Perceptions of 'inclusion' and perceived preparedness among school teachers in Sri Lanka

ARTICLE in TEACHING AND TEACHER EDUCATION · OCTOBER 2014
Impact Factor: 1.32 · DOI: 10.1016/j.tate.2014.07.003

2 AUTHORS:

Shyamani Hettiarachchi
University of Kelaniya
4 PUBLICATIONS 0 CITATIONS

Ajay Kumar Das
Murray State University
22 PUBLICATIONS 66 CITATIONS

Available from: Ajay Kumar Das
Retrieved on: 18 August 2015
Perceptions of ‘inclusion’ and perceived preparedness among school teachers in Sri Lanka

Shyamani Hettiarachchi a,b, Ajay Das c, *

a Department of Disability Studies, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka
b School of Psychology and Speech Pathology, Faculty of Health Sciences, Curtin University, Australia
c Department of Adolescent, Career and Special Education, Murray State University, Murray, KY, USA

HIGHLIGHTS

- Teachers in inclusive schools did not consider themselves competent.
- Significant differences in all competencies between two groups of teachers.
- Significant differences in teacher competencies by background variables.
- Lack of training and resources emerged as major concerns.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 30 October 2013
Received in revised form 4 July 2014
Accepted 10 July 2014
Available online 30 July 2014

Keywords:
Inclusion
Disabilities
Skills
Teacher training
Sri Lanka

ABSTRACT

This study examined the preparedness of regular and special education teachers in Sri Lanka to teach students with disabilities in an inclusive educational setting. It also explored their perceptions of the term ‘inclusion’ and its applicability to the Sri Lankan context. A total of 75 teachers were surveyed using a two-part questionnaire. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight teachers. The interview data was analyzed using Framework Analysis and the quantitative survey data was analyzed using descriptive statistics. Special education teachers indicated higher perceived competence in working with students with special needs compared to general education teachers. Implications for teacher preparation via pre-service and in-service training are discussed.

1. Introduction

The paradigm shift in special education from ‘segregated instruction’ to ‘mainstreaming’, ‘integrated education’ and ‘inclusive education’ has been part of the discourse of professionals in education worldwide in the last three decades. Inclusive education, however, remains a much debated, often contentious and complex issue particularly in resource-poor countries. Much of this contention stems from a lack of clarity on its conceptualization and implementation. While inclusive education in the West is seen as a fundamental right of every child with special needs 1 (for example, Least Restrictive Environment provision in the American legislation stipulated within the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), the same rigor is not available in legislation and policies in many developing nations, including Sri Lanka.

Inclusion, however, seeks to address the learning needs of all children, young people and adults, with a specific focus on those who are vulnerable to marginalization and exclusion (Rieser, 2008). Inclusive education proposes a move away from segregated teaching and learning contexts to the inclusion of students with special educational needs within the general education classroom. It is “distinguished by an acceptance of differences between students as an ordinary aspect of human development” (Florian & Kershner, 2009, p. 173).

In this paper, ‘inclusive education’ is defined as ‘the integration and education of most students with disabilities in general education classes’ (Eleweke & Rodda, 2002). Inclusive education offers a child with special educational needs the right to enroll in his/her
local mainstream school and be supported to reach their academic and social potential. Nevertheless, sharing a collective classroom space does not guarantee against ‘educational exclusion’, as mere presence does not assure ‘full participation’ in learning. This ‘process of inclusion and exclusion’ is one of complexity, ‘renegotiated moment-by-moment by pupils and teachers’ (Benjamin, Nind, Hall, Collins, & Sheehy, 2003, p. 547).

One challenge to the inclusion of children with disabilities within mainstream education may be the historic view of medically describing a person according to their ‘disease process’ or ‘impairment’ (Croft, 2006). This view, in which the locus of control is internal to the person with disabilities, places the onus on him/her to adapt in an attempt to be integrated into mainstream education or receive instruction in a separate, segregated special education facility. Connected to this view is the challenge of defining disability and characterizing impairment (Florian & McLaughlin, 2008). This view has been challenged by the disability rights movement, which proposes disability as a social construct, with a shift in the responsibility of providing mainstream education to all children falling on the system rather than on the individual (Oliver, 1990 cited in Barnes, 2001). This view, therefore, promotes an ‘integrated’ education system for children with disabilities. While current local legislation promotes inclusive education, arguably, to ensure ‘full participation’ of children with disabilities within the mainstream classroom teachers need to be cognizant of the concept and nuances of inclusive education. It also requires teachers to have knowledge and skills in managing and supporting children with special educational needs within the regular classroom.

Modern, Joergensen, and Daniels (2010) conducted a review of inclusion advocacy work in 26 countries and found that ‘relatively strong policy environments are just not being put into practice’ (p. 14). Among the barriers impeding the establishment of inclusive education in developing countries are the large student numbers in mainstream classrooms, the low teacher to pupil ratio, the location of schools and poor accessibility to buildings, the limited or lack of specific training in inclusive educational methodologies, poor collaboration between special education teachers and their mainstream colleagues, the lack of additional classroom support such as teaching assistants and teaching/learning aids, prejudicial attitudes toward persons with disabilities among parents and teachers, fears about the perceived negative effect of including children with special educational needs on children without disabilities in the mainstream classroom and poverty (Das, Kuyini, & Desai, 2013; Cornelius & Balakraishnan, 2012; Eleweke & Rodda, 2002; Furuta, 2009; Modern et al., 2010). Conversely, among the factors identified to promote inclusive education in countries where it has been well-established are progressive policies, the availability of trained teachers and the access to on-going training and classroom resources (Kugelmass & Ainscow, 2004; Philpott, Furey, & Penney, 2010).

While there is agreement in principle, the challenge in most resource-limited countries such as Sri Lanka, is for the provision of any type of formal or informal education for children with disabilities. A review of the access to education for children with disabilities run by the Social Services Department in the North-Western province of Sri Lanka had indicated important disparities in facilities across schools (Furuta, 2009). In addition, the author reports a wide range of students, from preschool to adults, often randomly positioned in the same classroom with no heed to age or ability, with some students continuing in the same class with the same teacher for over 10 years. Although the right to all children, including children with disabilities to access mainstream education is agreed upon in principle, in practice, many children are, and continue to be denied access to mainstream placement in Sri Lanka.

Furuta (2006) raises concerns even on admission to special units within mainstream schools with as much as 35% of her study participants reportedly denied access. The reality for many children with disabilities in the developing world is limited or no access at all to formal education (Filmer, 2005; Guernsey, Nicoli, & Ninio, 2006; Thomas, 2005).

Furthermore, tensions arise from the ‘parachuting’ of concepts connected to inclusion, still largely a concept from the Global North or the Minority world (e.g. western developed nations such as Australia, Canada, United States, United Kingdom among others) into resource-limited Majority world countries in the Global South (e.g. India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh among others), with primarily didactic pedagogical styles and culturally-specific educational ideologies. As Patter (2007) asserts, “for countries of the South, national agendas are often based on borrowed notions of, and strategies for, inclusion” (p. 628). Highlighting a culture-specific or region-specific phenomenon, Cornelius and Balakraishnan (2012) acknowledge that the adoption of inclusive education policies have been ‘considerably slower pace, if at all, in developing countries’ (p. 82) compared to resource-rich countries.

The availability of support services including related service providers and resources such as teaching aids promote positive attitudes among teachers to inclusive education (Prakash, 2012). Conversely, those skeptical of adopting inclusive educational policies remain unconvinced of its potential academic and social benefits for those included (Lewis & Doorlag, 2003; Salend, 2005). Additionally, these teachers have raised concerns about limited training opportunities and a lack of personnel and administrative support, which does not adequately prepare the teacher to implement a policy of inclusion in the classroom (Das, Kuyini, et al., 2013).

Likewise, a number of investigators who have conducted research on inclusion in other countries that have socio-politico-educational variables similar to Sri Lanka argue that positive teacher attitudes toward inclusive education will strengthen its implementation (Das, Kuyini, et al., 2013, Shah, Das, Desai, & Tiwari, 2014; Prakash, 2012). They emphasize that in order for the teachers to hold positive attitudes toward inclusive education, they need to have a clear conceptual understanding of inclusion. For example, Das, Kuyini, et al. (2013) conducted a survey of 470 regular school teachers in New Delhi, India, and reported that the teachers were positively disposed toward including students with disabilities. The authors also found that the teachers who had contact with a person with a disability and those who did not have a focus on disability during their pre-service teacher education programs were more positive toward inclusive education. In another study, these authors used qualitative methods to determine teachers’ concerns and perceived barriers to implementing inclusive education in schools in New Delhi, India (Bhatnagar & Das, 2014). The respondents in this study were moderately concerned about implementing inclusive education in their schools. The teachers identified a number of barriers to inclusive education, including a lack of trained teachers and policy on inclusion, parental pressure to accommodate their child with special needs, fear of

---

2 The terms ‘Minority world’, ‘Global North’ and western countries will be used interchangeably in this paper to refer to resource-rich economically advantaged countries of the West.

3 The terms ‘Majority world’, ‘Global South’ and resource-poor countries will be used interchangeably to refer to economically developing countries, particularly countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America.
downfall of academic achievement and a lack of professional development for teachers, among others.

On the other hand, a lack of consensus on what inclusion entails and more critically, its implications for the regular education teacher is a significant barrier to its establishment in practice (Bhatnagar & Das, 2014; Miles & Singal, 2010). Research indicates that teachers who hold negative attitudes toward inclusion tend to employ less effective instructional strategies, which results in increasingly poor performance among students with disabilities in regular education classrooms (Nutter, 2011). The author further argues that the negative attitudes of teachers toward students with disabilities adversely affect their self-esteem and self-concept. The literature sheds some light on the source(s) of negative attitudes held by teachers regarding inclusive education. This includes a lack of training for inclusion, inadequate support from administrators, limited knowledge of inclusion procedures and policies and programs for students with disabilities (Das, Kuyini, et al., 2013; Kavale & Forness, 2000; Nutter, 2011).

The literature indicates that general education teachers benefit from training to support children with disabilities in mainstream classrooms (Philpott et al., 2010). A few research studies exploring teacher self-perception, particularly in India (relevant to the Sri Lankan context) have acknowledged its contribution to the designing of needs specific service program (Das, Gichuru, & Singh, 2013). Though pre-service and in-service training programs should not be solely devised based on perceptual findings due to the potential and knowledge, self-perception data can be a useful adjunct to real score levels.

1.1. Inclusive education provisions for students with disabilities in Sri Lanka

Inclusive education remains a relatively new concept in Sri Lanka, largely inherited from the Global North. A number of external and internal factors impacted the development of this movement in Sri Lanka. As a signatory to the Salamanca World Declaration of 1994, the Millennium Development Goals in 2000 followed by its update in 2010 and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2007, Sri Lanka was obliged to develop policies and programs that provide increased educational opportunities to its children with disabilities within regular education settings. Although a signatory to the UNCRPD, Sri Lanka has not ratified the convention to date.

Other factors were more indigenous in nature and borne out of the policy initiatives of the Sri Lankan government. For example, the Ministry of Social Welfare in Sri Lanka in its National Policy on Disability (2003) specifically outline that students with disabilities should be educated in ordinary classrooms or in special education units attached to regular schools. According to a United Nations report (UNICEF, 2003), some of the factors that led to the development of inclusive education in Sri Lanka were:

Firstly, the human rights movement took up the cause of disabled children facing challenges through lack of education. Secondly, there was a global change from segregated schooling to integrated forms of schooling. Initially, 17 visually handicapped children were integrated in the first grade of six regular schools. The children were enrolled in a school near their home, and followed the same program as other children. A special teacher visited the school for tutoring, counseling and providing special learning aids (p. 1).

This is reflective of changes to legislation and other policy initiatives concerning special education in most counties in Asia, though often limited in its expression to legislation and policies, but sometimes — and increasingly — it is shown through a range of practices, albeit on a small scale’ (Mitchell & Desai, 2005, p. 167). It may be that in economically developing countries, the nature and quality of ‘inclusion’ may be dependent on the culture of education and available resources. While the discussions in the Global North have been on the location of the education placement (i.e. special or mainstream), the debates in the Global South have been dominated by the need to provide some form of formal education for children with disabilities. Inclusive education can therefore be viewed as a cost-effective solution to the challenge of offering varied forms of education to children with disabilities.

Sri Lanka has a long history of formally supporting children with special educational needs, from the establishment of a special school for children with hearing or visual impairment in 1912. Special schools have traditionally served the needs of these children. The introduction of an ‘integrated special education program’ within special units attached to regular government or state schools in the 1960s (Piyasena, 2002; Rajapakse, 1993) and ‘Integrated Education’, with the addition of a child with disabilities into a regular school with adaptations (Ministry of Social Welfare, 2003) in the 1970s marked a transition from segregated learning settings to more mixed learning environments.

Sri Lanka’s commitment to inclusion is stipulated within its legislation, which emphasizes that every 5–14 year old child has a right to ‘compulsory education’, irrespective of ability (Parliament of Sri Lanka, 1997; Yokotani, 2001). Bolstered in part by international conventions and agendas, Sri Lanka has adopted a policy of inclusive education. This is outlined in the National Policy on Disability for Sri Lanka (Ministry of Social Welfare, 2003):

More recently in keeping with international developments and particularly with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the emphasis has been on Inclusive Education. At present, children who have disability obtain education in Government schools either through inclusion in the ordinary classroom or in special education units attached to ordinary schools (p. 16). In theory, this consolidates the legal right of children with disabilities to be enrolled in regular schools. It marks a seismic shift from hitherto ‘segregated education’ to a policy of equality, assimilation and access. While there is evidence of a governmental commitment toward education for children with disabilities, the ‘lack of a definitive policy on inclusive education’ may be contributing to the gap between policy and its implementation (UNICEF, 2013). The anecdotal evidence of closures of special educational units attached to regular schools in Sri Lanka is a concern. Though inclusive education is arguably appropriate in principle, the financial implications of offering such an educational model in resource-limited countries such as Sri Lanka has been questioned, particularly in the light of few training opportunities for teachers, limited resources and large classroom sizes (Furuta, 2009).

At present, there are four educational options for students with disabilities in Sri Lanka: special schools, special units attached to mainstream schools, inclusive mainstream school settings, and special resource centers attached to mainstream schools offering additional support particularly with literacy. In total, there are 26 national special schools across the country, of which 5 are in the Northern Province and 10 in the Western Province (Government of Sri Lanka, 2012). In many of these special schools, the curriculum on offer is functional, based primarily on achieving independence in activities of daily living. In addition, there are 525 special units attached to mainstream schools of which there are 2 in National schools and 12 in Provincial schools in the Northern Province with 16 National schools.
and 141 Provincial schools offering special unit placements in the Western Province (Government of Sri Lanka, 2012). In a few of these schools, a small number of children have gradually moved into the mainstream classroom. Effectively, these schools run a ‘twin-track’ approach (DFID, 2000) with measures to promote inclusion and initiatives to encourage Education for All (EFA) in whatever form available, inclusive or segregated. Also, fee levying special schools in the Western Province number a total of 10 with just 1 available in the Northern Province (Government of Sri Lanka, 2012).

The Department of Census and Statistics of Sri Lanka (2001) reported the prevalence of disability as 1.6% of the total population, with 2.5% of this said to be children. Disability, in combination with other factors such as poverty, the war and parental attitudes deter children from accessing education. In prevalence figures 10 years ago, 31.7% of the population of persons with disabilities had never accessed education (Department of Census and Statistics, 2003). By 2000, 59.5% of boys and 40.5% of girls with disabilities were attending school respectively (UNICEF, 2013). In former conflict areas, particularly of the North and East, the threat of violence and insecurity resulted in poor attendance, though hopefully, the end of the conflict has opened up opportunities for education in these areas. Children of parents killed or disabled in the conflict are also noted to be often absent from school or not accessing schooling (UNICEF, 2013).

Despite the push toward inclusion, a study by the National Institute of Education (2000) concluded that 70% of classes for children with special needs were not offered in regular classrooms but in special education units. Teachers identified special educational units as the most appropriate educational placement for children with disabilities rather than regular classrooms (Ahuja & Mendis, 2002 cited in UNICEF, 2013). The lack of mobility from the special unit to the regular education classroom is due in part to the limited availability of spaces and the diverse range of children to be accommodated with regard to age and ability (UNESCO, 1994). Wijemanne (1999) asserts that the demand for mainstream education for children with special needs outweighs the available facilities, placing considerable pressure on current educational placements.

1.2. Aims of the study

Inclusion places novel responsibilities on school teachers. It brings with it the need for new knowledge and skills among the teachers to enable the differentiation of the curriculum, use of student-centered pedagogical methods, collaborative practice and devising of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for students with special needs (Vaughn & Bos, 2012). There is, however, much research available that highlight challenges associated with the implementation of inclusive education (Das, Gichuru, et al., 2013, Das, Ruyini, et al., 2013). These challenges include the lack of trained personnel and materials, appropriate training, adequate funding, additional time for preparation, development of new skills and classroom sizes (Shah, 2006).

With regard to the Sri Lankan context, the National Policy on Disability in Sri Lanka (Ministry of Social Welfare, 2003) outlines barriers of environmental and transportation accessibility, communication, culture, the scarcity of assistive technology devices and societal and family expectations as impeding the implementation of inclusion. The challenges faced by the teachers include the management of children with various ‘disabling’ conditions; presence of students of different ages in the same classroom (Furuta, 2006), the examination-centric nature of the education system (Jayaweera, 1999) and the lack of support staff (Furuta, 2006). This has been supported by other research studies on the situation in Sri Lanka (Ahuja & Mendis, 2002; Furuta, 2006, 2009). Moreover, differences in ideology and interpretation as well as of resources have influenced the implementation of policies. The ground realities, however, have not been conducive to the implementation of new schools for children with special educational requirements.

The overall aim of this project was to unearth teacher self-perception of their knowledge and skills, with a view to addressing perceived concerns when devising packages and offering tailor-made pre-service and in-service training programs for schools. While incongruence between perceptual levels of ability and actual levels could exist, addressing areas of concern on knowledge and skills may be useful in increasing teacher confidence. This could, in turn, have a positive knock-on effect on the ‘teacher preparedness’ (Das, Gichuru, et al., 2013) and teacher engagement in the classroom. This study was undertaken to identify the perceived current skill levels of teachers in Sri Lanka with regard to their ability to work with children with special needs. It also aimed to identify the perceptions of these teachers regarding inclusive education. This type of data can also be beneficial when determining the scope and content of programs. The research questions for this study included:

1. What is the skill level of the teachers currently perceived to be necessary to work effectively with students with special needs in inclusive educational settings?
2. Is there a significant difference between the perceived skill levels of the teachers whether they were attached to special or regular/inclusive schools?
3. Is there a significant difference between the teachers’ skill levels according to the following background variables: geographical location in Sri Lanka, gender, age, training in special education, years of experience in teaching students with disabilities and the location of the school?
4. How do teachers conceptualize ‘inclusion’ for children with special educational needs?

2. Method

2.1. Research design

A mixed methods research design (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003) was used in this study. It incorporated the use of a survey questionnaire and semi-structured interviews to determine the teachers’ perceived levels of competence at supporting children with special educational needs in mainstream classrooms and their understanding and explanations of inclusive education. Admittedly, a study design which includes observation of teachers to document actual skill levels and areas of need would be more informative with regard to influencing pre-service and in-service training and discussions at policy level. The authors see this as the next step, opting to gain a better understanding of the prevalent discourse, attitudes and perceived skills of teachers at this preliminary stage.

2.2. Participants

Teachers working with students with disabilities in regular education classrooms, special units attached to regular schools or special schools in the Northern and Western Provinces of Sri Lanka were invited to participate in the study. A purposive sampling method was used to find the sample of teachers to be included in the study. An attempt was made to include a representative sample of teachers working across the different educational contexts (i.e., special units, mainstream classrooms, special schools) and from...
rural and urban settings. An urban setting refers to educational facilities in larger cities, which are arguably better resourced compared to the rural setting. Rural refers to smaller villages or provincial schools with limited resources. The group from the Northern Province did not include any teachers from a mainstream context as there is no such provision for children with disabilities in this geographical region at present. An attempt was also made to include teachers with a variety of educational backgrounds. Teachers attached to special educational units within government mainstream schools have undergone a 2-year training course offered by the National Institute of Education (NIE) to qualify as a special education teacher or undergone two-year teacher-training programmes to qualify as a mainstream teacher.

Participants were identified through professional links with personnel at various schools across the two regions. Administrators in these schools were contacted to find a list of teachers who would be interested in participating in a survey. Once the list was obtained, the first author delivered the questionnaires, information sheets and consent forms to the school sites in a sealed envelope and picked them up at a mutually agreed date. A total of 96 questionnaires were distributed in fourteen schools (three in the Northern Province and eleven in the Western Province). In certain circumstances, the first author was available during the completion of the survey and answered any questions that the participants had. A total of 30 Tamil-speaking teachers from the Northern Province and 45 Sinhala-speaking teachers from the Western Province responded to the survey. This yielded a return rate of 78.12%. Those teachers who responded to the survey were requested to indicate if they would like to participate in an interview exploring their views on inclusion. The vast majority of teachers indicated that they would be available for this purpose. Based on participant willingness and ease of access to set-up a meeting, eight teachers were selected to be interviewed.

Semi-structured interviews were then conducted by the first author to understand the teachers’ perceptions of inclusive education. Teachers from the Northern Province were included to try to gain a more comprehensive understanding of available educational services for children with special needs in this area post-war.

2.3. Instrumentation

A two-part questionnaire was utilized for data collection from the respondents regarding their current perceived skill levels in inclusion competencies. Part-one of the questionnaire was designed to obtain background information related to the teachers. It asked the respondents specifically if they had received training in special education (i.e. through formal pre-service or in-depth inservice professional development opportunities), their experience in teaching students with disabilities, location of the school (rural or urban as defined by the local authority) and the type of school they taught at (i.e. regular or special). Part-two of the questionnaire was a Likert scale in which the teachers were requested to respond by indicating 1 = not at all competent to 4 = highly competent to specific questions. Part-two of the questionnaire was titled, Inclusion Competencies of Sri Lankan Teachers (ICSLT). The questionnaire was a modified version of Inclusion Competencies of Indian Teachers (ICIT). ICIT was developed by Das (2001) to determine the perceived current skill levels of regular school teachers in India to implement inclusive education. ICIT is comprised of 52 items (competency statements) clustered around ten competency categories.

Das (2001) established the psychometric properties of the instrument and used it in a large-scale survey of regular school teachers in Delhi. He reported the reliability (Alpha value) of the total-scale score to be .94. In addition, he reported Alpha values for each of the ten categories ranging from .80 to .87. He also established the validity of the instruments by presenting it to key informants including teacher educators, regular education and special education teachers, personnel working in the Ministry of Education, India, and parents of students with and without disabilities. Some modifications were made to ICIT to make it responsive to the respondents in Sri Lanka. ICSLT included 36 items that were clustered around nine competency categories. The categories included: professional knowledge, classroom climate, collaboration, assessment, classroom management, goal setting, instructional techniques, individualized instruction and evaluation. Three versions of the ICSLT questionnaire were made available to the respondents. One was in English and the other two were in Sinhala and Sri Lankan Tamil which were produced after a careful translation by two experts in the field. The revised instrument (ICSLT) was subjected to psychometric analysis. A high co-efficient Alpha (.98) was obtained that far exceeded the minimum Alpha value requirement, .80, for an instrument used in educational research ( DeVellis, 2003). In addition, semi-structured interviews used a topic guide to facilitate the interviews. Though sharing a working definition of inclusion among the participants may have been useful, gaining an understanding of participant definitions and representations of the concept was deemed more important. The interviews were conducted with the teachers in the language of their choice i.e. English, Sri Lankan Tamil or Sinhala.

Approval for this research study was obtained from the Ethics Research Committee of the Faculty of Medicine, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka. An information sheet and consent form was made available to the participants in three languages: Sinhala, Tamil and English. The participants were requested to complete the consent form from prior to responding to the survey or engaging in the semi-structured interview. Respondents were assured of anonymity and confidentiality in all reporting of the data.

2.4. Data collection and analysis

Each participant was given the ICSLT survey questionnaire, which they completed individually. The quantitative data gleaned from the written questionnaire were collated. Semi-structured interviews, lasting approximately 60 min were conducted with the expert informants at their homes or schools, aided by a topic guide. The first author conducted all of the interviews. The qualitative data gathered via the semi-structured interviews were analyzed using the key principles of Framework Analysis (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994).

As this was a small set of data, a hands-on approach to data analysis was favored instead of qualitative data software. The five stages recommended within this approach for systematic analysis of data identifying a thematic framework, indexing, charting, mapping, and interpretation were followed (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994). This led to the development of a coding scheme which was employed systematically across all the data. The data was compiled into summaries that were reorganized in correspondence to each theme. Respondent validation was gained by checking back with five of the eight expert informants.

3. Results

Part-one of the questionnaire on key demographic details of the participants is summarized in Table 1. Analysis of the data indicated that a vast majority of the teachers were female (93.34%), had received training in special education (78.66%) and worked in a special school (74.66%). In addition, 60% of the teachers were from the Western province of Sri Lanka, about 65% were under the age of 40, 60% worked in schools located in an...
urban area and 40% of them had been teaching students with disabilities for over 10 years.

### 3.1. Teachers’ perceived current skill levels

Part-two of the questionnaire was analyzed to determine perceived current skill levels of the teachers to teach students with special needs in an inclusive setting. The following procedures were employed to identify the teachers’ perceived current skill levels in each of the nine competency categories of ICSLT:

(a) Means for each of the competency categories were computed by adding the current perceived skill level ratings of the teachers for each competency statement in a category and then dividing the total score by the number of items in that category (there were four competency statements in each category).

(b) Competency categories were then arranged in rank order from highest to lowest mean scores to indicate the relative current skill levels of the teachers in each category.

A mean score above 4.0 would indicate that the teachers considered themselves as highly competent in that competency. Similarly, a mean score between 3.0 and 4.0 would indicate that teachers regarded themselves as moderately competent in that competency. A mean score below 3.0 would indicate that teachers regarded themselves as not competent in that competency. The scoring pattern would be applicable to competency categories as well.

#### 3.1.1. Perceived current skill levels of the teachers working in special schools

Table 2 shows the means and standard deviations of the teachers’ (that worked in special schools) perceived skill levels for each of the competency categories of ICSLT. Teachers’ mean rating was above 3.00 in each of the categories of ICSLT indicating moderate to high perceived competence in all categories. In relation to the ranking, the teachers rated their highest level of skills in Classroom Climate (rank #1) and least in Professional Knowledge (rank #9).

#### 3.1.2. Perceived current skill levels of the teachers working in regular/inclusive schools

Table 3 shows the means and standard deviations of the teachers’ (that worked in regular or inclusive schools) perceived skill levels for each of the competency categories of ICSLT. They indicated their highest perceived current skill level in Classroom Climate (rank #1) and lowest skills level in Goal Setting and Evaluation (lowest rank).

#### 3.1.3. Difference between the skills of the teachers in special or regular/inclusive schools

Differences between mean ratings for the teachers’ perceived current skill levels in each of the nine competency categories of ICSLT were subjected to t-tests. The results indicated that significant differences between the teachers’ skill levels in special schools vs. regular/inclusive schools in all competency categories but one, Professional Knowledge (see Table 4). This table refers only to self-report data on perceived skill levels and not to actual levels of skill.

#### 3.1.4. Relationship between teachers’ background variables and their current skill levels

Table 5 indicates the perceived skill levels (not actual levels of skill) of school teachers in Sri Lanka according to their background variables. Those teachers who were from the Northern Province of Sri Lanka indicated higher levels of skill (3.64) than the teachers from the Western Province (3.16). The difference between their response was statistically significant ($p < .000$). Female teachers indicated higher skill levels (3.63) than their male counterparts (3.32). The difference between their response was statistically significant ($p < .000$). Those teachers who were above 40 years of age indicated higher skill levels (3.46) than the teachers who were 40 years of age or younger (3.28). The difference between their response was also statistically significant ($p < .009$). Those teachers who had received training in special education indicated a significantly higher level of skills (3.52) than those who had not received

---

**Table 1**

Demographic variables of the teachers ($N = 75$).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>No. of respondents</th>
<th>% Of respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Location of the school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern province</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western province</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6.66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>93.34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below 30 years</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>34.66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30–39 years</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>30.66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40–49 years</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above 50 years</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6.66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training in special education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>78.66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>21.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience in teaching special needs students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 2 years</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3–5 years</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6–9 years</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14.66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 10 years</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location of the school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>74.66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular/inclusive</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>25.33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2**

Perceived current skill levels of the teachers working in special schools ($N = 56$).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competency category</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professional knowledge</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom climate</td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom management</td>
<td>3.76</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal setting</td>
<td>3.79</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional techniques</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualized instruction</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3**

Perceived current skill levels of the teachers working in inclusive schools ($N = 19$).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competency category</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professional knowledge</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom climate</td>
<td>2.99</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>2.61</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom management</td>
<td>2.79</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal Setting</td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional techniques</td>
<td>2.85</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualized instruction</td>
<td>2.64</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
such training (2.69, p < .000). The teachers with more than five years of experience in teaching students with disabilities indicated a significantly higher level of skills (3.60) than the teachers who had less than five years of experience (3.03, p < .000). The teachers that worked in urban schools indicated a significantly higher level of skills (3.64) than those who worked in rural schools (3.15, p < .000).

3.2. Teacher perceptions of inclusion

Transcription of the interview data was subjected to thematic analysis using key principles of Framework Analysis (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994). The following themes emerged from this analysis: conflicting concepts, lack of training, power and agency and selfish vs. selfless.

3.2.1. Conflicting concepts

Although a majority of participants stated that they would be competent at explaining the rationale for the inclusion of children with special educational needs within a mainstream classroom, in-depth discussions during interviews highlighted confusion and a lack of coherence in the understanding of the concept of ‘inclusion’. In a discussion with Padma, a special education teacher attached to a special unit within a Catholic mainstream school in the Western Province, she had this to say:

> We try to integrate some of the children into the main school. We now have six children with special needs in normal classrooms.

However, when asked specifically about the philosophy of her unit, she explained:

> My unit has ten disabled children. They work at the unit. The unit is separate from the main school. We don’t integrate the children for lessons. It’s too difficult. But they have morning prayers together. It is a lot of hard work to watch them during this time. They were all able to sit through mass last week. Two of the children that we integrated were sent back. The normal classroom teachers could not cope.

All three interviewees from the Northern Province explained ‘inclusion’ as integration into a special unit within a mainstream school. When discussing the issue, one of the interviewee, Mr. Sreedaran stated:

> I work at a special school. ‘Inclusion’ is when a child with disabilities is offered a place in a special unit, which is part of normal school. It is inclusion into normal school.

3.2.2. Lack of training and support services

All eight teachers that were interviewed voiced concerns about the lack of basic and on-going training to the teachers. Chandika, a young teacher from the same school as Padma, but in the mainstream section voiced her concerns about inclusive education, particularly highlighting the lack of training provided by the government. She articulated her views as follows:

> I am new to this school. I just started two weeks ago. They have included a boy with special needs into my class. I had no training before I started and there is no training at the school either. I am scared. I have 42 children to teach in my class. I have no idea what to do with him. I don’t know what inclusive education is about.

Chandika spoke at length about the number of students allocated to each class and the lack of support she received as a new teacher. Explaining her point that students with special educational needs will be better placed in the special unit, Chandika added:

> There is a trained teacher and two trainee teachers there. I do not have any help in my classroom.

Another teacher, Kumari, expressed similar concerns. She, however, posed her concerns as a question. She added:

> I have been a special education teacher for 11 years, so I know how to work with special needs children. How can you include children with special needs into the normal class without giving the teachers any training?

Providing a ‘northern’ perspective, Devi noted a gap between theory and practice when discussing her ideas of inclusion. She commented:

> We have heard of inclusive education although we are not entirely clear what it means. There are special schools here for children who are deaf or blind or for children with mental retardation. Now that the war is over, we can think more about supporting these children. We must also think about the psychological scars of our students. We need special training.

Amidst a lack of clarity on the philosophy and concepts of ‘inclusion’ was the call for more specific training to deal with difficulties experienced by all children. Adding to this discussion, Lakmini pointed out that in spite of undergoing the coursework at Training College in Special Education, she felt inadequate. It was illustrated by the following comment:

> You can’t attend six months or three months or a two-day training workshop and learn how to work with children with disabilities. We were trained well at Training College and had excellent teachers but it is still not enough. There is so much to learn. Managing the classroom with so many children with very different disorders and levels is challenging. I don’t know how untrained teachers manage.

---

4 All names have been changed and the data in Sinhala or Sri Lankan Tamil has been translated into Sri Lankan English with no attempt made to change the colloquial terminology used in order to maintain the ‘voice’ and authenticity of the participant narratives.

5 The terminology used by the participants, though considered inappropriate by the authors has been kept in order to maintain the authenticity of the comments.
Lakmini also went on to articulate a problem faced by all teachers; the lack of opportunities for continued professional development:

_There are no opportunities to learn more, to keep our knowledge up to date. I think my methods are old._

Explaining this further, Heshani commented that:

_‘(Our) training was inadequate because of the number of children in the class and complex difficulties between the children’._

3.2.3. Power and agency

The themes of ‘power’ and ‘agency’ emerged through the interviews. Many interviewees raised the issue of a lack of power and agency felt by them with regard to their identity within a mainstream or special unit setting. As Heshani, a teacher at a special unit described, the teachers at the unit feel a lack of recognition within the school, with little or no voice in policy matters. Discussing this point, she had this to say:

_We feel cut away from the main school. We want to integrate children into the normal classroom but the other teachers and authorities don’t like it._

In a conversation with Lakmini, an experienced special education teacher, she raised concerns about the recent quick turnaround in special education, with the closure of units. She linked this to the themes of power and agency, explaining:

_Some new teachers get into special education as it is an easy way into the system. Once they get in, they move into the normal classroom and forget the special education unit. That is why the units are closing, particularly in the South._

3.2.4. Selfless vs. selfish

In spite of a lack of power and agency experienced by special education teachers, the reason proposed by most respondents for becoming a teacher was altruistic and ‘selflessness’. This was particularly poignant in the discourse of mainstream teachers when discussing their counterparts working in special units or special schools. Thisara, a male teacher working at a mainstream school expressed:

_These special education teachers are inspiring. They really care about these children and not about themselves._

Nevertheless, a few of the informants challenged this view of altruism, stating more self-centered or ‘selfish’ reasons for teachers joining the staff. Similar to Lakmini’s comments earlier, Kumari’s observations were representative of the views expressed by a few. Her words also highlight a perceived value judgment and possible stigma attached to being a special education teacher in Sri Lanka:

_Many young teachers now go to teacher training college to earn a special education degree because it’s easier to get a special education teaching position. Once they are made permanent, they quietly move into the regular school and the special education unit gets shut down._

4. Discussion

Cautious interpretation of the findings of this study is required due to its limitations. Firstly, the results are based on ‘perceived’ skills, which were not substantiated by observation of classroom practices. This carries the risk of an over or under-estimation of the levels of competence. Secondly, the cohort of participants included from the Northern Province were all attached to special schools, with no perspective of teachers working in mainstream schools or special units in regular schools. However, this is reflective of the current educational facilities and opportunities available for children with special educational needs in this geographical area as there are no inclusive educational facilities in the Northern Province at present. This may be indicative of the different stages of transition from segregation to full inclusion seen across the country. The difference in educational provision for children with disabilities might also be a consequence of many years of war, affecting primarily the North and East. Furthermore, the majority of the teachers from the Western Province were special education teachers; while some of them were special education teachers attached to special units within mainstream schools.

This study aimed to achieve two specific purposes. First, it aimed to determine the perceived level of competence among teachers (regular education and special education) in Sri Lanka with regard to working with students with special needs. Second, it aimed to gather information on the teachers’ knowledge, conceptualizations and interpretation of ‘inclusion’ and views on how best to support children with special educational needs to access the regular education curriculum. Within these two broad purposes, it also aimed to determine whether a significant difference existed in the teachers’ perceived competence based on their background variables.

---

Table 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Background variables</th>
<th>Mean (SD) Northern Province</th>
<th>Mean (SD) Western Province</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
<th>CI</th>
<th>p*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Geographical location in Sri Lanka</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3.63 (.33)</td>
<td>3.32 (.27)</td>
<td>3.81***</td>
<td>p &lt; .000</td>
<td>--.42, --.13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3.28 (.31)</td>
<td>3.46 (.27)</td>
<td>2.67**</td>
<td>p &lt; .009</td>
<td>--.32, --.04</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location of the school</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>3.52 (.27)</td>
<td>2.69 (.40)</td>
<td>10.24***</td>
<td>p &lt; .000</td>
<td>.66, 983</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.01 (.29)</td>
<td>3.60 (.28)</td>
<td>8.31***</td>
<td>p &lt; .000</td>
<td>--.70, --.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.15 (.24)</td>
<td>3.64 (.51)</td>
<td>5.12***</td>
<td>p &lt; .000</td>
<td>--.67, --.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience in teaching special needs students</td>
<td>Less than 5 years</td>
<td>3.63 (.33)</td>
<td>3.32 (.27)</td>
<td>3.81***</td>
<td>p &lt; .000</td>
<td>--.42, --.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.28 (.31)</td>
<td>3.46 (.27)</td>
<td>2.67**</td>
<td>p &lt; .009</td>
<td>--.32, --.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.15 (.24)</td>
<td>3.64 (.51)</td>
<td>5.12***</td>
<td>p &lt; .000</td>
<td>--.67, --.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.63 (.33)</td>
<td>3.32 (.27)</td>
<td>3.81***</td>
<td>p &lt; .000</td>
<td>--.42, --.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.28 (.31)</td>
<td>3.46 (.27)</td>
<td>2.67**</td>
<td>p &lt; .009</td>
<td>--.32, --.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.15 (.24)</td>
<td>3.64 (.51)</td>
<td>5.12***</td>
<td>p &lt; .000</td>
<td>--.67, --.29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***.01 < p < .001. CI = confidence interval.
The special education teachers from the Northern and Western Provinces indicated a high level of competence in all nine competency categories of the ICSELT. When the data was disaggregated for regular/inclusive school teachers, it showed a marked decline in the perceived competence of the teachers. This finding is in-line with the findings of the Das (2001) who reported low mean scores (a mean below 3.0) across all competency categories among regular school teachers in Delhi, India. In addition to the correspondence in mean competence ratings of the mainstream teachers in Sri Lanka and India, the rank order of competencies showed some similarities for the highest ranked competency as well (Classroom Climate).

While a high percentage of the teachers indicated receiving some training to assist children with special educational needs, it is not clear whether this level is deemed sufficient by them. In fact, the lack of adequate training and the need for on-going Continued Professional Development (CPD) training was voiced by all the participants interviewed as crucial to enable better awareness and competence on how to best support children with special needs. The lack of specific knowledge and training on inclusive methodologies disempowers mainstream teachers from supporting children with special educational needs in their classroom. Das, Gichuru et al. (2013) argue that in this regard, short-term seminars or workshops would not appear to be the answer. Rather, ongoing professional development opportunities should be made available to the teachers’ (p. 11). David and Kuyini (2012) also assert that teachers have benefited from in-service programs that form part of a long term systemic staff development plan rather than from single-shot, short-term programs.

The lack of clarity among the teachers in special school and mainstream settings in their conceptualization of ‘inclusion’ and the complexities associated with it is a cause for concern. The ambiguity of understanding among the participants on the definition and constructs associated with inclusive education is itself a barrier to the establishment of an inclusive education policy. The description of inclusive education among the participants was more akin to earlier ‘integrated’ special education programs within special units introduced in the 1960s in Sri Lanka (Piyasena, 2002; Rajapakse, 1993). This reflects the lack of consensus on a common, culturally-applicable definition of inclusive education globally (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2006; Booth & Ainscow, 1998; Campbell, 2002; Humphrey, 2008; Sheehy, Rix, Nind, & Simmons, 2004). It also mirrors the complexity of operationalizing a policy of inclusion in reality and perhaps the challenge of implementing ‘borrowed’ or ‘Western’ constructs on inclusive education in the East.

Although the right to compulsory and by extension inclusive education for all, is enshrined within local legislation (Ministry of Social Welfare, 2003), the lack of clarity and consensus among teachers must be addressed in order to ensure inclusive learning environments. Not doing so runs the risk of tokenism, of students assimilated in reality and perhaps the challenge of implementing ‘borrowed’ or ‘Western’ constructs on inclusive education in the East.

The professional development programs should be targeted in the areas in which the need was found based on the results of this study. For example, the teachers working in special schools expressed a lower level of skill in professional knowledge of special education, collaboration skills and individualized instruction. Professional development opportunities for these teachers can perhaps begin with intensive training in these areas before including other topics. Similarly, the participants working in inclusive schools expressed a lower level of skills in collaboration, goal setting and evaluation of students with disabilities. Appropriate professional development opportunities should be made available to these teachers especially targeting the three areas. The need to take particular acre to incorporate competencies deemed relatively low by teachers into training programs was a main suggestion by Das, Gichuru, et al. (2013) with regard to Indian teachers. A train-the-trainer model can be utilized for imparting professional development to the teachers at their school sites or for a cluster of schools in a region. This model has been successfully used in another South Asian country with similar socio-economic and educational backgrounds as Sri Lanka (Das, Gichuru, et al., 2013).

In addition, the curricula for teacher training programs in higher education institutions need strengthening. This may involve the addition of core modules on supporting children with special needs, providing knowledge and skills at differentiating curricula, adopting student-centered instruction and pedagogical approaches (UNESCO, 2006; Vaughn & Bos, 2012) as well as the addition of ‘inclusive education’ theory and practice into the general education training in both Sinhala and Tamil (Furuta, 2006).

A cause for concern is the perceived stigma attached to being a special education teacher reported by the participants. The need to incorporate awareness programs to confront stigma associated with disability among teachers has been recommended in the UNICEF report (2013). This could mean that teachers who are specifically trained in inclusive education methodologies often leave the special unit, opting to work with children without disabilities in the mainstream classroom. This could, however, work in favor of establishing inclusive education as these teachers will have adequate competencies to support children with special needs within the mainstream classroom, should a policy of inclusion be established.

The perceived stigma associated with being a special education teacher may be connected to the negative societal perceptions of disability. This includes the religious-cultural explanations of the causes of disability and a charity model of disability (Alur, 2002; Oliver, 1990). This finding questions an assumption on which inclusive education is rolled out in most countries, that of teachers’ understanding and agreement with the philosophy of inclusive education. In that sense, the current findings, though on Sri Lankan teachers, may in fact be a reminder of the need to gather baseline data on teacher knowledge prior to pre-service training and the
need to address potential negativity, confusion and current terminology within teacher training programs. Therefore, to address the implementation gap between policy to practice of inclusive education, pre-service and in-service training needs to address cultural connotations of disability and prevailing negative attitudes toward persons with disabilities. Changing the somewhat negative and pejorative images and ideas the teachers may hold of persons with disabilities needs to precede or be included at the core of training.

The trepidation of teaching children with special needs within a mainstream context, which leads to negative feelings as suggested within the interview data, must also be taken into account. According to available literature, this ‘negativity’ deters school authorities from establishing an inclusive education policy or impedes the effective running of inclusive education programs (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996; Shah, 2006). By contrast, a more positive attitude is alleged to enhance the running of mainstream programs (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Das, Kuyini, et al., 2013). The need for pre-service training and continuing professional development via in-service education in order to foster a positive attitude toward children with special educational needs by teachers has been stressed within the literature (Kim, 2013). Thus, addressing this ‘fear’ and ‘negativity’ via information and training should be strongly considered. The reported teacher apprehension could also be alleviated somewhat by decreasing the number of students in each classroom to a more manageable size (Furuta, 2006) and by pledging a reasonable budget to provide classroom assistants or ‘shadow teachers’ (Ford, 2007).

Furthermore, the results of this study calls for introspection among all stakeholders in Sri Lanka who are involved in the implementation of inclusive education and in the education of students with disabilities in general. It is necessary to discuss the results in detail to comprehend why these findings have emerged among teachers in the Northern and Western Provinces. What about the preparedness among teachers in other provinces and rural difficult-to-reach areas? In addition, a close scrutiny is warranted to fully understand teacher concerns regarding inclusion, including the perceived stigma attached to being a special education teacher in Sri Lanka. A sustained and comprehensive effort from all stakeholders is required to address teacher concerns. It is only then that the true inclusion imperative can be realized in Sri Lanka.

Finally, a comment must be made on the terminology used by the participants. There was very little evidence of ‘person-first’ terminology, with archaic and often derogatory terms used, even though the teachers maintained that children with special educational needs had a right to education. In addition to agreement on the conceptual underpinnings of ‘inclusive education’, there is also the need for agreement on more acceptable and dignified ‘person-first’ terminology among all those fighting for and supporting the rights of all persons with disabilities in Sri Lanka. The importance of terminology that has been agreed upon and which protects the rights of children with special needs is imperative in addressing societal stigma. Therefore, the responsibility of safeguarding, upholding and actively promoting the rights of children with disabilities falls on professionals such as teachers, academics and healthcare professionals.

5. Conclusion

In summary, the data provided valuable information on teachers’ understanding of ‘inclusive education’ and a self-assessment of their perceived competence in this process. The results need to be evaluated with regard to issues of access to education within the Sri Lankan context, availability of teacher training and the localized constructs and evolving concepts of education and inclusion. In conclusion, while the teachers from the Northern and Western Provinces of Sri Lanka indicated higher levels of skill in all nine competency categories; there were lower perceived levels of skill among teachers working in mainstream schools. This was corroborated by the interview data. This study strengthens the need to review the training offered to teachers employed in regular schools. Further research is required to determine the nature, duration and content of the teacher training that may address these concerns.

The lack of congruence on what constitutes ‘inclusive education’ and the perceived limitations in current teacher knowledge and skills stress the need to review available pre-service and in-service training packages. The DFID policy (2000) of a ‘twist-track’ approach of inclusive initiatives and disability-focused strategies could be appropriate within the Sri Lankan system to promote ‘education for all’. This would entail the promotion of inclusion wherever possible for children already within the education system, supplemented by access to any form of formal education including special schools or units for children with disabilities who are hitherto not accessing education. The UNICEF (2013) report recommends the establishment of more special educational units in schools for children with severe disabilities with trained teachers in Delhi, India. It must, however, be acknowledged that this compromise position (Miles & Singal, 2010) could undermine mainstream teachers, promote divisions and obstruct the process of inclusion. That said, it could be argued that a twin-track approach at this stage in Sri Lanka may be pragmatic, in order to get as many children with disabilities into education and to help build inroads into establishing contextually-relevant and culturally-sensitive inclusive education.

References


