

# Strategies Used by the Teachers who are in Inclusion Classrooms Regarding the Students with Special Educational Needs

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## ABSTRACT

Integrating children with special educational needs in ordinary schools has been a central aspect of providing educational rights to every child. Sri Lanka is a country that values education, and the government schools provide free education facilities to every student concerning special educational opportunities for disabled students as well. Children with disabilities in Sri Lanka are educated through inclusion in mainstream or specialized schools. Teachers are the most important persons contributing to achieving the expected outcomes of inclusive education policy. They are the people who take action and implement educational reforms at the school level. A key element in the successful implementation of inclusive education is teachers' ability to maintain and teach a classroom with an inclusive background. Therefore, the present research inquired about the strategies used by teachers in inclusive classrooms regarding students with special educational needs. The main objectives of the study are to find out the awareness about inclusive education among the teachers who are in inclusive classrooms, to identify the motivational strategies used by the teachers who are in inclusive classrooms, and to find out the teaching methods used by the teachers who are teaching in inclusive classrooms. Qualitative methods were used to collect data with classroom observations and semi structured interviews. A purposive sampling method was used to select the sample, and gathered data were analyzed thematically. Evidently, the teacher's awareness of inclusive education was insufficient, and they were not provided with proper training regarding teaching in an inclusive classroom. Teachers used motivational strategies like reinforcement methods, assisting the issues of the SEN students, arranging the classroom environment according to the needs, and giving equal opportunities to the students. Most teachers used the lecture method in the classroom. Brainstorming and role-play were also visible. Less use of student-centred methods was visible. Proper awareness and training are needed to uplift the quality of teaching in inclusive classrooms in Sri Lanka.

**Keywords:** SEN- Students with Special Educational Needs; Inclusive Education

## INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education strengthens the education system's capacity to reach all learners. It serves as the primary strategy to achieve education for all concepts put into attention in Jomtien, Thailand (UNESCO, 2009). The inclusion of students with special educational needs in regular mainstream classrooms has been a focal point of debate in education systems across the world (Schemit, 2008; Zakaria, 2017).

"Students with special educational needs" is a broader concept that refers to disabilities or low intellectual capacity. Highly gifted children, as well as children with social and emotional problems, students with learning disabilities, or difficulties of students who are in their schooling years that make it stiffer for them to learn than most children of their age, are also determined under this term. The literature emphasizes that inclusive education is presented as an ideology that guides practice to respect the right of all learners to quality education. It aims to remove all the barriers and equip the students with special educational needs with skills that can be utilized in their lives. (Perera & Chandradasa, 2022) The rationale behind inclusion is that a child with a disability will best be able to cope in a typical world by being able to adapt to a regular school environment (Eleweke & Rodda, 2002).

Sri Lanka is a country that values education, and the education policy of 1948 mandates free education for all at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels. The majority of government schools provide free education facilities to each student and are also concerned about special educational opportunities for disabled students. Children with disabilities in Sri Lanka are educated either through inclusion in mainstream schools or through specialized schools. However, according to the research done on several occasions, it is clear that there are some discrepancies in providing inclusive education opportunities, and there are problems in the ongoing process at the school level. Many have done research on the process of inclusive education and the problems in implementing inclusive education at the school level

Inclusive classrooms are designed to accommodate students with diverse learning needs, including those with disabilities, learning differences, and other exceptionalities. Teachers in inclusive classroom settings should use a variety of strategies to create a supportive and inclusive learning environment. Teachers are the most important persons who contribute to achieving the expected outcomes of inclusive education policy. They are the persons who take action and implement the given educational reforms at the school level. A key element in the successful implementation of inclusive education is the ability teachers have to maintain teaching and managing a classroom with an inclusive background. So, it is evident that the teacher's positive attitudes, beliefs, and acceptance of the policy are essential in completing the outcomes of inclusive policy. As teachers are the main stakeholders in inclusive education in the Sri Lankan education sector, the research study aimed to find out the strategies used by teachers in Inclusion classrooms with children with special educational needs.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Allen and Cowdary (2011) described inclusive education as a conception of education where everybody has a place, and where everyone is participating. In inclusive classrooms, everyone is constantly learning, because this constitutes a positive social learning environment where learners have a place and have roles to learn. So, in that positive community, learners acquire knowledge not only of the academic requirements and learner outcomes but also learn how to get along with each other (Salend, 2010). Literature has shown that there is a benefit to children with special needs when they are placed in general education settings and they have the opportunity to make new friends and share new experiences and friendships with typically developing peers, which leads to greater social acceptance in and out of school (Soodak and McCarthy (2006); Avramindis and Kalyvo, (2007). However, several studies carried out remarked that the teachers lacked adequate knowledge, facilities, skills, and training. According to Oswald & Swart (2011), because of the lacked knowledge, facilities, skills and training regarding teaching in inclusive classrooms shaped teachers' perceptions of inclusion. After receiving training, teachers felt more positively about including students with disabilities. Pre-test and post-test scores showed that teachers who participated in the study increased their teaching skills and knowledge of inclusive education. Similarly, a study of teachers in Uganda found that those who had some form of training in inclusive education held more positive and willing attitudes towards inclusion than those without any form of training in inclusion (Ojok & Wormnaes, 2013). Yuwono and Oketh (2021) in their study found that class size poses a serious challenge to teachers who are not well-trained when they have students with special educational needs (LwDs and OSNs) in large classes. Another finding indicates that teachers face challenges with the way the curriculum is designed—posing challenge to them on how to best handle it. It is also found that teachers face challenges in managing the average class number (teacher-learner ratio). It is also found that classroom environment, resources and implementation of policies on education for LwDs and OSNs have both direct and indirect influences on the teachers' impact in class. Perera (2023) states that the awareness of the teachers about inclusive education is not at a satisfactory level. Moreover, both positive attitudes and negative attitudes are with teachers. Teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education were found strongly influenced by their professional variables rather than their personal variables.

Sulayman (2019) indicated in his research the inclusive classroom provided an effective learning environment in which students felt relaxed and appreciated. Further, he revealed the e-curriculum and teaching methods that were used by the English Language teacher to support student inclusion and development. The study showed that one teacher changed the mood of education in her classroom where all the students were about to fail. There should, however, also be support for the students outside the classroom, which means that additional staff will be needed to fulfil the expectations of better education for all. Moreover, a recent study done by Khalil, A. I., &

Hantira, N. Y. (2022) inquired about special teachers' knowledge and attitudes towards the use of assistive technology for disabled children management. A quasi-experimental research design was applied with 68 purposive samples of teachers selected conveniently from four settings located in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Results revealed that most of the teachers lack knowledge of assistive technology, and less than one-fifth of the sample had zero-level knowledge about the assistive technology used in the classroom for students with special educational needs. There was a highly significant difference between pre and post-test among studied teachers according to their total knowledge and attitude scores regarding assistive technology pre- and post-the program. One of the remarkable findings revealed that only 42.6% of the studied participants committed to continuing AT training; among them, nearly two-fifths (37.9%) were willing to attend a specialized course and less than one-third of them were willing to attend on-job training and workshops or seminars (31% for both). These findings were congruent with Onivehu et al. (2017), who examined teachers' attitudes and competence in the use of assistive technologies and found that Teachers have positive attitudes towards the use of assistive technology in special needs schools in Osun State, Nigeria. The study also concluded that teachers were not competent in using assistive technologies for students with speech disorders, visual impairments, hearing impairments, physical impairments, and emotional and behavioral disorders but were competent in using mobile technologies as assistive technologies for students with learning disabilities. Additionally, Jacqueline et al (2015) added that across Canada, Faculties of Education are preparing teachers who express confidence in educating students with special education needs. Further, these teachers believe that students with special education needs have the ability to learn and they, as teachers, have the skills and ability to teach within the inclusive classroom. Even with the statistically and practically significant differences in the findings, the scores on these measures indicate that we are graduating teachers who believe that all students belong in the regular education classroom.

Mahlangu and Mtshali (2024) indicated that teachers had an alarmingly low level of awareness of how to teach in a diverse classroom. They somehow had linear, effective pedagogical knowledge to deal with a diverse class with multicultural and varied age groups. This study recommends that teachers' pedagogical capital be further developed to boost their willingness to teach in inclusive classrooms.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 Objectives of the study**

The study aims to determine the awareness of inclusive education among teachers in inclusive classrooms, identify the motivational strategies used by these teachers, determine the teaching methods used by these teachers, and give suggestions for maintaining a successful inclusive classroom.

### **3.2 Research Design and Sample**

The study adopted a descriptive study design and used qualitative approaches in sampling, data collection, and data analysis. The study participants were 20, comprising 12 teachers who teach in inclusive classrooms, 6 principals in those schools, and two ISAs in the respective educational Zones. A purposive sampling method was used to select the sample from Colombo and Piliyandala educational zones. The sample is shown in Table 1.

### **3.3 Instruments**

A qualitative approach was utilized through semi structured interviews and observations to gain an in-depth understanding and clarification about the teachers' awareness, motivational strategies, and teaching methods of special educational needs in inclusive settings. According to Creswell (2003), semi-structured interviews are deemed the most appropriate way to obtain in-depth about the experiences of individuals. Therefore, the semi-structured interviews were used to obtain data and information from the teachers, principals and ISAs. Altogether ten questions were included in the interview schedules for the teachers, principals and ISAs. All the participants were interviewed by the researcher herself and all the discussions were recorded.

Classroom observations were conducted to clarify further and to help the researcher gain an in-depth

understanding of the 12 teachers who teach in inclusive classrooms.

Table 1 Sample of the study.

Selected school Type	No of schools	Teachers	Principle	ISA
1AB (p)	2	4	2	2
1AB (N)	2	2	2	
1C	1	2	1	
Type 2	1	2	1	
Total	6	12	6	2

### 3.4 Data Analysis

The gathered data were analyzed thematically. Content data analysis involved identifying themes and sub-themes. The analysis involved narrations and direct quotes where necessary. All personal data collected were not disclosed to third parties, and all the participants were assured that the data would not be revealed to them. The selected schools were code-named, and the participants were also given a code to maintain ethical assurance.

## RESULTS OF THE STUDY

The findings of the study can be revealed according to the main themes identified and illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2- Themes and the subthemes

Main themes	Sub Themes
Awareness	Inclusive policy
	Assistive technology
	Teaching methods
	Assessment methods
Motivational Strategies	Reinforcement
	Classroom environment
	Teacher personality
	Providing opportunities
	Learning objectives
Teaching methods	Goal setting
	Student teacher relationships
	Teacher cantered
	Student centered

The responses obtained from the interviews with the teachers revealed that teacher's awareness of the inclusive education policy was not sufficient. Three out of twelve teachers had no idea about inclusive education and its benefits for students with special educational needs. Five teachers responded that they hadn't had any proper training or awareness programs regarding teaching in an inclusive classroom, which consists of both normal students and students with special educational needs. So, most teachers think that having a special needs child in their class and teaching them is an extra burden. One of the teachers in 1AB (N) school responded with an unsatisfactory tone about teaching and the awareness of inclusive education.

*“Miss, I think special education units are the ideal place for them. How can we follow up on the syllabus with them? We have to spend extra time on them. And I will not let them have any responsibility, even if they have problems with extracurricular activities.... I feel sorry for them. So, I listen to them, but teaching is difficult.”*

*(Teacher 3 from 1 AB (N) school)*

Expressing a similar view regarding the same point teacher 1 from 1C school said,

*“Some students with special educational needs take more time to complete their activities. Miss, I think that's a disadvantage for those students, and it's an extra burden for us, too. Mmm, hmm, it's a disadvantage for us also. Anyway, I have to move from one activity to another without waiting for them to be completed. Actually, Miss, I can't cover the syllabus with whatever I have to do with them as they call intervention or something.”*

*(Teacher 2 from 1C school)*

Teachers were not aware of assistive technology. Even the word was not familiar to them. They were not capable of providing help and assistance regarding assistive technology. Only three out of twelve teachers were a little familiar with the word, but all the teachers expressed that they needed assistance regarding assistive technology. The responses obtained by the principals of all four schools regarding the teachers' awareness of the inclusive policy and assistive technology regarding inclusive education revealed similar results.

*“In our school, we have inclusive classrooms. As per the guidelines we have to give admission to those students. But miss. there are many problems, one thing is my staff is not very familiar with working with these children. They need assistance because they are always complaining about the difficulties they face in the classroom. Teachers face many problems, and they need training to improve their teaching methods. Assessment is also there and they face issues regarding the assessment also”*

*(Principal 1 of 1AB N school)*

Awareness of the teaching methods and assessment methods of the teachers was insufficient. This fact was evident in the previous statement. Expressing a similar view to the above response principal of a type 2 school said,

*“In our school, there were several students in primary classes. Some have learning disabilities, some have impairments. But it was really hard for my staff members to tolerate the situation as they had to go align with the syllabus. Miss the hardest part is how to assess the achievement of the students. Actually we didn't receive any guidelines regarding this. Teaching them is hard. My teachers lack the essential knowledge about teaching methods”*

*(Principal of type 2 school)*

According to the observations, impaired students were ignored because of the lack of awareness. In 1 AB(N) school and 1AB(P) school, there were students in the inclusive classroom. Every classroom consisted of nearly 40-45 students. Because of the higher number of students in the classroom, the classroom environment was congested. It was observed that it was difficult to move for physically impaired students. Few of the teachers were not much concerned with their needs in the classroom, but other teachers were concerned with the needs of the children with special educational needs. Teachers used the same methods to address them in their lessons



without concerning the different learning styles of the student. The same assessment methods were used by the teachers in the classroom, and it was evident that they lacked the proper knowledge and training to conduct lessons in the inclusive classroom.

**Motivational strategies** used by the teachers in the inclusive classroom were investigated mainly by classroom observations. It was evident that teachers used different reinforcement methods to motivate students with special educational needs. Four out of twelve teachers used positive and negative reinforcement to motivate the students. Five teachers used the token economy method in a very creative way. In one of the classrooms of 1C school teacher used a creative reinforcement method in her subject. English. She has assigned groups in the classroom in her subject and given names and a file folder for students. Whenever she wants to do an activity, students should get together and complete the task. she assigns marks for the group, and selects the best group and gives out 10 points. Then, in every team, she gives a star mark to each and every student and maintains a star chart. Each and every child has the ability to be the star of the day in every group. By that, she is reinforcing the students with special educational needs to engage in school activities.

This fact was confirmed by the data obtained from interviews with the teachers. Teacher two of type two school said,

*“Miss, I am always using reinforcement methods to motivate the students. Whatever task they are completing, I give them a big star and a happy face in their books. Verbally, I am reinforcing them always. I give them rewards like making them group leaders, and subject monitors ... They like wearing the badge that I made for them”*

*(Teacher two of type two school).*

A similar viewpoint and data were encountered in the interview done with the principal of 1C school.

*“My staff is trying their best to make this successful miss. As I can assure you, they are using many reinforcement strategies to maintain the quality of teaching. Especially primary teachers are using many motivational techniques to give the best education to the students”*

*(Principal of 1Cc school).*

Arranging the classroom environment according to the needs was done but according to the observations, it was not sufficient regarding the students with hearing impairments, visual impairments and physical impairments

**The personalities of the teachers** who teach in the inclusive classrooms were observed by the researcher herself. Teachers had a good teacher personality. They were handling all the students in the inclusive classroom. It is attributed to the personality development of the impaired students in the inclusive classroom. They were motivating the students by saying words such as You can do it if you try hard, ask anything, and I will assist you. Especially the teachers who were teaching at type 2 schools had a really positive teacher personality when compared with others. Teacher 2 of type 2 school was active as she was a grade 4 teacher, and she had a positive view regarding the students with special educational needs. However, it was evident that the awareness of handling the situation and the knowledge they had were insufficient.

**Providing opportunities** is another motivational strategy observed in the inclusive classroom. The majority of the teachers had given some opportunities to the students with special educational needs in their classroom. Opportunities to take leadership and memberships in school activities and take part in extra-curricular activities were widely evident in 1AB (P) schools and 1C schools. It was observed that they were given responsibilities in the classroom. In type 2 schools it was evident that the students with special educational needs took initiative in medial work and aesthetic activities. However the given opportunities were not sufficient in 1 AB( N) schools.

The teachers did not correctly give **learning objectives**, which was unsatisfactory. All the teachers did their lessons without pre-preparation, and they addressed the learning objectives very poorly. **Goal setting-** was done but not in a professional manner. **student-teacher relationships** were positive. Observed and it is clear that the teachers need essential training regarding teaching in an inclusive classroom.

The majority of teachers used the traditional lecture method when teaching lessons. It was observed that this did not positively contribute to inculcating the students' qualities. Most of the students faced many difficulties in grasping the content of the lesson. Less use of student-centred methods was visible in the observations. Role-play and guided discovery were used limitedly in the primary classrooms.

## CONCLUSION

Inclusive education is when all students are placed in age-appropriate general education classes in their neighborhood schools regardless of their challenges. The Teacher's awareness of the inclusive policy is important to the better functioning of the policy at the school level. Teacher awareness of Inclusive policy, Assistive technology, teaching methods, and assessment methods insufficient

Reinforcement (Positive, tokens, interval, Ratio), Classroom Environment, Teacher personality, Providing opportunities, learning objectives, Goal setting, and student-teacher relationships were the visible motivational strategies used by the teachers. More Teacher-centered teaching methods were used in the classroom. Proper awareness and training are needed to improve teaching quality in inclusive classrooms in Sri Lanka.

Differential instructions, Universal design for learning, Individualized education plans, co-teaching, flexible grouping, assistive technology, and scaffolding can be used as appropriate teaching strategies in inclusive classrooms.

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