

Factors Influencing the Practices of Special Education Units (SEUS) System in Regular Schools in Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

This study was undertaken to investigate the strengths and weaknesses in the practice of the SEU system within the regular schools in Ampara district, Sri Lanka. The study followed both quantitative and qualitative (mixed) approach and survey research design. Data collection was primarily based on questionnaires, observations, and interviews. Additionally, secondary sources were consulted to understand the narrative coming from the field. The sample included 27 school principals, seven In-Service Advisors (ISAs) of Special Education, and 86 special education teachers. Quantitative data were analyzed using diagram, figures and percentage with supports of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), and narrative analyze methods employed for analyzing qualitative data gathered. The findings of the study indicated that majority of the SEUs obtain professional support in matters regarding human resources (such as recruiting teachers, teaching assistants, doctors, and counsellors). Further, some schools have modified their resources to meet the needs of the students with special educational needs (SENs). SEUs provide opportunities for students with SENs to participate in extra-curricular activities with other students in the classrooms and schools, though such participation fluctuates depending on the type of activity involved. However, the majority of schools with SEUs grapple with several shortcomings in terms of human resources and physical infrastructure as well as the philosophy behind their approach to students with SENs. These have to be promptly tackled in order to the future to be better for these students. Therefore, as a final point, this study recommends several measures for the future development of the SEU system in the Sri Lankan education system.

Keywords: Special Education Units, Human Resources, Physical Resources, Sri Lanka

INTRODUCTION

The general thought about children with disabilities is that they are ten times more vulnerable when compared to students without SENs not attending schools. Even if children with disabilities attend school, they are more likely to drop out before the completion of school education (UNICEF, 2013). There is global agreement that all children have the right to be formally educated, including children who have SENs (United Nations, 1989; United Nations, 2008). Moreover, the Human Rights-Based Approach to Education for All (UNICEF & UNESCO, 2007), the articles of the rights under the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 2007), and Sustainable Development Goals (UNESCO, 2015) also reinforce provisions for the education of children with disabilities.

However, educating students with SENs is a peculiar challenge, more so when optimal education occurs when they have the learning experience with other school children. In this context, the paradigm shift in the field of special education from 'segregated instruction' to 'integrated education' and 'inclusive education' has been part of the discourse of professionals in education worldwide during the last three decades (Hettiarachchi & Das, 2014).

In Sri Lanka, the SEU system possesses features of an integrated education system. Developing countries including Sri Lanka are still in the early stages of special needs education. The introduction of integrated

provisions to the Sri Lankan education system in 1968 enabled for a greater number of students with SENs access to education in regular schools in many areas of the country.

However, the government's 'integrated education' programme for children with disabilities conducted to enact the 1968 provisions only facilitated separate learning contexts, though still within regular schools (Piyasena, 2003; Rajapakse, 1991). Moreover, the Ministry of Education took over the direct responsibility of special education and developed integrated programmes for children with hearing impairment and cognitive learning challenges such as intellectual disabilities (Piyasena, 2003). The integrated education system model was formally adapted to the Sri Lankan context by the National Institute of Education in 1969 (National Institute of Education, 2000). These institutional provisions were later compounded by the introduction of a Five – Year Plan of Action on Inclusive Education by the MOE (Dhanapala, 2009). Currently, the MOE has taken necessary action to expand the policy to all educational levels, national to provincial, to stipulate that a child with SENs must be attached to the neighborhood regular school. In the typical SEU, all children with disabilities are given the opportunity to mix with their regular peers during certain lessons and also during extra-curricular activities. Those children who achieve a reasonable progress in SEUs are eventually able to join in the regular classroom (Piyasena, 2003). By the year 2005, Sri Lanka had 850 SEUs in government schools with 930 teachers assisting 9260 students. Subsequently, by the year 2006 nearly 1200 units and 1250 specially trained teachers were spread all over the country (Ministry of Education, 2006). Of the 52,000 children with special needs in Sri Lanka, approximately 5088 children are educated within the mainstream or regular school system (National Education Commission, 2014).

8462 disabled people are reported to be living in the Ampara District. Out of them, 380 are school going children with disabilities. They are accommodated in 27 SEUs in regular schools, which seek to provide education for the development of students with SENs (Education Department of Eastern Province, 2015). However, according to UNESCO (2005), children with disabilities are in most instances denied the opportunity to learn with other children in regular classrooms. Having separate SEUs within regular schools is the main challenge for an inclusive education system (Perera, 2015). This study investigates the challenges faced by SEUs in their operation within regular schools and looks into their strengths and weaknesses. In doing so, it explores prospects for moving towards a more inclusive education system. To this end, it seeks to understand the context within which SEUs operate in regular schools, the factors that therein enable or constrain them, and how key stakeholders perceive SEUs.

Objective

The objective of the study is to investigate the strengths and weaknesses in the practice of the SEU system within the regular schools in Ampara district, Sri Lanka.

METHODS

This empirical study employed a mixed (both qualitative and quantitative) approach and survey research design to undertake the study. The study used questionnaires, interviews, and observations to gather data. Questionnaires were used to collect data from teachers and principals, and interviews were used to obtain additional insights to better make sense of the quantitative data, particularly from principals and ISAs. Further, to collect data on the practices maintained by the SEU system in schools, the observation technique was used. This study was able to utilize the experience and observations of the entire population of principals, school teachers, and ISAs in Ampara district who work with SEU system, for the gathering of quantitative and qualitative data. Principals of all 27 schools in Ampara District that accommodate SEUs, 86 teachers who work with children with SENs in the SEUs, and Seven Additional Directors/ ISAs of Special Education from seven educational zones made up this population. The following table – 1 provides an overview of this study population.

Table 1: Target Population and Samples

Participants	Target Population	Samples
Principals	27	27
Teachers	86	86
Additional Directors/ ISAs	7	7

FINDINGS

The following figure – 1 shows that as much as 30% of the SEUs are situated – though within a regular school – in a location that is isolated from the rest of the school, in separate buildings. The reasons for this segregation can be diverse, ranging from the unavailability of space in existing buildings to accommodate SEUs, to the preference of the administration to keep the SEUs and regular students separate (either due to prejudice or due to the need to offer customized learning environments).

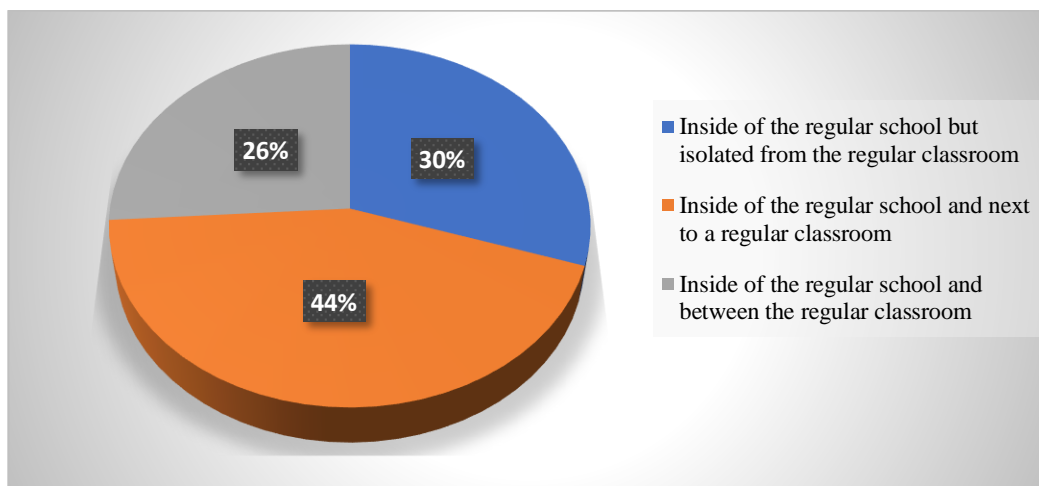


Figure – 1: Location of the SEUs in the Regular Schools

The following figure – 2 illustrates the teachers’ appointed to SEUs, whether permanent or voluntary, receive training from the Ampara Special Needs Network (ASNN). Relying more on a permanent cadre than a voluntary one is more sustainable in the long run as they have more incentives to stay on in the service. Volunteer appointments, on the other hand, are mostly short term, interest driven affairs that are also largely influenced by the constantly changing styles of teaching, which may impact the learning ability of the students.

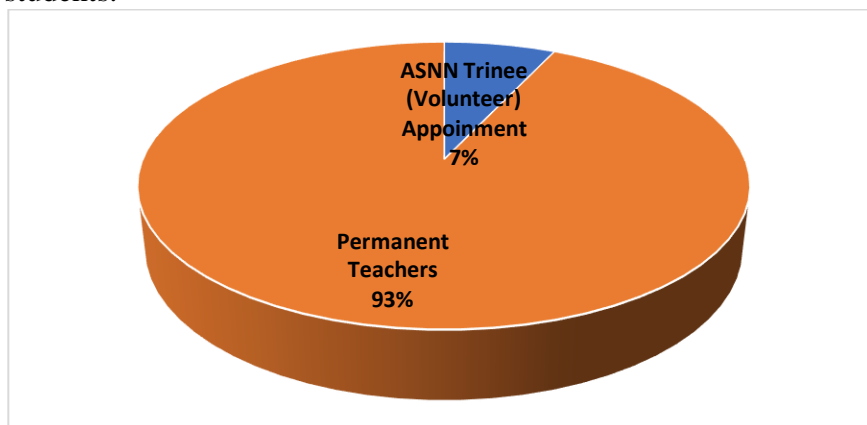
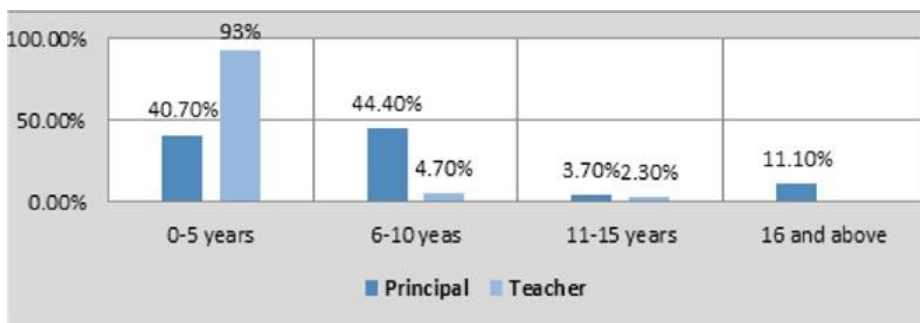


Figure – 2: Distribution of teachers by the type of appointment

The following table – 2 explores the past experience in regular schools, decidedly more principals than teachers reported to have such. Close to half of principals reported to have 6-10 years of experience as regular classroom teachers, while as much as 93% of the teachers who work in SEUs reported to have less than 5 years of experience as regular classroom teachers. Though this factor does not have a direct bearing on their service delivery at SEUs, it may have an indirect impact on their ability to decide when a student with SENs is ready to be introduced to the regular classroom, how such integration should happen, evaluation of her/ his performance following such integration, etc. Therefore, teachers with relatively less experience with regular classrooms may have to alternate between the two to identify different learning styles and enrich the experience of both types of students.

Table – 2: Experience of SEU Teachers and Principals in Regular Schools



Most teachers reported to have at least a decade of experience at SEUs, as the following figure – 3 illustrates. Obviously, this is a commendable fact and promises a bright future for beneficiaries of SEUs in the district. However, as mentioned above, the most use of this experience can be made only so far as teachers in SEUs also have extensive experience in regular classrooms.

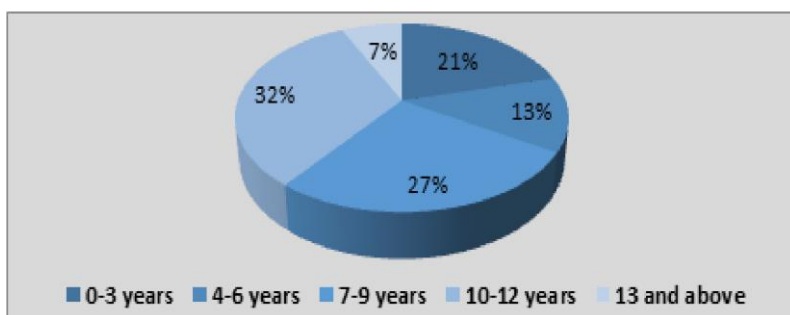
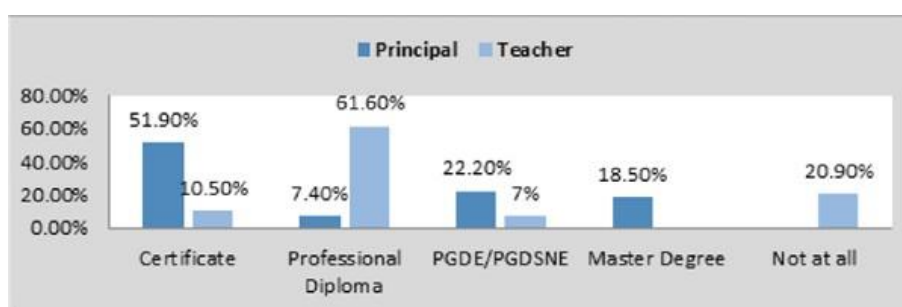


Figure – 3: Experiences as SEU teachers

Table 3: Professional qualifications of teachers and principals in SEUs

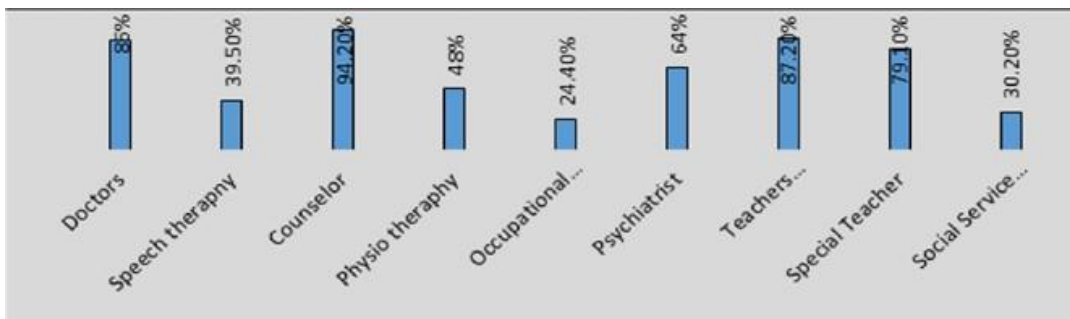


The above table – 3 indicates that the clear majority of teachers at SEUs are formally qualified to hold their appointments, while around 20% possess no formal qualification as such. While experience may be obtained during the course of engaging in the profession, it is needless to say that a degree of formal training is

required before teaching students with SENs due to their different learning requirements and capacities. In comparison to teachers, principals of schools that accommodate SEUs seemed to have less qualifications, with most principals having certificate level qualifications as compared to diploma or above in teachers. However, the formal qualifications of principals only have a marginal impact on the quality-of-service delivery of SEUs, except perhaps in a managerial sense.

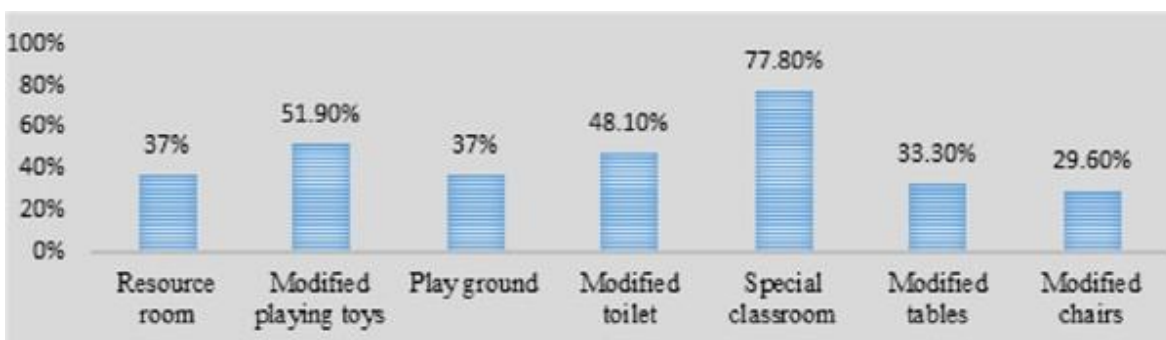
In terms of human resources (table – 4), a commendable level of the SEUs surveyed reported to have specially trained teachers (for example teachers specialized in engaging with students with autism, cerebral palsy, etc.), teaching assistants, and additional facilities such as occupational therapists. However, only between 20-40% most SEUs is indicative of the well-rounded approach taken to the education of students’ presence of counselors and psychiatrists in counselors, and doctors. More than half the SEUs also had on-site psychiatrists. The of the schools reported that they have training, social services, physiotherapy, etc.

Table – 4: Human Resources for SEUs



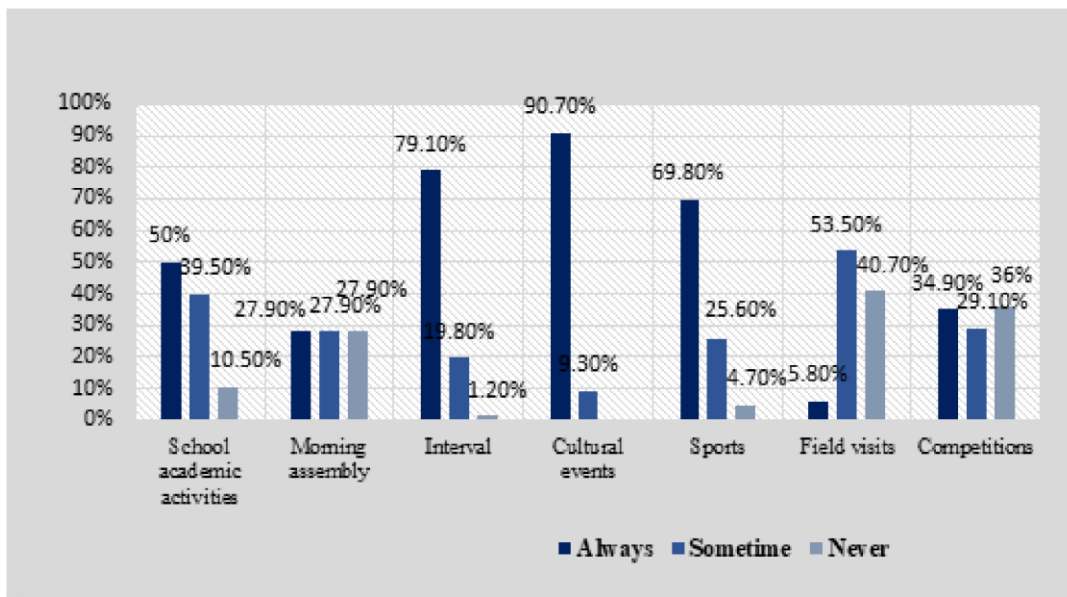
As the qualitative fieldwork revealed, some of the occupational training centers aforementioned are situated within the relevant schools, while some schools had opted to liaise with external institutions to make these provisions available for students with SENs. These additional facilities suggest a long-term investment in students who receive their education at these SEUs, with a school to consider incorporating these elements in their respective SEUs.

Table – 5: Physical Resources for SEUs



Having physical resources adapted for the use of students with SENs is a crucial requirement in ensuring that their experience at school is smooth and enjoyable. However, apart from special classrooms and modified toys, most SEUs seemed to have paid relatively little attention to other resources, particularly modified toilets. This needs to be called to the urgent attention of the authorities of these schools, as the learning experience may be seriously hampered – and possibly even damaging – due to the lack of these facilities. Additionally, as the qualitative discussions revealed, Individualized Educational Plans (IEP), organizing special days (disability day, braille day, and sign language day, etc.), employing assistive technologies for practice, physical and sports activities designed especially for SEU students, and special curricula are also used to supplement these provisions.

Table – 6: Integration of SEU Students with Regular Classroom Students



It is promising that in the clear majority of cases, SEU students participate in school activities with other students, particularly in the case of cultural events, school interval, and sports events (Table – 6). Understandably, equal participation in field visits is somewhat limited, and in academic activities and competitions, moderate. However, it was observed that the morning assembly is not utilized as an opportunity to the extent that it can be used, with equal amounts of teachers reporting that SEU students either only sometimes mingle with other students at morning assembly, or do not mingle at all. This practice, especially given that intermingling is promoted even in academic activities, is puzzling. Both types of students will get the opportunity of picking up certain social cues when sharing a space, and this opportunity is denied to them by having segregated morning assemblies.

Overall, however, the degree of intermingling to be positive, with ample learning opportunities for both types of students. appears

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The need for extensive research on people with disabilities, particularly students, as a means of raising awareness for their special needs, cannot be overemphasized. Previous scholarship has made this point to a certain extent in relation to Sri Lanka (John, et. al, 2013; Samararatne, Soldatic, & Perera, 2018; Abeywickrama, Jayasinghe, & Sumanasena, 2014; Furuta & Alwis, 2017; Ellepola, 2016). The findings of this study also point to the need for further provisions that cater to the special needs of SEU students, in terms of both physical/human infrastructure, and the philosophy involved.

In relation to philosophy, most SEUs in the schools surveyed were located in a separate building from other students. While reasons for this segregation remain unclear, this scenario deprives students with SENs of a holistic learning environment, and other students of an alternative perspective that may well contribute to their own personal development. In this light, measures that have been taken by some of the schools to strategically locate SEU classes near regular classes should be commended. Furthermore, not adequately utilizing the morning assembly as an opportunity to enable mingling of SEU students with other students needs immediate attention. Especially since greater mingling was reported in academic activities (where greater challenges are expected), this is puzzling. As no great obstacles are anticipated in this regard, the morning assembly should be used to provide mingling opportunities to students with all types of cognitive orientation. A commendable development with regard to integration is the presence of long term strategies that envision the full integration of SEU students to the wider society.

Given that such strategies were only available in some schools only, however, it may be worthwhile for all schools to consider incorporating these elements in their respective SEUs.

Human resources are closely connected to the issue of philosophy regarding students with SENs. Consider for example the degree of experience a teacher has had in a regular classroom and its bearing on integration of SEU students with other students. Those teachers with a higher degree of exposure to the regular classroom will use that knowledge in devising effective teaching strategies for students with SNEs. Likewise, the experience in the SEU classroom may inform the regular classroom as well, making both types of students learn from each other's strategies. This will also enable the teacher to more accurately decide when and how to introduce a student from the SEU to the regular classroom, and evaluate such student's performance thereafter. Therefore, it is important that all teachers of SEUs, regardless of how extensive their experience in the SEU classroom is, should work with non-SEU students as well in order to make their teaching strategies more effective for their primary audience.

A related point in this regard is the desirability of relying more on a permanent cadre than a voluntary one, seeing as the former has more incentives to continue the service, thereby ensuring an uninterrupted learning experience for the student. The enthusiasm and drive of volunteers may, in this light, better be utilized as teaching assistants, which would enable them to learn through observation and assistance.

Physical infrastructure wise, most schools reported having specially designed classrooms and customized technology to assist SEU students. However, in more than half the cases, certain basic requirements like modified toilets were not available on site for the use of students with SENs.

In order to make the classroom experience smoother and more enjoyable for SEU students, complementary resources such as these need to be deployed. In addition to expanding these facilities in schools that already accommodate SEUs, it is equally important to introduce SEUs to schools that do not have them at present, so that students with SENs can more easily access educational facilities in the convenience of their own neighborhood.

CONCLUSION

This research looked into the practice of SEUs in the Ampara District of Sri Lanka, with the aim of understanding the institutional context within which they operate, and identifying their strengths and weaknesses thereby. The study revealed that in all of the 27 schools of the District with SEUs, professional support is used in giving educational training to students with SENs, particularly in the case of teachers, teaching assistants, doctors, and counsellors. Some schools have made further provisions for SEU students, including measures to help them completely integrate with the greater society upon leaving school, such as providing occupational training. This latter trend may be a good cue for other schools as well, if the vision for such students is to be long term. In addition, in most schools, the classroom was adapted to the special needs of SEU students, but other complementary – and essential – facilities like the toilet were not. This fact should be brought to the immediate attention of school authorities, in order to make the school environment more SEU-friendly.

In terms of the philosophy behind their approach to SEU students, most schools seemed to have segregated spaces for their SEUs, which does not provide for a holistic leaning environment for students with SENs, nor gives the opportunity for non-SEU students to be exposed to an alternative perspective that will possibly contribute to their own personal development. However, mingling opportunities for all students were provided in each of these schools, by way of sports activities, cultural events, breaks in between lessons, and to a lesser extent academic activities, competitions, and field visits. The morning assembly, intriguingly, was reportedly used to enable such mingling far less than it could have been, which warrants immediate

attention. Overall, while existing provisions for students with SENs promise a journey in the right direction, much remains to be done in terms of developing the facilities at existing SEUs, establishing more SEUs in schools where they are not already established, and revisiting the philosophy behind how SEU students are received.

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