



Perceptions of ‘inclusion’ and perceived preparedness among school teachers in Sri Lanka



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H I G H L I G H T S

- Teachers in inclusive schools did not consider themselves competent.
- Significant differences in all competencies between two groups of teachers.
- Significant differences in teacher competencies by background variables.
- Lack of training and resources emerged as major concerns.

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This study examined the preparedness of regular and special education teachers in Sri Lanka to teach students with disabilities in an inclusive educational setting. It also explored their perceptions of the term ‘inclusion’ and its applicability to the Sri Lankan context. A total of 75 teachers were surveyed using a two-part questionnaire. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight teachers. The interview data was analyzed using Framework Analysis and the quantitative survey data was analyzed using descriptive statistics. Special education teachers indicated higher perceived competence in working with students with special needs compared to general education teachers. Implications for teacher preparation via pre-service and in-service training are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The paradigm shift in special education from ‘segregated instruction’ to ‘mainstreaming’, ‘integrated education’ and ‘inclusive education’ has been part of the discourse of professionals in education worldwide in the last three decades. Inclusive education, however, remains a much debated, often contentious and complex issue particularly in resource-poor countries. Much of this contention stems from a lack of clarity on its conceptualization and implementation. While inclusive education in the West is seen as a fundamental right of every child with special needs¹ (for example,

Least Restrictive Environment provision in the American legislation stipulated within the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), the same rigor is not available in legislation and policies in many developing nations, including Sri Lanka.

Inclusion, however, seeks to address the learning needs of all children, young people and adults, with a specific focus on those who are vulnerable to marginalization and exclusion (Rieser, 2008). Inclusive education proposes a move away from segregated teaching and learning contexts to the inclusion of students with special educational needs within the general education classroom. It is “distinguished by an acceptance of differences between students as an ordinary aspect of human development” (Florian & Kershner, 2009, p. 173).

In this paper, ‘inclusive education’ is defined as ‘the integration and education of most students with disabilities in general education classes’ (Eleweke & Rodda, 2002). Inclusive education offers a child with special educational needs the right to enroll in his/her

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¹ The terms ‘special needs’ and ‘disabilities’ will be used interchangeably to refer to a child who requires additional support in school.

local mainstream school and be supported to reach their academic and social potential. Nevertheless, sharing a collective classroom space does not guarantee against 'educational exclusion', as mere presence does not assure 'full participation' in learning. This 'process of inclusion and exclusion' is one of complexity, 'renegotiated moment-by-moment by pupils and teachers' (Benjamin, Nind, Hall, Collins, & Sheehy, 2003, p. 547).

One challenge to the inclusion of children with disabilities within mainstream education may be the historic view of medically describing a person according to their 'disease process' or 'impairment' (Croft, 2006). This view, in which the locus of control is internal to the person with disabilities, places the onus on him/her to adapt in an attempt to be integrated into mainstream education or receive instruction in a separate, segregated special education facility. Connected to this view is the challenge of defining disability and characterizing impairment (Florian & McLaughlin, 2008). This view has been challenged by the disability rights movement, which proposes disability as a social construct, with a shift in the responsibility of providing mainstream education to all children falling on the system rather than on the individual (Oliver, 1990 cited in Barnes, 2001). This view, therefore, promotes an 'integrated' education system for children with disabilities. While current local legislation promotes inclusive education, arguably, to ensure 'full participation' of children with disabilities within the mainstream classroom teachers need to be cognizant of the concept and nuances of inclusive education. It also requires teachers to have knowledge and skills in managing and supporting children with special educational needs within the regular classroom.

Modern, Joergensen, and Daniels (2010) conducted a review of inclusion advocacy work in 26 countries and found that 'relatively strong policy environments are just not being put into practice' (p. 14). Among the barriers impeding the establishment of inclusive education in developing countries are the large student numbers in mainstream classrooms, the low teacher to pupil ratio, the location of schools and poor accessibility to buildings, the limited or lack of specific training in inclusive educational methodologies, poor collaboration between special education teachers and their mainstream colleagues, the lack of additional classroom support such as teaching assistants and teaching/learning aids, prejudicial attitudes toward persons with disabilities among parents and teachers, fears about the perceived negative effect of including children with special educational needs on children without disabilities in the mainstream classroom and poverty (Das, Kuyini, & Desai, 2013; Cornelius & Balakrishnan, 2012; Eleweke & Rodda, 2002; Furuta, 2009; Modern et al., 2010). Conversely, among the factors identified to promote inclusive education in countries where it has been well-established are progressive policies, the availability of trained teachers and the access to on-going training and classroom resources (Kugelmass & Ainscow, 2004; Philpott, Furey, & Penney, 2010).

While there is agreement in principle, the challenge in most resource-limited countries such as Sri Lanka, is for the provision of any type of formal or informal education for children with disabilities. A review of the access to education for children with disabilities run by the Social Services Department in the North-Western province of Sri Lanka had indicated important disparities in facilities across schools (Furuta, 2009). In addition, the author reports a wide range of students, from preschool to adults, often randomly positioned in the same classroom with no heed to age or ability, with some students continuing in the same class with the same teacher for over 10 years. Although the right to all children, including children with disabilities to access mainstream education is agreed upon in principle, in practice, many children are, and continue to be denied access to mainstream placement in Sri Lanka.

Furuta (2006) raises concerns even on admission to special units within mainstream schools with as much as 35% of her study participants reportedly denied access. The reality for many children with disabilities in the developing world is limited or no access at all to formal education (Filmer, 2005; Guernsey, Nicoli, & Ninio, 2006; Thomas, 2005).

Furthermore, tensions arise from the 'parachuting' of concepts connected to inclusion, still largely a concept from the Global North or the Minority world (e.g. western developed nations such as Australia, Canada, United States, United Kingdom among others)² into resource-limited Majority world countries in the Global South (e.g. India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh among others),³ with primarily didactic pedagogical styles and culturally-specific educational ideologies. As Pather (2007) asserts, "for countries of the South, national agendas are often based on borrowed notions of, and strategies for, inclusion" (p. 628). Highlighting a culture-specific or region-specific phenomenon, Cornelius and Balakrishnan (2012) acknowledge that the adoption of inclusive education policies have been 'considerably slower pace, if at all, in developing countries' (p. 82) compared to resource-rich countries.

The availability of support services including related service providers and resources such as teaching aids promotes positive attitudes among teachers to inclusive education (Prakash, 2012). Conversely, those skeptical of adopting inclusive educational policies remain unconvinced of its potential academic and social benefits for those included (Lewis & Doorlag, 2003; Salend, 2005). Additionally, these teachers have raised concerns about limited training opportunities and a lack of personnel and administrative support, which does not adequately prepare the teacher to implement a policy of inclusion in the classroom (Das, Kuyini, et al., 2013).

Likewise, a number of investigators who have conducted research on inclusion in other countries that have socio-political-educational variables similar to Sri Lanka argue that positive teacher attitudes toward inclusive education will strengthen its implementation (Das, Kuyini, et al., 2013; Shah, Das, Desai, & Tiwari, 2014; Prakash, 2012). They emphasize that in order for the teachers to hold positive attitudes toward inclusive education, they need to have a clear conceptual understanding of inclusion. For example, Das, Kuyini, et al. (2013) conducted a survey of 470 regular school teachers in New Delhi, India, and reported that the teachers were positively disposed toward including students with disabilities. The authors also found that the teachers who had contact with a person with a disability and those who did not have a focus on disability during their pre-service teacher education programs were more positive toward inclusive education. In another study, these authors used qualitative methods to determine teachers' concerns and perceived barriers to implementing inclusive education in schools in New Delhi, India (Bhatnagar & Das, 2014). The respondents in this study were moderately concerned about implementing inclusive education in their schools. The teachers identified a number of barriers to inclusive education, including a lack of trained teachers and policy on inclusion, parental pressure to accommodate their child with special needs, fear of

² The terms 'Minority world', 'Global North' and western countries will be used interchangeably in this paper to refer to resource-rich economically advantaged countries of the West.

³ The terms 'Majority world', 'Global South' and resource-poor countries will be used interchangeably to refer to economically developing countries, particularly countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

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