four students who had been absent from school for a long period. It should be noted that two teachers mentioned students who had SEN other than disabilities. This implies that they had the notion of SEN with a broader definition than disability.

One reason for having students with physical disabilities as the biggest category in this study is related to the school policy of the Q-2 school. All four Q-2 school teachers had a student with physical disabilities in their class. The school is located in a catholic community. According to the principal, he started to accept students with physical disabilities who had been deprived of school education when he arrived as a principal a decade ago. They were students commuting from a catholic home for children with physical disabilities run by an NGO in the same township.

2) Accommodations /Modifications the participants provided

Regarding accommodations/ modifications they had done in their class for teaching students with SEN, among the total 36 regular teachers, 30 (83%) teachers mentioned they implemented some sorts, while five (14%) teachers did not have any idea upon this question. Table 5 shows the type and content of accommodations/ modifications expressed by 30 teachers (multiple answers).

Table 5. Accommodations/ Modifications

Category	Type	Content	Number
Accommodations	Individual Assistance	Giving individualized tasks	6
		Paying attention to the individual student	6
		Instructing letter writing in simple format	4
		Approaching the student and helping them	2
		Calling the student by name or “son”	2
		Other	6
	Peer Tutoring	Ask other students to help the student	7
Group Activities	Conducting group activities	2	
	Grouping by academic levels	1	
Modifications	Arrangement of Educational Environments	Seating	3
		Special desk/ chair	2
	Utilizing the Special Unit	Staying in the special unit classroom during special activities in the regular class	1
	Extra Tutoring	Before or after school teaching	3
		After class & special tutoring	3

It was found the majority of teachers were aware that they had given some sorts of accommodations/ modifications to teach students with SEN.

3) Difficulties in teaching students with SEN

Among 36 teachers, twenty-seven (75%) answered that they faced difficulties coping with SEN students, while nine (25%) answered they did not feel any difficulties. Among these nine teachers, however, two primary school teachers, P-3-4 and R-3-3, added their reservation that if they were teaching larger classes in some other schools, they would have faced difficulties.

Table 6 shows the difficulties faced by teachers when dealing with SEN students (multiple answers).

The issue of balancing between students with SEN and without SEN was given by many teachers as a difficulty in coping with SEN students in the class. This was further divided into the balancing in teaching and classroom management. Next, difficulty of giving individual assistance to the student with SEN was raised.

Lopez and Corcoran (2014) pointed out, from the semi-structured focus group discussion, teachers strived for equal relationships with all their students. However, they also highlighted that the most pressing concern shared by the teachers occurs as they grapple with the difficulty of providing students with SEN with additional attention whilst also attending the needs of other students in their class. Similarly, in this study, it was suggested teachers are being torn between conflicting feelings in trying to balance students with SEN and without SEN.

Table 6. Difficulties in Teaching Students with SEN

Category	Answers	Number	
Balancing between students with and without SEN	balancing in teaching	- It is difficult to satisfy both needs of the SwSEN and other students.	3
		- The SwSEN often obstructs obstructive for other student's learning.	2
		- Some students don't like the SwSEN to be in the same group at the time of group activities or competition in the class.	2
	classroom management	- Classroom management is more difficult with the presence of the SwSEN.	2
		- There is a strong pressure to complete the syllabus.	1
		- The educational needs of students are diverse.	1
		- If the SwSEN causes trouble on other students, it is regarded as teacher's fault.	1
Individual assistance	- Don't know how to instruct the SwSEN.	4	
	- Need to assist the SwSEN who can't write letters. Take more time.	1	
	- Need to attend to the SwSEN as they often calls the teacher "Come, sir!"	1	
	- Need to assist the SwSEN when moving to other classrooms.	1	
	- Need to run after the SwSEN who are trying to leave the classroom frequently.	1	
Working environments	- With having the SwSEN in the class, our workload becomes heavier.	1	
	- Don't have energy to cope with the SwSEN because of the competition in education.	1	
	- With having the SwSEN in the class, it is difficult to take a leave.	1	
Administrators	- Little attention has been given to this matter from the administrators.	1	
Caregivers	- Difficulty in getting support from caregivers.	1	

Note: SwSEN refers to the student with SEN.

4) Support from others in teaching students with SEN

Among 36 regular class teachers, 30 (83%) answered that they had some kinds of support from others to cope with students with SEN. They were getting support from the school administrators (16), other teachers (6), special unit teachers (4), and caregivers of students with SEN (6). Other than this support within the school community, they mentioned they had gotten support from the ISAs (5). There were two teachers who did not have any idea on how to answer this question.

Table 7 shows the support from the administrators perceived by teachers (multiple answers). The administrators' support were divided into two category of roles, coach and organizer. One teacher mentioned the advice from the administrator who is a Buddhist monk.

Table 7. Support from Administrators

Category	Item	Content	Number
Coach	Teaching methods	General teaching methods	5
		Special teaching methods to the SwSEN	3
	Attending the SwSEN	Asking teachers about the the SwSEN	2
Organizer	Giving discretion	Discretion to conduct after-class for the SwSEN and so on	2
	Coordination	Making contact with caregivers	1
		Making contact with the community people	1
	Disbursing costs	Contributing from the Quality Input ¹	2
		Hiring a helper for the SwSEN from the school budget	1
	Modification of the environments	Changing the classroom arrangement to cope with the needs of the SwSEN	1
		Modifying the school rule for the SwSEN	1
Teaching for a teacher	Teaching the class when the teacher is out	1	

Note: SwSEN refers to the student with SEN.

Cobb (2014) conducted a meta-analysis of North American research on the work of school principals in the special education milieu and found that the principals take on seven roles, such as visionary, partner, coach, conflict resolver, advocate as they work to foster inclusive education.

The results of this survey revealed that principal's supports as an organizer were extensive, ranged from the coordination of related people, disbursing cost, modification of the environments, teaching for an absent teacher, to even hiring a helper for a student with SEN. In fact, from the interview with administrators, two school principals, both of whom were in R education zone, were found to have extensive training in inclusive education. Principal of the R-2 school received training in India and R-3 school principal had a diploma certificate in special needs education from the NIE.

5) Knowledge and ideas on the term 'inclusive education' and diversity in their classrooms

There is a word for inclusive education in Sinhala and Tamil. Regarding the knowledge of the term 'inclusive education', among 36 teachers, nine (25%) explained the meaning. Twenty-seven (75%) stated that they did not know the term and among them six (17%) had heard the term. It was found that the term itself has not been widely known to teachers even in the education zones selected for advancement to some extent in implementing inclusive education.

¹ Education Quality Inputs scheme is a step to upgrade the school level management to give greater authority to schools and teachers to make decisions to improve teaching and learning methods in schools (Arunatilake and Jayawardena 2013).

Among 36 teachers, twenty-five (69%) answered that they think the students with SEN would be better off learning in the regular classrooms. The reasons for this were two folds: ‘Significance of learning from other students’ (13) and ‘Human rights point of view’ (8). The two categories were further divided as shown in the Table 8. The other four teachers did not mention any reason.

Table 8. Reasons for Teachers in Favor of Students with SEN Learning in the Regular Classrooms

Category	Reasons	Number
Significance of learning from other students	- Students without SEN can learn from the SwSEN.	3
	- The SwSEN can learn from students without SEN.	3
	- Both can learn from each other.	7
Human rights point of view	- The SwSEN would feel alienated if they learn in separate settings.	4
	- Children should not be divided.	2
	- Students with SEN should not be labelled.	1
	- The law requires the SwSEN to learn in the regular classroom.	1

Note: SwSEN refers to the student with SEN.

However, two of the twenty-five teachers who were in favor of SwSENs learning in regular classrooms pointed out the negative side of that at the same time. They explained that it may hamper the development potential of students with SEN in the regular classrooms.

Three (8%) thought the students with SEN would be better off learning in special settings such as special units or special schools and eight (22%) thought both regular and special settings would be better.

Finally, the participants were asked whether there is a diversity of needs among students other than disabilities, and if there were, to identify them. As a result, twenty-five teachers (69%) answered that there is a diversity among students in their classrooms. Examples of the diverse needs of students mentioned by the participants were such as extreme poverty, parent’s going abroad, living in an extremely remote area. Especially, migration of mothers overseas for employment as domestic workers influences neglect of basic needs of health and nutrition of children as well as supervision of attendance at school (Jayaweera and Gunawardena 2013).

Among the 25, seven teachers mentioned that they were often engaged in collecting money for poor students to buy school supplies or clothes.

In conclusion, though only 25 % of teachers participated in this survey, knew the meaning of the term ‘inclusive education,’ nearly seventy percent of teachers think it is good to teach students with SEN in the regular classrooms.

Concluding Remarks

This research aimed to find out how regular class teachers viewed teaching students with SEN in Sri Lankan government schools. Since Sri Lankan schools are diverse, teachers' teaching experiences and way of thinking differ from the popular National schools to the Type 3 schools in rural areas. Therefore, this research intended to arrange the conditions of schools by selecting the three types of schools in each education zone that are geographically and ethnically diverse. From this research, the following points were summarized.

Firstly, this research has revealed that all the participants, either as a class teacher or subject teacher, recognized the presence of a student with SEN in their classes. Most of the participants in this research were keen in meeting SEN of students in their classrooms, instead of considering those students as lazy or problematic. Implications of this can be the awareness regarding SEN of students had increased among teachers compared with the situation a decade ago described by Alwis (2005).

Secondly, this research shed a light on actual practices related to accommodations/modifications for students with SEN teachers provided in the classroom. From the interviews with teachers, it was clear that accommodations which teachers provided were implemented naturally and unconsciously. Those were intended to be conducted as strategies to implement inclusive education. This means even in the competitive education environments encompassing schools, the well-being of students is regarded as very important and there is no room for doubt when helping students who are in need. For example, a few teachers of the P-2 school mentioned that the principal in the school instructed teachers to be the 'mother' of their students. In contrast, modifications shown in the Table 5 seems to be conducted through the coordination with the specialist teachers such as special unit teachers and ISAs.

With respect to support for teachers teaching students with SEN, they felt they were supported especially from the school administrators. In this research, it was revealed that some principals played the role of coach and organizer as well as advocate. The leadership which administrators need to take may differ by type, location, size, and the controlling government of schools.

However, there was a pitfall in coordination between teachers of regular classes and special units. Only four regular class teachers (27%) among fifteen working in the schools with the special unit mentioned that they had received support from the unit teacher. This may reflect the alienation of the special unit under the present school organization in Sri Lanka. Reframing the special unit's standpoint towards professional leadership in special needs education in the school would be a future issue for investigation.

Thirdly, findings in this research reinforce that three quarters of teachers felt that they faced difficulties in teaching students with SEN. Other than difficulties in individual assistance to students with SEN and factors related to burdens added to their working load by having students with SEN, it was found that teachers felt stressed to meet the needs of

both students with SEN and other students without SEN. The stress for teachers regarding this balancing issue occurred because nearly 70 % of participants think that students with SEN would be better off learning in the regular classrooms in terms of learning benefits for both sides and human rights point of view.

It was suggested that teachers face new types of stress or dilemmas when balancing classes to meet the needs of both students with and without SNE as awareness on inclusive education increased. At the same time, this research indicated that a school culture was already in place to provide personal aid to students with any need, especially among rural schools, Therefore, training and seminar need to be introduced with the following goals in mind; firstly, on inclusive education strategies such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which meet the needs of students both with and without SEN; and secondly, on inclusive education philosophy that reinforces a teachers' internalized professional ideas of accepting and helping students facing difficulties.

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