

# Stakeholder Attitudinal Shifts towards Implementing Inclusive Education

W.A.W.G.P.N. Weerasinghe

Department of Special Needs Education, Faculty of Education, The Open University of Sri Lanka

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to examine the extent to which stakeholders' attitudes have changed regarding the shift of the general school structure towards Inclusive Education (IE) practices. This research was conducted using case study design and a qualitative approach. Five general schools implementing inclusive education practices in the Batticaloa District were selected using convenience sampling method. The participants comprised five Assistant Directors of Education for Special Education, five principals, five classroom teachers, and ten subject teachers. Interview schedules were used to collect data from the Assistant Directors of Education for Special Education, principals, and classroom teachers. A focus group discussion schedule was used to collect data from subject teachers in inclusive classrooms. Descriptive analysis was employed to analyze the data through coding, categorization, and theme generation. The findings indicate that stakeholders in inclusive education demonstrate positive attitudes and practices towards both key areas: provisions for special needs and student interactions within inclusive settings. On the other hand, stakeholders demonstrate negative attitudes and face practical challenges regarding the development of Individualized Education Programmes (IEPs) for students with special educational needs, as well as in relation to inclusive education policies. Furthermore, mixed attitudes are evident towards the implementation of physical structures for inclusive education. In this respect, negative attitudes are observed among higher authorities, while teachers display more positive attitudes. Based on these findings, it is recommended that awareness be strengthened at both school and zonal levels regarding the importance of inclusive education policies and Individualized Education Programmes to enhance inclusive education practices for students with special educational needs in government schools in the Batticaloa District. In addition, awareness should be raised about the need for appropriate physical infrastructure for inclusive education and the responsibilities of relevant stakeholders in ensuring its provision.

**Keywords:** Inclusive Education; Stakeholders; Special Educational Needs (SEN)

## INTRODUCTION

The concept of inclusive education has gained significant prominence in the field of education worldwide. It is increasingly implemented with the aim of broadening access to education for all children. Inclusive education is widely regarded as a valuable approach for supporting students with special educational needs. Moreover, inclusive education is recognized as a fundamental right of the child and should not be viewed as a privilege (Mag, Sinfield, & Burns, 2017). Moreover, effective inclusive education is essential because every child is unique. Children with special educational needs have diverse abilities, learn in different ways, and progress at different paces. Therefore, inclusive, learning-oriented, supportive, and empowering environments should be created in schools and communities to enable all children to develop their full educational, social, emotional, and physical potential. It is important to recognize that a child's educational development cannot be separated from social, emotional, and physical development, as these aspects are closely connected (Haddad, 2009; Peters, 2003).

Inclusion should begin within the family and extend to the wider society. Schools play a vital role in educating students with special educational needs alongside students without special educational needs within the regular education system. In this context, the attitudes of stakeholders such as parents, community members, peers, family members, teachers, and principals are essential for the successful implementation of inclusive education for students with special educational needs.

## Research Problem

Batticaloa District was affected by 30 years of civil war and natural disasters such as the Tsunami, cyclones, and floods, resulting in high rates of poverty and high malnutrition. Specifically, a high number of children with special needs live in the Batticaloa District. According to several research findings and the experiences of researchers, although general schools in the Batticaloa District implement inclusive education practices, students with special needs continue to face challenges in accessing appropriate educational provision (Ketheeswaran, 2019). Based on these challenges, this study was undertaken to examine the extent to which stakeholders' attitudes have changed in response to the shift in general school structures towards inclusive education practices, with the aim of further strengthening inclusive education.

## Inclusive Education

Inclusive education refers to the participation and acceptance of all students in age-appropriate regular classrooms within their local schools, enabling them to learn, contribute, and take part in all aspects of school life. It also focuses on how schools, classrooms, programmes, and activities are designed and organized so that all students can learn and participate together (Nilholm, 2021). Inclusive education involves implementing an inclusive education system through key functions such as educational provision, physical infrastructure, inclusive policies, Individualized Education Programmes (IEPs), student interactions, staff and volunteer competencies, external relations, assessment of achievements, curriculum design, and teaching strategies that support students with special educational needs to develop their capabilities within the regular education system. There is substantial evidence highlighting the problems and challenges associated with inclusive education practices. As a result, these challenges and barriers have been widely recognized, and several major barriers to inclusive education were identified in the early part of the twenty-first century. In addition, expert opinions and key documents have contributed to clarifying the current understanding of issues related to inclusive education (Eleweke & Rodda, 2002; Mittler, 2012; Peters, 2003).

The most common international challenges to successful inclusive education processes and practices include a lack of policy and legal support, inadequate school resources and facilities, a shortage of appropriately trained school volunteers, insufficient teacher training in inclusive approaches and techniques, ineffective pedagogical practices, and rigid curricula. Additional barriers include segregation, limited adaptation or individualization, unsupportive school environments, weak regional leadership, and negative socio-cultural attitudes towards disability (Eide & Ingstad, 2011; Eleweke & Rodda, Johnstone & Chapman, 2009; Mittler, 2012; Peters, 2003; Rose, 2010; Schuelka, 2018; Yasunaga, 2014). These challenges continue to restrict the improvement and development of inclusive education practices at the international level.

There is evidence that Sri Lanka faces several problems and challenges in the effective implementation of inclusive education practices for students with special educational needs. These challenges include the lack of appropriate teaching strategies for diverse learners in inclusive classrooms (Alwis, 2012), limited resources and opportunities for students with special educational needs, and barriers to equitable educational access and post-school social participation, particularly in rural schools (Higashida et al., 2016). International and national research findings have examined these challenges and issues related to inclusive education practices at both global and national levels.

According to statistical data from the Eastern Provincial Department of Education, 7,248 persons with disabilities reside in the Batticaloa District of Sri Lanka. In addition, key socio-economic indicators reveal a poverty rate of 19.4 per cent, malnutrition affecting 10.99 per cent of families, and 27,706 female-headed households in the district (Guruge et al., 2017). These factors collectively contribute to the increasing number of persons with disabilities in the Batticaloa District. Currently, 247 students with special educational needs are receiving education in inclusive classrooms across 174 government schools in the Batticaloa District. It is against this backdrop that this study was carried forward.

## Research Objective

The aim of this study is to examine the extent to which stakeholders' attitudes have changed in relation to the shift of the general school structure towards inclusive education practices.

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## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Research Approach and Design

The research approach and research design are key aspects of the research methodology. Accordingly, a comprehensive qualitative approach was adopted to conduct this study.

A multiple case study design was selected for the study. A case study is considered a suitable research design when researchers aim to gain in-depth, context-specific understanding of a particular real-world phenomenon. Furthermore, a case study provides a strong basis for exploring the key characteristics, explanations, and effects associated with the phenomenon.

### Research Population and Sample

In Sri Lanka, 4,431 government schools operate under the inclusive education system. This study was conducted in government schools located in the Batticaloa District. Accordingly, the population of the study comprised 174 government schools implementing inclusive education in the Batticaloa District.

A closer examination shows that the Batticaloa District consists of five educational zones, namely Batticaloa Central, Batticaloa West, Batticaloa, Kalkudah, and Paddiruppu. Within the Batticaloa Central educational zone, there are 76 schools, of which 31 implement inclusive education practices. These schools serve 52 students with special educational needs and are staffed by 50 inclusive classroom teachers and 232 subject teachers involved in inclusive classes.

Subsequently, the Batticaloa West educational zone consists of 68 schools, of which 25 implement inclusive education practices. These schools include 34 students with special educational needs, 29 inclusive education classroom teachers, and 179 subject teachers involved in inclusive classes. The Batticaloa educational zone comprises 65 schools, of which 41 have inclusive education practices. These schools include 54 students with special educational needs, 51 inclusive education classroom teachers, and 257 subject teachers for inclusive classes. Furthermore, the Kalkudah educational zone consists of 83 schools, of which 49 implement inclusive education practices. These schools include 72 students with special educational needs, 69 inclusive education classroom teachers, and 302 subject teachers involved in inclusive classes.

Finally, the Paddiruppu educational zone consists of 69 schools, of which 28 implement inclusive education practices. These schools include 35 students with special educational needs, 32 inclusive education classroom teachers, and 186 subject teachers involved in inclusive classes.

It is noteworthy that each of the five educational zones has one Assistant Director of Education for Special Education and one Teacher Advisor for Special Education. Based on this structure, one inclusive school from each of the five educational zones was selected using the convenience sampling method. Purposive sampling was used to select the participants for the study. Accordingly, one inclusive classroom was selected from each of the five selected inclusive schools. From these schools, five principals, five classroom teachers, and ten subject teachers were selected. In addition, five Assistant Directors of Education for Special Education were selected from the five educational zones using purposive sampling.

### Data Collection Tools

Individual interview schedules were selected and developed to collect data from school principals, Assistant Directors of Education for Special Education, inclusive classroom teachers, and parents of children with special educational needs. A focus group discussion schedule was selected and prepared to gather data from subject teachers in inclusive classrooms. All data collection procedures were carried out by the researcher, and the data were securely stored.

### Validation of Data Collection Tools

The developed interview schedule and focus group discussion schedule were validated through expert review by an Assistant Lecturer and a Professor specializing in research.

## Ensuring Reliability

Qualitative studies must demonstrate reliability. Accordingly, researchers use several indicators, such as accuracy and trustworthiness, to ensure reliability (Higashida, 2014). In this study, steps were taken to maintain reliability by ensuring the accuracy of the data, as well as confirmability and credibility.

## Data Analysis

The collected data were coded, followed by categorization of the codes and generation of themes. The descriptive analysis method was used to analyze the data.

## Research Ethics

To maintain research ethics, a letter of permission was obtained from the Provincial Director of Education. Permission was also obtained from the Zonal Education Authorities and school principals. In addition, informed consent was obtained from all stakeholders prior to data collection, after which the interviews and focus group discussions were conducted.

## Scope of the Study

The limitations of the study include the fact that the research was conducted only in the Batticaloa District and that only five schools were selected from the 174 inclusive schools in the district.

## Research Analysis, Findings, and Discussions

The collected data were analyzed, findings were established, and discussions were conducted. During the analysis, the five selected schools were identified as A, B, C, D, and E. Similarly, pseudonyms were used in place of the real names of the participating informants. Details related to these are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Participants' Pseudonyms and School Codes

School	Types of Schools	Students/ Pseudonyms	Assistant Director of Education	Principal's Name	Classroom Teacher's Name	Subject Teachers' Names
A	1AB	Nirojana	Harish	Rajee	Deepa	(1) Suresh, (2) Selvi
B	Type 1	Prakash	Murugan	Yogesh	Ashvini	(1)Theeban(2)Uma
C	1C	Nivetha	Janani	Sangeetha	Bhavani	(1)Bala (2) Mithran
D	1C	Kavitha	Adhil	Ziad	Thiru	(1)Ayesha,(2)Amar
E	Type 1	Aravind	Devi	Arun	Priya	(1)Chithra(2) Dhanu

Furthermore, data analysis was conducted under the following subheadings: Provisions for Inclusive Education, Physical Aspects for Inclusive Education, Policies for Inclusive Education, Individualized Education Programmes (IEPs), and Student Interactions in Inclusive Education.

## Provisions for Inclusive Education

The provisions for inclusive education include two main types:

1. Communication between the school and stakeholders regarding inclusive education practices.
2. Collaboration with stakeholders in implementing inclusive education practices.

In this regard, all five Assistant Directors of Education (ADEs) have undertaken initiatives to strengthen communication between schools and stakeholders to support inclusive education practices within their respective educational zones. Accordingly, ADEs from Schools A, C, D, and E conduct meetings to communicate with stakeholders. For example, ADE Harish from School A stated, "...I conduct a meeting once a month to share the services available to the students within the zone and to guide the authorities on how to obtain these services." Furthermore, all five Assistant Directors of Education (ADEs) collaborated with

stakeholders such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), police departments, community members, medical professionals, the education sector, and the school community to support inclusive education practices. The ADEs continue to work collaboratively with these stakeholders to strengthen such partnerships. Murugan, from Educational Zone B, stated, "...police departments, community organizations, volunteer organizations, and the Zonal Education Department are collaborating for the school's inclusive practices."

Four school principals from Schools A, B, C, and E communicate with stakeholders and raise awareness to improve inclusive education practices. In addition, they work collaboratively with stakeholders to strengthen inclusive education practices in their respective schools. For example, Assistant Director of Education Janani from School C stated, "...World Vision and community members work with us for the benefit of students with special educational needs in this school." This indicates that these principals hold positive perceptions regarding communication between the school and stakeholders, as well as collaboration with stakeholders in inclusive education practices. Furthermore, the positive views expressed by the majority of principals reflect their awareness and proactive approach, which contributes to the improvement of inclusive education practices in their schools through effective provision. However, one school principal from School D expressed a negative view regarding both communication between the school and stakeholders and stakeholder collaboration for inclusive education practices.

For example, Ziad stated, "...this community does not prioritize the education of girls, and therefore, parents are not interested in working with us." He further highlighted the community's flawed perceptions regarding the education of female students with special educational needs. This may act as a barrier to improving the provision of inclusive education practices in the school.

All five inclusive classroom teachers demonstrated a favourable attitude towards providing provisions for inclusive education practices. Two teachers from Schools A and C communicated with parents, two teachers from Schools B and D communicated with previous teachers, and one teacher from School E communicated with both parents and previous teachers. Priya, the classroom teacher from School E, stated, "...I spoke with the previous classroom teachers and Aravind's mother, Anula, to get ideas for working with Aravind in the inclusive classroom."

Inclusive classroom teachers from Schools B, C, and E also collaborated with the parents of students with special educational needs. In addition, the inclusive classroom teacher from School D revealed, "...I receive support from the student counsellor teacher; we work together to improve Kavitha." Based on this analysis, it is evident that all five inclusive classroom teachers engage in collaboration with stakeholders. The findings confirm that positive attitudes and commitment among teachers and stakeholders contribute to the improvement of inclusive education practices within schools.

Eight out of ten subject teachers from Schools A, B, C, and E expressed positive attitudes towards inclusive education practices in inclusive classrooms. Accordingly, they communicated with parents, classroom teachers, other subject teachers, principals, community members, and special schools to strengthen inclusive practices. For example, subject teacher Selvi stated, "...when new teachers arrive, I share my experiences about Nirojana."

In addition, these subject teachers collaborated with principals, teachers, parents, peer students, and special schools. For instance, Dhanu, a subject teacher from School E, noted, "...Aravind's mother, Anula, is a teacher and works with me to improve Aravind." These responses indicate positive attitudes among subject teachers towards providing provisions for inclusive practices, which contribute to the improvement of inclusive education for students with special educational needs.

In contrast, two subject teachers from School D expressed negative views regarding the provision of inclusive practices. For example, subject teacher Ayesha from School D stated, "...it is difficult to communicate with the parents of students with special educational needs," after which no effort was made to communicate with Kavitha's parents, and the importance of such communication was overlooked. Moreover, subject teacher Amar from School D stated, "...Kavitha's mother is emotionally unstable, so we cannot work with her." This reflects a tendency to attribute responsibility to the parents by highlighting the mother's emotional condition.



These responses confirm that these subject teachers did not demonstrate positive attitudes towards providing provisions for inclusive practices.

In summary, all five Assistant Directors of Education (ADEs) demonstrated positive attitudes towards the provision of services for inclusive practices in schools and educational zones in the Batticaloa District. In addition, four principals showed positive attitudes towards providing information on inclusive practices in their schools. All five inclusive classroom teachers expressed positive attitudes towards providing provisions for inclusive practices within classrooms and schools, and eight subject teachers demonstrated positive attitudes towards the provision-related roles in inclusive education practices.

This situation indicates that the positive attitudes of teachers, principals, and Assistant Directors of Education towards providing provisions for inclusive practices reflect their knowledge and professional approach, which may contribute to the improvement of inclusive practices in schools and educational zones in the Batticaloa District. A study conducted by Bouillet (2013) reported that communication and collaboration related to provisions were limited or poorly organized in Croatian schools, a finding that contrasts with the results of the present study. This difference may be attributed to a lack of positive attitudes within the community towards communication and collaboration for inclusive practices in Croatian schools. Furthermore, positive attitudes towards the provision of services for inclusive practices enhance stakeholder awareness and may encourage more specialized contributions to inclusive education practices for students with special educational needs in government schools in the Batticaloa District.

However, the negative attitudes of one principal and two subject teachers towards providing provisions for inclusive practices may have an adverse impact on inclusive education activities within the school.

### **Physical Aspects for Inclusive Education**

The physical aspects of inclusive education practices include two main issues:

1. Providing a safe environment for students with special educational needs.
2. Ensuring accessible environments for all students.

In this section, the opinions of the Assistant Directors of Education (ADEs) and school principals involved in inclusive education practices are examined. Accordingly, all ADEs and principals expressed negative views regarding the availability of safe and accessible environments for students with special educational needs in schools and educational zones.

In general, they stated that creating safe and accessible environments is challenging and that responsibility lies with the authorities responsible for designing school buildings. For example, Murugan from School B stated, "...since the buildings are designed by engineers, I cannot do anything about the safe environment," and Rajee from School A mentioned, "...creating a safe environment is not in our hands." These statements suggest that the fulfilment of these responsibilities is expected from the relevant authorities. However, ADEs and principals also have a role to play in advocating for and supporting the development of safer and more accessible school environments.

These responses confirm that the Assistant Directors of Education and school principals are not fully aware of their role in developing safe and accessible environments in inclusive schools. This reflects a negative attitude towards the physical aspects of inclusive education within schools and educational zones. Furthermore, four inclusive classroom teachers from Schools A, C, D, and E indicated that students with special educational needs feel safe within the classroom and school environment. It was also evident that these students do not face difficulties in accessing spaces and facilities within the classroom and school. For example, Bhavani from School C stated, "...Nivetha has a partial hearing impairment, but she does not face any difficulty in movement." This statement confirms the presence of a safe environment for the student with special educational needs. Moreover, the majority of classroom teachers perceived both the safety of the environment and accessibility for students with special educational needs in a positive manner. This further confirms the availability of safe and accessible physical conditions that support inclusive education practices in these

schools. However, one inclusive classroom teacher from School B expressed a negative perception regarding the safety and accessibility of the physical environment for students with special educational needs in inclusive education practices.

For example, Ashvini stated, "...Prakash faces movement challenges in the classroom, which is a barrier to accessing facilities." This statement reflects her negative perception of the accessibility of the school environment and suggests that such conditions may hinder Prakash's participation in inclusive practices at school. Furthermore, the type and severity of a student's disability may influence inclusive classroom teachers' attitudes towards the accessibility of the environment in inclusive education practices.

Eight subject teachers from Schools A, C, D, and E reported that students with special educational needs feel safe within the classroom and school environment and do not face significant challenges in accessing spaces and facilities. For example, subject teacher Selvi from School A stated, "...Nirojana sometimes needs assistance to access places in the regular classroom," while Dhanu from School E noted, "...I think Aravind is comfortable in this environment, and he is happy in the school environment." The majority of subject teachers therefore perceived both the safety of the environment and accessibility for students with special educational needs in inclusive practices in a positive manner. However, one subject teacher from School B expressed a negative perception regarding the safety and accessibility of the physical environment for students with special educational needs in inclusive practices. For example, Uma stated, "...Prakash needs to urinate frequently, but he has to walk a long distance to the washroom, which is a challenge for him." This statement confirms a negative view of the physical aspects of the school environment.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that the nature of special educational needs, as well as the type and severity of disability, may influence classroom teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education practices. Based on the analysis, all five Assistant Directors of Education (ADEs) and all five inclusive school principals demonstrated negative attitudes regarding the physical aspects of inclusive practices within educational zones and schools. This situation may act as a barrier to the effective implementation of inclusive practices in these schools. However, four inclusive classroom teachers and eight subject teachers demonstrated positive attitudes towards the physical aspects of inclusive education practices. In contrast, one inclusive classroom teacher and two subject teachers expressed negative attitudes regarding the physical aspects of inclusive practices. These findings indicate that all Assistant Directors of Education (ADEs) and all five principals hold negative attitudes towards the physical aspects of inclusive education practices, while the majority of teachers hold positive attitudes. This confirms a clear discrepancy between the attitudes of inclusive education administrators and classroom teachers with regard to the physical aspects of inclusive practices. A study conducted by Ackah-Jnr and Danso (2019) highlighted the importance of appropriate architectural design in improving physical and artificial lighting, adapting classroom and building facilities, redesigning school layouts, and ensuring safety, accessibility, and usability within school environments.

This finding confirms the importance of providing a safe and accessible environment for all students in inclusive schools. Therefore, all stakeholders should strengthen their positive attitudes towards the physical aspects of inclusive education practices in government schools in the Batticaloa District.

### **Policies for Inclusive Education**

Under the framework of policies for inclusive education, two main issues are analyzed:

1. School-level policies
2. National-level policies

All Assistant Directors of Education (ADEs) and all principals expressed negative perceptions regarding inclusive school policies for inclusive education practices within their respective zones and schools. For example, Adhil from School D stated, "...we do not have a specific policy for our educational zone that is suitable for the education of students with special educational needs." This response reflects a negative attitude towards inclusive school policies and suggests that the absence of such policies may pose a challenge to the effective implementation of inclusive education practices in schools.

The views of inclusive classroom teachers and subject teachers regarding inclusive school policies were examined. Accordingly, all inclusive classroom teachers and all subject teachers in inclusive classrooms expressed negative attitudes towards the implementation of inclusive school policies for inclusive education practices. For example, Bhavani from School C stated, "...I have no idea about inclusive policy," and Chithra from School E mentioned, "...I have not learned about special education policies." These responses indicate a lack of adequate awareness and understanding among teachers regarding inclusive school policies. This situation may pose a challenge to the effective implementation of inclusive education practices in schools. Overall, Assistant Directors of Education (ADEs), principals of inclusive schools, inclusive classroom teachers, and subject teachers demonstrated negative attitudes towards policies for inclusive education practices in schools and educational zones. A recent study by Ileri et al. (2020) highlighted that inclusive policies are essential for overcoming physical barriers that hinder the effective implementation of inclusive education. This finding further underscores the necessity of inclusive policies in supporting inclusive education practices. Therefore, stakeholders should develop more positive attitudes towards inclusive policies to support the implementation of inclusive education in government schools in the Batticaloa District.

### **Individualized Education Programmes (IEPs)**

The Individualized Education Programme (IEP) is examined under two aspects:

1. The Individualized Education Programme for students with special educational needs
2. The Individualized Education Programme (IEP) Team for students with special educational needs

In this regard, all Assistant Directors of Education (ADEs) and all school principals demonstrated negative attitudes towards the implementation of the Individualized Education Programme and the functioning of the IEP Team for students with special educational needs. They expressed their views on the implementation of IEPs for students with special educational needs within inclusive education practices in their respective schools and educational zones. For example, Harish from School A stated, "...Individualized Education Programmes are not in practice in their educational zone," and Ziad from School D similarly mentioned, "...Individualized Education Programmes are not in practice in their educational zone." This situation reflects the level of commitment and attitudes of Assistant Directors of Education and school principals towards the implementation of Individualized Education Programmes and the functioning of IEP Teams for students with special educational needs within inclusive education practices.

All five inclusive classroom teachers expressed negative perceptions regarding the Individualized Education Programme (IEP) for students with special educational needs. They commented on the implementation of IEPs within inclusive education practices in their schools. For example, Thiru from School D stated, "...I do not know about Kavitha's Individualized Education Programme in the school," and "...the Individualized Education Programme Team is not available in the school." These responses indicate a lack of appropriate attitudes and understanding regarding the IEP and the functioning of the IEP Team. Furthermore, all subject teachers in inclusive classrooms also demonstrated negative perceptions towards the Individualized Education Programme and the IEP Team for students with special educational needs. They expressed views on the implementation of IEPs within inclusive practices in their schools. For instance, Chithra from School E stated, "...the Individualized Education Programme is unnecessary for students like Aravind," while Theeban from School B mentioned, "...I have no idea about the Individualized Education Programme for students with special educational needs." These responses suggest that teachers lack sufficient knowledge and awareness of IEPs within inclusive education practices. Overall, all Assistant Directors of Education (ADEs), principals of inclusive schools, inclusive classroom teachers, and subject teachers demonstrated negative views regarding the implementation of the Individualized Education Programme (IEP) for students with special educational needs within inclusive education practices in schools.

However, a study conducted by Timothy and Agbenyega (2018) reported that IEPs are used by school leaders as effective planning documents that support the identification and communication of students' learning needs. Their study further highlighted that the development of IEPs encouraged collaboration and consultation among school staff, reflecting positive stakeholder attitudes towards inclusive practices. This finding contrasts with the results of the present study and suggests that stakeholders in the Batticaloa District may lack adequate awareness and understanding of the implementation of IEPs for students with special educational needs.



In contrast, a study by Kovač-Cerović et al. (2016) in North Macedonia found that the introduction of IEPs created tensions with teachers' traditional practices, reflecting negative attitudes towards their implementation. This finding is consistent with the results of the present study. Therefore, stakeholders need to address and overcome the challenges associated with implementing IEPs for students with special educational needs. Negative attitudes towards the IEP and the functioning of the IEP Team may pose a significant barrier to effective inclusive education practices in government schools in the Batticaloa District.

### **Student Interactions in Inclusive Education**

Student interactions in inclusive education practices include two main types:

1. Peer interaction involving students with special educational needs in inclusive education practices.
2. Student–teacher interaction in inclusive education practices.

All Assistant Directors of Education (ADEs) and school principals expressed positive views regarding peer interaction within schools and educational zones. For example, Devi from School E stated, "...when a student with a physical disability was accommodated in Grade 1, the student could not walk at first, but gradually began to walk well due to the support provided by peers." This illustrates the positive role of peer interaction in supporting students with special educational needs. Furthermore, Principal Yogesh from School B stated, "...peer interaction and teacher–student interactions create a friendly environment in this school." This highlights the importance of peer interaction in fostering a supportive and inclusive school environment. All five Assistant Directors of Education and school principals expressed positive perceptions of student–teacher interactions in inclusive education practices. For example, Adhil from School D stated, "...I explain the importance of teacher–student interactions during meetings," and the principal of School E mentioned, "...student–teacher interaction in inclusive education practices creates a comfortable environment for students with special educational needs." These views further confirm the positive stance of the Assistant Directors of Education regarding student–teacher interactions in inclusive education.

School principals hold positive attitudes towards student–teacher interaction in inclusive education practices. This analysis indicates an overall positive perception of student interactions within inclusive education practices. Furthermore, principals can make effective use of student interactions in inclusive education to enhance the educational and social development of students with special educational needs. All five inclusive classroom teachers also expressed positive perceptions of student interactions in educational practices. For example, classroom teacher Ashvini supports teaching and learning through inclusive education practices. In this regard, the teacher from School E stated, "...I promote peer interactions to support my teaching." In addition, student–teacher interaction supports the inclusion of students with special educational needs. For instance, Deepa, the classroom teacher from School A, mentioned, "...I have a good relationship with Nirojana, and that helps her to be included in this classroom." These findings confirm that student interactions support inclusive education practices in classrooms and reflect positive attitudes towards student interaction in inclusive education practices.

All ten subject teachers expressed positive views regarding student interaction in inclusive education practices. Accordingly, subject teachers from Schools D and B emphasized the role of peer interaction in supporting the educational and social development of students with special educational needs within inclusive settings. For example, subject teacher Theeban from School D stated, "...peer interaction helps to improve the educational activities of students with special educational needs." Furthermore, all subject teachers highlighted the importance and benefits of teacher–student interaction in inclusive education practices. For instance, subject teacher Amar stated, "...the teacher should have a good relationship with students who have special educational needs." These responses confirm positive perceptions of student interaction in inclusive education practices and suggest that such interactions contribute to improving the educational and social experiences of students with special educational needs in inclusive settings.

Overall, all Assistant Directors of Education (ADEs), inclusive school principals, inclusive classroom teachers, and subject teachers demonstrated positive perceptions of student interactions in inclusive education practices. This reflects the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of stakeholders towards enhancing student interactions within

inclusive education. Furthermore, it is evident that these stakeholders are committed to strengthening student interactions in order to promote inclusive education practices in schools in the Batticaloa District. The findings of a study conducted by Cameron (2014) revealed that teachers are aware of the need to provide greater individual attention to students with disabilities and described various ways in which they adapt their instructional approaches in line with effective teaching practices. In addition, Mamas and Avramidis (2013) found that typically developing children are naturally motivated to interact and play with children with special educational needs during both free play and structured activities. The consistency of these findings supports the results of the present study regarding student interaction in inclusive education practices. These positive interactions are likely to contribute to the improvement of both educational and social experiences of students with special educational needs within inclusive education practices in government schools in the Batticaloa District.

## CONCLUSION

The data analysis and discussion of inclusive education practices for students with special educational needs in the Batticaloa District were presented under the following subheadings: Provisions for Inclusive Education, Physical Aspects for Inclusive Education, Policies for Inclusive Education, Individualized Education Programmes (IEPs), and Student Interactions in Inclusive Education.

## Research Findings

The attitudes of stakeholders regarding the implementation of inclusive education practices in the five schools in the Batticaloa District have not undergone a complete transformation.

- Overall, the findings based on the five selected schools indicate that stakeholders hold both positive and negative attitudes towards the provision of services for inclusive education practices.
- Stakeholders demonstrate positive attitudes and practices in two key areas: Provisions for Inclusive Education and Student Interactions in Inclusive Education.
- Negative attitudes and implementation challenges are evident among stakeholders in relation to the development of Individualized Education Programmes (IEPs) for students with special educational needs and Policies for Inclusive Education.
- With regard to the implementation of Physical Aspects for Inclusive Education, mixed attitudes are observed. In this respect, negative attitudes are evident among higher-level officials, such as Assistant Directors of Education and principals, while teachers demonstrate more positive attitudes.

## RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

- Awareness should be strengthened at both school and zonal levels regarding the importance of inclusive education policies and Individualized Education Programmes (IEPs) in order to enhance inclusive education processes for students with special educational needs in government schools in the Batticaloa District.
- Awareness should also be raised regarding the importance of physical aspects in inclusive education and the specific responsibilities of stakeholders in ensuring their effective implementation.

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