



SUPPORTING THE SPECIAL EDUCATION UNIT SYSTEM IN PROMOTING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

K. Ketheeswaranⁱ

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

Abstract:

This study was conducted to investigate the practice of the Special Education Unit (SEU) system in regular schools and its way forward to support the Inclusive Education (IE) system in the Ampara District. A survey design and qualitative and quantitative approaches were followed to conduct this study. The questionnaire, interview, and focus group discussion were utilized to collect data. 27 schools with Special Educational Needs (SENs) and participants were purposively selected. Data was collected from 27 school principals, 86 teachers from SEUs, seven In-Service Advisers of Special Education (ISA SE), and 35 parents of students with SEN. SPSS-16 was utilized for quantitative data analysis and the content analysis utilized qualitative data. The findings show that SEUs have been in practice since 2002 with the collaboration of the stakeholders, and it supports the improvement of IE practices in schools. Further, the study recommends that educational administrators should be allocated adequate resources and follow a mechanism to improve IE practices.

Keywords: special education unit; special educational needs; inclusive education

1. Introduction

Inclusive Education (IE) is now firmly established as the main policy imperative concerning children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and it is championed to remove discrimination and barriers to inclusion (Dhanapala, 2009). IE allows students with SEN full inclusion in education. Further, the integrated education system can be mentioned as the most related and close system in uplifting the concepts of inclusion because, in the integrated system, students with SEN are being placed in mainstream education settings with some adaptations with the pre-existing structures. Also, the concept of IE illustrates that the school should have access to include all the diverse students in a classroom (Mittler, 2000). Therefore, inclusive education is considered an

ⁱ Correspondence: email kketh@ou.ac.lk

essential practice in the education system by National Governments and International Agencies.

Successful implementation of IE plays a vital role in the education of students with SEN. Accordingly, advanced countries have developed the practice of IE (The World Economic Forum, 2017). However, developing countries are in the devolving stage of the IE system, especially, South Asian countries including Sri Lanka, which are in the developing stages of IE practices. In line with that, Sri Lanka needs to design culturally compatible IE models and achieve a paradigm shift within all communities towards inclusion.

In Sri Lanka, the SEU system has played a vital role in integrating children with SEN in the school community since the 1960s (Ministry of Education, 2006). According to this system, students with SENs can enroll in the SEU which operates inside the school, whilst according to the student's abilities, they participate in the regular classroom in particular subjects or activities. Some students gradually enroll in the normal classroom when they have their whole day activities. They follow the common curriculum with other normal students and SEU teachers can support inclusive classroom teachers if necessary. Moreover, Piyasena (2003) highlights that the children who could achieve reasonable progress in the SEUs were eventually able to join the mainstream in Sri Lanka. In the Sri Lankan context, the educational reforms, White Papers, reports, international documents, and conventions support the philosophy and practice of integrated and IE. These provisions have included the instructional approach to achieve the Education for All Goals (UNICEF, 2003). Provisions show that there is a positive trend towards the implementation of the IE system. Nevertheless, there are gaps in achieving the internationally recommended IE practice in the Sri Lankan education system. Thus, this study investigates the present practice of the SEU system in regular schools and its way forward to support IE.

2. Statement of the problem

The SEU system was introduced in regular schools in the Sri Lankan education system in 1969. The main objective of the SEU is to develop the students with SEN in the integrated setup which helps students with SEN to include them in the regular classroom after acquiring the necessary skills to function in a regular classroom. However, in the school system of the Ampara District, regular classroom teachers try to send normal students with low achievement from regular classrooms to the SEUs without understanding the objectives of the SEUs. On other hand, students with SEN who are accommodated in SEUs are sent to the regular classroom rarely, even though they can learn in the inclusive setup with normal students. As a teacher educator in the field of special needs education, the researcher identifies this problem in the schools of the Ampara District.

The studies conducted by Ellepola (2016) Ketheeswaran (2019) and Hettiaarachi et al (2018) reveal that the lack of awareness of principals, teachers, and educational administrators about the system of operation and the objective of the SEU system is a challenge to the education of students with SEN in the regular schools in Sri Lanka.

Accordingly, it is evident that the SEU system is not properly practiced in the regular schools of the Ampara District. Therefore, there is a need to study these problems to enhance the implementation of an integrated education system of the SEUs in the regular schools which will support the activities of the inclusive education system in the government schools of the Ampara District.

2.1 Background of the study

Sri Lanka consists of nine provinces, twenty-five districts, and ninety-two educational zones. Sri Lanka's population has a literacy rate of 91.9% (Geck, 2017). According to the report of the Ministry of Education (2018), 10,194 government schools employ 241,591 teachers catering to 4,165,964 students.

The Sri Lankan education system consists of Assisted Special Schools, Special Education Units and an Inclusive Education System for educating students with SEN. 26 Assisted Special Schools are located in the entire country and 2613 students with SEN are accommodated in these schools and 415 special trained teachers have been serving in these 26 Assisted Special Schools (Ministry of Education, 2018).

There are 704 SEUs in the National and Provincial Government schools in Sri Lanka. 104 National Schools have been practicing SEUs with 1220 students with SNE. 206 special trained teachers have been serving in those SEUs. 600 provincial schools have been functioning with SEUs and 6223 students with SENs have been accommodated in the SEUs of the provincial schools. Also, 90,689 students with SEN are included in the regular classrooms of the National and Provincial schools in Sri Lanka (Ministry of Education, 2018).

The Ampara District educational statistics show that the district consists of 7 educational zones and 437 regular schools that accommodate 162,381 students in normal schools with the service of 8,942 normal schoolteachers (Ministry of Education, 2016). Out of 437 schools, there are 27 schools with SEUs that have been in seven educational zones, and 380 students with SEN study in those 27 SEUs where 86 special trained teachers are employed. Moreover, the Ampara Special Needs Network (ASNN) runs to support the improvement of the SEU system in the Ampara District. According to the researcher's observations, most of the students with SEN are studying in the SEUs even though they can have the ability to learn in inclusive classrooms. Therefore, this research will be conducted to find out the way in which the SEU system supports carrying out successful inclusive education in the government schools of the Ampara District.

2.2 The main objective of the study

To investigate the present practice of SEUs system in regular schools and its way forward to support inclusive education practices.

2.2.1 Objectives of the study

- To find out the current practices of the SEU system in regular schools.
- To identify best practices and develop recommendations to promote the SEU system as a vehicle towards the inclusive education system.

2.3 Research questions

- How does the SEU system is practiced in the regular schools of the Ampara District?
- What are the best practices of the SEU system that support the IE practices of the regular schools in the Ampara District?
- How do the regular schools improve the IE practices in the Ampara District?

3. Methodology

This study used a survey design and this research also involved collecting, analyzing, and integrating quantitative and qualitative data. Therefore, a mixed research approach was followed in this research. The population of the study was 706 schools with SEUs in Sri Lanka; the target population of the study was 437 schools located in the Ampara District and the sample of the study was 27 schools with SEUs of the Ampara District. All 27 schools with SEUs were selected purposively for this study. The sample schools were composed of all seven educational zones in the Ampara District. The overview details of the sample are in the following Table 1.

Table 1: Overview of the sample of the study

Name of the zones	No of the schools with SEUs	No of principals of schools with SEUs	SEU teachers	ISA SE	Parents of children with special needs
Kalmunai	5	5	17	1	5
Sammanthurai	3	3	11	1	5
Akkaraipattu	3	3	10	1	5
Thirukkovil	3	3	05	1	5
Dehiattakandiya	4	4	16	1	5
Mahaoya	1	1	02	1	5
Ampara	8	8	25	1	5
Total	27	27	86	7	35

Table 2: Sampling methods and data collection instruments

Participants	Samples (schools with SEU)	Sampling methods	Data collection instrument
Principals	27	Purposive	Questionnaire
Teachers	89	Purposive	Questionnaire
ISAs in Special Education	7 (1 ISA from each educational zone)	Purposive	Interview
Parents of students with SEN	35 (5 parents from each educational zone)	Purposive	Focus group discussion
Principals	7 (1 principal from each educational zone)	Purposive	Interview

3.1 Data collection instruments

The data collection instruments were utilized for collecting data from the participants for this study. The details are in the above-mentioned Table 2. Further, there was content

validity and reliability in the data collection instruments. Accordingly, the Cronbach's alpha value test was conducted on the questionnaire and the Cronbach's alpha value was .808, and the reliability of the questionnaire was confirmed. Furthermore, experts' validity was conducted about the interview schedule and focus group discussion.

3.2 Data collection procedure

3.2.1 Questionnaires

In this study also, questionnaires were developed for collecting data from 86 teachers who work in SEU and 27 principals in the selected 27 regular schools with SEU. The questionnaire consisted of open-ended questions and close-ended (five scales, three scales, and yes or no') questions. The questionnaires of SEU teachers consisted of 43 questions and the questionnaires of principals consisted of 14 questions in total.

3.2.2 Interview schedules

Interview schedules were prepared to collect data from principals and ISA SE. Each interview schedule consisted of 15 questions about the introduction and background of the SEU system, the practice of the SEU system, and the future possibility for IE.

3.2.3 Focus group discussion schedule

A focus group discussion schedule was prepared for collecting data from parents with children with SEN who were attached to SEUs. The focus group discussion schedule consisted of 10 questions about the parents' view on special education practice and their children's development such as personal information and perception of the inclusion of their children.

3.3 Data collections and analysis procedure

3.3.1 Questionnaire for teachers and principals

The questionnaires for principals and teachers were distributed by hand. During the distribution of the questionnaires, the teachers' and principals' agreement was taken by the researcher in line with the research ethics. Teachers and principals were informed regarding data collection visits and procedures. In the first visit, questionnaires were distributed and in the second visit, the completed questionnaires were collected. A time period of two weeks was given to fill the questionnaires and completed questionnaires were collected after two weeks.

The SPSS-16 data analysis software was utilized to analyze the data collected from the questionnaire. Pie-charts, bar-charts, column-charts, and percentages were utilized to describe the output of the data. Moreover, the content analysis method was utilized for analyzing the data collected by open-ended questions. Therefore, teachers and principals were coded during data gathering in this study. Accordingly, 27 principals were coded as P1 to P27, and 86 teachers were coded as T1 to T86.

3.3.2 Interviews with school principals and ISA SE

Interview schedules were developed to collect data from principals and ISAs. Four principals were interviewed in the Tamil medium schools and three principals were interviewed in the Sinhala medium schools. Similarly, four ISAs were interviewed in the Tamil medium and three ISAs were interviewed in the Sinhala medium. All the interviews were done with the assistance of a translator. Each interview lasted one and a half hours.

Interviews were recorded using a voice recorder. The data files were managed as audio files and transcripts were developed in text format. Moreover, narrative analyses were utilized for analyzing the data. Interviewed principals are fictitious as P6, P11, P14, P17, P21, P22, and P26. Interviewed ISAs were made fictitious as ZA to ZG.

3.3.3 Focus group discussion

The focus group discussion schedule was developed to conduct focus group discussions with parents of children with SEN. The focus group discussions were conducted in two languages: One in the Tamil medium and the other in the Sinhala medium with the assistance of an interpreter. Each focus group discussion lasted for about one hour. The focus group discussions were recorded using a voice recorder and managed as two audio files and transcribed into text. The content analysis method was utilized to analyze the data gathered from focus group discussions. Parents were made fictitious as Pa1 to Pa30.

3.4 Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were applied throughout the research process. In this study, permission was sought from all the participants taking part in the interviews, focus group discussions and questionnaire. Accordingly, the Provincial Director of Education (PDE) of the Eastern Province granted permission to conduct the data collection in the government schools of the Ampara District. Furthermore, ADs of SE of all seven educational zones in the Ampara District granted permission to conduct data collection in the government schools of their educational zone. In addition, permission was taken from the principals of all five schools to distribute the questionnaires and conduct interviews and focus group discussions on their schools. Moreover, each participant of the study was informed of the aim and objectives of the study with a small description of the study at the beginning of the questionnaires, interviews and focus group discussions; and with their consent, the interviews and focus group discussions were continued.

4. Findings

The questionnaire consisted of a question to find out about the number of years since the establishment of the SEUs. The following Figure 1 showcases that the highest number of SEUs in the Ampara District, which is seven (25.9%) SEUs, was established in the year 2008. Moreover, in each of the years of 2006, 2007, and 2010 five (18.5%) SEUs, in the year 2002 three (11.1%) SEUs, and year 2012 two (7.4%) SEUs were established in the Ampara

District. Altogether, 27(100%) SEUs were established during the decade from 2002 to 2012.

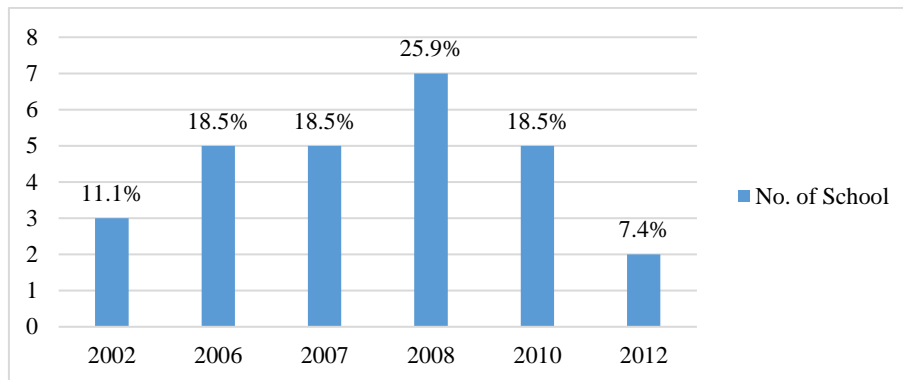


Figure 1: Establishment of SEUs in the Ampara District

The location of the SEUs in regular schools plays a vital role in educating and socializing students with special education needs. According to the analyzed data, Figure 2 shows that 12 (44%) SEUs are located next to the normal classrooms, seven (26%) SEUs are located between normal classrooms, and eight (30%) schools have SEUs in a separate building of the school. However, these SEUs are isolated from normal classrooms.

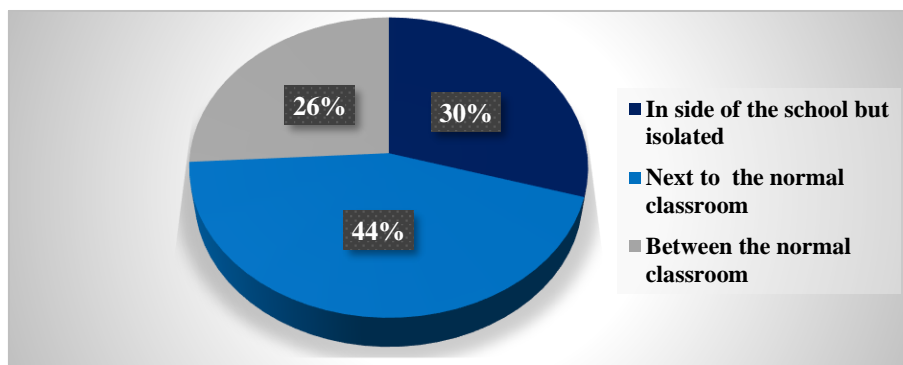


Figure 2: Location of the SEUs

Types of appointments of SEU teachers were identified by analysis of data collected by the questionnaire. The following Figure 3 shows that 80 (93%) teachers are appointed as permanent teachers and six (7%) teachers are appointed by Ampara Special Needs Network (ASNN) as volunteer teachers.

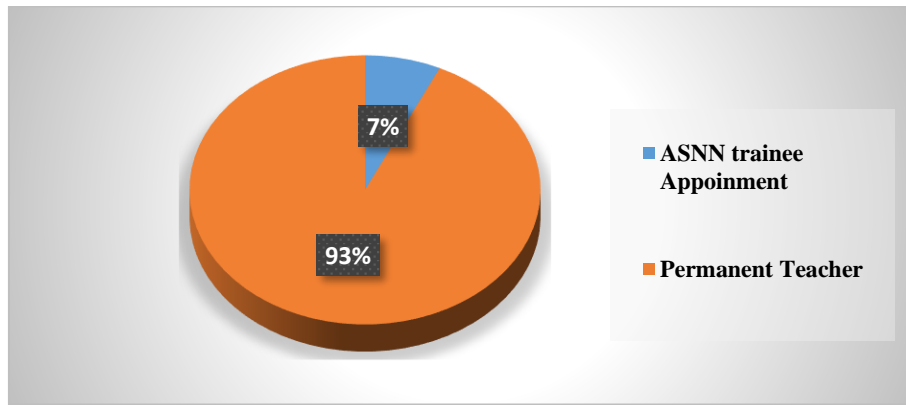


Figure 3: Appointment type of teachers of SEUs

The availability of human resources in SEU practices was assessed. According to the following Figure 4, in the Ampara District, 23 (86%) SEUs get facilities from doctors, 10 (39.5%) from the speech therapist, 25 (94.2%) from the counselor, 13 (48%) from physiotherapy, seven (24.4%) from occupational therapy, 17 (64%) from psychiatrist and 24 (87.2%) SEUs from teaching assistants. Moreover, 22 (79.1%) SEUs get facilities from special trained teachers while eight (30.2%) SEUs get facilities from social service officers. In summary, six (22.2%) SEUs gain all facilities such as from doctors, counselors, teacher’s assistants, special trained teachers, psychiatrists, etc. Accordingly, the highest number of SEUs get facilities from speech therapy. On the other hand, the least numbers of SEUs get facilities from occupational therapy. In addition to that, five (20.9%) SEUs do not get facilities from special trained teachers. The human resource person works either part-time or full-time in the schools. In addition to that, during the interviews, all the principals stated that resource persons of the Ampara Special Needs Network (ASNN) and World Vision visit and support, in-service professional development and provide physical resources in the Ampara District.

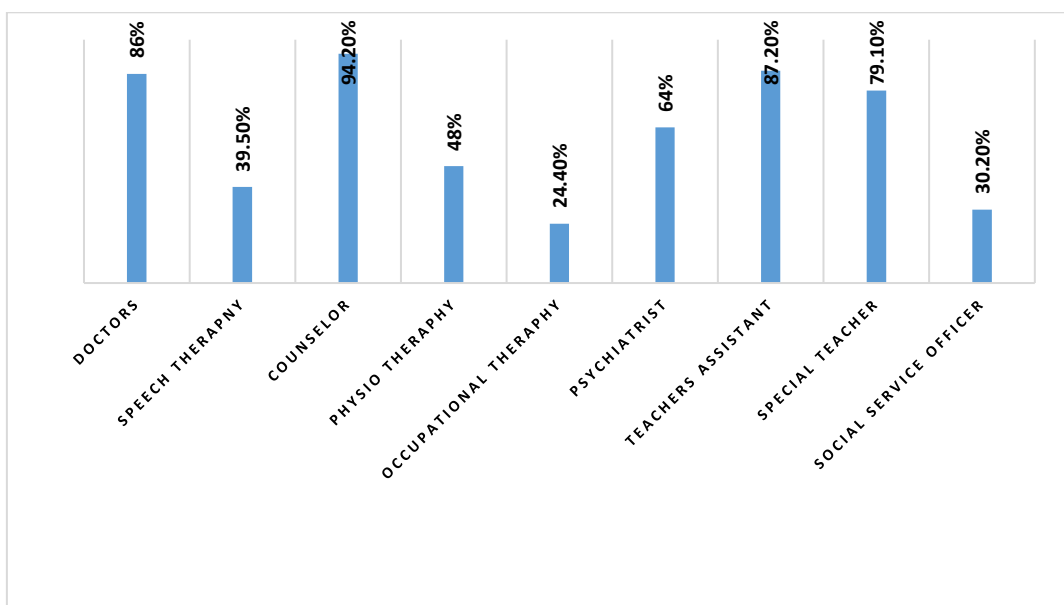


Figure 4: Human resource of SEUs

Physical resources play a vital role in practicing SEUs. According to Figure 5's data output, 21 (77.8%) schools have special classrooms for practicing the SEU system, 10 (37%) schools have a resource room consisting of sports equipment, equipment for physical exercise, resources for assessment, etc. 10 (37%) schools have playgrounds with facilities for SEN students, nine (33.3%) schools have modified tables, eight (29.6%) schools have modified chairs according to the needs of children with SEN, 13 (48.1%) schools have modified toilets with sinks at different heights, wheelchair transport facilities, etc. Moreover, 14 (51.9%) schools have modified toys for diverse needs of children with SEN and during the interviews in schools, principals responded that their SEUs have vocational training opportunities for training children with special needs, either inside or outside the school.

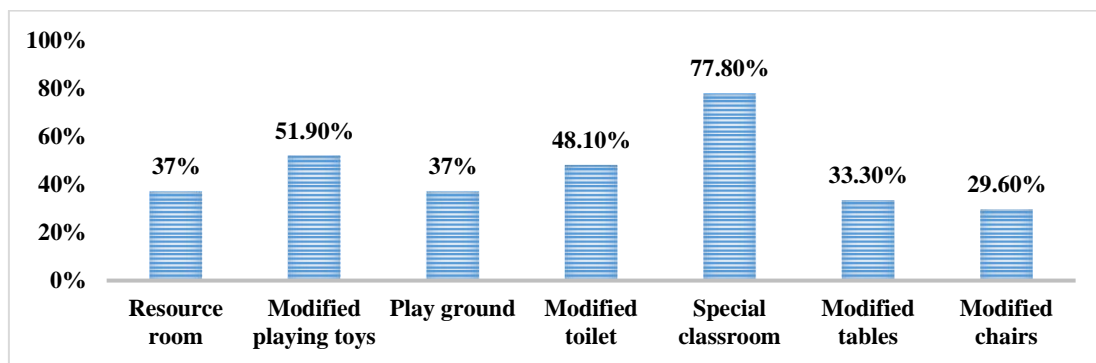


Figure 5: Physical resources of SEU practices

Moreover, during the interview with principals, it was revealed that schools have sports activities, physical activities, individual lesson plans (IEP), special days (disability day, braille, and sign language), and quality inputs to meet the students' diverse needs and ICT; specially trained teachers in a particular area (e.g. Autism, CP), assistive technologies for instruction and special curricula are undertaken by special trained teachers in SEU including developing students with SEN in inclusive classrooms.

According to Figure 6, 43 (50%) teachers responded that the SEU students are always integrated with normal classroom students in academic activities; 68 (79.1%) teachers responded that the SEU students always integrate with normal students in school intervals; 78 (90.7%) teachers responded that the SEU students always integrate with normal classroom students in cultural events and 60 (69.8%) teachers responded that the SEU students always integrate with normal students in sports activities. Moreover, 46 (53.5%) teachers responded that the majority of SEU students sometimes are integrated with normal classroom students in field visits and morning assembly. Finally, 31 (36%) teachers responded that most students with SENs of SEU never integrate with normal classroom students in competitions. In line with these findings, there are considerable positive responses from SEU teachers about the integration of SEU students with normal classroom students in various activities.

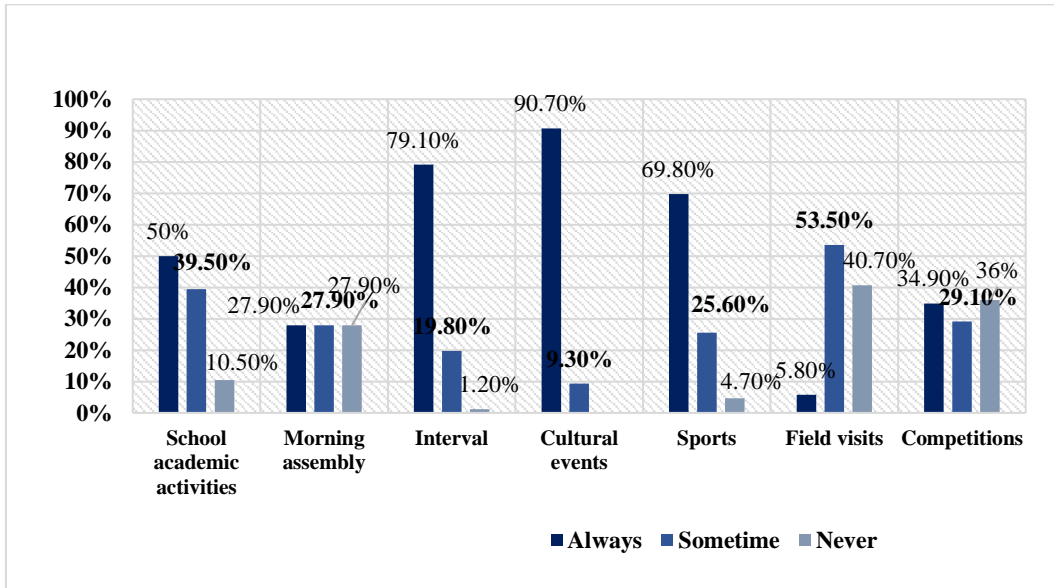


Figure 6: Integration of SEU students with normal classroom students

Figure 7 illustrates the type of participation of students from SEU with normal classroom students in the academic activities of the selected schools. According to the analyzed data output, 23 (26.7%) SEU teachers responded that students of SEU fully participate, 74 (86%) SEU teachers responded that students of SEU are partially participating, and 53 (65.1%) SEU teachers responded that students of SEU participate in certain events in academic activities with normal classroom students. According to analyzed data, a smaller number of participants said that SEU children fully participate with normal classroom students, which is 23 (26.7%).

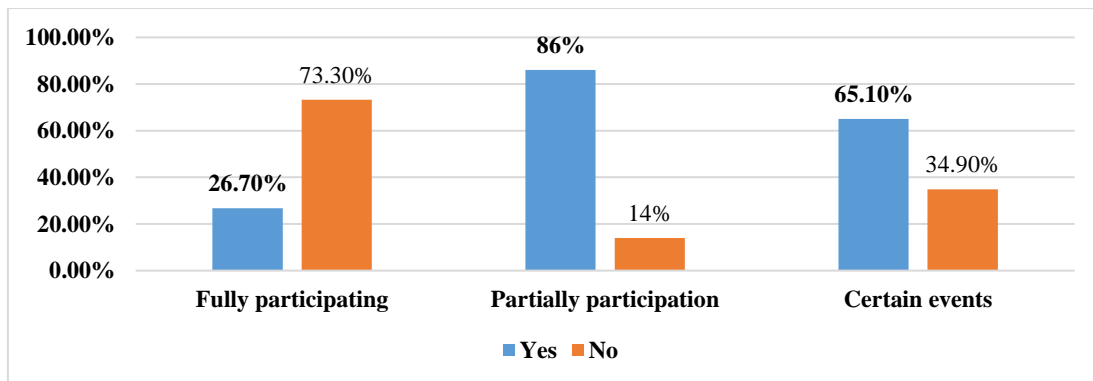


Figure 7: Type of participation of students from SEU with normal classroom students in academic activities

4.1 ISAs' Views about SEU practices

ISAs of special education responded to the question regarding the practice of SEU in their zones. Three ISAs responded regarding SEU practices of their zones. According to their responses, the SEU system in their zones is practiced at a satisfactory level.

The ISA from 'ZB' stated, "In my educational zone, SEUs are functioning well". The ISA from 'ZE' expressed, "I am satisfied regarding the cooperation of the professionals in our

educational zone, and it helps in maintaining a smooth function of the SEUs". Further, the ISA from 'ZA' stated, "Special Education teachers do their best at their job".

All the ISAs mentioned that they conduct training programmes, monitoring programmes, model class practice and training programmes for teachers, in order to enable them to identify the educational needs of students with disabilities. Moreover, they expressed that all schools with SEUs in their educational zones are supported by an NGO named Ampara Special Needs Network (ASNN) for professional development.

4.2 Improvements of SEU systems

Besides, inquiries were made from ISAs for Special Education about the improvements of SEU systems in their educational zones. Three ISAs responded about the improvements of SEU in their zone. Their responses were as follows:

ISA from zone 'ZE' stated, *"We are conducting caretaker counseling sessions for parents. It is good for their children's well-being. At the sessions, we discuss with parents the ways in which we could support children in their learning and there is good cooperation from parents".*

ISA from zone 'ZG' stated, *"Now we are developing individual education plans for children with special needs".*

ISA from zone 'ZB' stated, *"We included new topics for professional development programmes which helped to develop knowledge and skills among teachers regarding curriculum adaptations and now we are planning to implement district-level curriculum adaptation programmes".* It is evident from the above responses that the ISAs make provisions to improve the SEU system in the Ampara District.

At the focus group discussion, parents also expressed their perception of the support of the SEU system in the development of their children. According to the responses of the parents six parents stated about the socialization of their children: Parent 'Pa9' expressed, *"Now my child builds up relationships with peers. This happened after the child was admitted to the Special Education Unit. There are lots of activities inside and outside the school for socialization. My child has learned to socialize at a certain level".*

Three parents expressed the academic development of their children. For instance, Parent 'Pa26' stated, *"After studying in this unit, my child has shown an improvement in reading and writing skills. Now, he can talk".* Parent 'Pa19' expressed, *"Our children participate in extra-curricular activities with normal classroom students. It helps in the total development of our children".* Parent 'Pa21' expressed, *"Our children with SEN love to go to school now".*

In line with parents' responses, the SEU system supports the socialization of their children, developing academic skills and extra-curricular skills, and their total development.

Participants were questioned on best practices that support the development of inclusive education. The following Figure 8 shows the responses of respective teachers. According to the data, 83 (96%) teachers responded positively (yes) while four (4%) responded negatively (no). It seems that the SEU system supports developing IE schools.

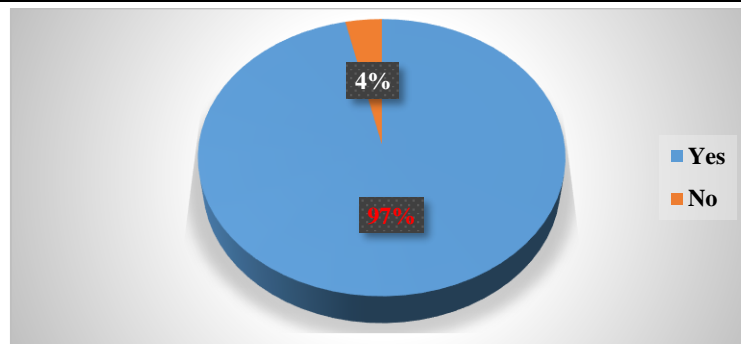


Figure 8: Support of SEU to implement the Inclusive Education system

Principals responded to questions regarding the best practices that support developing Inclusive Education and various ideas were shared by the principals.

All seven principals stated that the support of teachers is the most important factor for practicing Inclusive Education systems. For instance, the principal from school 'P21' expressed, *"Support of a teacher of SEU is necessary for the practice of inclusion in our school"*.

Three principals highlighted that the identification of children with SNE is extremely important in practicing Inclusive Education in their school. For example, the principal from school 'P6' stated, *"Teachers in the SEUs support to identify students with SENs and their needs, and after developing them, they are enrolled in an inclusive set up"*.

Six principals stated that the commitment of teachers is more important in Inclusive Education practices. For example, the principal from school 'P14' expressed, *"Commitment of teachers of both SEU and regular classroom is necessary for Inclusive Education"*. According to the principals' responses, the teacher's commitment plays a vital role in the education and inclusion of students with disabilities in their school.

4.3 Inclusion of students with SEN in the normal classroom

Principals and parents were questioned regarding their views on Inclusive Education, and they expressed their views on the same.

The principal from school 'S17' stated, *"It's an instructional process that is conducted, catered to students with SENs with extra resources, additional training and adapted curriculum in the regular classroom"*. The principal from school 'S26' expressed, *"Accommodate all students both SENs and without SENs in a regular classroom without discrimination"*. The principal of school 'S14' stated, *"Inclusion of students with SENs is a necessity because it is a goal of the SEU in our school"*. The principal from school 'S21' articulated, *"We have provisions for inclusive practice in our schools and we are practicing it"*.

In contrast to the above ideas, principal 'S11' stated, *"Inclusion is impossible in our school because only deaf and mute students are accommodated in our school"*. It shows that most principals are in favor of Inclusive Education.

Parents also voiced the inclusion of children with SENs in the normal classroom. Parent 'Pa2' expressed, *"My child with SENs gradually improved in knowledge and skills. Thus, if they are included in the normal classroom, they will get the opportunity to develop more"*. Parent 'Pa22' stated, *"My child with SEN improved in social activities and extra-curricular activities. Thus, if he is included in the normal classroom, he will be improved in academic"*

activities as well". Parent 'Pa28' expressed, *"All the teachers have to develop their competencies about the students with SEN before including our children into the inclusive classroom"*. Parent 'Pa18' stated, *"Inclusive classroom will support my childhood education and socialization of my child; it will be an opportunity for my child to socialize"*.

Parents have positive perceptions about the future inclusion of their children in the normal classroom. However, they have stressed that the teachers' competencies in Inclusive and Special Education must be improved.

4.4 Experiences in inclusive education practices

Principals were questioned regarding their own experiences on Inclusive Education practices in their school. According to their responses, four principals expressed the integration and IE practices of students with SEN in their schools. The principal from school 'P17' expressed, *"Some students have been attached to normal classrooms and they get support from SEU teachers in our school"*. The principal of school 'P26' stated, *"One student sat for the Ordinary Level Examination last year and obtained pass results for all subjects. He was accommodated in the inclusive set up"*. School 'P6' Principal explained, *"Students with SENs integrate with normal classroom students during extracurricular activities in our school"*.

Moreover, seven principals stated that SEU improves students and sends them to the inclusive classroom. For instance, the principal from school 'P17' stated, *"SEU students when improved in their social skills and skills related to learning, will be attached to the inclusive set up in the future"*.

According to their responses, the SEU system supports improving the students with SEN and they are included in the inclusive set-up.

The following Figure 9 explains the opportunities to improve the integration and Inclusive Education system in the Ampara District. According to the analyzed data, 19 (71.4%) schools have a good integration in daily routine activities, extracurricular activities, and opportunities for the socialization of students of SEU; 15 (57.1%) schools have good opportunities to integrate SEU students and provisions for the inclusion of students in SEU. It proves the improvement of the SEU system in the Ampara District. However, only eight (28.6%) schools have a good practice of integration in academic activities. They are like labs for the SEU practice in the Ampara District.

During the interview, ISAs were questioned on the support of the SEU system to improve the Inclusive Education system. Most of the ISAs responded that the SEU system supports improving Inclusive Education practice. SEU is the place for improving students with educational needs. For instance, ISA from zone 'ZC' ascertained, *"We sent some students to the fully inclusive classroom from SEU"*.

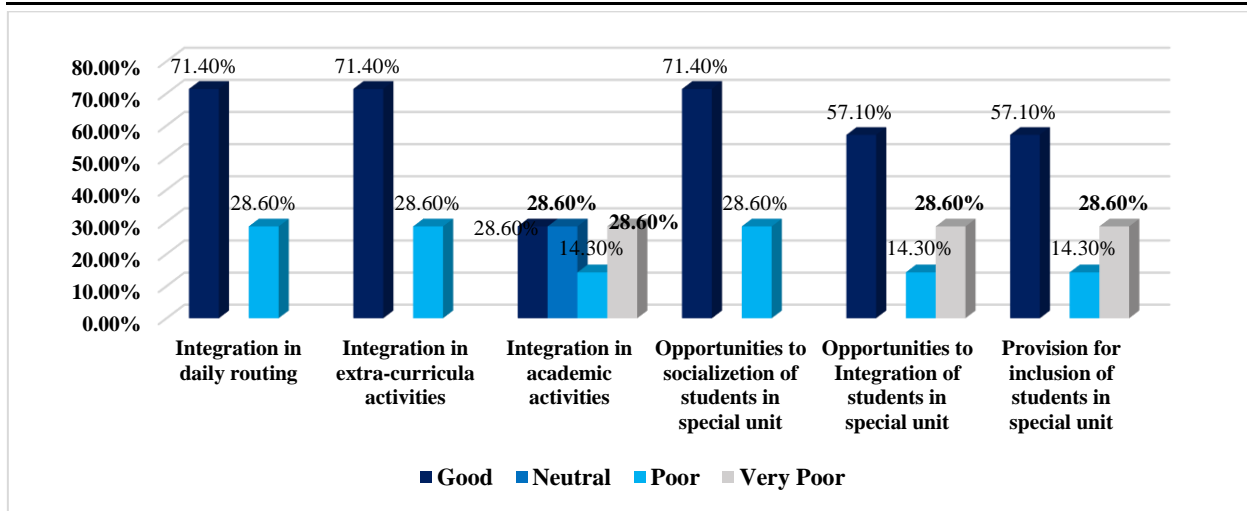


Figure 9: Opportunities to improve the integration and inclusion of students of SEUs

Moreover, the ISAs expressed their ideas regarding the improvement of the IE system through the SEU system. They expressed that developing awareness among stakeholders on SEU, educational zone level policy and plan should be developed to practice SEU and IE systems. Assessment should be taken individually, and IEP should be practiced; all teachers must gain knowledge and skills on IE practices.

ISA from zone 'ZB' said, "SEU should be separated into two classes according to the severity of SEN – whoever is at a mild level in one, and the severe level in two".

According to the above interpretations, SEU plays a vital role at the initial stage of IE as it develops the readiness of students with SENs to be accommodated in the IE set-up. However, according to the data revealed, the IE system is difficult for students with a severe level of disability.

5. Discussion

The Ampara District consists of 437 government regular schools and the 27 regular schools with SEU system have been practicing it for the last 17 years. All the 27 SEUs of the Ampara District have been established in the decade from 2002 to 2012. The higher number of SEUs was established in 2008. However, there are challenges in relation to the inadequate physical resources for practicing the SEU system. The study conducted by Wang (2009) identified several factors that would affect the success of the education of students with SEN including class size, inadequate resources, and lack of adequate teacher preparation. Accordingly, the similarity of the findings of the studies is confirmed.

The majority of the SEUs are in appropriate locations in the regular school and have a special classroom for practicing SEU in their school premises. However, some SEUs are isolated from regular classrooms in the schools. It is a challenge to the integration of the students with diverse needs who accommodate the SEUs. Yngve, et al. (2019) highlight that students' needs should receive special attention when investigating and accommodating students' needs for support in school activities. It shows that the

present study and the above-mentioned study have similar findings on accommodation and diversity of the students with SEN.

Some schools have sports activities, physical activities, individual lesson plans (IEP), special days (disability day braille, and sign language), quality inputs to meet the students' diverse needs, and ICT. Special trained teachers have used area (e.g.: Autism, CP) assistive technologies for instruction, and special curricula are undertaken by special trained teachers in SEU and inclusive classrooms for developing students with SENs. However, these practices are not at the recommended level. The social activities develop the interrelationship between peer group perception and the construction of personal self-concept in special needs students (Cambra, & Silvestre, 2003). The findings of the present study also highlight the importance of social activities and techniques in improving the practices of integration of students with SEN in the schools.

Students with SEN are provided with opportunities to participate with regular classroom students in the schools. Among them, some students have got the opportunity to participate fully, and most students have got the opportunity to participate partially which indicates that these practices may be the provisions for Inclusive Education practice in the Ampara District. A study conducted by Wang, H. L. (2009) encountered the opportunities for students with special educational needs to participate with regular students in mainstream schools supporting the outcome of students with SENs in academic and social activities. Moreover, Padeliadu and Lampropoulou (1997) have revealed that teachers' positive attitudes help to improve the participation of students with SENs with regular students in the integration education system.

The knowledge of most of the Special Education teachers' and principals' knowledge about the SNE and positive perceptions and understanding about SEU practices support the improvement of the SEU practices in the Ampara District. In a similar study, the principals have a positive perception of integration and inclusion of students with SEN in the regular classroom in Canada (Jahnukainen, 2015). Furthermore, the results show that the teachers' perceptions of the integration of students with Special Education needs are favorable (Arrah & Swain, 2014; Dev & Kumar, 2015). The findings of the present study are quite similar to the above-mentioned findings.

With the implementation of a school-level policy for the integration of the students with SEN in the school zone, facilities such as Assistive Technology (AT) for mobility and learning and extra activities of celebrating a special day for students with SEN, arranging educational tours, clinical camps, exhibitions, competitions for students with SEN and weekly progress assessment, using the school-level curriculum for SEUs could support in improving the SEU system in the Ampara District. A study conducted by Hurst, Wallace, and Nixon (2013) revealed that the activities related to social interaction improves students' learning by enhancing their knowledge of literacy and teaching and their critical thinking and problem-solving skills. It ensures that the present findings and the above-mentioned findings are quite similar.

Students with diverse educational needs are accommodated in each SEU in the Ampara District and teachers are facing problems to teach different disability categories at the same time and mostly use the same teaching methods and resources to instruct all

the students. There is a similar finding in a study conducted by Clough and Lindsay (1991) revealing that although the respondents appear more supportive towards integration, they vary in views regarding the most difficult needs to meet. Teachers identify children with learning difficulties and, to a greater extent, children with emotional and behavioral difficulties are the most difficult categories. It shows that higher diversity is a challenge in practicing an integrated education system.

In the study conducted by Muttiah, Drager, and O'Connor (2016), the stakeholders have a positive perception and benefit about the integrated and Inclusive Education of students with SEN in Sri Lanka. The present study has also located findings that stakeholders have a positive perception about the SEU system, and it is an opportunity to improve students with SEN in the regular classroom. Moreover, SEU allows socialization for students with special needs with regular classroom students, supports developing social skills and academic skills of students with SEN, and paves way for inclusive classroom practices with the support of the SEU practices in their schools. Also, ISAs of Special Education and principals work on creating awareness on Inclusive Education among stakeholders at their school level and educational zonal level. Most of the SEUs send children with SENs to regular classrooms to learn subjects such as art and dancing with normal students and give opportunities to engage in extracurricular activities.

Even though there are limited resources for the integrated and IE practices, the commitment of the Special Education teachers and regular classroom teachers supports the implementation of inclusive practices in their schools. Also, it supports students with SEN in developing their social and academic skills, and also aid in passing National level examinations supported through Inclusive Education. A similar finding of a study conducted by Kaur, Noman, and Awang-Hashim (2016) have long-established a similar finding of the current study, which is, the teacher's attitude plays a central role in the successful implementation of Inclusive Education in mainstream classrooms with the teacher making a conscious effort within the limited resources to create strategies to help the student fit into the mainstream classroom. It shows that teachers work hard to include the students with SEN in the regular classroom.

Teachers, principals, educational administrators, and parents promote the integration to the inclusion of students with SEN in schools of the Ampara District. The school culture promotes social values such as tolerance, respect for difference, etc. to teachers directly involved in the integration and inclusive activities and parents who accept and understand the benefits of integration and inclusion of students with SEN (Voinea, Topala, & Bota, 2018). Lapham and Papikyan (2012) encountered that the strengths of the SEU and resource rooms of integrated education were the ways in which they grew naturally into the Inclusive Education system in the United States of America. Thus, similar findings of the present study also confirmed the promotion of Inclusive Education from the integration of the students with SEN in the schools.

6. Recommendations

- Students with SEN should be accommodated in the SEUs according to the categories and severity of the SEN and special trained teachers, resources, adapted curricula, and activities that should be provided to meet their SEN.
- The in-service programme should be implemented for developing the professional qualifications of the special education teachers and regular classroom teachers in line with curriculum adaptations, alternative evaluations, ICT integrations, and Alternative communications.
- Educational qualifications and working experiences with students with SENs should be considered when appointing SEU teachers to SEUs.
- School-level policy and regional level policy on SEU practices and Inclusive Education must be developed and implemented in all schools in the Ampara District.
- Assistive technologies should be provided for improving mobility, communication ability, academic and social skills of the students with SEU in the Ampara District.
- All the schools with students with SEN should have vocational training practices in line with the individualized transition plan of each student with SEN.
- Provide adequate physical resources and human resources to schools with SEU for practicing the SEU system in the Ampara District.
- Develop a mechanism to develop and update teachers' knowledge and skills concerning the SNE and SEU practices.
- Develop a mechanism for Inclusive Education with the support of SEU classroom physical resources and human resources of the SEU.
- Develop aspects of integrated education practices step by step towards the full inclusion of SEU.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interests.

References

- Arrah, R. O., & Swain, K. D. (2014). Teachers' Perceptions of Students with Special Education Needs in Cameroon Secondary Schools. *International journal of special education*, 29(3), 101-110.
- Cambra, C., & Silvestre, N. (2003). Students with special educational needs in the inclusive classroom: Social integration and self-concept. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 18(2), 197-208.
- Dev, S., & Kumar, J. (2015). Teacher's Perception towards Integration of Learning-Disabled Students into Regular Class Room—A Study in Dubai & Abu Dhabi Schools. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 211, 605-611.

- Dhanapala, T. (2009). *Inclusive Education as A Strategy for Achieving the "Education for All" in Sri Lanka* (Doctoral dissertation, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan).
- Ellepola, Y. (2016). Sri Lanka's Invisible Children: The Need for Inclusive Education for Children with Special Needs. Talking Economics.org. Retrieved from; <https://www.ips.lk/talkingeconomics/2016/04/25/sri-lankas-invisible-children-the-need-for-inclusive-education-for-children-with-special-needs/>
- Geck, C. (2017). The world fact book. *The Charleston Advisor, the Charleston Company*. 19(1), 58-60.
- Hettiaarachi, S., Ranaweera, M., Walisundara, D., Daston-Attanayake, L., & Das, A. K. (2018). Including All? Perceptions of Mainstream Teachers on Inclusive Education in the Western Province of Sri Lanka. *International Journal of Special Education*, 33(2), 427-447.
- Hettiarachchi, S., & Das, A. (2014). Perceptions of 'inclusion' and perceived preparedness among school teachers in Sri Lanka. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 43, 143-153.
- Hurst, B., Wallace, R., & Nixon, S. B. (2013). The impact of social interaction on student learning. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 52(4), 5.
- Jahnukainen, M. (2015). Inclusion, integration, or what? A comparative study of the school principals' perceptions of inclusive and special education in Finland and in Alberta, Canada. *Disability & Society*, 30(1), 59-72.
- Kaur, A., Noman, M., & Awang-Hashim, R. (2016). Exploring strategies of teaching and classroom practices in response to challenges of inclusion in a Thai school: A case study. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 20(5), 474-485.
- Ketheeswaran, K. (2018). Job Satisfaction of Teachers Attached to the Special Education Units in Regular School in Sri Lanka; *European Journal of Special Education Research*, 3(1).94-110. doi: 10.5281/zenodo.1162967.
- Lapham, K., & Papikyan, H. (2012). Special schools as a resource for inclusive education. *A review of the Open Society Foundations' Experience Working with Special Schools in Armenia*. New York: Open Society Foundations.
- Ministry of Education. (2006). *Education Sector Development Framework and Programme*. Ministry of Education, Sri Lanka.
- Ministry of Education. (2016). *School Senses Preliminary Report: ministry of education isurupaya' Bththaramulla*. Retrieved from http://www.moe.gov.lk/sinhala/images/Statistics/stat2015_2016/2016_new.pdf
- Ministry of Education. (2018). *Sri Lanka education information-2012*: Retrieved from http://www.moe.gov.lk/web/images/stories/statistic/sl_edu_info_2018.pdf.
- Mittler, P. (2000). *Working Towards Inclusive Education*. London: David Fulton Publishers, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203386149>
- Muttiah, N., Drager, K. D., & O'Connor, L. (2016). Special Education in Sri Lanka: A snapshot of three provinces. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 36(2).
- Padeliadu, S., & Lampropoulou, V. (1997). Attitudes of special and regular education teachers towards school integration. *European journal of special needs education*, 12(3), 173-183.

- Piyasena, K. (2003). *Sri Lanka towards Inclusive Education*; Retrieved from <http://archives.dailynews.lk/2005/09/03/fea02.htm>
- The World Economic Forum. (2017). *The Inclusive Growth and Development Report 2017*. Geneva: the World Economic Forum.
- UNICEF. (2003). Examples of inclusive education. *Regional Office for South Asia*.
- Voinea, M., Topala, I. R., & Bota, A. O. (2018). When is the Integration of Students with Special Educational Needs Successful?-A Good Practice Example-School NO Brasov, Romania. *European Journal of Social Science Education and Research*, 5(2), 91-98.
- Wang, H. L. (2009). Should All Students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) Be Included in Mainstream Education Provision?--A Critical Analysis. *International Education Studies*, 2(4), 154-161.
- Yngve, M., Lidström, H., Ekbladh, E., & Hemmingsson, H. (2019). Which students need accommodations the most, and to what extent are their needs met by regular upper secondary school? A cross-sectional study among students with special educational needs. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 34(3), 327-341.

Creative Commons licensing terms

Authors will retain the copyright of their published articles agreeing that a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0) terms will be applied to their work. Under the terms of this license, no permission is required from the author(s) or publisher for members of the community to copy, distribute, transmit or adapt the article content, providing a proper, prominent and unambiguous attribution to the authors in a manner that makes clear that the materials are being reused under permission of a Creative Commons License. Views, opinions and conclusions expressed in this research article are views, opinions and conclusions of the author(s). Open Access Publishing Group and European Journal of Special Education Research shall not be responsible or answerable for any loss, damage or liability caused in relation to/arising out of conflict of interests, copyright violations and inappropriate or inaccurate use of any kind content related or integrated on the research work. All the published works are meeting the Open Access Publishing requirements and can be freely accessed, shared, modified, distributed and used in educational, commercial and non-commercial purposes under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).