

The Dedication of a School for Inclusive Education of One Child



“Thrice a day, I come to school to help my son. Early in the morning, I help him to get ready for school and accompany him to school. He has to come to school earlier than others because he is a junior prefect of the school now. I come to school again before the interval and help my son to go to the toilet. Five minutes before school is over, I come and pick him up,” said a mother of a primary student who studies in grade 4. We were looking into ways the school was attending to the special needs of her son Lahiru.

“If I cannot come, one of my relations, the class teacher, a member of the school staff or a parent help him.” Lahiru's mother told us. “Teachers and principals often discuss with me. Necessary changes are readily made to cater Lahiru's needs.”

“The principal gave my son's class the classroom closest to the gate. He remains in that class for both grades three and four. Other grade-4 classes are held upstairs. But, my son cannot climb the stairs yet.”

Lahiru is a boy with physical disabilities both in his hands and legs. Now he is a nine-year-old and after a series of medical surgeries, he now walks happily with a pair of prosthetic legs. However, still, he faces difficulties such as climbing steps.

“I can even run now,” says Lahiru with determination to further improve his mobility in future.

“When Lahiru was admitted to this school, the question of whether he could study in the same class as other children arose. However, we decided to overcome other challenges and give him equal opportunities. Lahiru's class was always handed over to experienced teachers. We educated other teachers, non-academic staff, other students and parents to help him,” said the deputy principal in charge of the primary section of Lahiru's school.

Inclusive practice can be defined as attitudes and methods that ensure all learners can access mainstream education. Everyone works to make sure all learners feel welcome and valued, and

that they get the right support to help them develop their talents and achieve their goals. When education is truly inclusive it can actually benefit all learners, not only Disabled learners¹.

"We must include everyone and no child should be left behind because of disability. That's why we do everything for Lahiru that we can within the limited facilities of the school. It is our responsibility," said the principal of Lahiru's school.

"The school has provided me with many privileges," Lahiru's mother said. "I am allowed to come to school whenever required. The school has allowed me and instructed me to drive my three-wheeler not only inside but also close to Lahiru's classroom very slowly, without causing danger to other children. It is a great convenience for my son."

"We had to re-design this classroom, which was reserved for the students of grade 1, to suit the students of grade 4. Since we have made the other children and their parents aware of Lahiru's needs, all of them happily contribute to solving the problems. We have sensitized them about Lahiru's educational needs and rights," said Lahiru's class teacher.

"The children's chairs and desks for this class are not convenient for Lahiru. Therefore, a desk and a chair are being designed especially for Lahiru so that he can sit and stand up easily. The school community helps with that," said the principal.

"We are all friends with Lahiru," said Chamodi, the girl who sits next to Lahiru in the class. "We help Lahiru and he too helps us."

Meanwhile, due to allocating the classroom near the gate for Lahiru, unfortunately, the distance to the toilet has increased.

"Children run here and there during their free time. Therefore, I have instructed Lahiru's mother to come before the interval and assist Lahiru," said the teacher. The school has prepared such plans for the freedom of both Lahiru and other children. Lahiru needs to maintain balance while walking because he wears prosthetics. Lahiru may lose his balance if he bumps into another child who is playing during the interval.

Sanitary facilities in most schools in Sri Lanka are basic. A toilet with a commode is very convenient for Lahiru. However, the school does not provide such facilities yet.

"Lahiru is an all-rounder. He writes letters, draws pictures and participates in activities and games without being hindered by physical disabilities. He tries everything other kids do. We provide all the necessary facilities for that," said the class teacher.

There is a poem in classic Sinhala literature that says, 'In the world, one is perfect for one thing - and another is perfect for another thing.' Physical disabilities should not be an obstacle to fulfilling one's potential. That's why we need inclusive education," said the principal.

¹ <https://www.allfie.org.uk/definitions/what-is-inclusive-education/>



“I want to be an engineer in the future,” Lahiru says. Showing us some photos stored in her mobile phone, Lahiru's teacher said that even now he plays with electronic circuits.

“Lahiru has many dreams. He wants to do everything. I am doing my best for him. I am very grateful that school has taken half of my burden. It is necessary not to let go of Lahiru's hand,” Lahiru’s mother said.

No child must be marginalized due to disability. Inclusive education allows students of all backgrounds to learn and grow side by side, and it benefits all. There are many things that schools can do to improve inclusivity. All those things do not require huge investments. Small things make big changes. The biggest changes are in thoughts and attitudes.

As UNICEF mentions on their website, “There are an estimated 240 million children with disabilities worldwide. Like all children, children with disabilities have ambitions and dreams for their futures. Like all children, they need quality education to develop their skills and realize their full potential. Yet, children with disabilities are often overlooked in policymaking, limiting their access to education and their ability to participate in social, economic and political life.”