

A School on the Path to Inclusive Education



The hustle and bustle of that coastal urban environment were almost unseen in the world within the high parapet walls around the school. Although more than five hundred students are studying, the school environment was very calm and peaceful in the morning.

The acting principal was busy. So, postponing the discussion with her, we went straight to the special education unit with her permission. The teacher was organizing the students' work, assigning various activities to her eight students who were present that day. There were children with Down syndrome, hyperactivity, autism, intellectual disabilities, and multiple disabilities. The teacher greeted us with a broad smile on her face amidst her busy schedule.

"I have been teaching in this school for 11 years. Previously, I worked in two schools. It has been 25 years since joining the teaching service as a special education teacher. I was trained at Maharagama Teachers' College. I started the special education unit of this school and I have been working here from the beginning as the only special education teacher here," the teacher told us.

She assigned hands-on activities tailored to her students' levels. They practiced buttoning and unbuttoning, putting on a jacket alone, simple sewing, categorizing pictures on cards, as well as writing letters. Activities were planned individually for each student according to their level of cognition. The teacher paid attention to the students one by one. Although it was a difficult task, she performed her duty with joy and relaxed mind.

"By now, four students of the special education unit have been integrated into regular classrooms. After some preparation in the special education unit, they have been studying in regular classes from grade one. Currently, two are studying in grade eight. Another student is studying in grade seven. The grade six student, who has multiple disabilities, is temporarily absent these days due to illness. That student showed great progress intellectually. Another student who was studying in grade seven does not attend school now. She is now 18 years old and her mother said that the child would be sent to vocational education.

Apart from academic skills like writing, reading, and listening, the special education unit also imparts life skills and basic vocational training to the students.

"I teach children at school how to chop vegetables carefully without cutting their fingers, how to peel and slice onions without tears flowing to their eyes, how to cook, how to light a gas stove, and how to deal with fire without burning risks. They are also trained in how to control salty and sour tastes in food. Mothers tell me that the children who studied in this class help them with cooking. We train them how to do their work alone. They are also trained on how to fold clothes and keep them in order. And I teach them to sew, how to use the needle, and how to make designs. This basic training is important in the long run."

The teacher also said that the students who left the special education unit have started vocational training.

She emphasized that in inclusive education, the student should be given individual attention considering the specialties of each student.

"It's the same when you draw a picture. Some can draw. Some can draw and colour. Some children want the teacher to draw the picture for them to colour. Everyone cannot be taught one thing in common. We need to plan and implement lessons for each student individually."

The teacher said that the Provincial Department of Education has given a lot of training opportunities to special education teachers.

"Besides training, our experience and creativity are also very important. After an appropriate period of preparation in the special education unit, every possible student is integrated with regular classes. Even after they are enrolled in regular classes, the teacher in those classes gives them special attention. As a special education teacher, I also focus on those students for a long time. Teachers are cooperating with that. They too have been educated on inclusive education."

The school always pays special attention to the students who have been integrated in sports events, various concerts, morning assemblies etc. The school provides them with every possible opportunity. The administration of the school has played a special role in changing the attitudes of other teachers, students, and parents to accept inclusive education. By now, the entire school is well-equipped for inclusive education.

Integrated education is an approach that aims to place students with disabilities in general education classrooms, with the support of specialized teachers or aides. The goal of integrated education is to provide students with disabilities with the same educational experiences as their non-disabled peers.

Inclusive education is a more comprehensive approach that aims to create a school environment that is welcoming and supportive of all students, regardless of their abilities or disabilities. The goal of inclusive education is to ensure that all students have the opportunity to participate and succeed in school, regardless of their individual needs.

After several years of development in the special education unit, Senuri went up from grade one through inclusive education. She is currently studying in grade seven. Senuri, a 14-year-

old student with intellectual disabilities, is good at sports and dancing. She represented the school in sports competitions for special education students and won provincial-level certificates in running and jumping events. She also participates in school sports. "I can run faster than all my friends in the class," she said.

"The school's support for my daughter's development has been immense," Senuri's mother said. "The daughter has memory problems. However, she loves to run, jump, play, and dance. The school provides her with opportunities for that. The daughter, who studied with the same teacher all day until grade five, is still getting used to the new system of changing teachers from period to period. She is slow but very happy with her classmates."

We met 16-year-old Manuth, who is studying in grade eight. He was a hyperactive child and today he is a student who has reaped maximum benefits through integrated education in the school. We observed that he was moving well with the regular students.

The principal of the school said that inclusive education helps to develop the independence and self-confidence of students with disabilities. "It also helps them build social skills and make friends. Inclusive education helps all students develop empathy and understanding of others and appreciate the diversity of human experience," she pointed out. She proudly presented her views on the role of the special education teacher in her school and about being able to direct the school to inclusive education.

For inclusive education to be successful, schools and teachers must be willing to adapt their teaching methods. Students with disabilities require additional support. However, the benefits of inclusive education far outweigh the challenges. It is a fair and effective model of education. Inclusive education is the best way to ensure that all students have the opportunity to reach their full potential.