

Challenges and Opportunities in Implementing Inclusive Education in Plantation Sector Schools of Sri Lanka

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Abstract

This study was conducted to investigate the challenges and opportunities and search for pathways to implement inclusive education in plantation sector schools of Sri Lanka by developing an inclusive education framework that suits children with disabilities. This study employed an exploratory research design, which is a qualitative research approach. Focused on Tamil-medium schools in the Hatton Education Zone, the participants including principals, teachers, parents, and students were selected for the study using purposive sampling. It utilized participant observation, in-depth interviews, and focus group interviews as data collection methods, and content analysis was used for the data analysis. Key challenges identified include insufficient teachers and specialized training for teachers, poor infrastructure and lack of awareness of inclusive education among the society. Nevertheless, there are opportunities such as strong community support, a positive attitude of school society and the existing policy framework of the National Education Commission (NEC) and the Ministry of Education (MOE). The study introduced a proposed inclusive education framework designed specifically for the unique needs of schools in the plantation sector. This framework highlights the importance of improved teacher training, upgraded infrastructure and collaborative efforts among plantation management, educators, and the community to guarantee equal educational opportunities for all children in plantation sector schools.

Keywords: *Inclusive education, plantation sector schools, children with disabilities, special educational needs, educational framework*

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Introduction

Background

Inclusive education is an approach in which students with many different kinds of disabilities and learning needs are educated in classes with non-disabled students. In an inclusive arrangement, students who need additional support spend most of their time with their non-disabled peers rather than in separate classrooms or schools (Kirschner, 2015). Unlike special education, inclusive education integrates all learners, addressing diversity and reducing exclusion based on disability, race, or other factors (Reddy et al., 2000).

Sri Lanka has promoted inclusive education along with the Universal Free Education Policy in 1945 and the Compulsory Education Policy in 1998. Despite high enrollment rates, children with disabilities still face challenges in access and participation due to factors like inadequate teacher training and infrastructure. In Sri Lanka, the education of children with disabilities in Tamil-medium schools is behind Sinhala-medium schools due to the lack of formal teacher training in Tamil-medium, which began only in the 2000s (Furuta, 2007).

The plantation sector in Sri Lanka concentrated mainly on the Central, Uva and Sabragamuwa Provinces, and to a smaller extent, on the Southern Province and some parts of the Western Province which have historically been marginalized areas with significant educational disadvantages. Special education in the plantation sector began in 2000 with the establishment of special education units in the Hatton education zone, offering services that bridge children with disabilities with the mainstream education system. However, the overall enrolment of children

with disabilities remains low, and schools often fail to provide suitable educational support (Furuta, 2007). The commencement of a few special education units in Tamil-medium schools in 2001 paved the way for getting school enrolments of children with disabilities from their restricted line room life and this has gradually led to the adoption of inclusive education approaches, though the progress has been slow and uneven.

Problem Statement

The current global debate surrounding special education centers around the inclusion of children with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream schools, a movement that gained traction following the 1994 UNESCO Salamanca Conference on Special Needs Education. In Sri Lanka, particularly in the tea-growing plantation areas, educational achievements lag behind national averages, although progress has been made due to legislation mandating free education and government prioritization of primary education (Little, 2003).

Despite the advancements in Tamil medium schools and the establishment of special education units in the 2000s, many children with disabilities still do not receive adequate educational support, often resulting in continued exclusion of them from formal education (Furuta, 2007). Due to the lack of responsible teachers, most schools have not paid attention to children with disabilities staying out of school. Few schools with special education units enroll children with disabilities according to the stipulated special education teacher-student ratio. The SEN student number is high in such schools. Although the legislation now enables enrollment of children with SEN in regular schools, the effectiveness of inclusive education remains a question. Many such

students are enrolled without proper support, leading to high dropout rates and societal issues such as child labour and marginalization. This research aims to assess current inclusive education practices in these communities and propose strategies for creating an inclusive school culture that aligns with the principles of inclusive education and equal educational opportunities for children with disabilities in plantation sector Tamil schools.

Aim and Objectives

This study aimed to investigate the challenges and opportunities in implementing inclusive education in plantation sector schools of Sri Lanka, with a focus on developing an inclusive education framework that supports children with disabilities. To achieve this aim, the following three specific objectives were formed:

- To explore the current situation of education of children with disabilities in plantation sector schools
- To identify the gap between the current education practices of children with disabilities and the inclusive education policies and legislation
- To develop an inclusive education framework for children with disabilities in plantation schools

Based on the above three specific objectives, the following seven key research questions were formed.

Research Questions

1. What are the categories of disabilities found in plantation sector schools?

2. What are the strategies implemented in the plantation schools to support children with disabilities?
3. How do the parents and the community contribute to the education support of children with disabilities?
4. Do the schools have appropriate human, physical and infrastructure to support the children with disabilities?
5. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the education practices implemented?
6. Is there any gap between the practices of inclusive education and legislation with current practices?
7. What is a suitable inclusive education framework for plantation sector schools within the existing opportunities?

Review of Literature

Many qualitative research have been conducted to study the inclusive education practices for children with disabilities in Sri Lanka. However, research related to such practices in plantation schools seems scarce. With hopes of filling this gap, this research explores answers for the above-mentioned research questions.

Inclusive education and children with disabilities

Inclusive education is a strategy aimed at addressing the diverse needs of all learners by increasing participation in learning. It involves integrating children with disabilities into

mainstream education with their peers, thus fostering inclusion rather than segregation (Losert, 2010). Inclusive education is distinct from special education. It refers to a model where disabled and non-disabled children learn together in mainstream schools with the appropriate support. This is an evolution from special education towards quality education for all children, addressing their specific needs in mainstream classrooms (Chavuta et al., 2008). The 'Individuals with Disabilities Education Act' (IDEA) ensures that students with disabilities are entitled to free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment (Walls, 2010).

Policy proposals and recommended strategic activities in Sri Lanka

Through a comprehensive status review, policy planners have identified special and inclusive education sector-specific 10 core areas and elements accompanying directive principles based on the guidelines elaborated in Part III of the National Education Policy Framework (NEPF) - 2020-2030 (National Education Commission, 2022). This approach is taken to ensure that the policy planning process gives comprehensive coverage across the sub-sector-specific core areas and elements while giving due consideration to issues and gaps highlighted in the status review that are lingering the progressive developments of the special and inclusive education sector. The specific ten (10) core areas are i) Access for children with special education needs to early childhood care and education; ii) Access for children with special education needs to regular education system; iii) Learners and learning environment; iv) Curriculum and teaching-learning process; v) Quality of human resources; vi) Quality of physical resources; vii) Financing of special and inclusive education; viii) Regulation, governance and management; ix) Quality assurance, and x) Data management and research (National Education Commission, 2022).

What is inclusive practice in education?

Inclusive education is when a school or college educates children of all abilities and backgrounds. It means that children with additional learning needs and special educational requirements are educated within a mainstream learning environment, rather than a specialist school (Kirschner, 2015). Inclusive practice in education can be described as attitudes and methods that ensure access to learning for all learners, to make sure that all learners feel welcomed and valued and get the right support to help them develop their individual talents and achieve their goals (Lee, 2023). When education is truly inclusive, it not only benefits learners but also the staff, school and wider community. Non-inclusive practices include preserving school cultures, policies and practices that are non-responsive to the diversity of learners and perpetuate inequalities, segregated schooling for disabled learners, valuing some learners more than others, maintaining barriers to some learners' participation in learning, thinking that inclusion mostly concerns disabled learners, viewing differences between learners as problems to be overcome, identifying academic achievement as the main aim of schooling at the expense of personal and moral development, and perceiving inclusion in education as a separate issue from inclusion in society (Lee, 2023).

Global situation of inclusive education

In recent years, inclusive education has become the subject of extensive global debate and discussion. Over 160 volumes containing the phrase “inclusive education” are listed in the library catalogue of the Institute of Education in London. Several international journals are now

exclusively devoted to the subject, and it is regularly selected as the theme for national and international conferences. Outside the academia, the promotion of inclusive education has provided the rationale for numerous international development programmes and the focus for international agreements such as the Salamanca Statement (1994) and Dakar Framework for Action (2000) (Fanu, 2022).

Implementation of inclusive education in the Sri Lankan context

The MOE in Sri Lanka has been actively involved in promoting inclusive education through a series of circulars aimed at decentralizing policies and enhancing the educational framework for students with disabilities, as evident in their recent initiatives. For instance, recent guidelines, such as Circular 37/2020, provide comprehensive strategies for implementing inclusive education in schools, detailing the responsibilities of educators and the support services available for students with disabilities (MOE, 2022). Further, Circular 33/2022 specifies the institutions responsible for special education assessments, including the Zonal Education Assessment Centers and the Inclusive Education Department of the National Institute of Education (NIE) (MOE, 2022).

Methodology

This study adopted an exploratory design under the qualitative research approach. It employed participant observation, in-depth interviews, and focus group interviews as data collection methods to gain comprehensive and significant insight into the research problem. For data analysis, a content analysis method was utilized to systematically interpret and derive themes and patterns from the collected qualitative data. This design ensured a rich, detailed understanding of the contextual and lived experiences of stakeholders involved in inclusive education in the plantation sector.

Participant observation allowed the researcher to observe the real-time dynamics of inclusive education practices within classrooms and schools. Under in-depth interviews, key informant interviews and survey interviews were used. The former was conducted with teachers, administrators, and students to gain deeper insight into their challenges and experiences, while the latter facilitated broader data collection with a mix of qualitative and quantitative elements. The focus group interviews were held with primary class teachers and parents.

The Hatton education zone in the Nuwara Eliya District was chosen as the study area due to its high concentration of Tamil-medium plantation schools (MOE, 2021). All the Tamil medium schools (112) situated in this zone were initially selected for the survey interview. The key focus was on six (06) schools with special education units from the three Tamil medium divisions of the particular zone (two schools from each division). Six (06) principals (one from each school), thirty

(30) primary teachers (five teachers from each school), six (06) Special Education teachers (one from each school), five (05) children with disabilities, five (05) children without disabilities, five (05) parents of children with disabilities and five (05) parents of children without disabilities from each school were purposively selected as participants of the study to provide wider perspective to this research.

Content analysis method was adopted for analyzing and interpreting the qualitative data (Powell & Renner, 2003). The following steps were used in data analysis: Getting to know about the data, focusing on the analysis, categorizing information, identifying patterns and connections within and between categories and interpretation. Two content analysis approaches were used: a) Focus with questions or topics, and b) Classical content analysis (Bauer, n.d). Using classical content analysis approach with data obtained from interview schedules and observation sheets, answers were searched for research questions No 01: What are the categories of disabilities found in Tamil medium plantation sector schools? No 04: Do schools have appropriate human, physical and infrastructure to support children with disabilities? No 05: What are the strengths and weaknesses of the education practices Implemented? and No 06: Is there any gap between the inclusive education legislations and policies with current practices? The 'Focus with questions' analysis approach sought answers for research questions No 02: What are the strategies implemented in the plantation schools to support children with disabilities? No 03: How do parents and community contribute to the educational support of children with disabilities? and No 07: How to develop an inclusive education framework for plantation sector Schools?

Findings and Discussion

Categories of disabilities found in the school sector

The key categories of disabilities found in the school sector were intellectual disability, learning disability, hearing impairment, autistic spectrum disorder, visual impairment, speech impairment, health impairment, and multiple disabilities. The number of male students with disabilities was found to be higher than the number of female students with disabilities. Furthermore, children with learning disabilities and children with intellectual disabilities were higher in number.

Strategies implemented in plantation sector schools to support children with disabilities

Among the responded schools, about 25% function special education units and they enrol children with disabilities while other schools enrol these children in the mainstream classes. Children who are studying in special education units, after reaching a capable level, are sent for integration education. Children with mild disabilities are sent for general education and they get help from special education teachers. Identification and the assessment and evaluation are initiated only by special education teachers. These special education classrooms are also supplied with teaching-learning materials.

Parents and the community support provided

It has been identified that parents take care of their children according to their capacity. They request school admission for their children following the normal procedure and send them to school regularly; accompany them to co-curricular activities and routine medical clinics; buy learning materials for their children; and obey all school rules and regulations. Sometimes, these parents' economic status affects this process. Parents hope that their children are promoted from special education to the Integration Education or Inclusive Education set up. At times, these children receive educational equipment and medical help from well-wishers, medical personnel social and religious organizations, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). However, the assistance received by plantation sector schools is less than the ones in urban areas. Yet, these students are accepted and loved by their parents and their society.

The level of human, physical and infrastructure facilities provided

Out of the responded schools, 49% have no human resource facilities to look after children with disabilities. Also, it was observed that appropriate equipment are not provided for these students. The special education classes in the schools were the same as the normal classrooms and physical accessibility was not provided according to the special needs of the children. Most of the special education classrooms were not at a satisfactory level in providing relevant human, physical and infrastructure facilities.

Strengths and weaknesses of the education practices implemented

As for the strengths, certain schools have enrolled children with SEN and the relevant authorities have identified their disabilities and diverse needs. In some schools, a small percentage of special education teachers have been appointed by forming special education units while a few schools have integrated children into mainstream classes. The positive attitude of special education teachers and primary teachers towards inclusive education is highly respected. The respondent primary teachers expressed their willingness to help all children, and principals mentioned the possibility of including SEN students in mainstreaming classes creating equal opportunities. Meanwhile, the Zonal authorities have undertaken supervision of special education programmes, in-service training for special education teachers and student developmental programmes even with limited allocations.

There are certain weaknesses identified as well. Though most schools have enrolled children with disabilities, they were not provided with relevant facilities. For instance, some schools have no one in charge of these children, and the special education classrooms are not equipped properly and adequately. The majority of mainstream teachers were not aware of inclusive education policies, legislation, practices and appropriate teaching techniques. Though the student-teacher ratio for special education is approved as 5:1 by the Government circular, it was revealed that more such students are found in these classrooms.

The gap between the practices of inclusive education and legislations with current practice

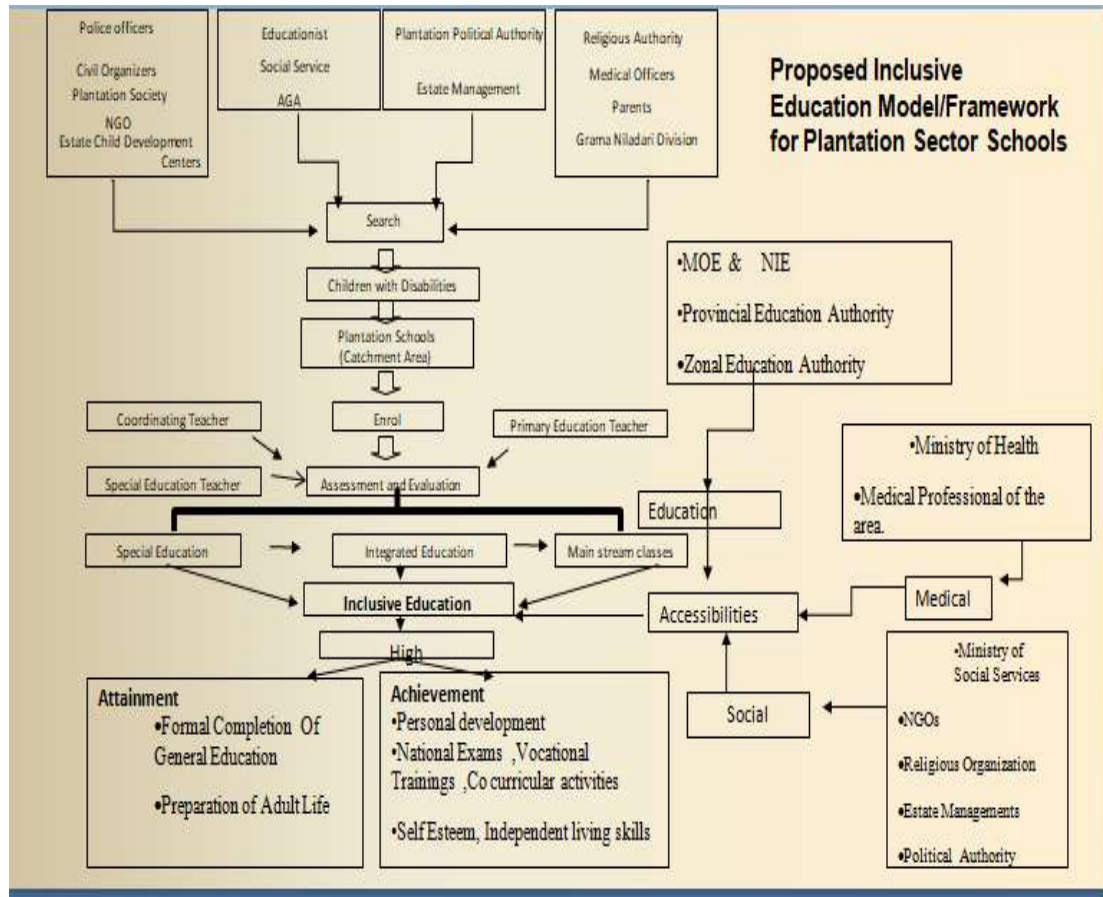
A wide gap is identified in teacher training. Both special education and primary education teachers have a lack awareness of inclusive education practices including appropriate teaching techniques that cater to different types of disabilities, finding accessibility and promoting inclusive education policies among children with disabilities. Accordingly, the participation of children with SEN in learning was not at a satisfactory level. Also, schools with special education units have enrolled a greater number of students exceeding the approved student-teacher ratio.

Suitable inclusive education framework for plantation sector schools

Based on the findings of the study, opportunities identified, and recommendations made for the development of inclusive education for children with disabilities in plantation sector schools, the following framework is recommended for effective implementation (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Proposed Inclusive Education Framework for plantation sector schools



Conclusion and Recommendations

This study underscores significant challenges impeding the effective implementation of inclusive education in plantation sector schools in Sri Lanka, including teacher shortages, lack of teacher training, inadequate infrastructure, special equipment and lack of awareness of inclusive education among the society. However, these obstacles are counterbalanced by promising opportunities such as growing community support, positive attitudes within school communities

and existing legislative frameworks. Prioritizing the above efforts will ensure that children with disabilities can access quality education alongside their peers, fostering equality and inclusivity in education.

This study recommends further research to be conducted in more plantation districts. Also, comparison studies are recommended at national and international levels to search policy implications, infrastructure design, assistive technology, curriculum, physical and environmental accessibility, and related services etc.

Increasing awareness of disability rights and inclusive education within school communities is vital. Annual awareness programmes should be organized by zonal-level administrators for school leaders, in-service advisors, teachers, and local communities. Teacher training is equally critical. Mainstream teachers must be provided training on identifying and supporting children with disabilities, and while special education teachers should receive specialized training for effective teaching strategies to different types of disabilities.

Schools must prioritize enrolling children with disabilities and adapt both curricula and physical infrastructure accordingly. Local committees comprising various stakeholders should be established to monitor enrolment and address accessibility barriers. To solve the shortage of special education teachers, schools with at least five students with special educational needs (SEN) should recruit specialized staff. Coordinating teachers can bridge the gap between mainstream education and SEN requirements. The NIE and other training colleges should

introduce Tamil medium courses in special education and IE, focusing on developing competencies for supporting children with disabilities in the plantation sector.

Collaboration with local government, social service organizations, and plantation management is necessary to provide essential related services, such as medical services, special equipment and transportation. Educational institutions must ensure adequate resources and infrastructure for both special education units and mainstream classrooms. A multifaceted educational approach combining special education, integrated education, and inclusive education is recommended. Strengthening special education units can facilitate smoother transitions for children with disabilities into mainstream settings.

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