# THE OPERATION OF SPECIAL EDUCATION UNIT IN THE REGULAR SCHOOLS AND FUTURE POSSIBILITIES FOR SUPPORTING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN AMPARA DISTRICT

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## ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to investigate the functioning of Special Education Unit (SEU) system in regular schools in the Ampara district and make suggestions to support the inclusive education system. The methodology of the study was both qualitative and quantitative and the survey approach was used to conduct the study. Twenty-seven (27) principals, seven (7) In-Service Advisors (ISA) of Special Education (SE) and eighty-six 86 SE teachers were selected for this purpose. Questionnaires, interviews and observations were used for data collection.

The experience, knowledge and attitude of teachers and principals and other professionals who worked in SEU system are beneficial for the implementation of inclusive education. INGOs and NGOs support the implementation of the inclusive education system by enhancing the functioning of SEU system. Some of the schools with SEUs have resource rooms, a school level policy, and an adapted curriculum which can support the implementation of the inclusive education. However, teachers need more training regarding strategies for teaching in an inclusive classroom. Moreover, awareness programmes have to be conducted for stakeholders of inclusive education. Finally, the aim of the study has been achieved and the outcomes are recommended for future development of SEU system and inclusive education in Ampara district.

**Key Words:** Special Education Unit, Integrated Education, Inclusive Education, Regular Schools

## INTRODUCTION

The paradigm shift in SE from 'segregated instruction' to 'integrated education' and 'inclusive education' has been part of the discourse of professionals in education worldwide in the last three decades (Hettiarachchi & Das, 2014). In line with that, inclusive education is considered a current trend by national governments and international agencies. However, developing countries including Sri Lanka are still in the developing stage of an inclusive education system. Therefore, Sri Lanka needs to design a culturally compatible inclusive education model for the inclusion of all communities that will enable it to keep pace with this global paradigm shift in education. Moreover, provisions show that although there is a positive trend towards the implementation of an inclusive education system, there continues to be a gap in achieving the internationally recommended level of inclusive education in the Sri Lankan education system.

Moreover, eight thousand four hundred and sixty-two (8462) disabled people live in Ampara district. Out of them three hundred and eighty-six (380) are children of school going age with disabilities. These students are accommodated in twenty-seven (27) SEUs in regular schools with the expectation that these units would provide a proper education aimed at the development of students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) (Education Department of Eastern Province, 2015). However, students with SEN who are accommodated in SEUs rarely participate in inclusive educational activities. In the schools in Ampara district; even though they have the capacity to learn in an inclusive setup with normal students. According to UNESCO (2003), children with disabilities are denied the opportunity to learn with children in regular classrooms. Moreover, according to Perera (2015) the separation of SEUs inside regular schools is the main challenge for establishing an inclusive education system. In order to solve the above problem, this study investigates the operation of the SEU system in regular schools and its potential for contributing towards an inclusive education system.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

**Disabled People and Education:** The general thought about children with disabilities is that, children with disabilities are ten (10) times more vulnerable when compared with students without SEN not attending school. Moreover, even if children with disabilities attend school, they are more likely to drop out before the completion of school education (UNICEF, 2013). However, educating the students with SEN is a challenge in the world today. In addition, there is a global agreement that all children have the right to be formally educated individually and/or together, including children with SEN (United Nations, 1989 & United Nations, 2008). Moreover, Human Rights-Based Approach to Education for All (2007), the articles of the rights under the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 2007), Sustainable Development Goals-2015 (UNESCO, 2015) reinforce provisions for education for children with disabilities.

**Provisions for Education of the Disabled:** In Sri Lanka, some important publications: Sessional Paper - 1943, Jayasooriya Report - 1961, Jean Canmore Report 1962-1965, Five-year Plan 1972/1976, 1st Report of National Commission - 1992, General Education Reforms - 1972, Premaratne Report - 1979, Educational Reforms - 1979, White Paper - 1981, General Education Reforms – 1997 and National policy on disability for Sri Lanka – 2003 reinforce education of children with SEN. These publications support implementation of SEU in the mainstream government schools (Piyasena, 2003 & Rajapakse, 1991), and introduced provisions for an integrated education in Sri Lanka.

**SEU:** Children identified as having SEN come to school with a wide range of different needs. Some children, with greater needs, may benefit from being placed in a special class in mainstream schools where there are smaller numbers of normal pupils in the class. It is important to have a differentiated curriculum for the special class. The term 'differentiated curriculum' means that teachers adjust their teaching taking into account the children's different needs and abilities. A certain number of these children in these classrooms, who have more complex needs, will have access to individualized education programmes. Children who need additional care may have access to a special needs assistant where necessary and appropriate (National Council for Special Education, 2014).

In the early 1970s the Ministry of Education started increasing educational opportunities for these children through integration (with the introduction of SEU system). In line with that, children who have disability obtain education in Government schools either through inclusion in the ordinary classroom or in SEUs attached to normal schools (Ministry of Social Welfare, 2003).

**Inclusive Education:** Giangreco (1997) identified the following features in the implementation of inclusive education system. They are, collaborative teamwork, a shared framework, family involvement, general educator ownership, clear role relationships among professionals, effective use of support staff, meaningful Individual, Education Plans. Moreover, Winter and O'Raw recommended these measures regarding the inclusive education. They are provisions for information, physical aspects, inclusive school policies and the Individual Education Plan, student interactions, staffing and personnel, external links, assessment of achievement, curriculum and teaching strategies (Forlin, Chambers, Loreman, Deppeler & Sharma, 2013).

**Empirical:** John, Attanayake & Daskon (2013) suggested that, there are people with disabilities in Sri Lanka, and there is a need for conducting research on SEN for disabled children in the Sri Lankan school context. In this respect, Samararatne, Soldatic and Perera (2018) conducted a Study of the disabled children in Sri Lanka and recommended the development of a SE programme for them.

The Literature Review suggests researches should be conduct on the Educational Disability of the children in the Sri Lankan context.

Abeywickrama, Jayasinghe & Sumanasena (2014) found out that, there is a need to design inclusive education models to make a paradigm shift within the education system in Sri Lanka. Moreover, Furuta and Alwis (2017) suggest that more training programmes and seminars be conduct on special needs education strategies and the philosophy that can enhance and improve the teachers' professional competence and their attitude for accommodating the students with special needs.

However, the Ministry of Education (MOE) in Sri Lanka has taken necessary action to extend the policy at all educational level, the national to provincial, to stipulate that a child with SEN must be attached to the neighborhood regular school. Moreover, the MOE prepared a Concept Paper on Promoting and Developing the Processes of Implementing Inclusive Education in Sri Lanka, to submit to the Cabinet of Sri Lanka, and also prepared a Five (5) Year Plan of Action on Inclusive Education to strengthen the suggestions made through the Concept Paper (Dhanapala, 2009). The literature shows the findings in relation to educational needs of the students with SEN.

**AIM OF THE STUDY**

The aim of the study was to investigate the functioning of the SEU system in regular schools and to identify the way forward to support an inclusive education system.

**METHODOLOGY**

A blend of qualitative and quantitate research method and survey approach was employed for this study.

**Participants:** There are twenty seven (27) schools with SEU in the Ampara district. Therefore, twenty-seven (27) principals were selected from each school. Moreover, eighty-six (86) teachers who work with children with SEU and Seven (7) Additional Directors/ISAs of SE from seven educational zones were selected for this study. In summary, the entire population in the SEU system is included in this research. Moreover, five parents of children with SEN from each Education Zone were selected using the lottery random sampling method for this study. Overview of the population and sample of this research are in following Table – 1.

Table – 1, **Population and Samples**

| **Participants** | **Population** | **Samples** |
|---|---|---|
| Principals | 27 | 27 |
| Teachers | 86 | 86 |
| Additional Directors/ISAs | 7 | 7 |
| Parents of Students with SEN | 373 | 35 |

**Data Collections:** Questionnaires, interviews and observations were used for collecting data in this study. Questionnaires, particularly, was utilized for collecting data from teachers and principals. The interviews were held for collecting data from principals and ISAs. The focus group discussion was conducted for collecting data from parents of students with SEN. The observations in schools helped in collecting data about SEU system functioning in schools.

**Research Questions:**

1. How does the SEU system operate in regular schools?
2. What are the factors that promote or hinder the functioning of the SEU system in regular schools?
3. How do stakeholders perceive the SEU system?
4. How the SEU system supports the implementations of the inclusive education in the Ampara district?

## FINDINGS

The data collection instruments such as questionnaires, observation, schedules and interview schedules were used to collect data in order to elicit the answers for the setout research question in this study. Personal information of teachers and principals, establishment of SEU, human resources, physical resources, diversity of special students and related factors were analyzed.

Table - 2 illustrates appointment types of teachers, gender distribution of the principals and teachers and the experience of SEU teachers. In line with that, 93% of the teachers are appointed as permanent teachers and 7% of teachers are appointed as temporary teachers for working in SEU. Additionally 92.6% of the principals are males, on the other hand 87.2% of teachers who teach in SEU are females. Furthermore, 7% of special trained teachers have 13 or more years of experience in SEU. 32% of teachers have 10-12 years of experience, 27% of teachers have 7-9 years of experience, 13% of teachers have 4-6 years of experience and 21% of teachers have less than 13 years of experience in teaching in SEUs.

Table – 2: **Background of the Respondents**

| Type of Appointment | | Gender Based Distribution | | | | Experiences as a SEU Teacher | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Principal | | Teachers | | | | | | |
| **Permanent** | **Temporary** | **Male** | **Female** | **Male** | **Female** | **≤ 3 Years** | **4–6 years** | **7-9 years** | **10-12 years** | **≥13 years** |
| 93% | 07% | 92.6% | 07.4% | 87.2% | 12.8% | 21% | 13% | 27% | 32% | 07% |

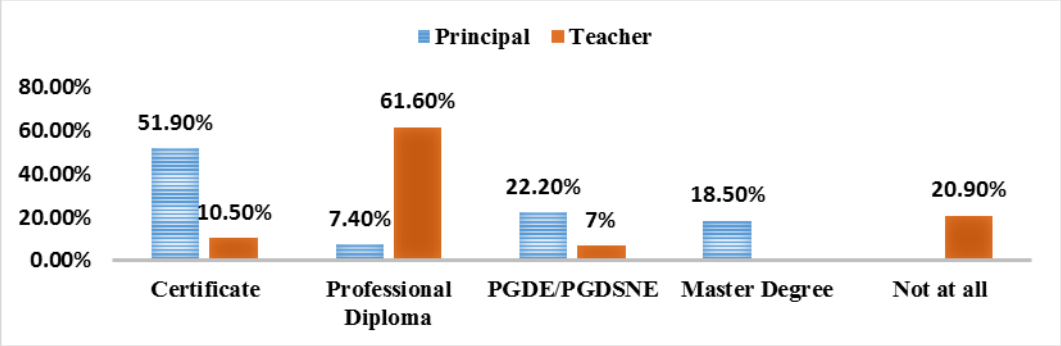


Diagram – 1; **Professional Qualifications of Teachers and Principals**

The data in relation to the professional qualification of teachers and principals who work in the selected schools is shown in Diagram – 1. 61.6% of SEU teachers have the National Diploma in Special Education, 10.5% of the teachers have the Certificate in SE and 7% of teachers have either the Postgraduate Diploma in Special Needs Education or the Postgraduate Diploma in Education, however, more than 20% of teachers do not have any professional qualification.

On analysing the profetional qualifications of the principals it was found that 18.5% principals have a Masters Degree. 22.2% of principals have either Postgraduate Diploma in Education or Postgraduate Diploma in Special Needs Education. 7.4% teachers have the National Diploma in Special Education. And 51.9% of prencipals have a certificate qualification. When both teachers' and principals' professional qualifications were comparad it was found that most of the teachers have the Diploma in SE and most of the principals have certificate qualifications in the field of education.

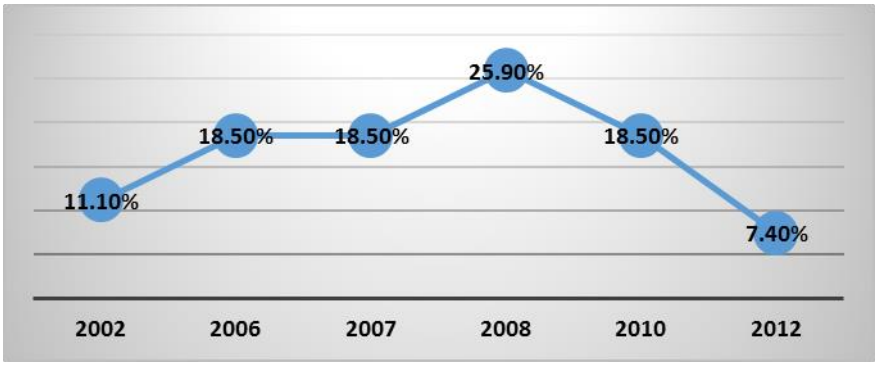


Diagram - 2**; Years of Establishment of SEUs in the Ampara District**

Diagram - 2 shows that 25.9% of SEUs were established in 2008; 18.5% SEUs were established in 2006, 2007 and 2010 respectively. 11.1% of SEUs were established in 2002 and 7.4% of SEUs were established in 2012.

However, no SEUs were established in the research area after 2012. All the 27 SEUs were established during the decade from 2002 to 2012.

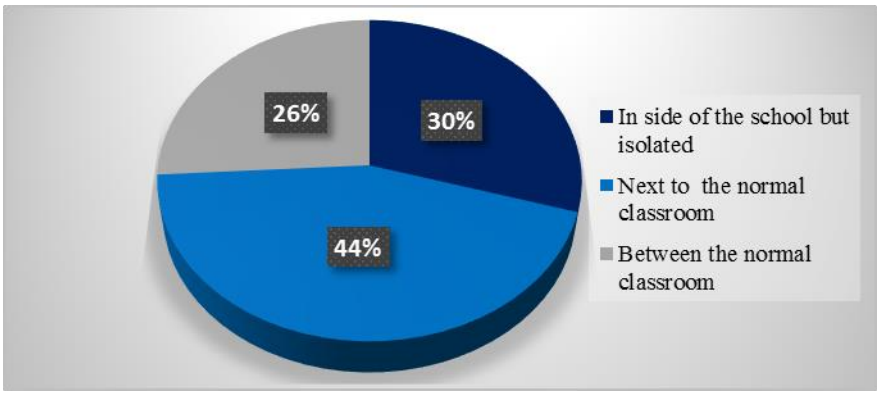


Diagram - 3; **Location of the SEUs**

Diagram - 3 shows that 44% of SEUs are located next to the regular classrooms; 26% of the SEUs are located between regular classrooms, and 30% of schools have SEUs within the school premises, however these SEUs are isolated from regular classrooms, for instance, they are in separate buildings within the schools.

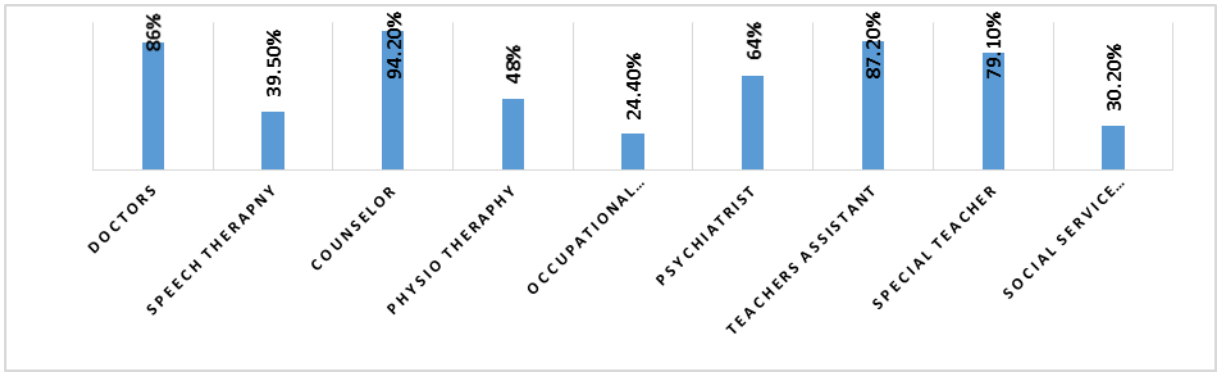


Diagram: 4; **Human Resource of SEUs**

According to diagram - 4, 86% of schools have a medical doctor; 39.5% of schools have speech therapy facilities; 94.2% of schools have counselors; 48% of the schools have physiotherapy facility; 24.4% schools have an occupational therapy facility; 64% of the schools have a psychiatrist; 87.2% of school have a teacher assistant; 79.1% of schools have specially trained teachers in SEU; 30.2% of schools get support from Social Services Officers. However, the human resources work either part time or full time in the schools.

In addition to that, all the principals responding at the interview said that, resource persons of the Ampara Special Needs Network (ASNN) and World Vision visit and support In-Service professional development and provide physical resources in the Ampara District.

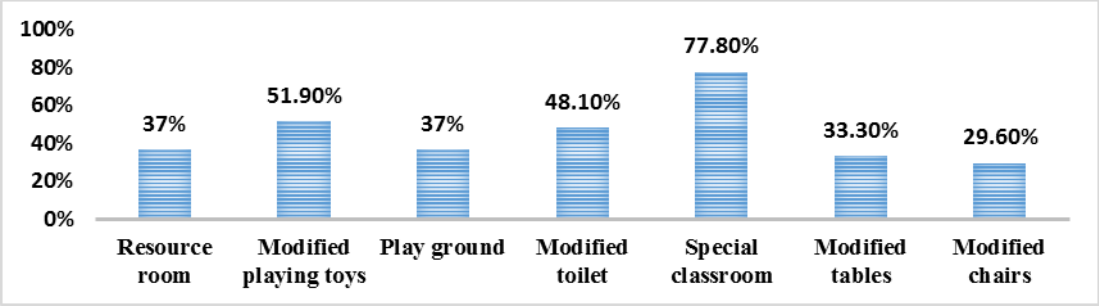


Diagram - 5; **Physical Resources of SEU Practices**

Diagram - 5, data output shows that 77.8% of schools have special classrooms for the functioning of SEU system, 37% of schools have a resource room consisting of sports equipment, equipment for physical exercise, resources for assessment and so on. 37% of schools have playgrounds with facilities for SEN students; 33.3% of schools have modified tables, 29.6% of schools have modified chairs according to the needs of children with SEN; 48.1% of schools have modified toilets with commodes and sinks at different heights, wheel chair facilities etc; 51.9% of schools have modified playing toys for diverse needs of children with special needs and during the interview school principals responded that their SEUs have vocational training opportunity for training children with special needs, either inside or outside of the schools.

Moreover, during the interviews with principals, it was revealed that, they have sports activities, physical activities, Individual Lesson Plans (IEP), special days (Disabled's day, braille and sign language) and quality inputs to meet the students' diverse needs, ICT, special trained teachers in particular area (eg: Autism, Cerebral Palsy), assistive technologies for instruction, and special curricula are undertaken by specially trained teachers in SEU, inclusive classrooms for enhancing the learning of the students with SENs.

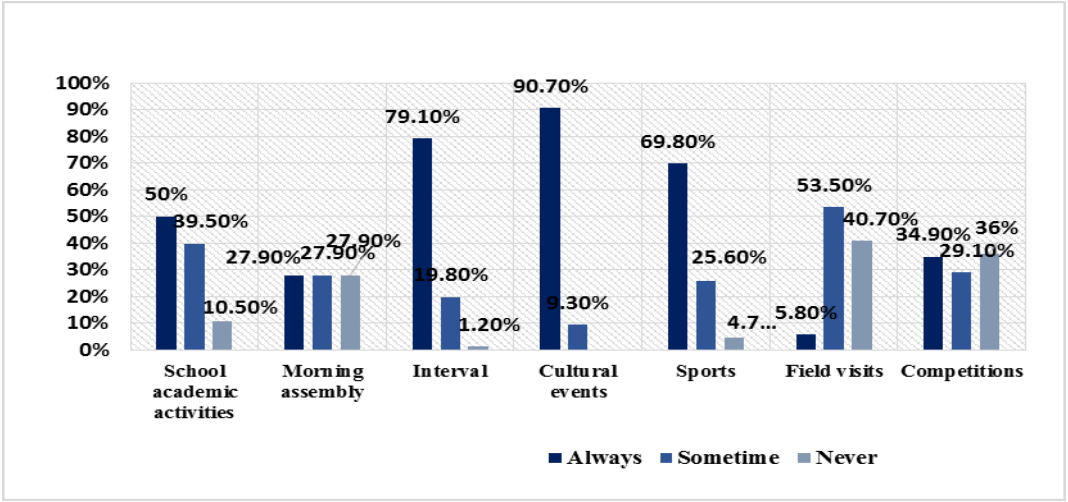


Diagram - 6; **Integration of SEU Students with Regular Classroom Students**

Diagram - 6 shows that 50% of the teachers responded that, students always with SEN participate in academic activates in their schools; 79.1% of teachers responded that the SEU students were always integrated with regular students during school interval; 90.7% of teachers responded that, the SEU students were always integrated with regular classroom students in cultural events and 69.8% of teachers responded that, the SEU students were always integrated with regular students in sports activities. Moreover, 53.5% of teachers responded that the majority of SEU students were sometimes integrated with regular classroom students in field visits (53.5%). In morning assembly (27.9%). Finally, 36% of teachers responded that the majority of students with SENs were never integrated with regular classroom students in competitions.

The findings show there is considerable positive response from SEU teachers for integration of SEU students with regular classroom students in various activities.

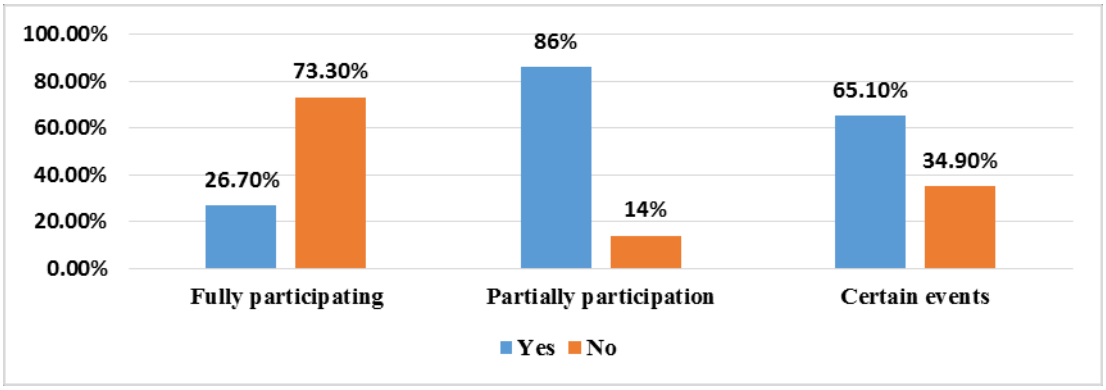


Diagram - 7; **Type of Participation of Students from SEU with Regular Classroom Students in Academic Activities**

Diagram – 7 illustrates the type of participation of students from SEU with regular classroom students in academic activities in selected schools. According to the analyzed data output, 26.7% of SEU teachers responded that students of SEU fully participate, 86% of SEU teachers responded that students of SEU partially participate, and 65.1% of SEU teachers responded that students of SEU participate in certain selected events in academic activities along with regular classroom students. According to analyzed data, 26.7% of participants said SEU children fully participated with regular classroom children.

Moreover, principals responded during the interview about participation of students from SEU with regular classroom students, and their responses are given in Table – 3.

Table – 3, **Students Participation - SEU with Regular Classroom**

| Respondents | Responses |
|---|---|
| Seven (7) principals | *"…students in SEUs participate in extracurricular activities with regular classroom students such as sports event, morning assembly, interval, and cleaning activities…"* |
| Five (5) principals | *"…students in SEUs participate in cultural events, and competitions…"* |
| One (1) principal | *"…morning assembly time and interval time are most important times to integrate students with SEN with regularl students…"* |

Moreover, ISAs for SE responded to the question regarding the functioning of SEU in their zones. Their responses are given in Table – 4.

Table – 4, **Responses of ISAs on the Functioning of SEUs in their Education Zones**

| Respondents | Responses |
|---|---|
| Six (6) ISAs | *"…SEU functioning is at a higher level in this zone…"*<br><br>*"I am satisfied with the corporation of our professionals in the zone"*<br><br>*"…SE professionals do their best, but the attitude of the community is challenging …"* |
| Seven (7) ISAs | *"…conduct training programmes for teachers, monitoring programmes, model class practice, and training programmes for the identification of the educational needs of students with disabilities. All schools with SEUs in the Ampara District are supported by ASNN for professional development…"* |

In addition to that, the response of ISAs on provisions for improvement of the SEU system in their zones is given in Table – 5.

Table – 5, **Provisions for Improvement of the SEU System**

| Respondents | Responses |
|---|---|
| Seven (7) ISAs | *"…conduct caregiver counseling for parents, parents' awareness meetings, discuss with parents on the improvement of the child, developing cooperation of the parents, practice individual education plans for children with special needs, conducting professional development programmes, develop knowledge and skills among the teachers, plan a district level curriculum adaptation programme and get enough resources to improve the SEU system…"* |

Moreover, the response of the parents on the inclusion of SEN children within the regular classroom is given in Table – 6.

Table – 6, **Response of Parents about Inclusion of SEN Children in the Regular Classrooms**

| Respondents | Responses |
|---|---|
| Three (3) parents | *"…children with SENs gradually improve their knowledge and skills if they are included in the regular classroom; they will get the opportunity for further the development.* |

In addition to that, the response of principals on SEUs' support for the improvement of inclusive education system is given in Table – 7.

Table – 7**, Response from Principals on SEUs' Support to Improvement of Inclusive Education**

| Respondents | Responses |
|---|---|
| Seven (7) principals | *"…SEU supports to develop the readiness among students with SEN to be accommodated in the inclusive education system…"* |
| Five (5) principals | *"…resources of SEUs are useful for the implementation of inclusive education in schools…"* |

## CONCLUSIONS

- The appropriateness of the location of the SEUs, the accommodation of students with diverse needs, qualifications of teachers and principals and the permanent appointment of teachers supported at a certain level are needed to improve the functioning of SEUs in the Ampara District.
- The SEU system has been functioning for fifteen years in the Ampara District. This one and a half decades of experience can support the improvement of the functioning of SEUs and provide useful insights for strengthening the shift to inclusive education at the next stage.
- Students with SEN are provided opportunities to participate with normal classroom students inside the school. Among them some students have got the opportunity to participate fully, and a majority of students have had the opportunity to participate partially. These findings indicate that these practices can create a conducive atmosphere for the shift from SEU to inclusive education functioning in the Ampara District.
- Curriculum adaptation, classroom arrangements, skills and knowledge of teachers and principals, as well as the considerable level of support of the stakeholders will certainly help to boost the shift to inclusive education in the Ampara District.
- Teachers are promisingly positive about providing support the SEU system as well as inclusive education.
- The inadequacy of physical and human resources inside and outside of the SEUs, less support from normal classroom teachers, administrative staff and the community, the lack of professional development programmes for special teachers, the negative attitudes of parents and principals as well as the poor economy

of the families of children with disabilities are major challenges for SEU in regular schools in the Ampara District. These factors will be a challenge for further inclusive education in the Ampara district.

- The contribution of parents, experts in special education, school level policy and planning can strengthen the SEU system. However, there is still much work to be done in this regard to reach internationally recommended levels.
- Some schools have a resource room as well as the culture required for the functioning of the SEU which can help improve the inclusive education system.
- The majority of the stakeholders have a positive perception about the SEU trending towards the inclusive education in the Ampara District. However, the lack of knowledge among stakeholders regarding the mechanism, organization and coordination about the SEU system as well as the inclusive education system are challenges for improving inclusive education in the Ampara District.

## RECOMMENDATION

- The location of the SEUs, accommodation of students with diverse needs, qualifications of teachers and principals and appointment of the teachers should be improved appropriately to support to inclusive education system in the Ampara District in future.
- Students who have SEN must be clustered according to their special needs rather than being accommodated together in the SEU. Furthermore, specially trained teachers, resources, adapted curricula and activities should be provided to meet their special needs. It will be supportive for the inclusive education in the Ampara district.
- Research is required to identify the challenges and utilize the advantages in relation to the practice of SE in order to improve inclusive education in the Ampara district.
- Each student who is accommodated in an SEU should be given opportunities to participate fully with normal classroom students based on their abilities. Moreover, provisions have to be made for fully inclusive education in each school in the Ampara District.
- Curriculum adaptation, classroom arrangements, the professional development of teachers and principals and the commitment of stakeholders should be maintained at the recommended level to improve the SEU system as well as inclusive education in the Ampara District
- An awareness programme should be conducted to develop positive attitudes among stakeholders to support the SEUs as well as an inclusive education in the Ampara District.
- Adequate physical and human resources should be provided to facilitate SEUs as well as the inclusive education system in the Ampara District.
- Programmes should be conducted for all professionals in relation to the special needs education as well as disability.
- At a minimum, district level mechanism and organizational strategies for managing SEUs as well as inclusive education practice in the Ampara District should be developed.
- More should be done to emulate the success of a country which has fully implemented the inclusive education system through the SEU system.

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