Conceptual Understanding and Practice of "Inclusive Education" among the Primary School Teachers in Rathnapura District - An Experience Sharing

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Save the Children
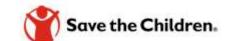
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Objectives

To understand the level of primary grade school teachers' knowledge on "inclusive education" and how do they apply the knowledge practically in their classroom teaching practices.

Especially in a "before and after scenario" in LB teacher training programs.

It is expected that this understanding will enable policy makers to school level stakeholders to rethink teacher professional development strategies on inclusive education.

Questions Answered

1. What is the level of understanding of primary grade teachers on the concept of "Inclusive Education"?
2. How the teaching practice is changed after the LITERACY BOOST (LB) teacher training program on "Inclusive Education".
3. What are the suggestions to improve future teacher professional development programs on inclusive education.
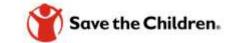
Significance of the topic

- Save the Children defines inclusive education as education that enables all children to learn together with support for their individual needs.
- Inclusive education seeks to identify and address barriers and discrimination that prevent some children from being supported to learn alongside their peers.
- The most common lenses of discrimination impacting students in education include disability, ethnicity, language, gender, sexual orientation, refugee status, socio-economic and cultural status, and poverty.
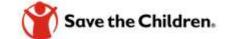
Significance of the topic (Continued)

- The increased global focus on inclusive education stems from efforts to guarantee the Right to Education to large numbers of out-of-school children who are excluded from access to quality education because of social, economic, and cultural stigma and discrimination.

- The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated challenges for those most marginalized and excluded children.

- The inability of Governments and the Global Community to guarantee an appropriate quality education to all children not only constitutes a huge personal loss, but also limits their potential contribution to society and country.
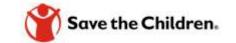
Significance of the topic (Continued)

- Inclusive education is hailed as a key approach and a major benchmark in education policy developments and in education quality improving programs worldwide.

- The need of teachers to have a proper understanding and practical implementation support on Inclusive Education have been globally recognized because teachers are one of the most significant stakeholder groups of any education system in the world.

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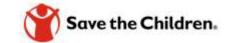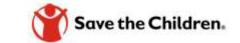
Significance of the topic (Continued)

- Sri Lankan education policy makers and government authorities have indicated Inclusive Education as an important cross cutting theme which enables thousands of more children to retain and reap the benefits of the free education system.

- Therefore it is important that all the teachers – especially primary grade teachers have a clearer conceptual understanding and confidence to create an inclusive learning environment for the students.

- It is expected that this experience sharing document will enlighten the paths towards quality education through quality teacher professional development.
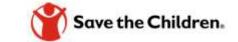
Methodology

A total of 150 teachers - 113 Sinhala medium primary school teachers of 16 schools and 37 Tamil medium primary teachers from 4 schools in Rathnapura District (Balangoda & Embilipitiya Zones) participated in the Inclusive Education Literacy Boost Teacher Training organized under the USDA funded PALAM/A project. Teachers came from different backgrounds having different qualifications from colleges of education to universities. The experience ranged from 30 years to 3 months.

Methodology (Continued)

Methods to check the level of knowledge of teachers -

1. Before the start, "K-W-L forms" (Know, want to know, Learned) sheets were distributed among the participated teachers. The teachers were asked to fill 3 columned formats. In the first column they had to reply about the existing knowledge on inclusive education. In the second column what they wanted to learn from the program. After the program concluded they had to provide feedback on the third column.
2. Interactive activities were used to get an understanding on the pre-earned knowledge.
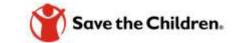3. Verbal feedbacks were collected at the end of the program.

Methodology (Continued)

Methods to assess Teachers' practice of the concept after the trainings

1. 16 schools and 100 classrooms were visited by SCI with the support of ISAs is respective zones. **"The Classroom Observation Tool"** which was developed by the MEAL department of SCI was used to guide the classroom observation and extract the results.
2. At the school observation visits - Key Informant Interviews, random verbal feedbacks and visual observations, lesson plan assessments were conducted to gather information on how teachers use newly gained Knowledge and skills to improve their teaching strategies.
3. WhatsApp groups acted as an open space for the school teachers to share evidence their innovative and inclusive teaching practices.
4. Verbal feedback at the "Feedback Meetings with school administrators" also provided additional information.

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Major Findings

Findings related to - The level of knowledge of the concept

1. Majority of the teachers were unclear about the concept of "Inclusive Education" before the training.
2. Majority of the teachers wanted to get a deeper understanding of the concept of inclusive education.
3. Though some teachers had pre-heard and pre-learned about the term, they did not express deeper theoretical understanding and application of the concept.
4. Teachers were confused on 3 other contrasting terms which surrounds Inclusion – Integration, Exclusion and Segregation.
5. The school teachers who had a slight understanding on "Special Education" (segregation) had a comparatively a positive understanding of the term of I.E.

Major Findings (Continued)

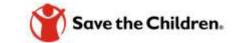**Findings related to the practical application of the concept (After the training)**

1. Teachers were showing sensitiveness towards the concept as they showcased good characteristics of an inclusive classroom. For example, A teacher directly claimed that due to sensitivity given through the LB training, she paid more attention to a student who is suffering from Autism and also paid attention on acquiring relevant knowledge and skills to accommodate the student needs.
2. Some teachers verbally expressed that they have increased sensitivity towards every learner and they understood the importance of making an inclusive environment.
3. Some teachers were giving special attention to so called "slow learners" by giving them extra time after the school.

Major Findings (Continued)

Findings related to the practical application of the concept (After the training)

4. According to verbal feedback of school principals - The number of teachers who attempt to "push" students with learning difficulties towards "Special Education units" has been reduced.

5. In general majority Teachers show weaknesses technical competencies related to effectively managing different difficulties of the students such as Visual difficulties, hearing difficulties, Autism, Down syndrome etc. (Accommodation)

6. According to several teachers the major challenge teachers faced in implementing Inclusive educational practices was "Special Education Units". According to them the existing school administration entities who promote the establishment of more special education units, appointment of new "special education teachers", contradicts and collide with the inclusive education practices.
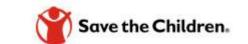
Discussion and Analysis – Main Points

It is interesting to see that though most teachers have come across the term of "Inclusive Education" during their pre-service training, that their practice and understanding doesn't reflect a deeper comprehension on the term. This indicates either gaps of the teachers' comprehension or ineffective teacher training methods used on the concept.

Though teachers possessed a familiarity with certain elements of inclusive education practices they were unable to recognize the theoretical aspects which underpinned that particular practice. This indicated the gaps in competencies the teachers have in building relationship a the theories they learnt and practice.

In many countries which claim to have "better education systems" such as Finland, uses Special Education interchangeably used to enhance a better learning experience for students with learning difficulties while emphasizing the importance of an inclusive learning environment. However it seems that there is a dichotomous understanding about these concepts among Sri Lankan teachers. (Inclusion, Segregation, Exclusion and Intergration)

Conclusion and Recommendations

1. Support for teacher professional development initiatives must be improved to supplement the knowledge, skills improvement needs of teachers. These skills and capacity building should cover the aspect on accommodating all the students, who are learning in different conditions. (SCI's snap training aims this)

2. Rather than focusing on "Cognitive output" of a training, the trainings and assessment methods which are aimed at teacher PD should also focus on "Social and Emotional" aspect of the trainings. Ex – Improved sensitivity towards the need of slow learners.

3. The existing conflict between the "Segregation" based practices and Inclusive Orientation should be addressed.

4. Teachers should be capacitated to use existing resources and space of special education segment of the state education system towards maximizing an inclusive learning environment, rather than seeing the negative side of it.