

IS INCLUSIVE EDUCATION HELPFUL WITH CHILDREN WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER?

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Although there is an 'education for all' policy, it is essential for policymakers, educational ministries, and other governing bodies to ensure effective implementation. According to the Annual School Census of Sri Lanka 2020 Report by the Ministry of Education, there are 1,195 special education units in the Colombo district, but specifics about their inclusive programs remain unclear. The "Towards a New Education Act" report estimates that around 20% of school-aged children have special educational needs. Globally, it is estimated that 1 in 160 children has Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), with prevalence increasing over the past 50 years (Epidemiology Unit, SL 2019). This qualitative study examines the educational experiences of students with ASD aged 6 to 16 years (grades 1- 11) within the inclusive education setting. The research involved 30 teachers with experience in inclusive educational settings for students with ASD, and data was collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed including coding and thematic analysis. This research aimed to determine whether inclusive education in mainstream classrooms is effective for students with ASD. In Sri Lanka, challenges in implementing inclusive education include limited resources, insufficient teacher training, and inadequate infrastructure. Teachers often lack the necessary skills and support to effectively cater to diverse learning needs, impacting the quality of education for students with special needs (Gunawardena & Perera, 2021). Additionally, societal attitudes and perceptions about disability can further hinder the successful integration of students with ASD into mainstream classrooms. The findings highlight an urgent need for reform in the education system to better accommodate students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Seven themes have been identified as features affecting inclusion of students with ASD into mainstream classrooms such as severity of ASD, age of student with ASD, features of educator, classroom set-up, support from school, the relationship between the student and the school, and the question whether Inclusive Education is helpful. The coding process was carried out after the interviews, making it an inductive coding method, wherein the codes were decided on only after the data was gathered. These factors are explored in detail to understand the gap between the theoretical framework and practical implementation of inclusive education.

Keywords: Inclusive education, children with ASD, teachers working with children with ASD