

Inclusive Education in a Competitive Environment



This primary school has seven parallel classes from grades one to five, with each class accommodating 40 students. The classrooms are lively and engaging, filled with enthusiastic learners. Teachers are dedicated and committed to providing a stimulating learning environment for all students.

Located in the suburbs of Colombo, this primary school is highly sought-after by parents. The school's emphasis on preparing students for the Grade 5 scholarship examination, which serves as a gateway to prestigious secondary schools, contributes to its popularity. Every year, around 250 students sit for the Grade 5 scholarship examination, and approximately 100 of them qualify for admission to top-tier secondary schools.

"The academic environment here is highly competitive," the acting principal acknowledged. "Naturally, parents want the best for their children."

"The afternoons are just as vibrant as the mornings," explained the acting principal. "Many students stay after school for additional instruction, extracurricular activities, and other enriching pursuits. We are incredibly proud of our dedicated staff, who go above and beyond to foster outstanding academic and personal growth in all our students."

"We provide maximum support to the special education unit. Students with specific learning needs are given opportunities to participate in nearly all co-curricular and extracurricular activities. They have opportunities to participate in morning assemblies, concerts, sports, and other events," emphasized the acting principal.

The fierce competition associated with the Grade 5 scholarship examination has been criticized in Sri Lanka for hindering children's holistic development. However, the issue remains unresolved. The intense competition for the Grade 5 scholarship examination poses challenges for teachers seeking to dedicate additional time to students with specific learning needs. Teachers consistently dedicate extra hours to lesson preparation, making it difficult to allocate extra time specifically for students with special needs.



After admission to the school, two students were identified recently as having specific learning needs. Following a thorough assessment, they were enrolled in inclusive education programs. One student was recommended to study in mainstream classroom with the support of a teacher assistant. The school has willingly accommodated the child's need.

"Coincidentally, a student from the Open University, majoring in special needs education, was assigned to our school for an internship. Upon graduating, she agreed to continue working as a teacher assistant for this student. The parents cover her expenses," the acting principal explained.

"We wholeheartedly support the government's initiative to recruit teacher assistants to support teachers in primary classes," remarked one of the primary teachers. "However, we try our best to manage the situation. Parents need to be more aware of inclusive education practices."

The special education unit is conveniently located near a side gate of the school. The gate opens onto a nearby road, allowing vehicles to access the doorstep of the special education unit if necessary. The administration has successfully coordinated the support of the school community for the development of the school infrastructure.

"One student with a walking difficulties is brought to school by his parents every day. The child cannot sit on a regular school chair, so the school has provided him with a special chair designed and manufactured with the support of the school community," explained the Secretary of the School Development Board.

"We have received support from the department through various projects to enhance the facilities in the special education unit. They now have an attached toilet with commode facilities and ramps for students with disabilities to use conveniently," added the Inclusive Education coordinator of the school.

We observed students engaged in various activities, including painting, singing, dancing, and learning letters and numbers. They receive training in essential daily living skills, such as buttoning

and unbuttoning, combing their hair, maintaining a tidy environment, assisting with cooking, and washing, drying, and packing their clothes.

The special education unit of this school thrives on the support of the school administration and the community. Their dedication to inclusive education ensures that all students have the opportunity to learn, grow, and reach their full potential. Some of the popular schools in Sri Lanka are still in a highly competitive environment. However schools like this school are trying to include all children partly with the support of the special education unit.