Exploring challenges faced by parents when providing education to students in inclusive education units: A case study in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Inclusive education is a fundamental right for students with special needs, and parental involvement is crucial for their academic and social success. This qualitative research aimed to explore the challenges faced by parents of students enrolled in Inclusive Education Units (IEUs) in Sri Lanka. The study used a case study approach and focused on a sample of 15 parents from Dharmapala Vidyalaya; Pannipitiya which is a school that hosts IEUs. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and direct observations, both within the school environment and beyond. Those methods allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the parents' experiences and the specific difficulties they encountered. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data, revealing several critical challenges. Those included inadequate resources and facilities within the IEUs, such as a lack of specialized teaching staff, insufficient learning materials, and limited access to assistive technologies. Additionally, parents reported poor communication and collaboration between themselves and teachers, which hindered the implementation of individualized education plans (IEPs). Social stigmatization of students with special needs by peers and the broader community further complicated their integration to the society and well-being. Outside the school environment, parents faced difficulties accessing essential support services and therapies for their children, along with societal misconceptions and negative attitudes toward individuals with disabilities. These challenges heightened the emotional and social burden on parents, leading to increased stress, isolation, and reduced involvement in their children's education. To address those issues, the study recommended improving school resources, enhancing parent-teacher communication, and expanding access to external support services and therapies.

Keywords: Inclusive Education Units, Inclusive Education, Parental Challenges

Introduction

Inclusive education is a fundamental right for students with special needs, aiming to provide equal opportunities for their academic, social, and emotional development. According to UNESCO (2005), inclusive education was defined as "a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures, and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education." This approach ensures that all students, regardless of their abilities or disabilities, have access to quality education within the mainstream school system.

The concept of inclusive education is grounded in several theoretical frameworks. One of the foundational theories is social justice theory, which advocates for equal rights and opportunities for all individuals, including those with disabilities. Inclusive education aligns with this theory by striving to remove barriers that prevent students with special needs from fully participating in mainstream education. The social model of disability also underpins inclusive education, which views disability not as an individual problem but as a result of societal structures that create exclusion. In this model, the focus is on changing the environment to accommodate diverse needs, rather than "fixing" the individual (Drishti IAS, 2021).

Another relevant framework is Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which emphasizes the multiple layers of influence (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem) that shape an individual's development. Inclusive education can be seen as functioning within these systems, with schools (microsystems) needing to collaborate with families, communities, and policymakers (exosystem and macrosystem) to create a supportive environment for children with special needs (Paquette & Ryan, 2001).

In the Sri Lankan context, inclusive education policies reflect a growing commitment to integrating students with special needs into mainstream schools, particularly through Inclusive Education Units (IEUs). However, despite these efforts, parents often face significant challenges in supporting their children's education in IEUs. Understanding those challenges and the theoretical frameworks supporting inclusive education is crucial for developing effective strategies to promote parental involvement and improve outcomes for students with special needs.

This study aimed to investigate the challenges faced by parents in IEUs in Sri Lanka, focusing on both school-related and external factors that hinder their ability to support their children's education. The research   also explored potential interventions to enhance parental involvement that contribute to the successful implementation of inclusive education.

As an educational approach, the inclusive education is recognized and valued the diverse abilities and needs of all students, including those with special needs. It emphasizes providing equitable access to education, promoting participation, and fostering the holistic development of students. Inclusive education strives to create an inclusive and supportive learning environment that respects the rights and dignity of all students.

Parental involvement is widely recognized as a vital factor in the success of inclusive education. When parents actively participate in their children's education, they contribute to their academic, social, and emotional development. Parental involvement includes engagement in various aspects of their children's education, such as assisting with homework, participating in school activities, and collaborating with educators to address their children's individual needs.

In Sri Lanka, the special education system includes IEUs within mainstream schools. These units are designed to cater to the diverse needs of students with special needs by providing individualized support, accommodation, and a tailored learning environment. IEUs aim to integrate students with disabilities into mainstream education while offering specialized services, such as IEPs, modified curricula, and access to assistive technologies. The objective is to provide these students with an opportunity to participate in the general education system while receiving the necessary resources to support their learning and development.

However, the implementation of inclusive education in Sri Lanka, particularly through IEUs, faces several limitations. Despite policy frameworks supporting inclusive education, IEUs are often under-resourced, lacking adequate facilities, trained staff, and specialized equipment. Teachers in these units may not have sufficient training in special education, and there are often shortages of teaching aides and assistive technologies. Furthermore, the infrastructure within mainstream schools is frequently not equipped to accommodate students with physical disabilities, limiting their access to classrooms and other school facilities.

Beyond these school-level challenges, there is often limited collaboration between parents and teachers. This lack of communication and coordination hampers the effective development and implementation of IEPs, which are crucial for meeting the specific needs of each individual student. Additionally, social stigma surrounding disabilities remains prevalent in Sri Lanka, further complicating the inclusion process. Parents of children with special needs may face societal isolation and emotional stress, which in turn affects their capacity to fully support their children's education. Those cumulative challenges highlight the need for more robust support systems and resources to make inclusive education in Sri Lanka more effective.

The research problem addressed in this study was the challenges faced by parents in providing education to students studying in special education units. Despite the efforts towards inclusive education and the establishment of IEUs, parents in Sri Lanka often encounter various obstacles that hinder their ability to support their children's education effectively. Understanding what those challenges are is crucial for developing strategies and interventions that enhance parental involvement and support, thereby promoting inclusive education and the overall well-being of students with special needs.

To address the above research problem, the following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the school-level problems and challenges faced by parents of students studying in special education units?
2. What problems and challenges do parents face in the out-of-school environment due to having children with special needs?

3. How do these challenges impact parental involvement and support in their children's education?
4. What potential strategies and interventions can be developed to enhance parental support in special education units?

By addressing those research questions, the study sought to gain a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by parents in providing education to students studying in IEUs and to provide insights for developing effective strategies to enhance parental involvement and support.

The main objective of this research was to investigate the challenges faced by parents in providing education for students studying in IEUs. The study aimed specifically to:

1. Identify and analyze school-level problems and challenges faced by parents in IEUs.
2. Examine the problems and challenges faced by parents in the out-of-school environment due to having children with special needs.
3. Understand the impact of these challenges on parental involvement and support in their children's education.
4. Explore potential strategies and interventions to enhance parental support in IEUs.

Inclusive education has been widely recognized as a means of promoting equal access to education for all students, regardless of their abilities or disabilities. Globally, inclusive education is driven by international frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006) and UNESCO's Salamanca Statement (1994), which advocate for education systems to be inclusive and to cater to the diverse needs of all learners. The key goal is to ensure that students with special needs are not segregated but are instead educated alongside their peers in mainstream schools with the appropriate support systems in place.

In Sri Lanka, the policy framework for inclusive education is aligned with those international conventions, with the "Education for All" initiative serving as a key policy framework. The Sri Lankan government has made efforts to integrate children with special needs into the mainstream educational system through the establishment of IEUs in selected schools. However, the implementation of these policies faces numerous challenges as discussed above. Such limitations include insufficient resources, lack of trained staff, and cultural stigmas associated with disability (Bandara, 2019; Perera, 2020).

The role of parental involvement in inclusive education has been well documented. Research highlights that parental engagement is critical to the success of children with special needs, as parents provide not only emotional support but also advocate for their children's needs in educational settings (Epstein, 2001). According to Hornby and Lafaele (2011), effective collaboration between parents and teachers is essential for addressing the individual educational needs of students with disabilities. However, challenges such as poor communication between parents and schools, lack of understanding of individualized education plans (IEPs), and societal stigmatization often hinder parental involvement (Sharma et al., 2018).

In the context of Sri Lanka, Bandara (2019) and Samarasinghe (2017) observed that parents of children with special needs often struggle to navigate the educational system. Many parents report feelings of isolation and frustration, as they face significant obstacles in accessing appropriate services and support for their children. The stigma surrounding disabilities in Sri Lanka further exacerbates those challenges, making it difficult for parents to advocate for their children's needs.

The concept of IEUs within mainstream schools is designed to address the needs of students with disabilities by offering specialized resources while keeping students integrated into regular classrooms. However, research indicated that IEUs often face several challenges that hinder their effectiveness. According to Sharma et al. (2018), those challenges include inadequate funding, a lack of qualified special education teachers, and limited access to assistive technologies.

Samarasinghe (2017) emphasized that, in Sri Lanka, IEUs in many schools lack the necessary infrastructure to accommodate students with physical or cognitive disabilities. There was also a lack of specialized training for teachers, which reduces the capacity of IEUs to meet the diverse needs of students. Perera (2020) further pointed out that the absence of structured policies for resource allocation makes it difficult for IEUs to function effectively. These issues underscore the need for a stronger institutional framework and investment in human and material resources to support inclusive education.

The literature on inclusive education often references the social model of disability, which shifts the focus from individual impairments to the barriers created by society. Oliver (1990) introduced this model, arguing that disabilities are not merely medical issues but are socially constructed ones through the exclusion and marginalization of individuals with disabilities. In the context of education, this model suggests that schools and society must adapt to meet the needs of all learners, rather than requiring students with disabilities to conform to a standard model of education.

Applying the social model of disability to Sri Lanka, Samarasinghe (2017) argued that societal attitudes toward disability are a significant barrier to inclusive education. Cultural stigmas and misconceptions about disability contribute to the marginalization of students with special needs, further complicating the efforts of parents and educators to provide a supportive learning environment. This suggested that, beyond the logistical and resource-based challenges, there is a need for a shift in societal attitudes to embrace the principles of inclusion.

While there is a growing body of literature on inclusive education, much of the research so far focused on the situation in high-income countries. There is limited empirical data on how inclusive education is implemented in low- and middle-income countries such as Sri Lanka, particularly in the context of IEUs. Additionally, while parental involvement is recognized as critical, few studies have focused specifically on the challenges faced by parents in the Sri Lankan context. This study sought to fill this gap by providing an in-depth examination of the obstacles parents encounter in supporting their children's education in IEUs while contributing to both local and global discussions on inclusive education.

Methodology

This study utilized qualitative research methodology to investigate the challenges faced by parents in providing education to students studying in IEUs. Qualitative research allows for an in-depth exploration of the subjective experiences, perspectives, and meanings attached to the phenomenon under investigation. Through qualitative methods, the study aimed to capture the complex and distinctive nature of the challenges faced by parents in this context.

The research design employed a case study method, focusing on parents of students studying in IEUs at Dharmapala Vidyalaya, Pannipitiya, a national school in Sri Lanka. The sample consisted of 15 parents whose children were enrolled in the IEU at the school. By selecting a single school for this case study, the research aimed to provide a detailed examination of a specific educational setting and the challenges unique to the particular group of parents.

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with parents to explore their experiences, perspectives, and challenges regarding their involvement in their children's education. Additionally, observations were carried out in both school and non-school settings to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by parents. Verbal consent was obtained from all participating parents. The observational data provided valuable contextual information, offering insights into the dynamics between parents, students, teachers, and the broader educational environment.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Interview transcripts and observational notes were systematically coded and organized into themes and sub-themes. This analysis allowed for the identification of patterns, commonalities, and variations in the data, leading to a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by parents.

Results

The findings of this study revealed several significant challenges faced by parents in providing education to students studying in special education units. These challenges were categorized into two main domains, namely school-level challenges and challenges in the out-of-school environment.

With regard to school-level challenges, parents reported a range of challenges within the school setting that affected their ability to support their children's education. Inadequate resources and facilities within special education units emerged as a prominent challenge. Parents highlighted a shortage of specialized teaching staff, a lack of appropriate learning materials, and limited access to assistive technologies. Those resource-related challenges hampered the delivery of quality education tailored to the unique needs of their children.

Additionally, it was found that limited collaboration and communication between parents and teachers hindered the coordination of IEPs and the accommodation of diverse student needs within the classroom. Parents expressed the need for improved communication channels and

enhanced collaboration to ensure that their children's educational requirements were adequately addressed.

Social dynamics within the school environment also posed challenges. Stigmatization and social exclusion of students with special needs by their peers were reported, affecting the overall well-being and integration of students. Parents expressed concerns about the negative impact of these experiences on their children's self-esteem and social development.

With reference to the challenges in the out-of-school environment, parents reported encountering challenges beyond the school setting, which in turn impacted their ability to provide comprehensive support to their children. Limited availability of support services and therapies emerged as a significant obstacle. Parents reported difficulties accessing specialized therapies, counseling, and support services required to address their children's unique needs. Those limitations hindered their children's overall development and progress.

Furthermore, negative societal attitudes towards individuals with disabilities are found to be contributive to the challenges faced by parents. Parents expressed frustration over the lack of understanding and acceptance within the community, which affected their advocacy efforts and their children's inclusion in various social contexts. Additionally, parents highlighted instances of abusing attempts by ordinary people, which further exacerbated the challenges they faced.

Frustration over the fate of children with the sudden death of a parent emerged as an emotional burden for parents. They expressed concerns about the impact of such tragic events on their children's well-being and education. Additionally, parents reported feeling marginalized in social gatherings due to the presence of stigma and a lack of understanding regarding special needs, further isolating them and their children.

Those challenges collectively had a significant impact on parental involvement and support. Parents expressed increased stress, emotional burden, and a sense of isolation. Balancing their responsibilities and commitments while navigating the complexities of the special education system proved challenging. Limited opportunities for connecting with other parents of children with special needs further added to their sense of isolation.

Overall, the findings highlighted the multifaceted challenges faced by parents in providing education to students studying in special education units. Those challenges included inadequate resources within the school setting, limited collaboration and communication, social dynamics, limited availability of support services and therapies, negative societal attitudes, abusing attempts, and the emotional burden faced by parents.

Those findings emphasized the need for comprehensive strategies and interventions to address the challenges and to enhance parental involvement and support in special education units. By addressing those challenges, stakeholders would work towards creating a more inclusive and supportive educational environment for students with special needs, empowering parents as active participants in their children's education and fostering the holistic development of students.

Discussion

The present study investigated the challenges faced by parents in providing education to students studying in special education units. The findings shed light on the complex and diverse range of challenges encountered by parents within the school setting and also in the out-of-school environment. These challenges included inadequate resources, limited collaboration and communication, social dynamics, limited availability of support services, negative societal attitudes, abusing attempts, and the emotional burden faced by parents.

The study underscored the crucial role of parental involvement in supporting the education of students with special needs. It was found that the identified challenges significantly impacted parental involvement and support, hindering their ability to effectively advocate for their children's educational rights and to ensure the provision of quality education tailored to their unique needs. The findings highlighted the need for targeted interventions and strategies to enhance parental involvement and support in special education units.

Addressing the challenges at the school level found to require allocating adequate resources, such as specialized teaching staff, appropriate learning materials, and assistive technologies, to ensure an inclusive and supportive learning environment. Collaboration and communication channels between parents and teachers needed to be strengthened to foster the development and implementation of IEPs that meet the diverse needs of students.

With regard to the outside of the school environment, it was found that there should be efforts made on improving the availability and accessibility of support services and therapies. This included expanding the range of specialized therapies, counseling, and support services to address the specific needs of students with special needs. Additionally, raising awareness and fostering understanding within society about disabilities would contribute to reducing negative attitudes and behaviors, providing a more inclusive and accepting environment for students and their families.

It was imperative to address the challenges of abusing attempts, frustration over the fate of children with the sudden death of parents, and the marginalization of parents in social gatherings. Those challenges had significant emotional implications for parents and further compound the difficulties they face in providing education and support for their children.

The findings of this study will have important implications for policymakers, educators, and other stakeholders involved in inclusive education. By addressing the identified challenges, stakeholders would work collaboratively to enhance parental involvement and support, thereby promoting the overall well-being and educational success of students with special needs. Empowering parents as active participants in their children's education would be crucial for fostering inclusive practices and ensuring that students with special needs receive the necessary support to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

While this study provided valuable insights into the challenges faced by parents in special education units in Sri Lanka, it was also important to recognize its limitations. The findings were context-specific and may not be fully generalizable. Further research is encouraged to explore the experiences and challenges faced by parents in different cultural, socio-economic, and educational contexts.

In conclusion, it could be declared that the findings underscored the importance of addressing the challenges faced by parents in providing education to students studying in special education units. By developing targeted interventions, promoting collaboration between parents and educators, improving resource allocation, and fostering a supportive societal environment, stakeholders would work towards creating inclusive educational settings where all students, including those with special needs could thrive and reach their full potential.

Conclusion

This study examined the challenges faced by parents in providing education to students studying in special education units in Sri Lanka. Through qualitative research methods, including interviews and observations, the study identified significant challenges within the school setting and in the out-of-school environment.

Within schools, parents reported inadequate resources, including a shortage of specialized teaching staff and limited access to assistive technologies. Limited collaboration and communication between parents and teachers also hindered the coordination of IEPs and the accommodation of diverse student needs. Social dynamics, such as stigmatization and social exclusion, further complicated the educational experience. In the out-of-school environment, parents encountered difficulties accessing support services and therapies for their children. Negative societal attitudes towards individuals with disabilities, instances of abusing attempts, frustration over the fate of children after the sudden death of parents, and marginalization of parents in social gatherings were additional challenges identified.

Those challenges had a significant impact on parental involvement and support. Parents experienced increased stress, emotional burden, and isolation. Navigating the complexities of the special education system proved challenging, and limited opportunities for connecting with other parents exacerbated feelings of isolation.

The study concluded that addressing those challenges required allocating adequate resources, improving collaboration and communication between parents and teachers, expanding support services and therapies, promoting inclusive practices, raising awareness about disabilities, and creating a supportive societal environment. Empowering parents as active participants in their children's education was crucial for promoting inclusive education and the well-being of students with special needs.

By understanding and addressing those challenges, stakeholders would work towards creating a more inclusive and supportive educational environment. This study contributed valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and other stakeholders involved in the field of special education in

Sri Lanka. However, it was also important to recognize the limitations of this study, as the findings may not be fully generalizable to other contexts. Further research is encouraged to explore the experiences of parents in different settings and to develop effective strategies for enhancing parental involvement and support in special education units.

Conflicts of Interest

The author confirms that there is not conflict of interest.

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