

Challenges of dealing with the challenged

W.A. Sumudu Thilanka, Assistant Lecturer

Abstract

Sri Lanka has achieved many goals related to education. Yet, in the process of ensuring the right to education for all, national education system has faced many obstacles related to special needs education (SNE). In this case, inadequate attention has been given to explore challenges of the teachers of special needs education at schools. Thus, study attempts to explore experiences of in-service special needs education teachers both in school and social settings. A purposive sample of fifteen respondents including ten teachers, four administrative staff members and one supporting staff member were selected. Qualitative data collected by deploying in-depth interviews was analysed through narrative analysis method. It was revealed that the teachers of special needs education are spatially and socially segregated within the school leading to marginalization in decision making of the school operations. Further, their performance is

questioned owing to unawareness on nature of special needs education leading them to dissatisfaction and demotivation in career. The exposure to updated knowledge/ techniques is limited restricting their career advancement. Socially, the profession has been questioned causing intimidation and female special needs education teachers faces gender-specific challenges related to marriage/ pregnancy based on misconceptions regarding disability. Finally, special needs education teachers are financially underpaid disregarding the commitment job requires. Hence, admiring their passion towards the profession, study stipulates to recognize the significance of their role in special needs education, to accommodate required trainings and career advancement opportunities, to create a platform for a dialogue on special needs education that eliminates misconceptions regarding profession and to ensure quality service provided for students with special needs.

***Keywords:* Inclusive Education, In-service Teachers, Special Needs Education, Students with Disabilities**

INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka is a signatory of numerous international conventions that necessitate the equal access to educational opportunities for all. Thus, the education system of the country adopts the principle of inclusion in responding to diverse needs of students coming from different socio-economic backgrounds with different physical/intellectual capacities. Education system has always accommodated children with special needs in various forms in Sri Lanka such as segregated education, integrated education and rarely inclusive education. As Lopez cited in Ratnawathi (2005) traces, Sri Lanka has a long and proud history in supporting people with disabilities. Modern education system was influenced by Western missionary school culture and the government has introduced free and non-discriminatory education for all in 1938 during the colonial period. Currently, the education system employs three ways for educating students with special needs. Those are special education, integrated education, and inclusive education.

In 1912, the Church of England founded the first residential Special School for Deaf and Blind Children was in Ratmalana. In 1935, the Catholic Church started the second residential school. The country's third residential special school was started in 1956 for the Tamil-speaking community. As a result of the above initiatives, by 1956, 515 children were enrolled in schools catering to special education (Mathews, Dewendre & Piyasena, 1977). Gradually, special education schools were increased. In 2020, according to the Annual School Census of Sri Lanka, thirty registered residential special schools operated in Sri Lanka (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Integrated education is a significant milestone in special education that assures the right to education of students with multifaceted special needs. In this system, classrooms for students with disabilities (mostly SEUs) are located in regular schools. But SEUs are separated with a dedicated teacher/s and students of SEUs attend mainstream classes with normal children either on a part or rarely full-time basis at varying degrees. Sri Lanka is practicing integrated education since 1960s (Piyasena, 2003).

Inclusive education is a new paradigm shift in SNE. As the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education specify, inclusion in the context of education is based on the idea that all children should learn together, regardless of differences or disability (UNESCO, 1994). It requires the full inclusion of students with special needs in mainstream classes. This has been practicing in Sri Lanka since 1990 (Ketheeswaran, 2019). But the inclusive

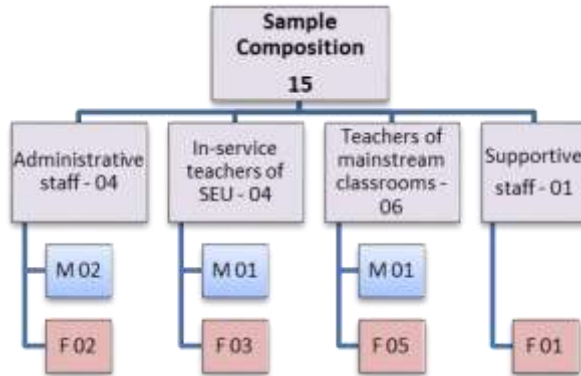
education practice in the Sri Lankan context does not exactly based on its original philosophy. Thus, it is rather a ‘Sri Lankan model of inclusive education’ that is closer to integrated education. However, inclusive education has been globally accepted as the best approach in SNE as it can improve students with special needs academically, socially and emotionally. Several local studies have argued the same and emphasizes that the experience, knowledge, and attitude of teachers and principals and other professionals are beneficial and crucial for the implementation of inclusive education (Abeywickrama et al, 2013, Alwis, 2005, Ellepola, 2016, Hettiarachchi and Das, 2014).

Considering the research background, it was identified that there are ample local and international studies aimed at identifying the challenges faced by students with special needs in experiencing the right to education. This victim focused approach in research culture has diverted the attention from causes towards the consequences. Yet, this study strongly believes that the challenges of SNE cannot be effectively addressed by tackling the constraints faced only by the students who are beneficiaries. The experiences of in-service teachers in educating the students with special needs must be deeply examined to ensure productive and efficient service delivery that can result in actual realization of the goals of inclusive education eventually.

METHODOLOGY

The study was exploratory in nature. The setting of the conducted study is a school in Gampaha district, Western province. According to the Annual School Census of Sri Lanka (Ministry of Education, 2020), there are 7,502 Students by grade cycle of studying in Special Education Units (SEUs) in government schools. Census statistics of Western province portray a considerable need of SE in the province. Majority of 1,195 out of the total number of government school students (7,502) in SEUs are studying in Western province. Even if the special schools are considered, Western province ranks at the top reporting 12 schools out of 30 in total. Further, the third highest number of government school students in SEUs is reported in Gampaha district (512). The selected school is a leading government school in the Negombo educational zone and specifically a catholic boy’s school where a special education unit is operating. The significance of the school is that it adopts segregated special education, integrated education, and inclusive education too.

The sample was selected purposively, and the sample consisted of ten (10) teachers including 04 in-service teachers of SEU (entire SEU staff) and 06 teachers employed in mainstream classrooms.



Three (03) of the SEU teachers were females and the head of the SEU was a male teacher. Four (04) other administrative staff members working at different capacities in the school including the principal who was a Christian father were in the sample. In addition, a cleaning staff member engaged in duties at both SEU and mainstream classrooms was also included in the sample comprising fifteen (15) respondents altogether.

M – Male F - Female

Figure 1. Sample composition of the study

The inclusion criteria for participation of non-SEU staff in the sample was having frequent interaction (minimum thrice a week) with the SEU staff.

In accordance with the statistics of the Ministry of Education, (2020) considering the number of teachers by the section of the teaching of major subject, teachers of SEUs are included in 17,441 which is 7.0% of the total number of teachers employed in government schools island wide. This numerical figure represents teaching Staff of not only the in-service teachers of SEUs but all those who involve in activities such as Library, ICT lab, Student counselling, Physical activities. Among them, 34.4% is male teachers and the rest of the 65.6% are female teachers.

These statistics would elaborate what constitutes the limited number and gender imbalance of in-service teachers of SEUs found in the sample.

Qualitative data was collected by deploying in-depth interviews. Interview guideline was scheduled focusing more to the questions on what the respondents see as challenging in the employment of SNE. Further probing technique was used to explore how such experiences lead to challenges of the socio-emotional life of staff of the SEU and the effective implementation of SNE in the school. In addition, observation was used as a method of data collection as the behavioural patterns of the respective sample generates a significant eminence in validating data. Collected data was analysed through narrative analysis method based on the suitability fact of the nature of data that was obtained from the respondents.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The benefits of physically segregated learning environments are arguable, yet most developing countries adopted this method as a stepping-stone towards inclusion (UNICEF, 2003). Sri Lanka also has a history of initiating successful attempts to inculcate an inclusive culture within education system. Wertheimer (1997) stated that the Sri Lankan government was an early pioneer of mainstreaming students with special needs. Yet, a procedure in keeping with this concept has not been followed within the school system. One common feature of inclusive practice in Sri Lanka is the setting up of SEUs within regular schools. Special teachers take the major responsibility for children with disabilities in a segregated environment. In this backdrop, in-service teachers of SEUs experience a wide range of challenges in their professional life. Prevalent culture specific beliefs and myths about disability has made not only their career but their social life challenging as professionals engaged in SNE. This sets the psycho-social wellbeing of SEUs teachers' vulnerable which negatively affect the quality of professional service they provide to the students with special needs.

In the background of a philosophy and demands of the growing international movement for inclusive education, the in-service professionals play an undeniable significance in making the standards and regulations of SNE an accomplishment. Therefore, study focuses two major contexts: within the workplace setting and the social setting, where in-service teachers face challenging experiences due to their profession.

EXPERIENCES IN THE WORKPLACE SETTING

Having a SEU in the school, the in-service teachers are located in the particular unit which is located the front left corner of the school (refer figure 2). The SEU is linked to the main entrance of the school which is at the front right corner through a ramp that is constructed alongside the ground.

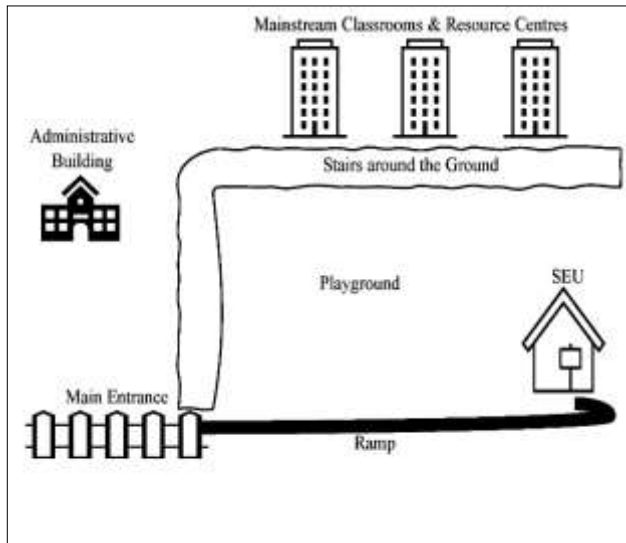


Figure 2.
the SEU in

Location of
the School

The physical structure of the SEU has kept both teachers and the students of the SEU away from mainstream classrooms, resource centres like IT lab, science laboratory, aesthetic rooms, auditorium or smart classrooms and the administrative building. Thus, both students and teachers are spatially segregated from the main school operations. This physical segregation has created an isolation of the SEU staff and the students from daily and specific activities of the school such as assembly, special masses and sports meets, etc. Further, these teachers have been distanced from the access to aforementioned resources that can be utilized to enhance teaching techniques. The location of SEU has limited teachers' attempts to take students to such resource centres.

“I always believe that some things such as behavioural patterns that we hardly educate these kids are easy to be trained by making them to watch as cartoons or animations. Because they are really interested in those and more likely to imitate

them. But, taking them across the ground is impossible because of the stairs. Otherwise, we have to take a long route through the ramp. Few of us cannot do that too. Even we as teachers cross the ground during the day rarely. It is tired and takes time. We have to keep our eye on these students. Now, it has become a practice that we are just informed even the decisions of important meetings. Because we cannot attend them leaving students in SEU. That is really disappointing. SEU is an important part of the school. It is essential that our concerns are taken into consideration in planning events and making decisions about the school”

(Teacher of SEU).

This reflects those teachers are restricted not only from utilizing resources but from the decision-making process too. The physical segregation has led to a significant social segregation of the SEU staff in the school setting. All respondents stated that the interaction between SEU and non-SEU staff is minimum. In addition, the non-SEU staff and the mainstream students portray a considerable unawareness on the job of SEU staff. During discussion, they have been named as ‘teachers of the sick children (leda lamainge guruwaru)’. SEU staff has been seen as a group who are committed to do a service resulting in non-recognition of them as skilled professionals in dealing with students with special needs. These factors have demotivated the staff within the school resulting in a lack of job satisfaction.

The SEU staff undergoes to an excessive drain of physical and mental energy. Having twenty-one students with ranging disabilities such as autism, multiple disorder, down syndrome, hyperactive condition, slow learners and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder has made their job difficult and challenging.

“Each student is special and requires an individualized education plan. But think of the number of students each of us should take care of... there is no single day I reach home without a headache” (Teacher of SEU).

“Kids pinch us, bite or hit us. Sometimes they hurt other students and when we mediate, they hurt us too. But we know those acts are unintentional. Anyhow, they keep us running like horses during the day.”

(Teacher of SEU).

Coupled with the extreme physical energy consumed, lack of support and appreciation of the other staff including school administration and the parents drain the mental energy of SEU teachers. It was stated that the parents expect miraculous improvements of children while they follow no instructions given to be practiced at homes.

Particularly, compromising with mainstream class teachers to integrate the students from SEU has ever been confrontational. As revealed, neither parents nor teachers are willing to accept that these students require integration not only to excel in traditional competitive education but to obtain a sense of normalcy and the experiences gained by students through social interaction and participation with peers can enhance their strengths. Performance productivity of SEU staff has been questioned based on constant complaints about the failure of children with disabilities to cope with the pace and abilities of the same age mainstream students. In most of the cases, the integrated students have been reversed to SEU by the mainstream class teachers with the knowledge of the administration or voluntarily reversed to SEU by their parents. This discredits the attempts of SEU staff instead of understanding that inclusive or integrated education requires changes in content, techniques and assistance in mainstream classrooms.

Lack of frequent trainings and unavailability of updated knowledge about new techniques/ assistive devices that may help educating children have been perceived as another crucial challenge of the SEU staff in their career. The world has moved fast in inclusive education practices. Yet, these teachers possess very outdated knowledge and skills which they obtained during their initial phase of the career.

“We need frequent trainings. There are modern techniques that can improve the impact of SNE. But, either the central to local authorities or school is concerned in training us. At least we cannot personally follow such trainings since it is exceedingly difficult to get leave”

(Teacher of SEU).

“Having a limited number of staff in the SEU, they rarely take a leave. There have been instances that we give a holiday to SEU students if more than one of the staff happen to take an unavoidable leave”

(Principal of the School).

These findings reflect that the teachers' career advancement is hindered due to resource limitation of the school. It is not just the professional skills of teachers that are stagnating but the tools, assistive and therapeutic devices used in educating children. This indicates how negatively both personal and professional life of the SEU staff have been influenced.

EXPERIENCES IN THE SOCIAL SETTING

In addition to the challenging experiences in-service teachers of SEU face in the workplace setting, they are compelled to cope with the challenges that come across in their social settings. Mostly, it was seen that the unawareness on SNE among communities, myths and misconceptions in the society associated with disability have come into major play in causing negative experiences to the teachers employed in SNE.

Study revealed that the entire SEU staff has experienced negative responses from their immediate social circle for opting SNE. They have been criticised and influenced by their own families at the starting phase of their career to reconsider their career choice. They have had to struggle in convincing their families that SNE is as equal as other teaching professionals. It was stated that the families, relatives and the peers doubted whether they are actually in the teaching profession due to social scepticism or unawareness about the SNE.

“My farther once asked me whether I am actually a teacher or a caretaker of the students with disabilities. He doubted me because they did not know that teachers are specially trained to educate children with special needs. This saddened me because I wanted to make my parents proud being a teacher”

(Teacher of SEU).

It is not rare to find the same unawareness or attitude among many in the society.

“When I first started my job here, I did not know there is a special classroom like this to educate disable children in schools. I initially thought these teachers are looking after these kids”

(a cleaning staff member).

It was interesting to find out that the gender is crucial in manipulating the social experiences of teachers employed in SNE. Specially, being young women, these

teachers have faced many stigmatized experiences since they are employed in the SNE. All female teachers other than the head of the SEU stated that they faced problematic circumstances in marriage since they are teaching in the SEU.

“It was a proposed marriage. Matchmaker had told them that I am a teacher. So, his parents liked it a lot. Only once we both agreed to marriage, they got to know that I am a teacher in the SEU. They objected me unless I agree to resign. Then, my husband said that he does not have problem with that. I was strictly requested by parents-in law to resign when I get pregnant as they do not want their son to have a disable child. They are still not in good terms with me. I am afraid what will happen when I get conceived in future”

(Teacher of SEU).

This idea was quite common among many families. Both own parents and in-laws either believe or fear that their daughters will give a birth to a child with similar disabilities if they stay too engaged with the students with special needs. The social beliefs what you associate more during pregnancy can influence on your child or myth of misfortune that would be brought by people with disabilities have a serious impact on the female teachers engaged in SNE. It was clear that they are passionate about teaching these students yet, those who still have no children fear that they will be held responsible if some kind of an issue occurs due to a biological reason when they have a child. This sort of gender specific social restrictions and misbeliefs have caused an unnecessary psychological burden to them.

Apart from above, the economic challenges have affected these teachers severely. Even if the teachers in SEUs have to spare more physical and mental efforts in their duty compared to the others, the remuneration they receive has no change to others. It was stated that they should be given an extra allowance for the fact that they have to go beyond merely teaching the students with special needs as there is a risk always associated with taking care of these children. Further, it was mentioned that they do not have any opportunity of earning an extra income through means such as tuition classes. Thus, they are highly dissatisfied with the remuneration they receive for the job that is done.

CONCLUSION

Concluding the findings and the discussion of the study, it is evident that the in-service teachers in SNE are facing multiple challenges both in their social and

professional settings irrespective of their continuous passion and commitment towards the profession. The magnitude of their role in SNE is indisputable as they are the direct implementers of SNE.

The experiences of the teachers of SNE in the school setting have directly made them feel marginalized from the school operations. Making them participated in decision making is utterly important as they make the voices and needs of the students with special needs heard and seen in planning. Further, such common discussion forums can be helpful in developing a dialogue between mainstream teachers and SEU staff which may raise the awareness of all regarding the gaps needs to be addressed in bridging SEU and mainstream classroom education. This is a steppingstone of instilling an inclusive education culture in the country.

In addition, both social and school settings should be adequately educated about the role of in-service teachers in SNE as such awareness can deconstruct the social stigma associated with both disability and SNE. It can be a motivation for those who are employed in SEUs. While encouraging a dignified employment, such initiative leads to sensitization of the public regarding SNE.

Another undeniable conclusion drawn from the study is that the staff of both SEUs and mainstream classrooms need a systematic training on educating students with special needs. Outdated teaching methods can result in low productivity and increased school dropouts from SEUs. Thus, harnessing the available resources and exploring opportunities for further improvement is a vital aspect of SNE.

Considering all above, it is obvious that the in- service teachers of SNE are challenged in dealing with the already challenged students with disabilities. The challenges of SNE professionals have a direct impact with the quality of the service they provide to the students with special needs. Addressing these challenging experiences can be beneficial in two ways as it results in increasing the job satisfaction and motivation of the teachers while such a progress benefits the students with special needs in meeting the standards of SNE. The study stipulates the responsible bodies to take necessary actions to eliminate any negative cultures, practices or beliefs prevailing in association with the profession of SNE with a view of encouraging inclusive culture in the national education system in the long run.

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