

Two vital sectors join hands in the Kurunegala district to support children with special needs in Sri Lanka



Ms. S.M.G. Padmini is Special Education Advisor in a Skills Development Center in Kurunegala district. She joined the profession in 1994 and was trained by the Department of Social Services with the help of the National Institute of Education. She currently teaches 21 children with special needs. Another Special Education Advisor helps her and external instructors provide pre-vocational training two days per week at the Skills Development Center. “We admit the identified children with disabilities at the age of two years and conduct preschool education for them. When they are improved, we engage them with activities in the normal class. When they are developed and suitable for school education, we direct them to the Special Education Units of the schools. Some children cannot be sent to school due to economic difficulties of the parents or other issues. We keep such children with us until pre-vocational education is completed,” she said.

North Western Province is unique in Sri Lanka because of the 21 Skills Development Centers managed by the Department of Social Services. These centers accommodate students with special needs after the age of two. The students transfer between the schools and the Skills Development Centers and the understanding between the administrations is very important in terms of seamless transition.

Project for Strengthening Education for Children with Special Needs through Inclusive Education Approach (REACH-SS) facilitated a workshop on October 24, 2023, at the Wariyapola Education Development Center to strengthen the collaboration between the Education Department and the Social Services Department in the North Western Province that conduct inclusive education programs.

The primary section head teachers, special education teachers, in-service advisers, Special Education Advisers of the Skills Development Centers, and the officials of both the Education and Social Services Departments joined this one-day workshop.

Mr. E.M.N Ekanayaka, Social Services Officer, Department of Social Services of North Western Province pointed out that his department is responsible for the welfare of the persons with disabilities in the province. Mr. Ekanayake further pointed out the following facts: “The Social Services Department started Community Based Rehabilitation (CBR) in 109 divisional secretariat areas in 1995. North Western Province is unique in this regard since the Provincial Department of Social Services has started Special Education Advisers for the children with disabilities.



“The Special Education teachers at government schools can come to the Development Centers, share experience, and identify the students suitable for the school education. The school children above 18 years old can be directed to the Skills Development Centers and we can coordinate them with vocational education. Social Service Officers help them in entrepreneurship too.”

Mr. A.S. Thilak Bandara, In-Service Teacher Adviser, Special Education of Nikaweratiya Educational Zone said that there are nine schools with Special Education Units among the 54 schools in the Nikaweratiya Educational Zone. The zone has 16 Special Education teachers. “Some parents with children with special needs face a lot of economic problems and they cannot afford the expenses like transport to bring their children to Special Education Units of schools. The Department of Social Services helps them financially. In some areas of the district, there are children with special needs who do not attend school. Schools have Compulsory Education Committees which are responsible for the education of the children in their respective areas. Additionally, there are project officers in zonal education offices. When we work with collaboration with all sectors such as the Department of Social Services, we can identify such children and direct them to schools.”



Mr. Nimal Hettiarachchi, Director of Non-formal and Special Education, Ministry of Education said that Inclusive Education is a broad concept that provides education to all with the support of all. He cited the definition of inclusive education as "Inclusive education means that all children of school age receive education with their siblings and neighborhood peers under regular teachers in the regular classroom of the nearest school.

“No. 37/2020 circular has guaranteed inclusive education for all students. According to that circular, assessment of students with special needs must be carried out at the age of three with the help of health and education authorities. Five recommendations are provided regarding the children with

special needs. Homeschooling may begin next year for children who cannot attend school due to practical issues. Other children are to be admitted to schools at the age of four to be prepared to be integrated into inclusive education in grade 1. One Guidebook has already been prepared for the education of the students with special needs. There is no limit of space for children with special needs in government schools,” Mr. Nimal Hettiarachchi said.

Ms. R.M. Thanuja Rathnayake, Deputy Director of Special Education, North Western Province, explained in detail the services provided by the Special Education Units of the schools in the province. Assistant Director of Education - Special Education of Nikaweratiya Educational Zone, Ms. Rasika Dasanayake highlighted the importance of collaboration among all sectors related to Inclusive Education during the panel discussion. She added, “If we unite with the Department of Social Services, we can deliver a better service to the children with special needs. We organized this program to initiate that collaboration. Our 16 special education teachers in the Nikaweratiya zone are very keen to collaborate with the Special Education Preschools and Skills Development Centers.”

Mr. Shuhei Oguchi, the Team Leader of the REACH-SS project stated that one aim of inclusive education is guaranteeing continuity of education.

“Inclusive education is a collective responsibility that demands the active participation of all stakeholders. By working together in harmony, we can truly realize the transformative power of inclusive education and create a world where all learners thrive. The collaboration among all sectors that contribute to inclusive education must be appreciated and promoted. That’s why this workshop is unique. This is the first time these two sectors met and discussed what they do with each other,” Mr. Oguchi pointed out.