INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN THE BATTICALOA DISTRICT: ANALYZING PRACTICES, STRENGTHS, AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract

This study explored the strengths and challenges of implementing inclusive education (IE) in government schools in the Batticaloa district of Sri Lanka. A qualitative approach involved multiple case studies of five government schools. Participants included five Assistant Directors of Special Education/In-Service Advisors of Special Education (ADs/ISAsSE), five principals, five class teachers, ten subject teachers, and five parents of students with special educational needs (SENs). Data were collected through interviews, focus group discussions, and observations. Positive perceptions were expressed about IE practices, including information provision, student interactions, principal and teacher competencies, connections with health services and parents, teaching methods, curriculum, assessment, and student achievements. Additionally, collaborative efforts with stakeholders, peer and teacher-student interactions, principal and teacher competencies, teaching methods, curriculum adaptation, assessment, and student accomplishments strengthened IE practices. However, challenges were also identified, such as the absence of school-level IE policies, safe and accessible physical infrastructure, implementation of Individualized Educational Plans (IEPs), and resource allocation. These challenges contributed to negative perceptions of IE practices among stakeholders. The study recommends that school-level IE policies be developed to facilitate IE practices, enhance school accessibility for children with SENs, and improve resource allocation for IE practices in government schools in the Batticaloa district.

Key Words: *Inclusive Education, Special Educational Needs, Regular Classroom, Individualized Educational Plans, Inclusive Education*

Introduction

Inclusive education (IE) is the world's most popular approach to education. It aims to educate all children, including those with Special Educational Needs (SENs). IE is a child's right, not a privilege (Mag et al. 2017). Countries with advanced education systems have developed IE systems, but developing nations like Sri Lanka are still in the process of establishing them (UNICEF, 2013). Children with SENs can succeed academically, socially, and emotionally in

inclusive classrooms. They can interact with other children without SENs and receive education in government schools. However, there are gaps in the IE practice and facilities for children with disabilities in the Sri Lankan education system. Therefore, it is significant to investigate the strengths and challenges of IE practices in government schools.

Moreover, Batticaloa district in Sri Lanka was affected by a 30-year civil war and natural disasters such as tsunamis, cyclones, and floods. These factors have resulted in high poverty and malnutrition rates, and many children with SENs live in the district. Even though government schools in the Batticaloa district practice IE, research findings and the researcher's experience suggest that students with SENs still face challenges in getting a proper education. Therefore, this study investigates the strengths and challenges of IE practices in government schools in the Batticaloa district.

IE is a global movement that aims to provide education for all children, regardless of their abilities or disabilities. IE is especially important in Sri Lanka, where 8.7% of the population has a disability. Sri Lanka has a long history of promoting IE. In 1943, the government introduced universal compulsory education for all students, including those with special educational needs. Since then, the government has implemented several policies and programs to support IE. Despite these efforts, there are still challenges to implementing IE in Sri Lanka. One challenge is the need for more resources. Many schools do not have the necessary infrastructure or support staff to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Another challenge is the negative attitudes of some parents and teachers towards IE. Despite the challenges, there are some successful IE programs in Sri Lanka. These programs have shown that students with disabilities can thrive in mainstream classrooms with the necessary support.

Challenges of Inclusive Education in Sri Lanka

Despite significant educational achievements, such as universal primary education and a high literacy rate, Sri Lanka faces many challenges in implementing IE. Inadequate teacher training and support, Limited resources, Negative attitudes towards IE and Lack of opportunity for Children with disabilities in rural areas are some of the challenges in the country. The most significant challenge to IE in Sri Lanka is the need for an appropriate IE model. These challenges could disrupt the practice of IE in the country and prevent children with special educational needs (SEN) from receiving the quality education they deserve.

Aim, Objectives, and Research Questions of the Study

Aim of the Study

The study aims to investigate the strengths and challenges of implementing Inclusive Education (IE) in government schools in the Batticaloa district.

Objectives of the Study

The following objectives are established to achieve the aim of the study.

- To identify the strengths of IE practices in government schools in the Batticaloa district
- To find out challenges are faced in implementing IE practices in government schools in the Batticaloa district

Research Questions of the Study

The following research questions are established to achieve the purpose of the study.

- What are the strengths of IE practices in government schools in the Batticaloa district?
- What challenges are faced in implementing IE practices in government schools in the Batticaloa district?

Methodology

The study employed multiple case study research design with a qualitative approach. The participants were purposefully selected, including five government schools. The participant groups consisted of five Assistant Directors of Special Education/In-Service Advisors of Special Education (ADs/ISAsSE), five principals, five class teachers, ten subject teachers, and five parents of students with SENs. The study utilized ten themes and categories which is shown in the Table1, proposed by Raw'o (2010) to structure the analysis. Data collection was conducted through interviews and observation, and a narrative analysis technique was employed for data analysis. To enhance the trustworthiness of this study, the researcher implemented several measures to ensure the data's accuracy, credibility, and dependability. In addition to ensuring methodological rigour, the researcher of this study upheld ethical principles. In pursuing ethical research, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and their identities were protected through pseudonymization.

Table 1. Themes and Categories Considered Regarding the IE Practices

Themes	Categories
The provision of information for IE practices	• Communication between the school and stakeholders for IE practices • The collaboration with stakeholders for IE practices
Physical features for IE practices,	• Safe environment for students with SENs • Accessible environments for Students with SENs
Policies for IE practices	• Policies for IE Practices
The individualised education plan	• IEP of students with SENs • IEP team for practicing IEP
Student interactions in IE practices	• Peer Interaction in IE Practices • Student-teacher interaction in IE practices
Staffing and personnel (competencies) for IE practices	• Principals in IE practices • Teachers in IE practices
External links for IE practices	• Links for funding and Resources in IE practices • Links with Health Services in IE Practices • Links for Support Services for IE Practices • Link with parents IE Practices
Assessment of achievement in IE practices	• Academic achievement of students with SENs • Social development of students with SENs
The curriculum in IE practices	• Curricular adaptations for students with SENs
Teaching strategies in IE practices.	• Strategies in teaching-learning for students with SENs

Source: (Winter and Raw'O, 2010)

Findings of the study

According to the analysis of data, the findings are discussed under each research question below:

RQ1: What are the strengths of IE practices in government schools in the Batticaloa district?

Analysis of data revealed the following strengths related to the IE practices in the government schools in the district:

- The practices of communication and collaboration with stakeholders
- The peer interaction and teacher-student interaction
- Staffing and Personnel (competencies) for IE Practices:
- Links for the Health Services in IE Practices
- Link with Parents in IE Practices
- Assessment of Achievement in IE Practices
- Provisions for Teaching Strategies in IE Practices

The practices of communication and collaboration with stakeholders: All five schools in the Batticaloa district demonstrate effective communication and collaboration practices among stakeholders for inclusive education (IE). For example, Arul (ISA SE) in case A highlighted the presence of an administrative structure supporting communication for IE practices.

"...I have an administrative structure for IE, and it supports communicate for IE practices..."

Likewise, Janu (class teacher) from school case C described conducting meetings with subject teachers and collaborating with various stakeholders, including the principal, teachers, peers, and parents, to enhance IE.

"...conducts meetings with the subject teachers..." "...I work with the principal, teachers, peers, parents, etc. for IE..." Similarly, Valli (subject teacher) in school case E emphasized the importance of collaborative efforts in supporting IE practices. *"...collaborative works support to the IE practices...".*

Additionally, observation data from school case B revealed that teachers actively engage with stakeholders, particularly in the case of Balu, as they are well-informed about his SENs and take steps to include him. Teachers communicate with the stakeholders about Balu because they are aware of the SENs of Balu and take measures to include him. This aligns with the Adams et al. (2018) study, emphasizing the significance of communicative and collaborative stakeholder interactions for successful, inclusive classrooms.

Peer interaction and teacher-student interaction: All five selected schools in the Batticaloa district actively practice peer interaction and teacher-student interaction in their IE approaches, underscoring their commitment to fostering student interaction. For example, Kumari (ISA SE) in case C emphasized the role of peer interaction in improving the academic achievement of students with SENs. Kumar (principal) from school case B stressed the significance of teacher-student interaction within IE practices. Shaanthi (class teacher) in the same (case B) school described integrating Balu (student) with regular students to enhance peer interaction. In contrast, Valli (subject teacher) from school case E highlighted Amal's (student) abilities to support peer interaction.

Moreover, observations from school case A revealed that students without SEN actively support Balu in the classroom and the school environment, engaging in social activities and providing assistance when needed. This collective effort by students without SENs underscores the inclusive nature of these schools. Studies by Efthymiou and Kington (2017) and Rasmitadila and Boeriswati (2017) further affirm the positive impact of teacher and peer interactions on the educational and social outcomes of students with special educational needs. These findings align closely with the results of this study, highlighting the potential of such student interaction practices in enhancing the implementation of IE in government schools in the Batticaloa district.

Staffing and Personnel (competencies) for IE Practices: Inclusive school principals, class teachers, and subject teachers in inclusive classes demonstrate competencies related to students with SEN. For example, Abdullah (ISA SE) from case D organizes teacher workshops focused on IE practices in their educational zone. Kamalan (principal) in school case E actively works to enhance teachers' competencies in teaching students with SEN. Janu (class teacher) in school case C expressed her readiness to teach students with SEN after learning about IE. From school case E, Kala (subject teacher) derives personal satisfaction from Amal's development.

Observation data analysis in school case C revealed a notably positive teacher attitude toward Kokila. Kusuma and Ramadevi (2013) pointed out that confident and skilled teachers positively impact community awareness in IE programs. Similarly, Black and Simon (2014) emphasized that inclusive practice should be seen as a collective effort requiring leadership and alignment of developmental supports to sustain organizational learning and commitment to inclusive education. These studies highlight the critical role of principal and teacher

competencies in enhancing the impact of IE practices on students with SENs. The findings of this study support and align with these existing insights, offering potential support for IE practices in government schools in the Batticaloa district.

Links for the Health Services in IE Practices: Figure 1 depicts the measures taken by stakeholders in all five (5) cases regarding external links for health services in IE practices. According to Figure 1, feedback was collected from all stakeholders, including five ADs/ISAs SE, five inclusive school principals, four inclusive class teachers, eight subject teachers in inclusive classes, and four parents of students with SENs, regarding measures taken for IE practices through health service links in their classrooms and schools. Notably, one inclusive class teacher, two subject teachers from inclusive classes, and a parent of a student with SENs responded negatively to the effectiveness of these health service links.
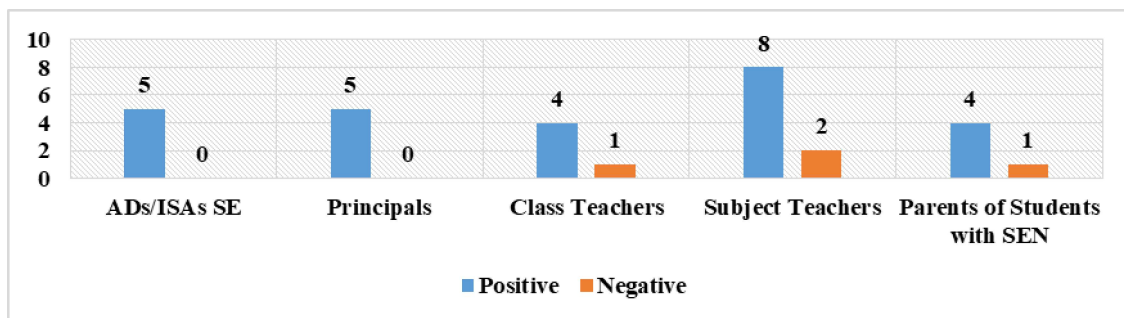

Figure 1: Links for the Health Services in IE Practices

For instance, in case E, Paarvathi (ISA SE) mentioned the provision of health services for students with SEN at the district level by the Teaching Hospital of Batticaloa. In contrast, Badurudeen (principal) in school case D confirmed that students with SEN receive health services from the same hospital.

Observation data analysis in school case A revealed that Maala's parents maintain contact with the school and possess a diagnosis report for Maala. The Teaching Hospital of Batticaloa has implemented various initiatives to provide health services for students with SENs, thus enhancing the links for health services in IE practices within government schools in the Batticaloa district. A study by Ioannidi and Gogaki (2020) highlighted how collaboration with health service providers could support the learning of students with SENs in IE practices. These findings align with the present study's findings, suggesting that these health service links contribute to improved learning outcomes for students with SENs in government schools in the Batticaloa district.

Link with Parents in IE Practices: Figure 2 shows the measures of stakeholders in all five (5) cases under the category of external links with parents of students with SENs in IE practices.
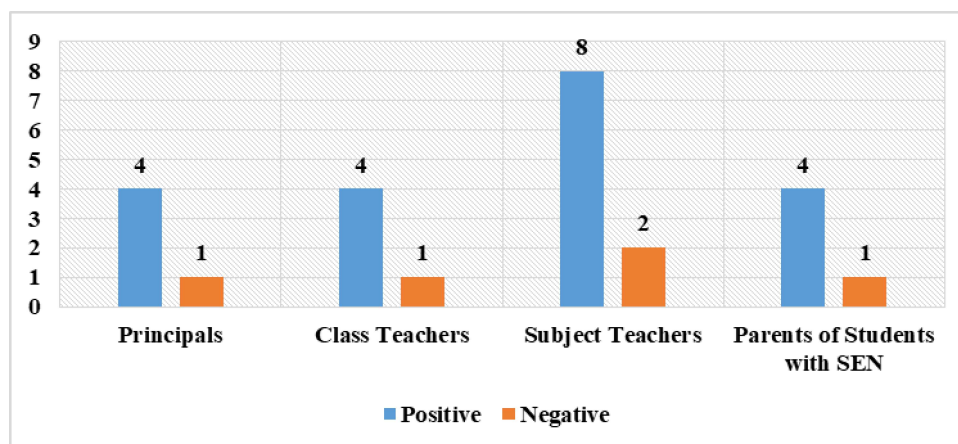

Figure 2: Link with Parents in IE Practices

The interview with four school principals, four class teachers, eight subject teachers in inclusive classrooms, and four parents of students with SENs found that most parents of students with SENs have a link with the school community to educate their children. One principal, Kumar, supported it, said, *"...parents are working with us to improve the IE practices in this school...".* Research has shown that parental involvement significantly correlates with the academic achievement of students with SENs in IE. The findings of this study support this research, highlighting the importance of parental involvement as a valuable metric for evaluating the efficacy of IE practices in government schools in the Batticaloa District. However, there is one school principal, one class teacher, two subject teachers of the inclusive classes, and one parent of a student with SENs who negatively responded about the links with parents of students with SENs in the IE practices.

Assessment of Achievement in IE Practices: Figure 3 shows stakeholders' responses in cases of A-E under the theme of Assessment of Achievement in IE Practices.
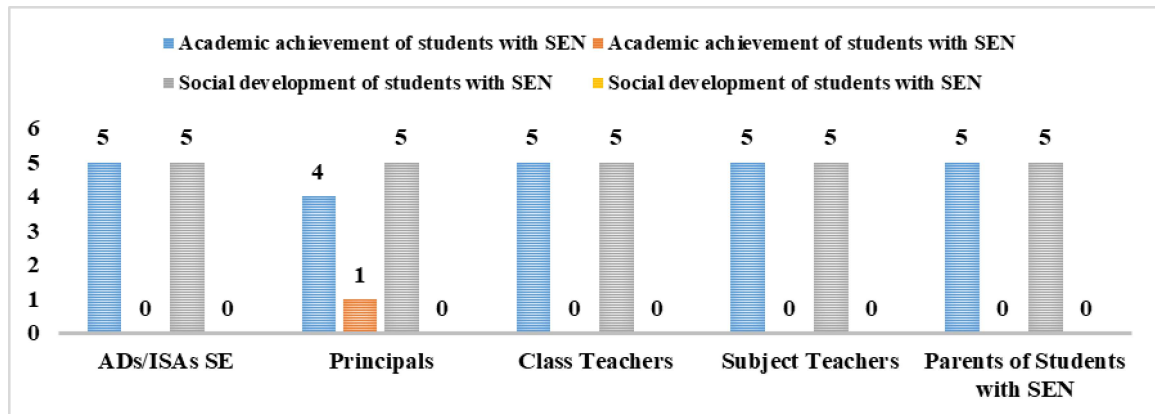

Figure 3: Responses of Stakeholders on Assessment of Achievement in IE Practices

Analysis of information obtained from interviews with the participants found that most parents of students with SENs have a link with the school community to educate their children. One principal, Kumar, supported it, said, *"...parents are working with us to improve the IE practices in this school..."*. Research has shown that parental involvement significantly correlates with the academic achievement of students with SENs in IE. The findings of this study support this research, highlighting the importance of parental involvement as a valuable metric for evaluating the efficacy of IE practices in government schools in the Batticaloa District. However, there is one school principal, one class teacher, two subject teachers of the inclusive classes, and one parent of a student with SENs who negatively responded about the links with parents of students with SENs in the IE practices.

Provisions for Teaching Strategies in IE Practices: Figure 4 illustrates stakeholders' positive and negative responses in cases of A to E under the theme of teaching strategies in IE Practices.
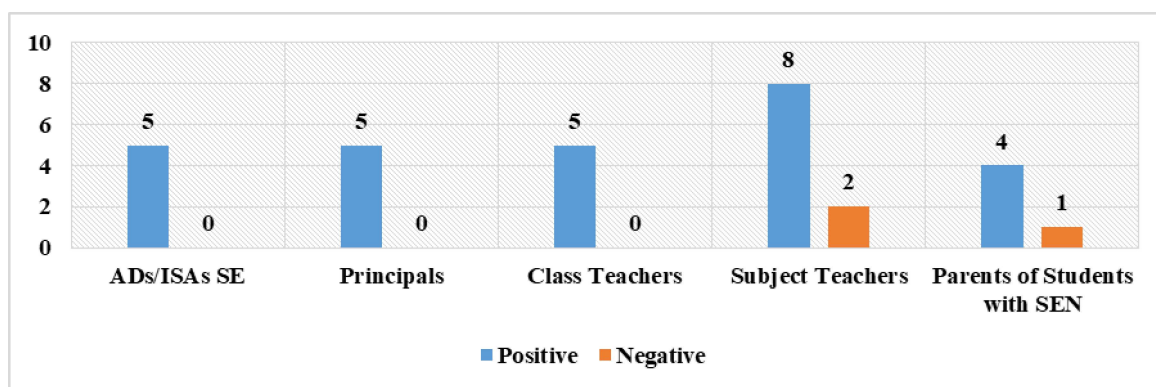
Figure 4: Provisions for Teaching Strategies in IE Practices

All five ADs/ISAs SE, all five school principals, all five class teachers, eight of the subject teachers in inclusive classes, and four parents of students with SENs provided positive responses regarding the measures implemented to enhance teaching strategies for students with SENs in the IE schools. They provided examples of teaching-learning strategies, such as conducting workshops for teachers teaching learning strategies, using various strategies to improve teaching-learning, making groups and motivating peers to support students with SENs, and going closer to students with SENs and speaking loudly in the classroom. These findings suggest a commitment to providing effective teaching-learning strategies for students with SENs in the IE schools of the Batticaloa district. However, there are some concerns about the teaching strategies used. Research has shown that effective teaching-learning strategies for students with SENs in IE schools are characterized by the efficient use of time, fostering positive relationships with students, delivering constructive feedback, achieving a high student success rate, and offering support for all students.

RQ2: What challenges are faced in implementing IE practices in government schools in the Batticaloa district?

Analysis of data revealed the following strengths related to the IE practices in the government schools in the districts:

- Physical Features for IE Practices
- Policies for Inclusive Education Practices
- Individual Education Plan
- External Links for IE Practices

Physical Features for IE Practices: The lack of a safe and accessible environment for students with SENs hinders the implementation of IE practices in government schools in the

Batticaloa District. This finding is supported by previous research, which has shown that most "inclusive schools" have subpar physical environments that are not accessible to students with physical and other sensory-motor disabilities. This challenge can be addressed by giving adequate attention to the accessibility of school environments and ensuring that all students have access to a safe and supportive learning environment. The following statements support this finding:

- *"...there are challenges in developing a safe environment for students with SEN..."* (Kumari, ISA SE from case C)
- *"...students with SEN face challenges in getting access here..."* (Kamalan, principal from school case E),
- *"...there are not any physical arrangements for students with SEN in this school..."* (Janu, class teacher school case C)
- *"...lack of accessible environment for students with SEN in the school...".* (Anula, a parent from

Policies for Inclusive Education Practices: One of the obstacles to improving IE practices in government schools in the Batticaloa District is the absence of an inclusive school policy for students with special education needs. For example, in case D, Abdullah (ISA SE) stated, *"...We do not have a specific inclusive policy, and it hinders IE in schools..."* The principal in school case B mentioned, *"...the lack of IE policies for IE practices hinders IE practices,"* and Sarasvathi (class teacher) in school case E stated, *"...the absence of IE policies for IE practices hampers IE practices."* Similar findings suggest a potential correlation between these obstacles and insufficient policy procedures concerning implementing IE in Kenyan schools (Ireri et al., 2020). According to Ahmad and May (2018), IE must grapple with policy implementation issues, creating an unfavourable climate for practice. The results of this study align with the points mentioned above, indicating that the lack of inclusive policies may impede the use of IE in government schools in the Batticaloa district.

Individual Education Plan (IEP): The absence of IEPs for students with SENs and the lack of an IEP team for their preparation can impede progress in IE within government schools in Batticaloa. For example, Arul (ISA SE) in case A emphasized how the absence of IEPs might hinder students' progress. Kamalan (principal), in school case E, noted that the IEP team is not functioning for students with SEN. In contrast, Shaanthi (class teacher) from case B

mentioned that absence of IEP of Balu hampers his inclusive education. Komathi (parent), in case A, expressed her unfamiliarity with the IEP team.

Additionally, observations in school case A revealed the unavailability of Maala's IEP in the school and a lack of evidence of the IEP team's presence within the schools and the educational zone. A study by Timothy and Agbenyega (2018) underscored the significance of stakeholders, IEPs, and continuous professional learning for successful IEP implementation in Australian schools.

External Links for IE Practices: Figure 5 illustrates stakeholders' positive and negative responses in cases of A-E under the theme of External Links for IE practices.
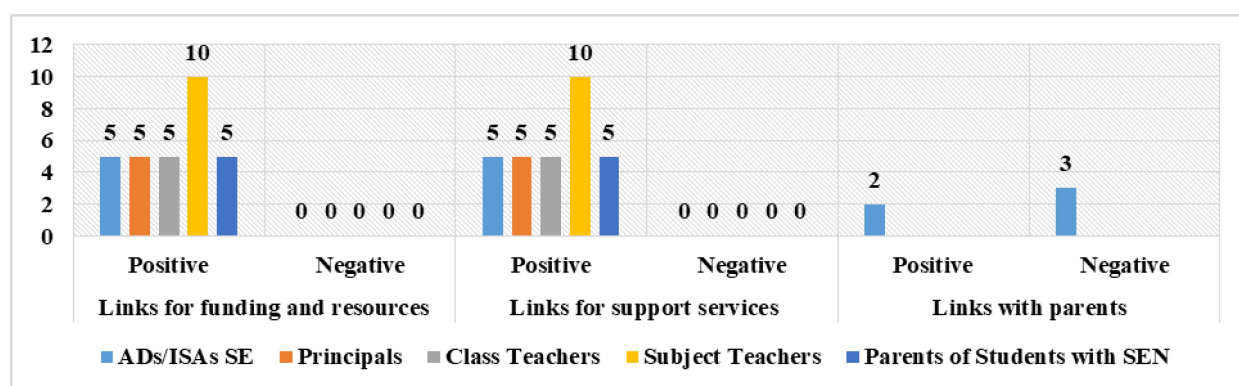

Figure - 5: Responses of Stakeholders on External Links for IE practices

According to Figure 5, all participants, including ADs/ISAs SE, school principals, class teachers, subject teachers in inclusive classes, and parents of students with SENs, expressed negative views about the availability of funding, resources, and support services in the context of Inclusive Education practices. Additionally, three ADs/ISAs SE had negative views concerning connections with parents for IE practices involving students with SEN in their respective educational zones. For instance, an AD in case A highlighted the lack of funding and resources for IE practices, while Babu in case B mentioned that although NGOs support students with SEN, it is not a long-term solution, and Social Service Officers' support does not cover all students with SEN in the zone. In the case of D, Abdullah mentioned that community beliefs and myths hinder the IE of students with SEN. The absence of adequate funding, resources, and support services poses significant challenges to enhancing Inclusive Education practices. For example, Komathi, a parent from case A, stated that they do not receive financial assistance or resources for their child Maala's IE practices.

In contrast, Rathai, a parent from case B, mentioned that the lack of support services hinders Balu's education. A study by Ahmad and May (2018) highlighted the various issues, such as resource shortages, fund allocation, support services, and related services, that act as obstacles to IE practices in India. The absence of external links for funding, resources, and support services can hinder the implementation of IE practices in government schools in the Batticaloa District. Moreover, ADs/ISAs SE have noted a lack of connections between parents and the school community in the context of IE practices. It is essential to acknowledge that parental involvement has been linked to positive outcomes for learners with exceptional needs in inclusive settings, as evidenced by Afolabi, Mukhopadhyay, and Nenty's (2013) findings. The disparities between the present study's findings and the research mentioned above pose a fundamental challenge to the outcomes of IE practices in government schools in the Batticaloa District. Nevertheless, two ADs/ISAs SE have expressed the importance of establishing connections with parents of students with SEN to enhance IE practices. This perspective can promote collaboration between educational administration and parents regarding IE practices for students with SENs.

Conclusion

The study highlighted strengths and challenges in implementing Inclusive Education practices in government schools in the Batticaloa District. Notably, effective communication and collaboration practices, the competence of key stakeholders, support from the Teaching Hospital of Batticaloa, and active parental involvement were identified as strengths that contribute to improving IE practices. Additionally, curriculum practices and teaching strategies played a crucial role in advancing IE practices within the schools. However, challenges such as the absence of an inclusive school policy, the lack of a safe and accessible environment for students with SENs, the unavailability of IEPs and IEP teams, and the inadequate provision of funding, resources, and support services hindered the enhancement of IE practices. The limited connection between parents and ADs/ISAs SE presented another obstacle to the success of IE practices. To address these challenges, the study offers a set of recommendations at both the planning and stakeholder levels. These recommendations include the development of a national IE policy, the implementation of Universal Design for safe environments, the establishment of district-level IEP teams, professional development, and awareness programs, as well as funding allocation and support services. Stakeholders, particularly inclusive school principals and teachers, are encouraged to create a clear vision and mission, develop school-level policies, and foster community and parental involvement.

Adopting Universal Design for Teaching is also recommended to ensure that teaching strategies are inclusive and accessible to all students. The study underscores the importance of addressing these challenges and implementing these recommendations to improve the quality of Inclusive Education practices in government schools throughout the Batticaloa District, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and equitable educational environment for students with SENs.

Recommendations

Based on the analysis of information from the participants of the study, the researchers propose the following recommendations:

Recommendations for Planning:

- Develop National-Level IE Policy: The Ministry of Education should formulate a comprehensive IE policy at the national level. This policy should provide clear guidelines regarding the responsibilities of stakeholders, professional development, and the allocation of funding for government schools across the country.

- Universal Design for Safe Environment: The Provincial/Zonal Education Department should implement Universal Design principles to create safe and accessible environments in inclusive schools throughout the Batticaloa District. It will help ensure that all students, including those with SENs, can fully participate in their educational experiences.

- Establish District-Level IEP Teams: To address the absence of IEPs for students with SENs, the Provincial/Zonal Education Department should establish district-level IEP teams responsible for developing tailored plans for students in need.

- Professional Development and Awareness Programs: The Provincial/Zonal Education Department should organize professional development programs for ADs/ISAs SE, principals, and teachers to enhance their knowledge and skills in IE practices. Additionally, community-level awareness programs should be conducted to educate community members about the importance of IE.

- Funding Allocation and Support Services: The Provincial/Zonal Education Department must establish a transparent mechanism for allocating funds and resources for IE practices in government schools. It is also crucial to ensure the availability of support services for students with SENs within the context of IE practices.

Recommendations for Stakeholders:

- School Vision and Mission: Inclusive school principals should develop clear vision and mission statements that prioritize and promote IE practices within their schools. These statements can guide the school's approach to inclusion.

- School-Level IE Policy: Inclusive school principals should create a school-level policy that enhances IE practices within their institutions. This policy should outline specific strategies and initiatives to support inclusion.

- School Enrolment Policy and Code of Behavior: Inclusive school principals should establish a comprehensive school enrolment policy and codes of behaviour that consider the unique needs of students with SENs, ensuring that they receive the support and accommodations necessary to reach their full potential.

- Community and Parental Involvement: Inclusive school principals should actively work to improve community and parental involvement in IE practices. Building a strong connection between the school and parents and engaging the community is crucial for developing an inclusive school culture.

- Universal Design for Teaching: Inclusive class teachers and subject teachers in inclusive classrooms should adopt Universal Design for Teaching principles. This approach ensures that their teaching methods are accessible and effective for all students, including those with SENs.

- Alignment with Best Practices: The statutes of Inclusive Education practices in all five schools in the Batticaloa District should be reviewed and modified to align fully with best practices in Inclusive Education, particularly focusing on the ten themes explored in this study.

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Virtual Education and Equity