

Inclusive Learning in Action: How Special Education Students Interact with Peers



The children were thrilled when the head teacher said, “Let’s go to the friends’ class to do an activity.” They lined up quickly and pushed like a train to stop near a grade 2 class.

It is a popular school in a major city. The Special Education Unit of the school has been located in the classroom nearest to one of the main gates for easy access. Two energetic young graduate teachers run the unit with great enthusiasm.

“We were recruited as graduate teachers and the Education Department asked us to fill the vacancies of the special education teachers. It was challenging for us. However, after receiving basic training from the Zonal Education Office and especially after starting work, our enthusiasm grew. We improved our knowledge through self-learning, experimenting, and discussing with the senior teachers,” the teachers said to us during a discussion.

On that day, they had planned a joint learning activity meticulously. Joint learning activities are designed to meet the needs of all learners, regardless of their abilities. They are often taught using a variety of teaching methods and materials. The aim of such lessons is to change attitudes towards children with special needs, allowing them to learn alongside their peers in regular classes.

It was a co-teach lesson led by the special education teachers with the support of the grade 2 class teacher. The students were used to similar group activities and therefore they were enthusiastic. The 10 special education students were distributed into six groups, with one or two of them leading each group. The teachers distributed activity packs among them, including everything needed for a craft like scissors, pencils, colored felt pens, and glue.



The special education teachers had prepared a farm with colorful paper trees and plants on the teacher's table. The students were to make animals for the farm. One model animal was provided to each group, and they were expected to make more animals according to the model. The special education students were to lead the craft-making activity.

Students of the Special Education Unit had already done the lesson in their class. Their paper farm on a table in their class was full of paper animals. Therefore, they confidently took the lead and started work. The other students also took their equipment and followed them. By the time the special education students completed the production, the other students had also learned the craft from them. Within half an hour, the children had created a number of cows, sheep, rabbits, hens, ducks, and rabbits.

The special education students demonstrated how to make the craft. When other students had questions, they answered and helped. Although it was a simple craft, a lot of learning took place. They learned not only the craft but how to interact with all of their peers with inclusivity.

Several hearing-impaired students also participated in the lesson. One of the hearing-impaired students has been integrated into the grade 2 class.

"He uses sign language with his Special Education teachers but tries lip-reading in class. He learns a lot from his interactions with other students. They help each other," the grade 2 class teacher said.

At the end of the lesson, the children gleefully raised their animal crafts and told their names. After that, they brought their animals and set them on the farm made on the teacher's table. All the students seemed to enjoy the lesson.

The special education unit comprises students with Down's syndrome, hearing impairment, ADHD (Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder), and multiple disabilities. The teachers plan

lessons individually for them. Several students have been integrated into general classes under the monitoring of the special education teachers.



“Since this is a popular school, the classes are crowded. Space in the classrooms is a challenge for group activities. Also, the teacher lacks time and freedom to focus the attention to the inclusive education of the students with special needs,” the grade 2 class teacher pointed out.

“We enjoyed the activity. Our new friend made the craft and we followed him. He explained us how to do it,” one of the grade 2 students told.

Sri Lanka’s primary classrooms comprise single class teachers. If there is an assistant teacher, it would be easy for the class teacher to handle the students with special needs. However, this school tries to promote inclusive education, and a joint learning activity are an important part of it.

Joint learning activity that we observed indicated that such lessons can be taught in any subject area, and they can be adapted to meet the needs of students of all ages. All students appeared to benefit from learning alongside their peers. Also, a joint learning activity helps to break down stereotypes and promote understanding and acceptance. In the real world, people with disabilities work and interact with people without disabilities on a daily basis. A joint learning activity help students to develop the skills and confidence they need to succeed in this world.