

**Including all? Perceptions of Mainstream Teachers on Inclusive Education in  
the Western Province of Sri Lanka**

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## Abstract

*This study aimed to uncover perceptions of 'inclusive education' using semi-structured interviews with 15 mainstream teachers from the Western Province in Sri Lanka. Thematic coding of the interview data was undertaken using the key principles of Framework Analysis. The main themes that emerged were incongruous conceptual understandings of 'inclusive education' and 'integration', discrepancies in the use of terminology, fear of incompetence, concerns regarding limited training facilities, the lack of incentives offered to work within special education settings, the pressure of working towards school examination success and the lack of policy awareness. These findings will be discussed with regard to its implications for policy and practice. The results underpin the need to consider local teacher perceptions and to address these concerns within pre-service and in-service training in order to support the establishment of education reforms of equal access for all, which are relevant and sensitive to cultural needs and considerate of local realities.*

## Introduction

The paradigm-shift from hitherto segregated education to inclusive mainstream education for children with or without disabilities was historic. In principle, it marked in unambiguous terms the right to education for all and the right to access education within a mainstream educational context (Eleweke & Rodda, 2002; Kalyanpur, 2011; UNESCO, 2000). The perceived premise of inclusive education is a strong argument for fostering social inclusion (Abosi & Koay, 2008) within the promotion of fundamental human rights, dignity and equal opportunities (Urwick & Elliott, 2010). Additionally, the case of the perceived cost-effective nature of inclusive education has also been proposed (Lei & Myers, 2011). That said, the wholesale application of inclusive education to low and middle-income countries with the expectation of reasonable accommodations to include all children within mainstream education and the orthodox view of educational effectiveness within inclusive education have been contested (Urwick & Elliott, 2010). Inclusion, only to promote 'social inclusion' without sufficient consideration for academic attainment, has been critiqued as reflecting a charity model approach to disability in stark contrast to the rights-based model proposed within inclusive education (Donohue & Bornman, 2014).

Arguably, inclusive education is a Global North concept transported to the Global South without overt preparation among teachers and educational personnel. While some of the challenges to implementing an inclusive education policy in the Global North resonate with the barriers faced in the Global South, a closer critical analysis of factors specific to the Global South-Majority World experience is imperative to both better understand the ground-realities faced and to bring about change.

Among the deterrents to implementing inclusive education in practice in the Global South highlighted within the literature is the lack of clarity and coherence on the conceptualization of

inclusive education, with the equation and interchangeable use of ‘inclusion’ with ‘integration’, with little consideration for accommodating all children within mainstream education (Bayat, 2014; Kalyanpur, 2011; Pather, 2011; Sharma & Das, 2015). Poor accessibility, which includes school buildings, the location of schools, transportation and inclusive latrines (Erhard et al., 2013) is said to deter equal access to education. Additionally, attitudinal barriers among teaching staff and parents of children without disabilities has also been found to be a challenge to the enrolment of children with disabilities within mainstream education (Bhatnagar & Das, 2014; Nutter, 2011). This reflects the misguided view that the education of children without disabilities will in some way be disrupted by the inclusion of children with disabilities, who may be paid more attention. Connected to this, in the systematic review of the literature on low and middle-income countries commissioned by CBM, Wapling (2016) reports on a recurrent theme of the importance to address the attitudes of teachers, pupils and parents prior to placement of students with disability within inclusive education programs.

Also, the lack of ‘preparedness’ to manage students with disabilities within the mainstream classroom and the scarcity of specific pre-service or in-service training on teaching methodologies for the mainstream classroom have emerged as key constraints (Barnes & Gaines, 2015; Das, Kuyini & Desai, 2013; Hettiarachchi & Das, 2014; Kavale & Forness, 2000; Nutter, 2011). This situation of feeling ill-prepared for teaching children with disabilities in an inclusive teaching context is amplified by the large student numbers in each class in resource-poor countries (Furuta, 2009; Hove, 2014; Mutasa, 2010; Nkonyane & Hove, 2014; Shah, 2007; Wapling, 2016). Compounding this is a lack of investment on better supporting teachers, with a lack of classroom teaching support (i.e. teaching assistants, shadow teachers or Learning Support Teacher) and limited collaborative teaching between mainstream and special education teachers (Ali, Mustapha & Jelas, 2006) and the examination-centric nature of education (Jayaweera, 1999). Underscoring many of these factors is the all permeating influence of extreme poverty on access to education (Le Fanu, 2014).

### **The Sri Lankan context**

The General Education Reforms of 1997 brought about a fundamental change to existing curricula, pedagogies, and the vision of education in Sri Lanka. Among the 19 reforms proposed on educational opportunity were access to special education for children with disabilities, curricula development, and teacher training. With reference to special education, there was to be wider access to educational opportunities via the formulation of programs to facilitate inclusion of children with disabilities into mainstream education. According to Campbell (2013) there is neither a philosophical framework nor a legal framework for the effective realization of rights. Despite having ratified the CRPD in February 2016, the country has not made notable progress in terms of introducing an effective disability rights law that brings the CRPD obligations into effect.

While the legal and policy framework remains thus, persons with disabilities in Sri Lanka face multiple discrimination as the general approach to disability continues to be based on the charitable and medical models. Independence and self-autonomy of disabled individuals is arguably not yet recognized either by their families or the society around them. The number of children with disabilities accessing education in 2000, is reported to have been 59.5% of boys

and 40.5% of girls in Sri Lanka (UNICEF, 2013). Though this number may have arguably increased over the past 20 years, it still suggests that an alarming 40.5% of boys and 59.5% of girls with disability are not accessing formal education, which is unacceptable. Though reporting on the state of educational access back in 2000, seventy percent of classes for children with disabilities were found to be offered within special education units and not within mainstream school contexts in spite of advocating for mainstreaming (National Institute of Education, 2000). However, this may not be unusual as Thomas (2005) states that globally, children with disabilities are more likely to have never accessed school compared to their peers without disability.

This gap between adequate policies and a lack of implementation is echoed within the literature (Anthony, 2011; Pather & Nxumalo, 2013; Modern, Joergensen & Daniels, 2010). For instance, a review of 26 countries found that strong policy environments do not necessarily translate into changes in practice (Modern, Joergensen & Daniels, 2010). Within the ground reality of children with disabilities not accessing any form of education in many countries (Srivastava, de Boer & Pijl, 2013), the poor uptake of inclusive education in the Global South is hardly surprising. Therefore, the baseline with regards to access to education for children with disabilities in under-resourced countries must be acknowledged (Wapling, 2016) together with the state of readiness to transition to inclusive education for children with disabilities (Srivastava, de Boer & Pijl, 2013). Spasovski (2010) argues that inclusive education in practice is firmly dependent on teachers' perception of children with disabilities, of their abilities and limitations, reflecting the stigma and stereotypes of disability prevalent within a society. These teacher perceptions are said to impact on both the students and the learning process, which makes uncovering and documenting teacher perceptions, particularly of the Global South-Majority World experience, of much value.

## **Method**

### **Study area**

The Western Province consists of three Districts: Colombo, Gampaha, Kalutara. This Province was chosen as it includes the capital city and is arguably the best resourced Province. The researchers felt it best to uncover the perceptions of teachers in the best resourced Province as it would offer clearer insights into the operationalization of inclusive education in practice. At present, there are 107 mainstream National schools and 126 mainstream Provincial schools in the Western Province.

### **Participants**

Teachers working in mainstream schools or in special units attached to mainstream schools in the Western Province of Sri Lanka were invited to be part of the study. A purposive sampling technique was adopted with the participants identified through professional contacts with the schools. A total of 15 Sinhala and/or English-speaking teachers from the Western Province were included in the study. The participants, all female, were between 25-52 years, with a range of work experience of 6 months to 24 years. There was one preschool teacher, ten trained graduate teachers, two trained mainstream teachers, one trained special education teacher and one government-appointed mainstream English teacher.

## **Interview guide**

The aim of the study was to uncover conceptual understandings of inclusive education among Sri Lankan mainstream school teachers in the Western Province. An interview guide was devised based on the literature on special education and inclusive education. The guide consisted of a structured section on demographic details and a guide of 7 topic areas for the semi-structured interviews (Appendix 1).

## **Data collection and analysis**

Face-to-face and telephone interviews were conducted with the participants using an interview guide to support the discussion. Each interview lasted between 20 - 45 minutes. The interviews were audio-recorded and recorded on paper simultaneously, as appropriate. A thematic analysis was undertaken on the interview data, using the key principles of *Framework Analysis* (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994).

## **Ethical considerations**

Ethical approval was gained from the Ethics Review Committee of the Faculty of Medicine, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka. An information sheet and a consent form were offered in Sinhala and English to the participants, as required. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant to maintain confidentiality.

## **Results and Discussion**

The thematic analysis of the semi-structured interview data resulted in seven main themes including conflicting understandings of ‘inclusive education’, discrepancies in terminology, limited training opportunities in inclusive educational pedagogies, fear of incompetence, lack of incentives, special education training as leverage and policy awareness.

### **Theme 1: Conflicting constructs of ‘inclusive education’**

The theme of ‘conflicting concepts’ refers to a lack of cohesion among the participants and often insufficient clarity on key constructs associated with inclusive education, which is of particular concern within the context of the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons of Disabilities (United Nations, 2006) by the Sri Lankan government, the Sustainable Development Goals of 2030 the country espouses to and the adoption of inclusive education at a policy level (Ministry of Social Welfare, 2003; UNICEF, 2003). The participants’ descriptions of inclusive education were at times lacking in clarity, and on occasion, contradictory in the constructs associated with the concept, suggesting a lack of a uniform definition among teachers. Rupa (P10), a teacher attached to a mainstream government school in the Gampaha district exemplifies this confusion. Her initial explanation was that a child with a disability is best supported within a special school setting, making the point, however, that this may be, in fact, easier for the teacher. She said: ‘*When there is a child with a disability in a classroom, we are*

*not able to give him any special attention but if the child is separated, then it is easier for the teacher. When everyone is together, it is difficult because there are other children in the class who are weak in studies. So in terms of the teacher, it is better to have the disabled child separated.'*

However, Rupa's follow-up comment as stated from the perspective of students is in contrast to the above, acknowledging that an inclusive educational setting may be most supportive to the students in-line with current global views (albeit views largely from the Global North) on inclusive education. She explained this saying, *'but in terms of the child, when he/she gets the opportunity to stay with everyone else in the same classroom, this child (the child with a disability) gets the sympathy of others. For example, even if this child hits the others they will not hit him back, that is what is 'special''*. Here, the emphasis is on gaining sympathy rather than a rights-based view of accessing 'education for all' (UNESCO, 2010). Explaining this idea further, Rupa went on to define the term 'special' suggesting that in the context of mainstream school, it is the tolerance and acceptance of 'difference', though in this case, of arguably 'unacceptable behavior' by the students in class, that is laudable.

In direct discussions on the understandings of the different educational options available to children with disabilities in Sri Lanka, there was particular confusion between integrated vs. inclusive education. Referring to integrated education, Malathi (P12), a mainstream school teacher attached to a Roman Catholic semi-government school sounded perplexed requesting for further clarification stating, *'What do you mean by that?'* and when the researcher offered an explanation, talked about inclusive and not integrated education noting that *'We don't have inclusive education in our school. There are children with mild disabilities. For example, I don't even know how to explain- there is a girl who doesn't understand much.'* It appears that Malathi's definition of inclusive education does not include children with mild disabilities but rather maybe, children with significant disabilities.

Another teacher, Tania (P15), though lacking in any direct experience of supporting a child with a disability in her classroom, agreed with the concept of inclusion in principle in opposition to segregation. She voiced her opinion saying, *'I have never had a student with disabilities. I have seen disabled children in big classes; they attend with regular children. I think it is good. If the disability is something that can be addressed in a classroom of other children it is okay to put everyone together. When you segregate, you isolate'*. That said, the caveat to the inclusion of all children with disabilities into the mainstream classroom is given as a disability *'that can be addressed in the classroom'*, and what constitutes the possibility of management is not clear; and who determines this is not specified. She did, however, go on to explain that if the question was on her personal life, she would strive to help develop the child to have commensurate skills to his/her peers as *'I don't like to look down on children with disabilities. If I have a child with disabilities, I would somehow want to bring that child up to the level of the other children.'*

Extending the idea proposed by Tania of including children with disabilities *'that can be addressed in the classroom'*, Sumudu (P14), insisted that special education is *'necessary'* explaining that inclusive education should be offered *'Not for all activities; only for selected activities, activities where everyone can participate.'* Her explanatory model of inclusion was

more akin to the concept of special education units in Sri Lanka where students with disabilities study in special units attached to the mainstream school and are integrated with the mainstream school students during particular activities such as games and art (Hettiarachchi & Das, 2014; UNICEF, 2003). Methuni (P11), a teacher of a Roman Catholic semi-government school, added a different dimension to this argument, suggesting inclusion (or segregation, depending on your viewpoint) of students, contingent on cognition and motor skills, feeling that these students could access and both literally and metaphorically ‘navigate’ the mainstream school system. She cogently expressed this view saying: *‘If there is no cognitive difficulty and if there is only a physical disability, I believe that special education is not needed’*. While this is positive and inclusive of children who do not have cognitive or motor difficulties, the subtext is that children diagnosed with these two particular disabilities should be excluded from accessing inclusive mainstream education. The literature does suggest an influence of the type of student disability on teacher perspectives on teaching in an inclusive teaching-learning setting (Sari, Celikoz and Secer, 2009), though theoretically, inclusive education should be accessible by all children, disregarding the type of disability.

Methuni went on to share her single personal experience of supporting a student with disabilities saying, *‘...I have only taught one girl who was partially blind in our school for the entire 15 years of my teaching practice. But we don’t practice inclusive education in our school. For instance, our school is not even accessible to someone who is using a wheel chair.’* While it is not clear from her words the qualitative nature of her experience (i.e. whether successful or challenging to have supported a student with partial-vision), her words do, nevertheless, add a little more to our understanding of her view. It may well be that it is this lack of ‘preparedness’ (Das, 2001) or easy physical access and by extension, all forms of accessibility, that may be influencing Methuni’s view of inclusion. A report by World Vision (2007) notes that while children with disability are increasingly included in mainstream schools, this is more a form of ‘integration’ (where the child must adapt to fit in) than ‘inclusion’ as there are few adaptations to accommodate diversity’ (p.9).

Conversely, Dhammika (P6), a graduate teacher attached to a mainstream school in Colombo presented a different view, at least initially, making a strident statement that children with disabilities are best supported with their peers without disability within the mainstream teaching-learning context. She proposed that:

*Special education as I understand is teaching differently abled kids separately. But I think they should be in normal classes. There are a few children in our school, one particular child is good in studies and everything but has certain abnormal habits such as suddenly clapping or disturbing during the assembly. But the children know him very well and treat him with respect. This time he took part in the sports meet. He came last, but there was a thunderous cheer for him from all the kids.*

Akin to Rupa’s comment, Dhammika too remarked on the reaction to children with disabilities by their peers without disability suggesting the positive nature of inclusive education, in this instance, encouraging their peer on rather than excusing particular behavior. She went on to espouse the virtues of inclusive education in creating as she saw it, students ‘with compassion’ towards their peers with disabilities. She purported thus:

*I think children understand more about respecting the differently abled, they have learnt it from being together with them. If they were separated they would never know.*

*Sometimes the students' advice the teachers too, sometimes when the teachers say these differently abled kids are a nuisance, the other children correct the teachers and advise us not to think like that and tell us to treat them with compassion.*

Dhammika makes note of not only the compassion shown towards students with disabilities by peers without disability, but also how they take on a role of 'moral tutor', offering advice to the teachers, in a role-reversal of sorts, regarding positive attitudes towards students with disabilities.

Having said the above, the contradiction in Dhammika's explanatory model was apparent when she explained her understanding of and view on inclusive education. Here she explains inclusive education as '*teaching together*' and goes on to describe her view as:

*Sometimes I personally feel it may be more useful if the differently abled kids were taught separately because they have special needs and the teachers could focus more on improving them, but in terms of becoming a part of normal school life, it is important to have them in the normal classrooms.*

So, while continuing to view inclusive education as offering a '*normal school life*' to children with disabilities, she also proposes exclusive special educational instruction claiming that these students have '*special needs*'. Dhammika's view has support from Ahuja and Mendis (2002 cited in UNICEF, 2013) who note that teachers in Sri Lanka have identified special education units as the most suitable educational placement for children with disabilities in comparison to mainstream classrooms. Similarly, Alborz, Slee and Miles (2013) had found a discrepancy between the commitment to inclusive education vs. a need to create special schools among Iraqi teachers. A high level of commitment to inclusive education was also found among Zambian student teachers, though they too simultaneously held the view that children with disability are best supported by specialists as it requires significant accommodations to the mainstream classroom (Muwana & Ostrosky, 2014).

This view of skepticism about the professed benefits of inclusion has been well-documented (Salend, 2005; Wapling, 2016). Spasovski (2010) for instance, contends that teachers' self-perception is of inadequate competencies and preparedness to support children with disabilities or with special educational needs. In the case of these Sri Lankan teachers, the root of the skepticism appears to be a lack of a clear, cogent conceptual understanding of inclusion and the lack of preparedness or training received resulting in notions of perceived difficulties. While positive teacher attitudes are said to bolster its operationalization in practice (Bhatnagar & Das, 2014; Das, Kuyini & Desai, 2013; Prakash, 2012), this perceived negativity may hamper efforts to establish inclusive education. Negative teacher attitudes towards inclusion could result in the use of ineffective pedagogical methods, which in turn, impact on academic attainment among students with disabilities (Nutter, 2011). This lack of consensus and conviction on the value of inclusion may explain why 70% of classes for children with disabilities are said to be offered within special education provision in Sri Lanka (National Institute of Education, 2000).

This confusion or lack of consensus on what inclusion entails may in fact reflect what Pather (2007) proposes as "borrowed notions" of inclusion from the Global North. Therefore, there is a need to more clearly conceptualise and construct 'inclusion' within the local context, which may also include deconstructing and challenging current notions of special education. A wider



approach to inclusive education must consider not only the marginalization of children with disabilities, but educational access of all children.

## **Theme 2: Discrepancies in the use of terminology**

The participants' discussion included comments on the diverse and often changing terminology in English and Sinhala. There was concern about the current terminology in frequent use, an appreciation of the presumed need for terminology even if the current use of terms was thought to be problematic, with a lack of consensus on the terms used.

Many suggested that the terms in contemporary use in Sri Lanka are questionable, noting as Dhammika (P6), a graduate teacher attached to a mainstream school argued, the term 'disabilities' itself is thought to *'immediately bring(s) to mind a child who is 'not normal' or abnormal'*. She asserted that *'the word 'disabled' is not used now. Instead we use 'differently abled'. Even in day to day conversations, we say people with special skills instead of disabled people.'* Likewise, many participants, including Methuni and Malathi, were defiant in their condemnation of some of the terminology in current use while favoring others, arguably they sided with a particular school of thought.

Malathi (P12) critiqued the use of current terminology, suggesting that *'the terminology is not good. ... It's better if we can avoid using the terminology' as 'the terminology gives me a sense of sympathy' so 'why not use 'children with special needs'*. Methuni (P11) shared similar reservations to Malathi (P12) on the current terminology in usage. Methuni said, *'I don't like the terminology. It'll hurt the one with the disability. We say 'blind', 'deaf' or 'mongol' sometimes. We hardly use terms like Down's syndrome. I don't like the terminology. They refer to something that the person is lacking. ...I don't like the term disabilities. I like the term 'differently abled' better. They have a special ability. Even without hearing you can achieve a lot in life. So I don't like the term disability. It is not the strength of the body. It is the strength of the mind.'*

Methuni's view raises an interesting dichotomy. While she is not in favor of terminology such as 'mongol' which she (as well as the disability-rights movement) finds offensive and therefore unacceptable, her list of self-proclaimed objectionable terminology extends to 'deaf' and 'disability', both of which have arguably been positively reclaimed by the disability-rights movement. Cultural connotations within the use of particular terminology must be considered. The culture-specific nature of terminology is markedly evident in the use of the term Deaf, which has been embraced by many cultures. Arguably in Sri Lanka, the Deaf community which have reclaimed and embraced Deaf identity and politics is a minority subaltern community on the margins of a system, robbed of agency with Sri Lanka sign language usage at the site of struggle. This is evident within the local context in the use of the terms 'disability' and 'Deaf' in the Disability Organizations Joint Front (2017) and the Sri Lanka Central Federation of the Deaf (2017).

Methuni's view, arguably shared by others in Sri Lankan society, is the view that persons with disabilities *'have a special ability'*. This notion is proposed presumably to counter the negative

societal stereotypes within Sri Lankan society (Ministry of Social Welfare, 2003), but inadvertently perpetuates positive stereotyping of persons with disabilities as possessing *'special ability'*. This echoes topical debates on 'inspiration porn' in which persons with disabilities are viewed as 'inspirational' exclusively or to a large extent on account of their disability (Heideman, 2015).

Sumudu (P14), an English teacher working for 6 years attached to a government school favored the use of the term *'differently abled'* proposing that *'we should have terminology. Otherwise we can't identify them separately.'* The reference to children with disabilities here is as *'them'*, as the other and therefore, the need for the terminology is with a view to perhaps 'label' or differentiate the group of children without disabilities from the 'differently abled' children. This potentially covert 'ableist' (Campbell, 2009) perspective underlines subtle ways of social exclusion prevalent in the attitudes of some of the teachers.

A lack of consensus in the use of terminology was apparent within the discourse of the teachers. As per this finding of a lack of consensus on what constitutes inclusive education, this together with the connotations of inclusion for a regular mainstream teacher have been proposed as substantial challenges to the operationalization of inclusive education from theory to practice (Miles & Singhal, 2010). Tania (P15) who works at an international school explained that she was uncomfortable with the use of any terminology that is inherently negative or disrespectful to persons with disabilities. She said *'I don't want to use terms which look down on children with disabilities'*. Adding to this view, Susima (P1) who is attached to a mainstream government school explained in detail the changing terminology as she envisaged it saying, *'I use to think disabilities are only physical, but now I know that disabilities could be both physical and mental. Visible and invisible disabilities. ... We use to say deaf, dumb, blind earlier. But now we use disabilities in hearing, disabilities in speech and disabilities in vision. Children who have problems in talking and so on'*. Susima as Methuni (P11) above, decried the use of archaic disrespectful terminology in favor of newer terms. Susima appears to reclaim the term 'disabilities' akin to the disability-rights movement while Dhammika (P6), Sumudu (P14), Methuni (P11) and Dulani (P13) promoted the use of the more recent coinage of 'differently-abled', which as the latter put it, *'the term 'disability' has been recently substituted by the term differently abled but the general term has not changed'*. Dulani notes a shift in the terminology while acknowledging a seeming lack of acceptance of this newer terminology.

### **Theme 3: Limited training opportunities**

The self-explanatory theme refers to the lack of possibilities for training available to mainstream school teachers on special education or inclusive education. This included a paucity of appropriate basic pre-service training as well as on-going in-service training. The conversations centered around the need for training together with questions of who should receive training, the content of the training courses and the pedagogical methods used within training.

Making the point of the dearth of training explicit, Sumudu (P14) argued that *'Training is needed. No training has ever been given. Without training I would not be able to handle a child with disability.'* She remarked that while she is working in a mainstream school and currently

does not have any students with disabilities in her classroom, she does not feel equipped with relevant pedagogical knowledge and skills to manage an inclusive teaching classroom. This mismatch between the potential demands of inclusion in terms of knowledge and skills and the perceived capacity of the teacher results in a lack of overall confidence and a sense of inclusion as ‘more work’ and therefore, ‘a burden’.

With the arguably sudden prospect of working with a student with disabilities within the hitherto mainstream school classroom reserved for students without disabilities, these teachers appeared to be apprehensive about their knowledge and skills to support children with disabilities. This fear of inadequacy and possible failure made some teachers reluctant to include students with disabilities in their classroom. In a conversation with Dulani (P13), she said that *‘Inclusive education is beneficial for differently abled children mostly. However, it may cause practical issues for the teacher.’* One of the ‘practical issues’ or key reason for this fear was the lack of direct training in special education and inclusive education received by the teachers. The current teacher training for mainstream teachers does not offer comprehensive training on pedagogical methods for supporting students with disabilities in contrast to the training afforded to special education teachers. That said, Lakma (P9) argues that the training offered to special education teachers is insufficient for mainstream school teachers who require particular pedagogical knowledge and skills to teach the mainstream syllabus to an inclusive classroom. Dhammika (P6) adds to this opinion by intimating that training should be offered to all teachers and that *‘Teachers should be given training on handling differently abled kids, specially the psychology of handling them.’* There is recognition by her of the importance of considering the psychological dimension of ‘handling’ children with disabilities in the classroom.

The availability of trained teaching staff and opportunities for on-going in-service training and classroom resources have been identified as contributory factors to the establishment of inclusive education (Das et al., 2013; Furuta, 2009; Kavale & Forness, 2000; Kugelmass & Ainscow, 2004; Modern et al., 2010; Nutter, 2011; Philpott, Furey & Penney, 2010; Sari, Celikoz & Secer, 2009). It appears that the lack of appropriate and adequate training is a factor highlighted by this Sri Lankan mainstream teacher group as impacting on the establishment and success of inclusive education within the local context.

When instructional courses are offered, the training program is said to be a *‘basic training program’* (Gayani-P2), usually recommended for teachers who are working in or expecting to work in special education. Arguably, for a policy of inclusion to succeed, all mainstream teachers should be equipped with the knowledge and skills required to support children with disabilities in the mainstream classroom. Thushila (P5) articulating this point expressed her view as, *‘I appreciate the special education given for a set of teachers to teach such learners. But all the teachers which includes those in mainstream schools should be given at least a basic training to work with such learners.’* Conversely, Methuni (P11), who by her own admission, had success with supporting a student with disabilities to access higher education was more skeptical about training. She was strident in her view that training should only be afforded to teachers directly working with children with disabilities rather than all and sundry. Explaining this view, she said:

*I don't think all teachers need to be given a training on handling children with disabilities. Only those who are dealing with those children should be given a training. I have not got a training. I dealt with the one with the visual impairment as I thought was fit. She did very well and in fact is waiting for university entrance.*

Tania (P15) attached to an international school had received specific training though she was critical of the effectiveness of the training due to a lack of experiential learning as they were *'never shown real life examples. It is (was) mostly just theory'*. The need for hands-on experiential learning opportunities were valued by the teachers, which in turn helped them to feel sufficiently knowledgeable, skilled and confident at handling children with disabilities in the mainstream classroom. Adding to this point, Malathi (P12) shared her own experiences, saying *'I think it is a good idea to give a training in handling children with disabilities to all the teachers. I would have benefitted. I have a child in the class who is slow to learn. If I had a training, I would have handled her better.'* These perceptual findings can inform the content and methodology of pre-service and in-service training programs.

Direct discussions on the content of the training courses required generated much debate. Sugath (P8), a mainstream primary school teacher from Colombo noted that *'Teachers have to be trained on special education so that their attitudes will change.'* This suggests a need for training and for training to focus on attitudinal change to enable readiness to engage in inclusion. Alghazo, Dodeen & Alqaryouti (2003) too acknowledge the power of positive teacher attitudes coupled with knowledge on inclusion as benefitting the process of mainstreaming and inclusion. Making this point both explicit and persuasive, Susima (P1) explained: *'Primarily, the need is to change the mindset of teachers. There are more disabled children now, especially in the Western Province there are more children with disabilities now.'* She warns that *'If the teacher does not identify the children, then they end up dropping out of school'*, highlighting the role played by mainstream teachers in identifying children with disabilities and referring them on for professional support. In reality, the experience of a significant number of children with disabilities in under-resourced countries is the limited access and often lack of access to formal education (Filmer, 2005; Thomas, 2005).

#### **Theme 4: Fear of incompetence**

With the arguably sudden prospect of working with a student with disabilities within the hitherto mainstream school classroom reserved for students without disabilities, these teachers appeared to be apprehensive about their knowledge and skills to support children with disabilities. Supporting diverse groups of students within inclusive mainstream classrooms requires specific training and levels of competence (Das, 2001). Dulani (P13) sees inclusive education as *'beneficial for differently abled children mostly'* but raises concerns that *'it may cause practical issues for the teacher'*. Among the 'practical issues' raised by the teachers interviewed were the lack of appropriate and adequate pre-service and in-service training and the large classroom size, both of which result in fears of incompetence and possible failure.

This fear of inadequacy and possible failure made some teachers reluctant to include students with disabilities in their classroom. In a conversation with Uthpala (P7), who is a young teacher

on her first posting to a school and was interviewed at the school appeared visibly anxious at being observed in class. She explained how she was new to the school and was not offered any training by the school prior to starting work on how to support a student with learning disabilities in her mainstream classroom. In discussion, she said *'I don't know what you think of me. I am very new to the school. I was not given any special training or any warning on how to support that child. I don't know the method to teach him.'* Subjectively, the student with a disability appeared to be the least of this teacher's challenges, with another 39 students to manage in the classroom with no classroom assistants.

The key reason for this fear was the lack of direct training in special education and inclusive education methodologies received by the teachers. The current teacher training for mainstream teachers does not offer comprehensive training on pedagogical methods for supporting students with disabilities in contrast to the training afforded to special education teachers. That said, Lakma (P9) argues that even when training is offered, it is insufficient for mainstream school teachers who require particular pedagogical knowledge and skills to teach the mainstream syllabus within an inclusive classroom of students with mixed abilities. As she put it, *'I will not be able to help these children. I don't know enough to help them with all the other children working towards the shishathwa (scholarship) exam. I don't think I will succeed.'* Adding to this point, Susima (P1) noted the fear felt by teachers of being judged and ridiculed by personnel from the Ministry of Education as *'The Education Inspectors will come and check if all the children have nice, round hand-writing. They will mock us if the children's handwriting is not good. They do not understand if we explain the disabilities.'* This fear of a downfall of academic attainment has been identified by Indian teachers arguably facing similar socio-economic, cultural and political realities (Das et al., 2013).

### **Theme 5: Incentives and support**

The need for inducements and the lack there of within mainstream schools for teachers supporting students with disabilities was a cause for concern. The teachers felt that supporting students with disabilities within the mainstream classroom is challenging, requiring a specific skill-set and therefore particular training. As teaching students with disabilities was perceived by some of the teachers to be an arduous task requiring special knowledge and skills, a few teachers bemoaned the lack of incentives. In a discussion with Rupa (P10) on working within a mainstream inclusive classroom, she had this to say: *'There are no incentives; financial or in terms of assistive equipment provided for children with disabilities in the mainstream. Sometimes they need special equipment to support with motor skills.'* This underlines notions of support required to adequately assist a child with disabilities to access the curriculum in an inclusive mainstream classroom. There is an acknowledgement of the need for specific 'equipment' or learning-aids and that the use of specialist pedagogical methods by the teaching staff should be incentivized.

Prakash (2012) notes that the availability of resources including teaching aids assists positive attitudes towards inclusive education among teachers. Sari, Celikoz and Secer (2009) similarly identified the level of special education support provided by the school administration as a key factor influencing teachers' perspectives. It may be that teachers who feel well-supported do not

view the inclusion of students with disabilities as a ‘burden’ or as additional work. Dayani (P4) added to this exchange with her suggestion of the need for a combination of teaching methodologies; pedagogical methods used within special education settings and those used in mainstream educational settings. Explaining this, Dayani said, *‘They need both a special form of education as well as mainstream educational opportunities since they have to be integrated to society while their special needs are addressed in their respective learning environments.’*

Talking about the external support available, only one participant was able to offer specific details. Susima (P1) described that *‘If there are children with autism in the class, we send them to the Pediatric Unit of the hospital. We obtain doctor’s advice about their behavioral patterns. The doctor usually gives us guidance on how to manage the child; let the child work slow; give less challenging tasks. For example, if the class is asked to write an essay, these children will be asked to write 2 lines on the same topic.’* Additionally, Susima went on to explain her own experience of managing a mainstream inclusive classroom. She explained as follows:

*‘I have one autistic child, one hyperactive child and a few slow learners in my class. They are on one side of the class and they follow the same syllabus as the others but at a lower benchmark. For example, if the other children are asked to write a few lines on ‘My home’, they would be asked to draw pictures of the house and people who live there.’*

### **Theme 6: Pressure to guarantee examination success**

The emphasis, perceived as ‘undue emphasis’ by one participant, on examination success puts tremendous pressure on teachers who feel that they are not able to ‘compromise’ on this examination-focus if students with disability are included in the mainstream classroom. On the one-hand, there is a philosophical belief in pushing towards inclusive education juxtaposed with, on the other-hand, a need for achieving good examination results and thereby maintaining the school position on national league tables. Two participants, Lakma (P9) and Susima (P1) both raised the above point. Susima (P1) articulated her concern clearly and cogently suggesting that *‘All the children are expected to perform equally well. Our entire education system is based on competitive exams. Children’s skills and knowledge is not tested. Their personal improvement is not a priority.’*

While acknowledging the need to address prevalent teacher attitudes towards disability and inclusion within training programs, the pressure to deliver on student examination results, particularly at shared compulsory island-wide examinations was identified by Susima as a fundamental obstacle to establishing inclusive education. As she said, *‘...The main reason why teachers do not want these children in a classroom is because of the pressure put on the teachers by the Department of Education. They always want a 100% pass rate.’* This examination-oriented education system and therefore the challenges faced by the teachers was also proposed by Jayaweera (1999) more than a decade ago. Susima argued further asking a challenging question of *‘How can you get a 100% pass rate and neat and round handwriting for each and every child, when there are children with disabilities; teachers cannot perform miracles. ... The Education Authorities have to be sensitized. They have to know what disabilities are.’* This tension between the opposing directionality of an education system which is examination-

oriented and that also attempts to embrace inclusion, places teachers in an uncomfortable position.

Susima went on to raise concerns about the lack of reasonable accommodations at examinations for students with disability, making the system unequal. As she put it, '*... what will happen to these children when they go to the O/L class? They cannot get the same marks as the others. There are no options available for them, there is no system to test their knowledge, something like a viva system.*' In spite of this view, there is evidence of reasonable accommodations offered to students with disabilities regarding modes of response such as the use of a scribe or special switches (Cerebral Palsy Lanka Foundation, 2017), though a change to the format of the examination has not been reported on. It may be that there is an overall lack of awareness among teachers on the types of reasonable accommodations that can be offered through the Ministry of Education.

### **Theme 7: Policy awareness**

This theme of policy awareness encapsulated the different levels of teacher familiarity (or lack thereof) on current local policies connected to inclusive and special education. The overall scarcity of knowledge on current policies concerning special education or inclusive education among the participants was admitted by all the teachers bar one interviewed. Often this lack of knowledge on contemporary policies was accompanied by embarrassment on the part of the participants who suddenly appeared to become aware of the potential repercussions of this limitation in knowledge. Sumudu (P14) in response to a question on government policy said '*I don't know any government policy on education*' followed by a nervous embarrassed chuckle. Similarly, Tania (P15), in spite of having received particular pedagogical training on supporting students with disabilities, acknowledged her lack of awareness of current educational policies connected to inclusive education noting openly and unambiguously that she has '*no idea what government policies are*'.

In further discussions with some of the teachers on awareness of local educational policies relevant to students with disabilities among teacher colleagues and administrative staff of their respective schools, the participants consulted reported a similar scarcity of knowledge. The scarcity of knowledge on inclusion policies and procedures, can in turn, foster negative attitudes towards inclusive education (Das et al., 2013; Kavale & Forness, 2000; Nutter, 2011). Discussions on current policies, its relevance and critical reviews of challenges of policies in practice were said not to feature in staffroom conversations. In a discussion with Malathi (P12), it was apparent that while she was apologetic for her lack of familiarity on contemporary local educational policies, she makes the claim that she is not unusual in this lack of understanding, suggesting that there is an overall deficiency in policy awareness among teachers. While seemingly reticent to speak, she claimed: '*I have no idea. Very sorry to say. I don't have much knowledge about government policies. That is not part of our conversations with other teachers even.*' The suggestion within Malathi's response is on a lack of overall knowledge among teachers of educational policies for both students with and without disabilities. Agreeing with the point made by Malathi and while similarly apologetic, Methuni (P11) said '*Sorry I am not familiar with any government policy. This is not something that is there in our discussions*

*among teachers. If you ask me to name a government policy especially with regard to children with disabilities, I wouldn't know!*

The explanation for this marked lack of knowledge among teachers on relevant educational policies was explained as due to a lack of clarity by the government on its educational policies, making this information largely inaccessible. Gayani's (P2) words captured the general view among the teachers that *'Government policies on education must be clear, transparent and comprehensible to everyone. Policies should identify the needs of the students and should address them. For policies to be successful and effective, policy makers should consider current and upcoming global trends in education.'* The suggestion within Gayani's words was that policies must be articulated lucidly making the information accessible to all but also be in-keeping with the current worldwide pedagogical research evidence-base for teaching students with disabilities. While the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2008) in February 2016 by the Sri Lankan government, and the strong stance on inclusive education in the National Policy on Disability for Sri Lanka (Ministry of Social Welfare, 2003) reinforce the right to free and compulsory mainstream education for all children, the 'lack of a definitive policy on inclusive education' (UNICEF Sri Lanka, 2013) may still be impeding its awareness among teachers and its establishment.

In spite of not being cognizant of contemporary legislation connected to education for children with disabilities, two of the teacher-participants stridently acknowledged the 'right to education' that should be afforded to children with disabilities. Ruwan (P13) in conversation noted that *'children have a right to education. They are born with that right.'* Sharing similar sentiments, Dhammika (P6), who had followed a Diploma course in Education admitted the following:

*'I did an Education Diploma where there were sections on this [education policy] but I cannot remember exactly what they were. But I can remember that the policies basically said that they [children with disabilities] should be treated equally.'*

Adding to her previous comment, Dhammika (P6) went on to explain her individual view point as: *'I personally think these children are the same as the other students, I know there is always a group protecting them in school.'* She appears to feel that there is adequate support to take care of or 'protect' children with disabilities within the mainstream setting, although no further details were offered. Conversely, Ruwan (P13) was less convinced of the adequacy of the support offered, stating that *'...There has to be some support for children with disabilities in the school in order for them to be independent. The school has to have the environment in which they will not have to depend on someone else for their day-to-day activities. Children with disabilities have to be able to reach their targets even if the other students do not help them.'* The suggestion here is not of 'protection' but of specific assistance to reach one's potential and encourage independence.

Contesting the view of the teachers who admitted a lack of awareness on current educational policy, Susima (P1) was adamant that no such legislation was available. She concluded that *'There are no such policies, but as mentioned before, we are given awareness on these issues during our training programs.'* In reality, the Sri Lankan government formally introduced the



inclusion of children with disabilities into mainstream classrooms through the 1997 General Educational Reforms, thereby legitimizing the approach started in the early 1970s, which appears not to be public knowledge among the teachers.

Susima's opinion was that she had imbibed knowledge on the rights of students through her training, complaining about what she felt was a lack of legislation, particularly favoring the introduction of law stipulating pedagogical approaches to teaching as *'The children are totally at the mercy of the attitudes of the teachers because there are no proper education policies on this. There has to be a law that compels the teachers to practice multi-level teaching approaches.'* Explaining about this pedagogical method further, Susima (P1) added that *'We have been asked to follow a multi-level approach now. There is no circular or policy but this concept was introduced to us in our training programs; we have approximately three trainings per year. We are repeatedly reminded that a classroom consists of different types of children and to adapt our teaching methods to suit every child. But I must tell you that the majority of teachers do not like this method, mainly because they are pressurised to achieve targets by education authorities.'*

There is a recognition that specific pedagogical methods must be adopted to better support students with disabilities within the mainstream inclusive teaching environment. In a study conducted 8 years ago, Furuta (2009) uncovered the lack of training opportunities for teachers, limited resources and large classroom sizes as key concerns in Sri Lanka. Therefore, training programs should offer locally-sensitive, contextually-relevant inclusive pedagogies that enable mainstream instruction to be accessible to all students.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the results suggest the need for all teachers to be cognizant of the current education policies relevant to children with disabilities. There is also a need for terminology to be agreed on at policy-level and filtered down to all teachers with room for review and revision as required over time. The contradiction in the perceptions of inclusive education both in theory and practice, and attitudes towards its implementation poses a barrier to the establishment of inclusive education, given as Mittler (2000) proposes the central role played by teachers within inclusive education. Therefore, for inclusion to move from theory to practice, there is a need to meet the training needs of mainstream teachers, which could include mandatory pre-service training and on-going in-service training. While the findings warrant close analysis of the reasons for large-scale exclusion of children with disabilities from education, our deliberations must also include wider consideration of disparities and inequities that exclude all children from schooling through discussions on the intersectionality between education and schooling and culture (including disability), gender, ethnicity, language, socio-economic background, religion, politics and power.

While the above interpretation and conclusions were reached based on the analysis of the data, it is acknowledged that there were limitations to the study, in spite of efforts to minimize such limitations. One concern is the lack of representation of equal participants from across the Province with a majority from Gampaha and Colombo and only two participants from the Kalutara District. We also only gathered data from one round of interviews and understand that we may have been able to gather deeper, richer data through a series of interviews with the same

participants. This study only gathered perceptions of teachers and the researchers acknowledge that there is a need to compare perceptions with behavior or 'real skill', to be able to understand inclusion in practice. Nevertheless, it is hoped that the teacher perceptions gathered could influence the pre-service and in-service training offered to mainstream school teachers enabling teachers to feel better prepared and open to inclusive education.

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