Excluded in Inclusive Schools: Experiences of Children with Disabilities, their Families and Teachers in Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study examined the experiences of children with disabilities, their parents and teachers at the special education units in 3 public schools, located in the Kandy district of Sri Lanka.

Method: The participants were 20 children with disabilities, 18 parents and 8 teachers. In order to examine the influence of physical, social and psychological environments on children's participation in learning, this qualitative study employed participatory tools, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and non-participatory observations. The data were manually coded using thematic analysis.

Results: Five themes emerged: attitudes, values and beliefs; support and relationships; devices and technology; natural and built environment; and services systems and policies. Factors facilitating or hindering learning were identified within each theme. Parents and teachers tend to focus on the children's impairments and academic achievements. However, extracurricular activities and supportive relationships were found to promote student participation.

Conclusions: Overall, the current practices in Sri Lankan education for children with disabilities did not meet the global recommendations. There is a need to design culturally compatible inclusive education models and to achieve a paradigm shift within all communities towards inclusion.

Key words: Inclusion, children with disabilities, Sri Lanka

INTRODUCTION

"Inclusion increases participation in learning and reduces exclusion within and from education" (UNESCO, 2003). The International Classification of

Functioning (ICF) demonstrates the dynamic relationship between a person, his/her impairment and the environment that can influence the activity and participation of children with disabilities (WHO, 2001). The ICF framework identifies the promoters and barriers in schools that will influence activity and participation of children (WHO, 2004).

Sri Lanka has near universal adult literacy and high primary school enrolment rates, owing to the free education policy and the Compulsory Education Ordinance (Parliament of Sri Lanka, 1997). However, out of a 10.6% population of school-aged children with disabilities, the number of children who access education is as low as 4.6% (UNICEF, 2003). The Ministry of Education (MoE) is the principal provider of education for all children in Sri Lanka. Formal education for children with disabilities is provided mainly by the special education units (SEU) within these government (public) schools. At present there are 907 SEUs catering to children with disabilities (Asian Development Bank, 2005). SEUs consist of separate classrooms located in the primary section of the mainstream schools, for students with intellectual impairment, severe physical impairment, communication impairment and visual impairment. The children, ranging in age from 6 -16 years, are segregated in these classes throughout their school lives.

The benefits of physically segregated learning environments are arguable, yet most developing countries adopted this method as a stepping stone towards inclusion (UNICEF, 2003). In Sri Lanka, moves towards the concept of truly inclusive education were initiated within some of these schools over the last 5 years. Students, based on their ability to cope with academic activities alongside their peers without disabilities, are relocated into mainstream classes for several hours a day.

This qualitative study explored the experiences of children with disabilities within state run "inclusive schools", with the aim of apprising the local and global partners in education about the possible adaptations these environments may need, to optimise participation in learning alongside other children.

METHOD

This qualitative research was conducted in Kandy District, in the Central Province of Sri Lanka. Out of the 8 schools which provide education for children with disabilities, 3 schools were purposively selected because they catered to children with a range of impairments.

Study Design

The study was conducted in 4 phases. During the first phase, ethical clearance and permission from local educational authorities were obtained. Subsequently the study proposal and the topic guides were presented to a steering committee comprising a special education teacher, a parent and one student with disabilities from each school. Amendments were made according to their suggestions and comments. During the second phase, non-participatory observations were conducted within classrooms. The third phase involved collecting data from children, parents and teachers from 3 schools. Finally, the findings were presented to the steering committee, the school principals and the education ministry authorities.

Study Population

20 students with disabilities attending the SEUs constituted the main study population. The type or aetiology of the impairment was not a deciding factor for recruitment. There were 17 girls and 3 boys, and they were between 5 - 15 years of age. While the majority were Sinhalese (16), the rest were Tamil (3) and Muslim (1).

There were totally 18 parents of children with disabilities from all the three schools. Two focus group discussions (n= 9, 6) were conducted in two schools and, as the numbers were too small (n= 3) in the third school, individual in-depth interviews were conducted. 8 teachers participated in key informant interviews.

Table 1: Details of Participants

Participants	No.
Children	20
- Visual impairment (VI)	2
- Hearing and communication impairment (CI)	10
- Intellectual impairment (II)	3
- Multiple impairments (MI)	5
Parents/carers	18
Teachers or assistant teachers	8
- Mainstream classes	5
- Special education units	3

Apart from the children, data was generated from teachers and family members. Teachers belonged to two categories (i.e. the special education units and the mainstream classes providing inclusive education).

Table 2: Summary of Participants and Data collection methods

Participants	Method of Data collection	Setting
Children	Single or group interviews using participatory tools	School
Parents/carers	Focus group discussions Key informant interviews	School
Teachers or assistant teachers Mainstream classes and SEU	Key informant interviews	Classroom
Investigators	Non-participant observation	School and class

Data Collection

Data was collected using four methods: participatory tools, semi-structured key informant interviews, focus group discussions and non-participatory observations. All interviews were conducted by the first author, with the second author present as an observer. Details of the data collection instruments are described in Tables 2 and 3. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim and translated into English by the authors. Names of participants were converted to codes to maintain anonymity.

Table 3: Participatory tools used in Data collection

Activity	Description	Probe
Draw their school as they saw it.	A verbal probe to describe the school environment, if there was no prompt response.	When you come to school in the morning you walk along the pathway from the gate to the class room. What do you like or dislike during this walk?
Drawings done by other children in the study population were used as a guide to describe what the school environment is. Children responded diagrammatically and /or verbally.	To generate ideas from children who could not comprehend purely verbal instructions.	Picture of the class- room, the step at the entrance, children playing happily, a child crying in the play ground. Do you recognise the site/person? Tell us what you liked or disliked about these places or persons.

Asked children to tell a story relating to a day's experience at school. Verbal or diagrammatic responses.	Enable children with poor cognitive functions to relate their experiences.	Once there was a little boy who liked going to school… Tell me why you like coming to school.

Measures of Participation in Learning

To assess children's participation, McConachie et al (2006) acknowledge the usefulness of observations within classrooms and during leisure and recreation activities. However, no classroom assessments were made because disturbance in the learning environment was likely, in the absence of accommodation methods. Since the diverse communication skills among children with disabilities make assessment difficult, this study accepted only the verbal or non-verbal declarations by the participants, or direct observations by the investigators as indicators of participation.

Data Analysis

Data was analysed manually using the thematic analysis method. All transcripts were cut and grouped according to emergent recurring themes in relation to factors influencing learning and participation of children with disabilities in school. The first and the third author coded two sets of the transcripts individually, and together reviewed the themes. Interpretations of drawings and non-participatory observations were also coded and categorised thematically.

RESULTS

Thematic analysis generated 5 main themes.

Attitudes, Values and Beliefs

All participants held independent opinions as to why children required schooling and the outcome they expected.

Based on their positive experiences, children viewed school as an avenue to socialise. Interaction with peers through participation in dance or sport encouraged them to learn, as depicted by their drawings and from what they said. The majority (11/20) of children disliked academic subjects in contrast to creative subjects, and some were able to explain the reasons (Table 4; 1).

Most parents (15/18) considered education as a route to escape from the stigma attached to the child's impairment, while some believed education could provide a secure future. They perceived inclusion of children with disabilities within mainstream classes as a way of achieving a sense of *"normalcy"* and attributed this to the experiences gained by children through social interaction and participation with peers. Parents considered teaching methodologies and exams as a challenge (Table 4; 2).

Teachers from mainstream and SEU classes shared similar ideas while focussing on the impairments of students. Although teachers with experience in special education facilitated teaching by identifying the strengths of students, there were constant complaints about the inability of children with disabilities to cope with the pace and abilities of their peers. The majority (5/8) of teachers highlighted the impairments as a barrier within the ordinary classroom (Table 4; 3).

Support and Relationships

The student drawings and interviews strongly portrayed support and relationships as the most significant factors influencing their perceptions of participation in school. Bullying was illustrated as a disturbing factor within the school environment.

Most parents and students regarded supportive teachers as being vital to school attendance and participation. Most students recognised the teaching methodologies addressing their specific needs as a positive aspect within the SEU.

> Student: *"I like to be in this class (SEU) because I like to draw rather than write. When I go to the ordinary class the teacher dictates the lessons. But I prefer to copy from the blackboard. When I am in the special class the teacher is very kind, she allows me to draw ....."*

> Interviewer: *"So what did you do about that in the ordinary class?"*

> Student: *"I told my teacher that it is difficult to do complex words but she asked me to practise the whole time and learn somehow."*

> Interviewer: *"So do you think that helps?"*

> Student: *"I try at home to learn with my mother but the next day I forget it."*

From these discussions it was also evident that learning was inspired through identification of strengths. One teacher explained his attempts to build a supportive environment within the school.

Table 4: Attitudes, values and beliefs about school environments

Participants	Quotes
1. Children	**Why they came to school**
	"I come to school to play with my friends" – 8-year- old girl with intellectual impairment. *"I could learn and play with my friends"* – 12-year- old girl with intellectual impairment.
	What they liked about school
	"I can draw art, my teacher is very kind and does not beat me" – 10-year-old student with intellectual impairment. *"I was beaten by a teacher because I could not do a lesson in environmental science. I cannot do Buddhism, environmental science, maths and language but I like to paint"* – 12- year-old girl with intellectual impairment.
2. Parents	**Why they thought children required inclusive education**
	"It is very important to experience inclusive education to enter into the normal society" - Father of a student with hearing impairment. *"My son learns to sit at one place and interact with students in the SEU, this will familiarise him with the school environment"* - Parent of a student with intellectual impairment. *"Students, parents and society view the special class as a place meant for some social sub class or for stupid children"* - Mother of a student with intellectual impairment.
	Challenges to participation in learning in the mainstream class
	"My child is very weak in learning new things. In the ordinary class he is not quick enough to follow the instructions of the teachers. Therefore he needs to be in the SEU to get personalised attention" - Mother of a student with intellectual impairment. *"I want my child to learn the normal curriculum, even though he is not good at them. If he cannot perform at exams he has no future"* - Mother of a student with intellectual impairment.
3. Teachers	**Focus on the impairment**
	"I do not send some of the students to the mainstream classes because they cannot hear and they do not know standard sign language to communicate" - SEU teacher. *"Some of these children cannot stay at one place. They are disturbing the others constantly. The teachers in the ordinary classes cannot give more attention to them"* - SEU teacher. *"I send them to the mainstream class for two periods per day, they cannot withstand longer durations as they are very weak, they cannot cope"* - SEU teacher.

*"Some students used to call me **"the disabled teacher"**, because I am teaching in the SEU. I had a lengthy discussion with them and now they come and play with the students in my class"* - SEU teacher.

Products and Technology

Lack of adapted materials and assistive equipment to facilitate learning was a significant hindrance according to all the participants, regardless of the type of impairment. Only one Braille machine was available in the class for children with visual impairment. Computer assisted learning was not possible and there were no inexpensive written adaptations such as large print text books.

"He can read if the letters are darker and larger. Unfortunately, for higher grades the letters in the text books become smaller" - SEU teacher.

Students with hearing impairment possessed hearing aids that did not match their requirements and did not work well. Though most teachers were conversant with special teaching methods, they were unable to put them into practice due to the lack of resources.

Natural and Built Environment

None of the classrooms were purpose built. There was no sound-proofing in classrooms for the hearing impaired students. However some parents thought that the noise did not interfere with their children's hearing because they were anyway "deaf".

"This classroom was built for the SEU with communication impaired children, it is near the road but I do not think the noise of the vehicles interferes with the hearing of our children because anyway they are 'deaf'" - Parent of child with hearing impairment.

Physical accessibility was observed to be a problem for children with physical and visual disabilities because of different elevations due to the hilly terrain in this area. No ramps or railings were constructed. Though none of the children in the study were wheelchair users, there were no provisions made to accommodate such students.

When asked directly about the need for such environmental adaptations, the teachers highlighted the need for the students to acquire skills to overcome barriers.

"It is a bit difficult to reach this class, but their home environments are worse and very difficult to mobilise within, but children learn to get around using their canes, and with time become quite independent. I do not think we need to change these environments any further" - SEU teacher.

However the students related contrasting experiences.

"I find it difficult to climb the steps and have stumbled down several times" - Student with visual impairment.

This was further supported by the drawings where students (4/20) illustrated the multiple levels within the school as a hindrance in their learning environment.

Services Systems and Policies

Lack of information about educational services and poor awareness regarding availability delayed school admissions for children of many families. Most parents and some teachers and students emphasised the need to change the curriculum contents, the mode of delivery and evaluation methods to match the students' abilities.

"All students have to sit a common examination. When a student with disabilities scores 30-35 marks that is equivalent to 60-70 marks of a child from an ordinary class. Therefore a separate marking scheme is essential" - Mainstream teacher.

The parents and teachers recommended that these strategies should be initiated by the top level policymakers, so that the lower level authorities would implement them. They considered the school principals to be key deciding figures within such systems.

DISCUSSION

The students, parents and teachers identified barriers and facilitators within learning environments. The barriers to participation appeared to outnumber the facilitators, and rested on strong cultural and political foundations. Also, some facilitators appeared very uncertain within the study context and would have transformed into barriers with minimal external cultural influences. Strong shifts in attitudinal and legislative practices would be required to achieve the inclusion and participation of children with disabilities in mainstream education.

Barriers to Learning

Attitudes, Values and Beliefs

Positive attitudes, values and beliefs of society, peers, families and teachers were identified as fundamental for the initiation and sustainability of education for children with disabilities. In some communities, parents decide to keep children

away from school due to their own conceptions, and in other situations attitudes within the school environment prevent learning even when children attend school (Mutua et al, 2002; Martin & Santana, 2003; Miller, 2003). Parents in Sri Lanka are influenced by the higher literacy rates and the presence of a compulsory Act for primary school education (Parliament of Sri Lanka, 1997). In contrast to other resource-poor settings (Mutua et al, 2002), the parents who participated in the study indicated the need for a school-based education. However the primary objective of parents and teachers was impairment correction.

Parents were apprehensive of the challenges posed in mainstream classes. Such reactions based on personal experiences and cultural misconceptions could be discouraging. If society had more inclusive attitudes and higher expectations of children with disabilities, this would inspire the families (Stubbs, 2008).

Support and Relationships

Social attitudes can influence teaching practices, regardless of the teachers' educational background. Teachers, peers and at times parents play supportive roles in making inclusion successful in resource-poor educational settings, including Sri Lanka (Lopez, 1999; UNICEF, 2003). Similarly peer buddy systems have strengthened inclusive initiations within schools in Africa (Child to Child Trust, 2003). Though the teachers with a special education background were aware of inclusive strategies, they rarely implemented them. Instead, they viewed the students' impairments as barriers to inclusion. Similar views are common among teachers, where they strongly oppose inclusive practices due to the emphasis on the impairments of children (Holt, 2002). Pressure from families to achieve normalcy through school-based education may influence teachers to practice inclusive strategies.

Bullying is common in environments where students of diverse age groups are mixed. It is described globally as a hindrance to learning environments (Law et al, 2007). Although some of the children mentioned the problem, none of the teachers identified this as a barrier to learning and parents seldom commented on it, reflecting the reduced significance they attributed to non-academic topics.

Products and Technology

Lack of resources and technology to facilitate learning was the most significant deficit identified by the teachers. Though over-emphasis on special education equipment is considered a barrier to inclusive education (Stubbs, 2008), the

teachers in the study had practical concerns and were advocating for cheap and locally available alternatives to facilitate learning.

In many poor countries assistive devices which are not compatible with the individual or the environment are distributed (Hartley & Wirz, 2002; Armstrong et al, 2007). Low-cost alternatives like large print books, Braille text books and talking books are unavailable within many public educational institutions (Weerakody, 2006). While poor economic status of countries may contribute to this, the lack of exposure to information and knowledge about adopting classroom practices may be equally responsible.

<u>Natural and Built Environment</u>

Along with implementing an inclusive curriculum, it is essential to develop inclusive physical environments. The topography of Sri Lanka with its central hill country poses many challenges with regard to physical accessibility. Despite minimal facilities within rural Sri Lanka, children in this study overcame barriers to reach schools, in keeping with other local evidence (Slee et al, 2008; Sumanasena et al, 2008). However the presence of physical barriers within the school environment was a hindrance which was not readily acknowledged by the teachers. This situation exists in spite of legislation and policies that promote strategies of accessibility (Ministry of Social Welfare, 2003; UN Convention, 2006).

<u>Services Systems and Policies</u>

Studies conducted in Sri Lanka, and in similar settings globally, identify transport and social welfare services as some essential prerequisites to initiate basic school attendance (Slee et al, 2008; Sumanasena et al, 2008). Intersector collaboration and implementation of policies are poorly developed in Sri Lanka, similar to many other resource-poor settings (McConkey, 2007). Some practitioners from Asia have questioned the sustainability of inclusive education policies exported from the West in such unstable conditions (Kalyanapur, 1996). Therefore the concept whether a child with disability can learn alongside others will be determined by the community's acceptance of inclusion. As Jones (2005) states, it is also crucial to strengthen the legislations and policies to ensure sustainability of such initiatives.

In previous studies on the needs of the children with disabilities, parents identified a significant paucity of information (Mutua et al, 2002; Ministry of Social Welfare; 2003, UNICEF, 2003; Sumanasena et al, 2008). Initiatives to increase awareness could impact favourably on the age of school admission of these children and improve the feasibility of age-appropriate inclusive strategies.

Miles (2007) identifies incorporation of enjoyable activities into the curriculum as good practise to improve participation in learning. Families in developed countries have achieved this through access to information, raised awareness and advocacy campaigns (Rabiee et al, 2005). In contrast, the families in this study were striving to mould the children to fit in to the prevailing system, rather than attempting a paradigm shift in society. Several students reported that they were compelled to learn writing despite their strong dislike of and difficulty with that activity. Such efforts are likely to frustrate children and discourage learning.

Facilitators to Learning

<u>Attitudes of Students</u>

The students' attitudes strongly facilitated learning. Most children with disabilities identified extracurricular activities as an incentive to attend school. This emphasises the value of enjoyable learning activities in creating inclusive environments, as identified by Save the Children UK (2002).

None of the students identified their impairments as a barrier to attending school. They relied upon encouraging teachers and supportive peers to help them participate. While some mentioned the difficulties they encountered within the mainstream classes, they readily acknowledged the support from teachers within special education units where their specific needs were addressed. As described by Miles (2007), a truly inclusive environment should provide appropriate support within a mainstream setting.

Many parents viewed the SEU as a "safe" environment for children, especially when their children encountered challenges within the mainstream classes. In contrast, a study reported that parents in the United Kingdom viewed the supportive systems in SEU as a better route to realise their children's potential (Rabiee et al, 2005). In the UK, the student-directed positive teaching strategies motivated families to achieve higher aims for their children. This also reflects the impact of awareness and advocacy programmes within developed settings.

Limitations

Owing to lack of resources to carry out a larger study, this study was conducted in only 3 schools in one district of Sri Lanka. Though this can be logistically and methodologically challenging, future studies should ensure greater involvement

of children with disabilities and their families at all stages of action research, especially when exploring their views on participation in learning.

CONCLUSION

It was observed that impairment-centred views, expressed by both teachers and parents, appeared to dominate within all learning environments. A shift in attitudes and concepts needs to be achieved. Since local beliefs and attitudes towards disability have a very strong influence, it is imperative to design practical and locally compatible inclusive education models to provide education for children with disabilities in low resource settings. The strengths of these children need to be recognised and positive expectations engendered in mainstream school contexts. While the primary focus should be on students' requirements, attention should also be paid to the parents' needs because the sustainability of all projects hinges on parental satisfaction with children's educational attainments and experience.

There should be more information about inclusion and advocacy programmes. Strengthening of support services such as transportation and social welfare is required to deal with environmental barriers and access issues. Moreover, the reinforcement of legislations and policies are fundamental to achieve progress in the education of children with disabilities.

In Sri Lanka, the current practices in education for children with disabilities do not match the global trends in inclusive education. Despite many initiatives, there is a strong need to reinforce these strategies and bridge the gap. Designing services to meet the requirements of stakeholders at the grassroots-level will be the way to achieve success in resource-poor settings. This study could be an eye-opener for professionals who cater to the needs of the children with disabilities within the health, education and social welfare sectors, not only in Sri Lanka but also in similar settings worldwide.

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