

## The Power of Inclusive Education Through Making Full Use of the Special Education Resources



"We have organized teams of friends to help every student with special needs in our school's Special Education Unit," said a very enthusiastic principal we met at a primary school in Kurunegala district. He went on to say, "When they arrive at school, during the interval, and when they are leaving after school, those friends come and ask them if they need help. Although many of them can manage themselves, this activity develops empathy, friendship, and collectivity among all students. Students with special needs find recognition, love, and care from their peers. By doing so, equality and inclusivity are practiced naturally. In this way, the goals of inclusive education can be achieved."

It was school intermission when we went to the Special Education Unit. We saw groups of friends come and befriend the students in the unit. Students with Down Syndrome, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), multiple disabilities, and intellectual disabilities are learning in the unit. They were having lunch after a dancing practice session when we went to meet them. A senior teacher, assisted by a young special education teacher was guiding them. Both of them discussed with us enthusiastically. "I was a primary teacher, but when there was no teacher for the special education unit here, I volunteered to accept it. The Zonal Education Office provided with me the necessary training and the principal was highly supportive," the senior teacher said.

The young teacher who was assisting the senior teacher has passed out very recently from the College of Education. She completed the three-year National Diploma in Teaching including one-year internship in special education before being absorbed into the regular teaching cadre. "We are well trained in special education in the National College of Education, but I think I am learning a lot more practical aspects every day when I work with the students with special needs. Every child is unique," she said.

“We did not have a spacious classroom for the Special Education Unit. The principal renovated this abandoned room and provided us with it. This Special Education Unit serves students from a large area around the school. However, most of the students are from low-income families and parents face problems like transporting the children to school from a distance,” the senior teacher pointed out.

This school was restructured as a primary school recently and the science laboratory used previously was abandoned in the present Special Education Unit space. The principal said, “I obtained permission from the Zonal Education Office and dispatched the equipment to other schools with science laboratories and emptied the space. We cleaned the room but lacked allocations for other renovations. School community did volunteer work in "Shramadana" supporting with paint and cement etc. The principal explained this as When a JICA team visited the school, we asked whether they could provide us with a carpet. But, eventually, they helped us to lay tiles on the floor. It is very convenient for students with special needs.”

The principal tries to mobilize funds for the other improvements. Until then, some makeshift arrangements like a railing have been made for the convenience of the students with mobility impairments.

Although there are classes only up to Grade 5, the school continues to provide services to students with special needs who are above that age. “To prevent the possibility of the students dropping out of school, we keep them in the unit and manage them. We integrate them with Grade 5 whenever possible,” the teacher in charge of inclusive education explained.

“We improved some students with special educational needs to the level they could pass the competitive Grade 5 scholarship examination. They now study in the general classes in the nearby national school. Unfortunately, that school does not have a Special Education Unit to cater to their special needs. We have informed their special needs to the school authorities and hope the teachers and principals will focus their special attention on them,” the principal said.

Apart from the Special Education Unit, several other students with special needs are in general classes learning with their peers. Teachers focus their special attention on them and try to address their requirements with the support of the teacher who is the inclusive education coordinator of the school.

“For example, we have one student in Grade 4 who has refused to speak in the school. We studied her medical and social background and found that she had no hearing or speech problems. We provide her with psychosocial support and she is improving now,” the inclusive education coordinator said.

The principal showed us a new venture under construction. “Apart from inculcating academic skills, our special education teachers train their students to carry out day-to-day activities themselves. This washing space is especially to gain skills such as washing clothes,” the principal said.

The Special Education teachers train the students to keep their environment and belongings tidy and safe. The school has provided them with a safe and caring environment in which they can grow with their peers. The principal's leadership and the teachers' dedication have created a thriving inclusive education environment despite the minimal facilities available in this small school.