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Where is My Right to Education?

Exploring Inclusive Education Opportunities and Barriers to Children with Disabilities in Sri Lanka

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List of Acronyms

CDS	Critical Disability Studies
CDT	Critical Disability Theory
DLFF	Dutch Lanka Friendship Foundation
CWD	Child with Disability
GWD	Girl with Disability
IE	Inclusive Education
PWD	Person with Disability
SEU	Critical Disability Theory
SL	Sri Lanka
UNCRC	Child with Disability
UNCRPD	United Nations Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
WWD	Woman with Disability

Abstract

Every child in Sri Lanka has the right to education. This position is underpinned by robust international and national frameworks. Despite these commitments, most children with disabilities in Sri Lanka are left behind with little to no education. Ampara district is set against the background of scenic landscapes abundant with nature, a history of progressive education reforms for mainstream education, and burdened by the aftereffects of colonial rule, a longstanding civil war, economic consequences of the COVID pandemic, and the ongoing economic crisis. This study in Ampara district explored the experiences of children with disabilities in accessing inclusive education, as well as the quality of education for those who make it to school. This has been accomplished by employing critical disability theory, a prominent approach in disability studies, to focus attention on the socio-economic-political opportunities and barriers for children with disabilities in the education landscape. Qualitative research was conducted with children with disabilities (girls and boys), their families, teachers and principals, and government officers, in three ethnic regions – Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim – in rural regions of Ampara. The experiences of these children with disabilities around different models of education (or no education at all) have been analysed to understand how these varied factors come to play in enhancing or impeding their education. The study actively included the voices of children and adults with disabilities as this research concerns their education and lives.

Relevance to Development Studies

Research on the education of children with disabilities is a central topic in disability studies, and it is crucial to the development and social justice of the community of people with disabilities and societies at large. Empirical evidence augments the enrichment of critical disability studies and insights into factors influencing the realisation of children's rights.

Keywords

Children with disabilities, Child rights, Critical disability theory, Inclusive Education, South Asia, Sri Lanka, Ampara, Ethnicity, Gender, Intersectionality.

Chapter 1 Introduction

In a multidimensional world where all of us, as individuals and communities, are perched at varying levels of privileges and disadvantages that subjectively vary across time and place, persons with disabilities are one of the largest marginalised groups at 16% of the global population as cited by WHO(2023). Highlighting the extent of inequity imposed, OHCHR website states: 'Persons with disabilities face discrimination and barriers every day that restrict them from participating in society on an equal basis with others'– this includes educational spaces such as schools (OHCHR).

On my first day of teacher training at an NGO (in India) working towards children and adults with disabilities, I was naively surprised to find so many children and adults with disabilities at the premises and wondered why we don't see them more often in commonly navigated spaces like schools, offices and other public places. Spending more time in the field, brought to light sympathy towards children with disabilities, or persistent attempts to 'fix' the impairment to bring them to school were unhelpful. The UNCRPD (United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities) is an international treaty paramount to human rights of persons with disabilities adopted in 2006. It states that: 'disability is an evolving concept and that disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others' (UNCRPD, Preamble para. e). This emphasis on factors external to the person's body, such as the attitude of people in the society towards them, access to infrastructure, information and technology, and communication barriers reinforces the debunking of the notion that disability is solely an internal impairment in a person.

To contextualise the population, there are 240 million children with disabilities (UNICEF Data, 2021). Although the right to education is a basic human right, a significant number of children with disabilities continue to be left behind as 49% of children with disabilities have never been to school (UNICEF Data, 2021). Access to inclusive education for children with disabilities is therefore a social justice issue.

My motivation towards this topic stems from my educator role in disability inclusion, and childhood experiences growing up as an expat kid – where we found community in people from all over South Asia. These experiences have led me to conduct research on disability and inclusive education in Sri Lanka, a nature-abundant island nation in South Asia (earlier known as Ceylon). This research project based in Sri Lanka aims to explore how children with disabilities residing in Ampara district access and experience inclusive education (or the lack thereof).

To signify the magnitude and relevance of discussing the exclusion of children with disabilities, a UNICEF report published in 2016 claimed that 23.5% of kids in the age

group of 5–14 years, with disabilities in Sri Lanka were not included in mainstream education (Grimes, 2021: 12). This critical social challenge is set against the background of a country with a history of a series of foreign empires' colonisation, a brutal civil war for 26 years between the two main ethnicities, impact of tsunami, and the current economic crisis. The UNCRPD recognises the challenging conditions of persons with disabilities with multiple forms of discrimination based on various social and economic factors (UNCRPD, Preamble para. p). Consequently, the intersection of disability with gender, social status, ethnicity or economic conditions exacerbates exclusion of children with disabilities in education. Therefore arise the main research question:

How do children with disabilities in Ampara experience inclusive education?

The following sub-questions will generate the material for answering the main question:

- What are the experiences of children with disabilities in Ampara with the various models of inclusive education?

- What are the main opportunities and barriers faced by children with disabilities and concerned members (parents/caretakers, educational professionals, and government officers) in navigating the different models of inclusive education?

- How do intersectional factors like gender, ethnicity, and economic status influence the inclusive education experiences of CWD?

Researching the experiences of children with disabilities in education adds to research that is instrumental to bringing more attention, acquiring a better understanding, as well as amplifying the voices of children with disabilities and their community's right to education. Using the critical disability theory (elaborated in chapter 2) enables looking at the issue through various approaches (a quality of the theory) which helps in bringing out the strengths and stretches faced in varying intersections and dimensions for a wider and deeper understanding of the relationship between disability and education. This is a valuable addition to disability studies and critical disability studies. Researching this question and sub-questions is therefore beneficial in three ways: amplifying marginalised voices, gaining a deeper understanding of social dynamics and everyone's role in creating disability, and finally charting out strengths and challenges to guide policy making and implementation towards inclusive education for CWD.

• Chapter 2 Contextualisation, Models of Disability, and Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the ongoing journey of educational inclusion of children with disabilities in Sri Lanka and the global context. It elucidates a panoply of relevant concepts that guide the approach and analysis of the study and includes a brief literature review. The literature review consists of an overview of significant theories and interdimensional factors that have influenced research on educational inclusion of children with disabilities with a specific focus on Sri Lanka and South Asia.

2.2 Contextualising Children with Disabilities and Education in Sri Lanka and Ampara

In terms of education, Sri Lanka has a strong history of education reforms since the educational policies and free education programs by revolutionary leaders such as the then Education Minister, the late Hon. Dr. CWW Kannangara who made education free for all its citizens from kindergarten to University as early as 1945. This represented a futuristic step ahead of its regional neighbours (Kalyana, 2020).

Through the compounding effects over the years, Sri Lanka has an adult literacy rate of 92% (male at 93.34%; female at 91.76%) (Country Economy, n.d.). Databases accessed online reveal this is higher than the South Asian adult literacy rate at 74.19% and global average literacy rate at 87% in 2021 (Macrotrends, n.d.).

Against this impressive literacy rate, there is an ongoing drive for making education inclusive for children with disabilities. According to the UNICEF site, 'Inclusive education means all children in the same classrooms, in the same schools. It means real learning opportunities for groups who have traditionally been excluded' (UNICEF, n.d.). Sri Lanka has committed to the major International Conventions relevant to disability inclusion, by being a signatory to the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, as well as the Sustainable Development Goals (UNESCO, 2021: 8). These international instruments have driven national changes in Sri Lanka and led to a trajectory of policies and programs including the Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act No. 28, the National Policy on Disability for Sri Lanka 2003, and the Inclusive Education Plan – all aimed at promoting inclusive education (Grimes, 2021: 8).

The impetus of these international and national rights standards and policies triggered the gradual entry of children with disabilities into the education system in two major models.

First, there are segregated special Schools that provide focussed education and training for children with disabilities. Second, there are Special Education Units set up within the mainstream schools that serve children with various disabilities (Grimes, 2021). According to a UNICEF report, in 2014, there were 25 special schools with an outreach of 2,795 children with disabilities in Sri Lanka, and 525 special education units (commonly referred to as SEU, an increasingly trending inclusive education approach where the units are attached to mainstream schools) catering to 5,088 students (Grimes, 2021: 26).

Despite these international and national developments, the quantity and quality of both categories of schools require improvements, and a huge number of children with disabilities (23.5%) in Sri Lanka are still excluded from the education program (Grimes, 2021: 12). According to UNICEF: 'There are several reasons leading to this exclusion such as cultural factors including stigma and patriarchal values' (Grimes, 2021: 22). Relating this exclusion to gender and patriarchal values, a study on exclusion of girls with disabilities in education in India states: 'There are multiple dimensions and settings where the W/GwDs get discriminated against, and one such aspect is education, access to schools, and literacy that remains a significant challenge for W/GwDs'(Ghosh et al, 2022: 2). A study done in the Kandy District of Sri Lanka explored the experiences of children with disabilities in special education units in three locations (Abeywickrama, 2013). Another study, analysing the strengths and weaknesses of the Special Education Units in Ampara, identified a few strengths including the positive attitude of the teachers, and the participation and mingling of the children with disabilities with the learners in the mainstream classrooms (Ketheeswaran, 2019). The gaps found highlighted the location of the Special Education Units, economic challenges of the families of the children with disabilities; accommodation needs of the learners, in terms of curriculum, classroom arrangements, and assistive devices; knowledge and qualifications of the professionals (teachers and principals); and resource management (Ketheeswaran, 2019).

Amidst these opportunities and challenges where many CWDs do not go to school at all, but many other CWDs do go to special schools or Special Education Units, and several students drop out at different points, this study aims to shed light on how the children involved experience education or the lack thereof, and on their ideas on meaningful education. The main focus is on the voices of children and adults with disabilities – and then on the voices of their families, teachers, principals and government officials.

2.3 Models of Disability, Significant Debates, and their Relevance to Inclusive Education

To conduct research related to disability, it is imperative to understand the various models of disabilities that have evolved over time because they have influenced the way individuals with disabilities, society, professionals and the government views disability. For the purpose of this study pertinent to educational inclusion, a few of the most relevant prominent

models are briefly elucidated: the moral/religious model, charity model, medical model, social model and rights-based model.

In the moral/ religious model, which is the oldest model, disability is seen as 'an act of God' where a disability is the person's or their family's fault which has resulted in punishment in the form of the disability (Retief et al, 2018: 2). In many regions and cultures, this is the main cause for isolating or hiding the persons with disabilities from society and therefore denying them their right to education. This is particularly present in South Asian contexts, as disability is viewed as a result of negative karma in Hindu and Buddhist religions – two of the major religions in Sri Lanka (Liyanage, 2017).

In the charity model, disability is seen as 'victimhood' where the persons with disabilities are to be pitied and helped (Retief et al, 2018). This is relevant because many development organisations with religious affiliations or based in the Global North continue to work in this model with the idea of helping the tragic disabled in the Global South.

The medical model emerged in the mid-1800's as a result of medical progress and redefined disability: 'Disability is seen as a medical problem that resides in the individual. It is a defect in or failure of a bodily system and as such is inherently abnormal and pathological' (Retief et al, 2018: 2). Focus is therefore laid on curing the disability to 'fix' their impairment through various medical procedures and therapy services to be able to enter society, or in this context schools. While adopting a solely medical model is problematic, for many people with disabilities the medical services can be necessary and even life-saving.

Then came the social model as a product of the British disability movement (1960's and 1970's) which broadly viewed disability as a 'socially constructed phenomenon' where disability is a product of how society is organised (attitudes, culture, infrastructure and economy) rather than the impairment in the body (Retief et al, 2018: 3). In the educational context this is demonstrated in several ways: shifting perspectives towards students with disabilities, making educational services and learning spaces accessible, personalising learning environments, curriculum, and instructional design and assessment. Modern approaches of the social model such as critical disability studies focus on the social aspects causing disability without rejecting the effect of impairments and the person's internal responses to it (Hosking, 2008). This encourages persons with disabilities and the pertinent actors to critique and approach inclusive education through multiple lenses.

The human rights model which holds 'close affinity to the social model' considers disability a human rights issue (Retief et al, 2018: 2). In this view, accessing and experiencing inclusive education is a basic human right of a person with disability, and allowing barriers to exist and persist is a violation of that right. Lawson (2020) goes on to say that the human rights model, which is an increasingly emerging approach, is not a product of the social model as commonly perceived, rather the two models complement each other and help improve further.

2.4 Literature Review

Having set the context of Educational Inclusion of Disability in Ampara, and with an overview of the major approaches and debates in Disability Studies, a review of further literature on concepts, challenges, and previous research work with a specific focus on Sri Lanka that guide this study are elucidated in this section.

2.4.1 Gender intersectionality

Upon discussing intersectional issues, it would be remiss to overlook the influential work of Crenshaw (1991) in the context of women of colour. This helps understand how power dynamics play out differently against intersectional axes of gender, disability, ethnicity and economic status in the Sri Lankan context. Singh et al (2024) conducted a study in India to highlight the higher gender-based violence faced by children with disabilities in comparison to body-normative children and therefore stressed the need for safety and sexuality education for children and adolescents with disabilities.

2.4.2 Multidimensionality and Power Dynamics in the Society

With a background of several intersectional axes, Foucault's work on power relations as highlighted by Balan (2010) helps understand how power permeates the society and operates through how an individual relates to themselves and society. Mladenov (2016) has explained how the design of neoliberal economy influences societies and places disability outside the economy for not being economically 'productive' as opposed to the white, heterosexual male. The economic implications on a person with disability and their family in comparison to a typical person facing economic challenges have been presented by Thusita (2017).

2.4.3 Prioritising Marginalised Voices and Situating Disability Research in South Asia

Historically, most social theories and research in the Global South have been administered by the Global North – an idea rooted in colonialism, and disability-related research is no exception to this (Grech, 2023). An increasing trend of a decolonial approach can however be seen in adapting the models to suit the local context, as well as giving precedence to native knowledge. Furthermore, Grech (2023) critiqued the power relations and dominant position of the Global North-based academics, researchers and INGOs working with disability, in deciding the priority issues and 'strategies' in the Global South. The ideas of prioritising situated knowledge and a bottom-up approach in research are also reflected in Feminist Standpoint Theory by Harding (1992). With a specific focus on disability-related research, the work by Wickenden et al (2014) considers the need to centre the voices of children and youngsters with disabilities living in the Global South while doing research

related to them. On the other hand, in Global Southern collectivist communities, disability impacts beyond the individual, and this is evident through the study on an inclusive education project in India by Richard (2014) which reminds one to focus on environmental and social factors outside the classroom such as social support, economic stability and access to information for successful inclusion inside the classroom.

2.4.4 Research Related to Children with Disabilities and Inclusive Education in Sri Lanka

Educational inclusion of children with disabilities is multidimensional and impacts several aspects of a child's life, and concerns the various associated actors such as family, professionals at school, and the state. the perception of parents in home-bounding their children with disabilities, coupled with their lack of awareness of opportunities have been studied by Jazeel (2016). Abeywickrama (2013) studied the exclusion of children with disabilities in inclusive schools in Kandy from the parents' and teachers' perspectives. Dilshan et al (2021) did a similar study at Kilinochchi and that gives us a pulse of the barriers to inclusive education in different regions in Sri Lanka. The presence of Special Education Units (SEU) in Ampara district and a positive perception of the school's actors towards the inclusive education system as well as a need for guidance to develop the inclusive education practices are revealed by Ketheeswaran (2021). The ratification of the United Nations Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities by Sri Lanka in 2016, and its effects as well as the extent of transition to rights-based approaches has been elucidated by Samararatne (2020). An overview of the policies and programs gearing towards the sustainable development goal 4 and inclusive education in Sri Lanka can be found in the Profiles Enhancing Education Reviews or PEER (UNESCO, n.d.).

In an environment where disability is intersected by gender, ethnicity, or socio-economic status, access to adaptive technology and information as well the growingly pervasive influence of national and international legal frameworks to promote the rights of persons with disabilities, the inclusion project of children with disabilities has been studied by various Sri Lankan based researchers. Guided by the theories and evidence elucidated in this section, this study shall investigate how educational inclusion is experienced and envisioned by children with disabilities and their families, inclusive educators, and government officials for multiple angles on the opportunities and challenges– with a novel central focus on the voices of the children with disabilities in the district of Ampara in Sri Lanka.

2.5 Theoretical Framework

While this study is broadly guided by the disability studies theories discourse and evidence from international and Sri Lankan research work drawn in the previous sections, it is most heavily influenced by a theory that emerged in 1970's within the discourse of the social model: critical disability theory (CDT). The critical disability theory criticises able-bodied supremacy by pointing out the oppression through economic and social restrictions of persons with disabilities making disability a product of socio-economic structures rather than biomedical condition as cited by Gillies (2014). Using critical disability theory as a framework was further explored by Sztobryn-Giercuszkiewicz (2017). A clear idea of the seven elements of CDT can be understood in the paper by Hosking (2008). As the site of study is in South Asia, inspiration was drawn from the work of Brocco (2024) where the significance of incorporating data from the Global South through anthropological methods is encouraged to be truly effective in challenging the social impairments. It also critiques the current body of work in critical disability studies to be predominantly quite western as it overlooks the community-based societies and decolonial perspectives pertinent to the Global South. Nguyen (2018) views critical disability studies as a means to decolonise disability studies and incorporate local lived experiences and knowledge.

Hosking (2008) enumerates seven assumptions of Critical Disability Theory as follows:

- **Social Model**

CDT as an element of the social model of disability where disability is seen as a social construct. In this version, the author also acknowledged the interrelationship of impairment in the body and societal factors.

- **Multidimensionality of disability**

The multidimensional nature of everyone is recognised to overcome identity politics.

- **Diversity as value**

CDT embraces and appreciates differences as a step towards equality.

- **Approach based on the rights**

CDT approaches the human rights model with a stress on the need to 'address the needs of the people' citing the diversity of the community.

- **Giving voice to persons with disabilities**

A reflexive approach is encouraged to avoid ableist views and ensure that the perspectives of the people with disabilities are heard and valued.

- **Influence of language on understanding disability**

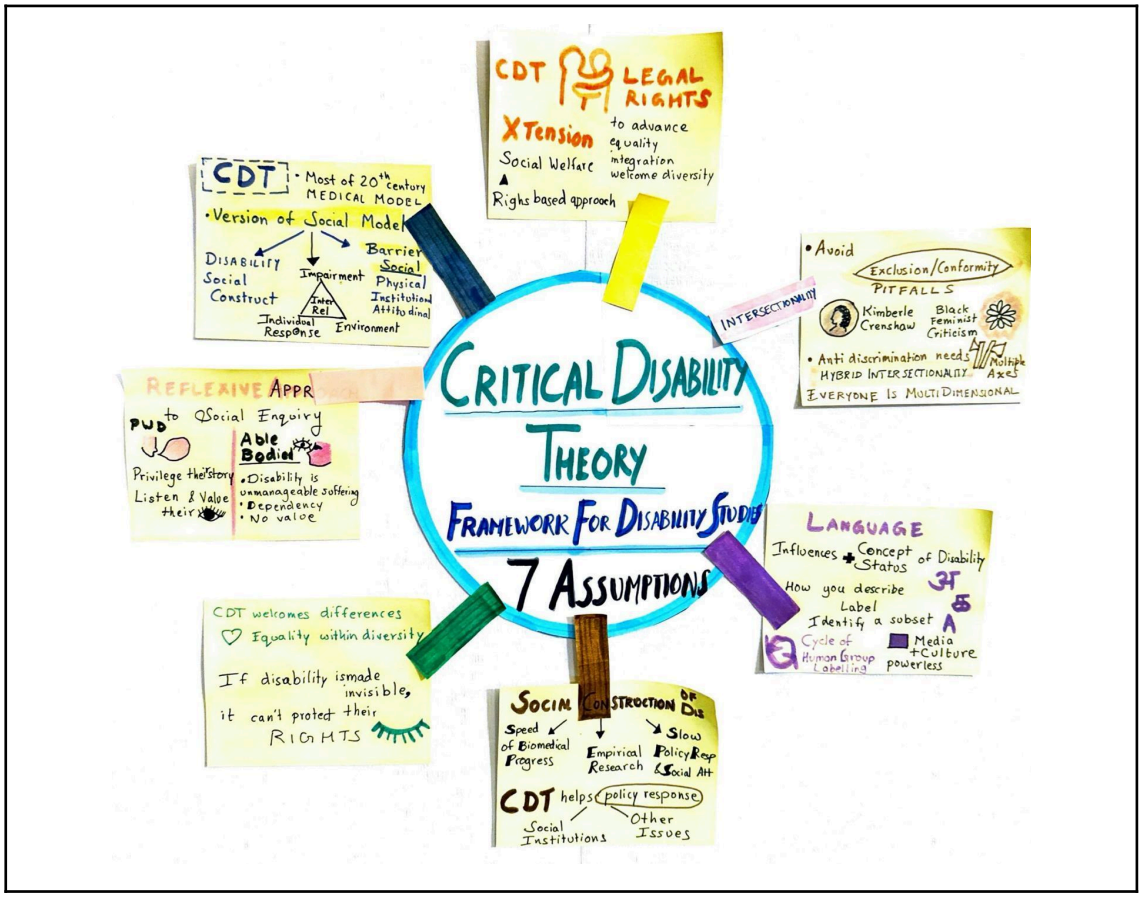
CDT calls attention to the printed and visual depiction of disability in a negative light and how this translates to social attitude.

- **Transformative policies**

CDT offers a base to advance policies related to disability by placing equality, inclusion and the autonomy of the (individual and community) people with disabilities in the centre.

It can be seen that the seven dimensions encompass a wide range of theories in the Disability Studies discourse such as the core elements of social model, intersectionality, ableism theory, power relations, and the human rights model. In this study, the biomedical barriers to disability shall be considered to holistically understand the interplay of internal and external factors to create barriers to inclusive education.

Figure 1 Mind map of critical disability theory



Source: Field notes, Ampara, July 2024

Visiting the various assumptions of Critical disability theory shows that it is a holistic approach that views the creation of disability, and path to advance equity through multiple perspectives. This is supported here: 'CDS has accompanied a social, political and intellectual re-evaluation of explanatory paradigms used to understand the lived experience of disabled people and potential ways forward for social, political and economic change. (Meekosha, 2009: 49)'. The multidimensionality of the theory moulded my research philosophy and guided the qualitative methods to look at the experiences of CWD in inclusive education through various angles, associated actors, and intersectionalities, while centering the study on the voices of CWD – to find answers to the research questions.

Chapter 3 Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides information on how the study was designed, the research site, adopting a qualitative approach, and an overview of the children and adults interviewed. It also acknowledges the limitations and ethical considerations involved in the project.

3.2 Research Steps and Methods

Research Plan

Aiming for sufficient data collection, I spent 35 days in Sri Lanka for field work from 5th July 2024 to 8th August 2024. To optimise the limited duration of the research project, and keeping my safety in mind, I connected with a Dutch based development organisation (Dutch Lanka Friendship Foundation) working towards disability inclusion (operating in Sri Lanka) for assistance to orient myself in Ampara district as well as find and meet participants for the study.

Research Site

Ampara is a prominent district in the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka filled with pristine nature, historic temples, paddy agriculture fields, water bodies and several towns. It consists of the largest water reservoir in Sri Lanka, Senanayake Samudra nestled by the Gal Oya Valley. The region is home to herds of elephants that roam freely and swim in the reservoir. While tourism is the main source of economic income in the country, Ampara is one of the lesser known tourist hotspots (except for a surfing spot) – making it a hidden paradise.

Figure 2 Picture of various locations in Ampara

Source: Field work, Ampara, July 2024

Ampara district is diverse, consisting of all the three main ethnicities that live in mostly segregated regions – Buddhist (Sinhala speaking), Tamil (Mostly Hindu religion) and Muslim (they are classified as a separate category although they are also Tamil speaking). Ampara used to be a hunters resting place during the days of the depleting British colonisation until Sri Lanka gained freedom in 1948 (Ampara Urban Council). The ethnic conflict led civil war was rife in this region and ended in 2009, putting the district on a path of recovery and development as with many other regions in the country (Grimes, 2021). In the background of breathtaking landscapes with forests, mountains, lakes and elephants, it is almost impossible to imagine violence and bloodshed during the conflict. By spending more time in the region and listening closely, I could hear the echoes of violence in the casual mention of going abroad to flee the war, or how a friend/ family member was abducted, injured, or killed. The war officially ended in 2009, and on a normal day I witnessed people living in their segregated regions travel to other locations for work or other purposes. From their stories and my daily observations, it could be inferred that the increasing interaction and mobility was accompanied with sensitive ethnic interrelationships through an interplay of varying power relations. Keeping this sensitivity and my own bilingual identity in mind, conversations around the relationship between ethnicity and educational inclusion of children with disabilities were carefully treated.

Going about the place on my own felt fairly safe, although I was advised to conceal my bilingual Tamil identity while navigating Sinhala regions. Due to my Indian upbringing I avoided venturing out alone in sparsely populated spaces after sunset. Given my local-like brown appearance and having picked up basic Sinhala, I was able to interact and form connections with the community as well as learn deeper information than meets the eye. People were generally welcoming and helpful everywhere – characteristic of Sri Lankan warmth and hospitality.

As with many parts of the world, the effects of the COVID pandemic were harsh in Sri Lanka. It regressed the economic conditions and impacted the education of learners in several ways – closure of schools for a prolonged period of twenty months, economic repercussions on the families thereby impacting the wellness and home environments of the children and families, and disruptions in travelling to school – all of which have amplified effects on children with disabilities (UNESCO Report, 2022).

The harsh economic effects of the pandemic combined with ongoing economic policy issues blew up into an economic crisis causing political unrest forcing the president to resign and demands for a systemic change (UNESCO Report, 2022). Against the background of these socioeconomic challenges, the education system has been heavily impacted – with disproportionate negative effects on marginalised groups such as children with disabilities – threatening their right to education (World Bank, 2021).

While navigating across Ampara for interviews, I witnessed several teenagers staying at home. When probed why they weren't at school, the common response was delay in examinations or receiving admission letters. The parents complained that the teenagers resorted to spending months of idle time at home watching TV and their smartphones, or spending too much time with peers. While shopping for basic supplies during my month-long stay, I could feel the pinch of the high cost of groceries and products. I was told that many families in the lower socio-economic classes resorted to having only two meals a day, unable to meet the increased economic expenses. In daily conversations, I also came across people delaying medical attention or procedures for themselves or their children with disabilities that were not covered by public healthcare due to financial constraints.

As all the three ethnic populations live in mostly segregated regions, the children also grow up segregated going to nearby schools that follow the local language as the medium of instruction. The diversity in population was helpful in gathering data from different ethnicities. The rural parts of towns and villages where I interviewed children with disabilities, parents of these children, teachers and principals are as follows: Ampara town, Rajagala, Kalmune, Karaiteewu, Annamalai, and Sorikalmunai. For interacting with the government officials pertinent to inclusive education for children with disabilities, I travelled along with a few members of the DLFF organisation outside Ampara district to two cities: Trincomalee (in the same province), and Colombo, the capital city of the country.

Research Approach and Techniques

The critical disability theory points out social and environmental factors that cause the experience of disability, the political participation of persons with disabilities, accepting disability as diversity, a rights-based approach, and multidimensionality. Therefore, the study primarily focuses on the voices of the children with disabilities, then their families, and other associated people. To serve this purpose, qualitative research was conducted in the form of Semi-Structured Interviews and Focus Group Discussions (Hennick et al, 2020l). The four main categories of respondents were children with disabilities (females and males) and their parents/caregivers from the rural regions of Ampara District; Special Educators and Principals; and Government Officials. The participants were recruited through snowballing through the network of Dutch Lanka Friendship Foundation in Ampara, Sri Lanka (Roulston, 2010). For the recruitment plan of network sampling, members from the Dutch Lanka Friendship Foundation assisted in organising meetings with the participants. More details on the organisation can be found in the annex. Interviews were then organised on different time slots and days as per the convenience of both interviewer and interviewee (Roulston, 2010: 99) at their homes (for children and parents) and schools (for teachers and principals) and offices (for government officials). I aspired to follow an interpretive paradigm to seek and make sense of information through the lived experiences of the participants (Hennink et al, 2020).

Overview of the Participants

Over the span of five weeks from 5th July 2024 to 8th August 2024, a total of forty-four interviews were held in four categories of respondents:

- **Fourteen children with disabilities** were interviewed at the homes of five girls and seven boys from both Tamil and Sinhala ethnicities at various rural villages in Ampara. Semi-structured qualitative interviews were designed using critical disability theory, with space for flexibility and free flow of conversations. Interactive activities were designed to suit diverse abilities of the children (Teachman, 2012).

Table 1: Details of the children category of participants

Parent/ Caregiver (Names Pseudonymised)	Age group	Gender	Ethnicity	School Model/ Status
1. Tanusha	18 - 22	Female	Tamil	Dropout from mainstream
2. Tanishka	16- 18	Female	Tamil	Dropout from mainstream
3. Sharmili	18 - 22	Female	Tamil	First mainstream school then special school then Dropout
4. Alex	6-10	Male	Tamil	Mainstream temporary break
5. Deepa	16- 18	Female	Tamil	SEU
6. Santosh	16- 18	Male	Sinhala	Mainstream then special school
7. Shaan	15- 18	Male	Sinhala	Special School
8. Manoj	18 - 22	Male	Sinhala	Mainstream then special School dropout
9. Neerja	11 - 15	Female	Sinhala	SEU Dropout
10. Priya	6-10	Female	Sinhala	First mainstream school then special school

11. John	6-10	Male	Tamil	Special school dropout/ break
12. Rakesh	11-15	Male	Tamil	Mainstream then special school Back to same mainstream school
13. Karuna	18 - 22	Male	Sinhala	Dropout from mainstream school
14. Tissa	11- 15	Male	Sinhala	Dropout from special school

- **Twenty parents/caregivers of children with disabilities**
  The conversations were held at their homes in Tamil and Sinhala regions. The questionnaire guide was designed using critical disability theory and allowed for free flow of conversations. The families were from various ethnicities and religions: Buddhist, Tamil Hindu, and Tamil Christian and Tamil Portuguese.
  Semi-structured qualitative interview

Table 2: Details of the parents/caregivers category of participants

Parent/ Caregiver (Names Pseudonymised)	Age group	Gender	Ethnicity	School Model
1. Aunt of Tanusha	18 - 22	Female	Tamil	Dropout from mainstream
2. Mother of Tanishka	16- 18	Female	Tamil	Asked to Drop out from Mainstream
3. Mother of Sharmili	18 - 22	Female	Tamil	First Mainstream school then Special School then Asked to Drop out
4. Mother of Alex	6-10	Male	Tamil	Mainstream Temporary break
5. Mother of Deepa	16- 18	Female	Tamil	SEU Dropped out
6. Mother of Kavindya	11 - 15	Female	Sinhala	No school

7. Mother of Santosh	16- 18	Male	Sinhala	Mainstream then Special School
8. Mother of Shaan	15- 18	Male	Sinhala	Special School
9. Father of Manoj	18 - 22	Male	Sinhala	Mainstream then Special School Dropped out
10. Mother and grandparents of Neerja	11 - 15	Female	Sinhala	Special Education Unit Dropped out/ temporary break
11. Mother and brother of Aloka	6 - 10	Male	Sinhala	No school
12. Mother of Gaurav	11 - 15	Male	Sinhala	Initially Mainstream school then Special School
13. Mother and Father of Priya	6-10	Female	Sinhala	Initially Mainstream school then Special School
14. Mother of John	6-10	Male	Tamil	Special School Dropped out/ break
15. Mother of Rakesh	11-15	Male	Tamil	Mainstream then Special School Back to same Mainstream School
16. Mother of Karuna	18 - 22	Male	Sinhala	Asked to Drop out from Mainstream School
17. Mother of Tissa	11- 15	Male	Sinhala	Dropped out from Special School
18. Mother and grandmother of Emma	6- 10	Female	Tamil	SEU
19. Mother of Evan	3- 5	Male	Tamil	Family's Montessori centre
20. Mother of Vedantan	11- 15	Male	Tamil	Left Mainstream School and moved to SEU

- **Six schools to interview the special educator and principals**
  The conversations took place at the schools. Two types of schools were visited: Special Education Units and Special Schools. During one of the parent interviews, I met a teacher with a disability working at a preschool and interviewed her there.

Table 3: Details of the special educators/principals category participants

School Education Model (Names pseudonymised)	**Participants**	**Qualitative research format**
1. Special Education Unit within Government Mainstream School **(SEU-1)**	Special Educator Mr Banda	Semi-structured interview
2. Special Education Unit within Government Mainstream School **(SEU-2)**	Special Educator Ms Preksha Vice Principal	Focus Group Discussion
3. Special Education Unit within Government Mainstream School **(SEU-3)**	Special Educator Ms Yamini Special Educator Ms Premavati	Focus Group Discussion
4. Special School **(SS-1)**	Principal	Semi-structured interview
	Special Educator Ms Ramya Special Educator Ms Suhana	Focus Group Discussion
5. Special School **(SS-2)**	Principal	Semi-structured interview
6. Preschool	Teacher Ms Ahalya	Semi-structured interview

- **Six government officers**

  Various government officers were visited at their offices – at the Zonal, Provincial and National level. Informal group discussions in a formal setting were used for these interviewees.

Table 4: Details of government officers interviewed

Government office position Names omitted and positions pseudonymised	Qualitative interview format
1. Government Officer - Zonal	Semi-structured interview
2. Government Officer - Zonal	Semi-structured interview
3. Government Officer - Provincial	Semi-structured interview
4. Government Officer - Provincial	Semi-structured interview
5. Senior Education Officer - National Policymaker - National	Focus Group Discussion
6. Advocacy Expert - National	Semi-structured interview

Navigating languages for communication

As a speaker of Tamil, I conversed with the Tamil participants directly; with minor differences in the dialects we were able to understand each other comfortably. For the conversations in Sinhala language, a translator from Sinhala to Tamil was hired with the assistance of the DLFF organisation. I conducted a final interview for the engagement of a translator and paid for her service myself to ensure researcher independence. The translator, Ms Dayani, is a remarkable strong woman who is a single parent living with her children and working to raise them and run the house – an unusual occurrence in South Asian societies. We established an effective working relationship where I steered the conversation through her prompt, succinct translations after every response by the participant. Immediately after every interview, we sat together to translate and transcribe the Sinhala language audio recordings, discussed and noted interpretations, contexts and implicit information while the event was still fresh in our memories.

Consent

As a first step, I sought recorded verbal 'consent for the study' from the participants (Roulston, 2010: 96). While seeking verbal consent I assured the participants that they could choose to avoid answering any question or stop the interview at any time or

withdraw their responses later if they chose to, and that they were in control of the conversation. With the introduction facilitated by a local member from the DLFF organisation, the participants welcomed me into their spaces and extended the warmth and familiarity they shared with the staff to me and my translator as well. There was a general willingness by the respondents to participate in the conversations and share their thoughts and experiences as the theme of the conversations entailed the educational inclusion of children with disability – a topic that participants saw as relevant and important.

Positionality

Several aspects positioned me in an amalgamation of emic and etic positions. As a brown, Indian woman, I could relate to South Asian societal contexts and cultural similarities. Although most of my understanding of the rural contexts comes from occasional field work in India and academic input in professional contexts, belonging to an urban town makes me an outsider. Coming from a bilingual Tamil family, I could connect with the Tamil ethnicity which is a significant community in Eastern Sri Lanka. At the same time I acknowledge potential bias towards the Tamil ethnicity in Sri Lanka. I address this by trying to adopt a reflexive approach as explained at the end of this paragraph.. My professional experiences in working with children with disabilities gave me an advantage in connecting and communicating with them. Being an Indian citizen from South Asia, embarking on a research journey representing a European educational institution makes me an insider-outsider again. During this entire research experience, I have been navigating decision making and relationship between the European based university, the Sri Lankan development organisation, and my position as a development professional in a field that floats on power relations between the Global North (where most knowledge and funding have traditionally originated) and the Global South (where the implementation takes place and has most often postcolonial contexts). Throughout the research and fieldwork I attempted to apply a reflexive approach: to stay mindful of the impact of my statuses on my research perspectives and on the research. (Holmes et al, 2020).

Limitations and Ethical Considerations

The main participants included a sensitive population: children with disabilities, including girl children, in a region with a history of ethnic conflict. An extensive description of the research plan, data management plan to protect data privacy, and commitment to deal with the participants, community, and data in a respectful and responsible manner, was submitted to the Ethics Committee of the ISS of Erasmus University Rotterdam.

To overcome biases from the participants in the presence of a staff from the DLFF organisation, as stated earlier, an external translator not connected to the organisation was hired and compensated by me.

In this research paper, a few terms have been interchangeably used. 'Child' or 'children' also mean children with disabilities unless specified. 'Teachers' refer to special educators unless the context is mentioned. Parents, families and caregivers have been combined into the same category. This usage of mine (at the risk of ambiguity and confusion) rises from common patterns of daily interactions in inclusive education spaces, and has been retained for a more authentic expression in the research paper.

In the journey of seeking information from children with disabilities and concerned members, several responses overlap due to the common nature of the central theme. For clarity in the discussion chapter, I try to structure the information with clear numbering and explicit subheadings. Appendices 1 and 2 consist of flowcharts of the overall opportunities and challenges derived from the research.

Thematic Data Analysis

A short note on the data analysis methodology is as follows: After completion of data collection, the Tamil interviews were translated and transcribed by me. Thematic analysis was done manually by printing all forty four interview transcripts and coding them using a combination of inductive and deductive approach through grounded theory 'for a pluralist and flexible approach' (Willems et al, 2019: 46). I made a list of open codes using critical disability theory and then more codes emerged as I continued to work on the transcripts. Using a string conceptual theory helped classify the codes into clear categories. Finally I employed selective coding to select and integrate categories of organized data to make meaning and statements (Willems et al, 2019, p-52). Detailed findings, interpretations and discussions using theories are discussed in the next chapter.

● Chapter 4 Data Analysis and Discussion through Critical Disability Theory

4.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the experiences of education (or the lack thereof) through different dimensions and shifting vantage points. The main entry of the study was through the voices of the children with disabilities themselves as the topic concerns them. The inputs were analysed and discussed using the critical disability theory that strives to dismantle social, economic and political factors detrimental to the experiences of people with disabilities. In doing this, the assumptions of CDT were followed in giving voice to the children and adults with disabilities and a decolonial perspective in valuing Global South lived experiences for empirical evidence. The experiences of opportunities and barriers faced by the children with disabilities in different educational models of schooling, different ethnically segregated regions, for female and male genders, in rural parts of Ampara are analysed and discussed here. While revealing these experiences, intersectional axes such as gender, ethnicity and economic status are examined to understand how they enable or impede the education experience of the children in the study. This chapter is divided into four sections based on the participants-category to gain a deep understanding of each category's perspective: children, parents, educational professionals, and government officials.

4.2 Children with Disabilities' Experiences of Education: From the Children's Voices

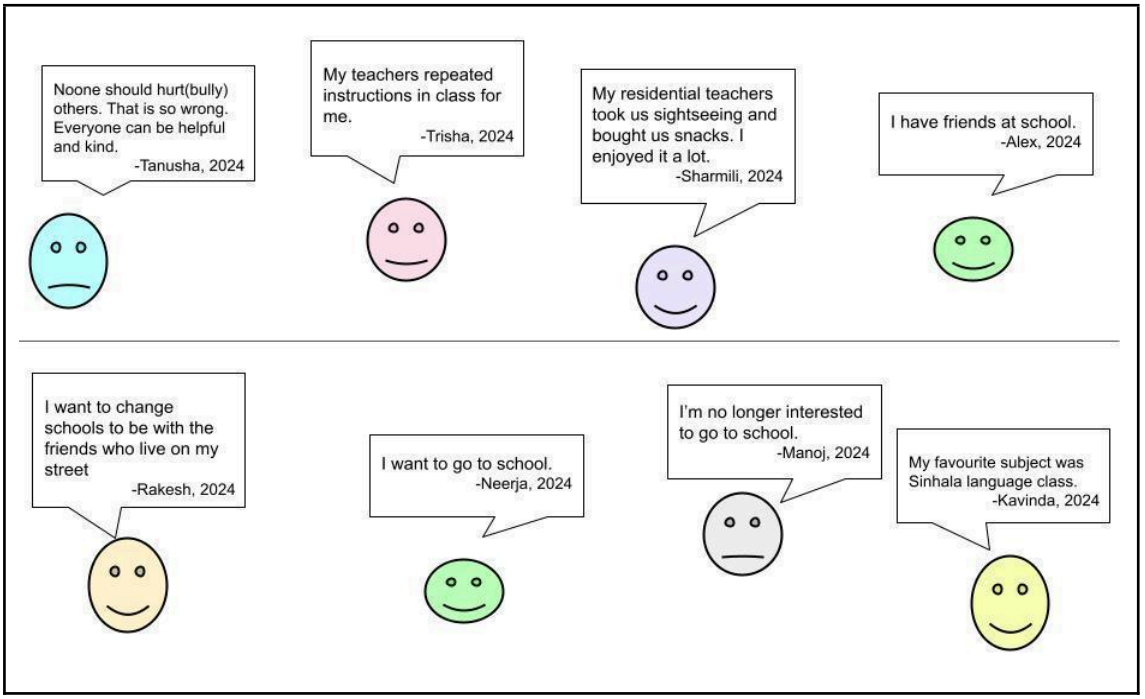
If I had the chance to finish schooling,
I would have studied to become a teacher for children
– children just like me.

–Teenage girl Sharmili with sensory impairment, forced to discontinue education due to the special school's shutting down during COVID

Quote from a child

A common critique about research related to children with disabilities is how they are ironically 'rarely consulted' although the research is literally about their lives (Wickenden et al, 2014). Children's voice-centric research is a rights-based approach and in line with the motto endorsed by UNCRPD: Nothing about us without us. People often assume children with disabilities don't have anything to say or don't know what they're saying. To this, (Wickenden et al, 2014) in her work aptly titled 'Ask Us Too!' argues that adults too can get ambiguous, contradictory or messy in their responses. Therefore a bottom to top approach is followed where fourteen children were interviewed in the presence of their parent/ teacher (given their minor status), at their home/ school – using differentiated conversation prompts, games and activities depending on the child's age, ability and disability.

Figure 3 Snippets of responses from children with disabilities



Source: Infographic created on google slides, Amsterdam, November 2024

At the School Site

From the responses shared by the children with disabilities, nine students (from special schools or special education units) enthusiastically shared a positive attitude towards going to school or having gone to school. They attributed this to friendly peers and kind teachers. The school site is seen as a space for social interactions and affection. This finding is in line with the social model of disability and in this case the social factors enhance the learning experience. The students were interested in the activities at school since there was focus on skills such as music, dance, art, and vocational skills, depending on the interests and abilities of the child – instead of mere academic tasks. This resonates with the theory's fourth assumption on diversity that 'embraces differences and appreciates their inevitability,

comprehending equality as a value based on diversity' (Sztobryn-Giercuszkiewicz, 2017: 5). These inputs denote the opportunities for CWD in navigating education in both special schools and SEU's.

Dropping out – by choice or force?

Among the participants interviewed, several children with disabilities that found the opportunity to go to different models of schools eventually dropped out due to various reasons. Ten out of the fourteen children discontinued education showing a high occurrence of this event, questioning their right to education protected by international treaties and national legislations.

Tanusha, in the age group 15-18 had to discontinue school because of bullying in the tuk-tuk (local vehicle) during travel. She tearfully explained how her female peers travelling with her caused her physical harm by poking her with a safety pin. While narrating she shared: 'Everyday on the tuk-tuk, they hurt me and made fun of me. Noone should hurt (bully) others. That is so wrong. Everyone can be helpful and kind instead' (Tanusha, 2024).

Viewing the incident through a critical disability approach reveals that disability and exclusion are socially constructed by negative social attitudes of the peers (Goodley et al, 2019). In another case, the parent of Trisha, a teenage girl with disability forced to drop out (by the school) due to her 'insufficient' academic performance, chided her saying: 'if you had studied well, you could have stayed at school, if you go back will you try harder this time?' (Parent of Trisha, 2024).

This situation reflects ableist standards and denial of rights by the school, and internalised ableism beliefs by the parent that have contrived to cull access to education for Trisha and many other children. The school site has been compared to the metaphor of an ableist playground where able-bodied and children with disabilities are treated as dichotomies and the able-bodied learner is rewarded for self-governance (Goodley et al, 2019). These examples therefore chalk out attitudinal barriers that influence the educational experiences of children with disabilities, in this case the experience being dropping out from mainstream schools.

On the other hand, students also voluntarily quit school due to lack of motivation or relevance. Manoj, aged 11 to 14, assertively expressed he did not want to go back to the special school and preferred playing cricket with friends (Manoj, 2024). Similarly, 15 to 18 year old Tamil girl Deepa with sensory impairment dropped out due to loss of interest, claiming she was too big for school now (Deepa, 2024). The CDT assumption of diversity as value denotes that all people with disabilities are not alike (Sztobryn-Giercuszkiewicz, 2017). These differences in diverse children have been considered insufficiently by the state and ignored them, leading to the children's negative experiences of marginalisation and rejection in education and society (Hosking, 2008).

4.3 Parents/ Caretakers' View on CWD' Experiences Related to Inclusive Education

> I hope he gets the necessary knowledge and skills at school, and receives support and guidance to find work to sustain himself' (Vedantan's mother, 2024).

Quote by a mother of a child with sensory impairment

4.3.1 Introduction

This section calls attention to the ideas and experiences of the children's families on the education project – as family is usually the primary environment for CWD. This is also a decolonial attempt in understanding how the Global South's community-centric societies differ from the Eurocentric individualistic societies: 'In many rural regions of the Global South, the family, rather than the individual, is the essential unit of social organisation' (Richard, 2014). From a rights-based approach, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) on the family describes it 'as the fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth and wellbeing of all its members and particularly children, should be afforded the necessary protection and assistance, so that it can fully assume its responsibilities within the community' (United Nations [UN], 1989). While the child – family relationship is significant everywhere, its cruciality is amplified in Global South contexts due to the community design as well as limited support offered by the state towards the child's care and welfare; both are essential to create an ambient learning environment for the child (Richard, 2014).

4.3.1 Parents/ Caretakers On the Experiences of Children with Disabilities at the School Site

- **Positive Perception and Purpose**

  Many parents of children going to Special Schools described how their children were self-motivated to go to school. The parent of Santosh, who is 16-18 years old, said:

  > He wakes up early by himself, gets ready and waits for the school van as it gives him purpose. The community's perception of him has changed because they see him neatly dressed in uniform and getting on the school van everyday. I'm proud to see him like this' (Parent of Santosh, 2024).

  Similar views were shared by the parents of two other children going to the same school. Globally, education for children with disabilities is an ongoing journey, yet these benefits of social interactions, meaningful learning, and the

confidence gained by going to school are reflected in these children – this gives more credit to special schools over other models, despite the disadvantage of segregation. Looking at children with disabilities as a part of different forms of diversity is an opportunity to reorient the ableism-disablism polarities, and re-create a new education model based on diversity and equity (Goodley et al, 2019).

- **Challenges and Barriers to Going to School**

  The high dropout instances in the sample size of twenty children is alarmingly high. Ten children dropped out from various models of school and two children with severe disabilities have never been to school at all – which makes more than half the participants. Concerns over the dropout situation were echoed by the teachers, principals and government officials as well. The bullying situation has been pointed out earlier. Other reasons for children dropping out that came up in this study, according to the parents are as follows:

- **Overlooked and Rejected by Teachers at the Mainstream School**

  All the students in the study who went to mainstream government schools at some point were discriminated against and ignored in the class, citing 'poor' academic performance similar to Trisha's case mentioned earlier. A few parents were unhappy with their children meaninglessly sitting unengaged and ignored all day, and shifted them to Special Schools or Special Education Units. Upon the instruction of the teachers and school, a few students were asked to discontinue. A few moved to Special Schools while others stayed at home and lost their right to education. Goodley et al (2019: 987) criticised this by saying, 'educational institutions create disability and impairment categories'. The Mainstream School teachers and principals' adverse attitude towards children with disabilities is a major attitudinal barrier and institutional barrier to their right to education and causes negative experiences related to education.

- **Corporal Punishment**

  Vedantan's mother recounted how she got to know that her son was hit by the teachers and that was the final straw for them. She immediately shifted her child to the nearest Special Education Unit (Parent of Vedantan, 2024). Corporal punishment is a violation of the child's right. While it is yet to be criminalised in the legislation, Sri Lanka has committed to prohibiting all kinds of corporal punishment towards children at school or home, at the South Asia Form meeting in 2006, after the regional consultation of a study by UN on 'Violence against children' in 2005 (End Corporal Punishment, 2024).

- **Gender: Menstrual Care and Safety**

  The study revealed many findings on this critical issue for female children with severe disabilities. Neerja had to discontinue education due to lack of care facilities due to her mother's health problems, and her mother worriedly expressed:

  > She has attained puberty and I am worried if she goes back to school, how would she manage menstruation and the severe cramps that she gets during her period. She is also quite pally with male members and naively goes towards them. Because of this, I am so scared of physical abuse (Neerja's mother, 2024) .

  Justifying the fear, the author of a study on girls with disabilities in India stated: 'They are the victims of social exclusion, having lack of autonomy over their sexual and reproductive health, vulnerable to violence, having lack of access to healthcare and education, etc.', as cited by (Ghosh et al, 2022: 2). Having established that people with disabilities are one of the most marginalised in the world, Ghosh et al (2022) claims that intersected by gender, girls or women are more marginalised. CDT's second assumption on multidimensionality is a reminder of the heterogeneity of people with disabilities, similar to this case where gender and the level of disability have varied effects on children's access and experience of education (Hosking, 2008).

- **Health challenges and severe disabilities**

  The parents of children with severe disabilities in the study questioned the relevance of education to their child, and their child's ability in participating in education. The mother of Aloka, a 3-5 year old boy with a neurological disorder, hopelessly asked: 'He is like this, how will he learn? What will he do at school? Besides, I have to take care of his grandparents, so I can't leave the house and be with him at school all day' (Aloka's mother, 2024).

  Similar problems were observed with John and Shaan who took medication for epilepsy, which caused drowsiness impeding their experience in education (Parent of John, Parent of Shaan, 2024). The question on the relevance of the educational paradigm, and caretaking needs pose barriers to these children's education. CDT's assumption three on diversity highlights the need for equity to understand the diverse challenges of a diverse population (Hosking, 2008). Hosking (2008) considered the CDT as 'biopsychosocial' which considers both the biomedical and social aspects of disability. This approach would help accelerate the discourse in solving these challenges that affect CWD's education experience.

- **Travelling to school**

  Challenges in travelling to school is a common physical barrier that affected twelve participants in this research. Karuna's parent recounted his inconvenient travel to the mainstream school:

  > When he was smaller, he sat behind his father on the bike as a pillion rider. As he got bigger, this could not be done with his condition, so he stopped going to school. His teachers sent him notes through his peers. He just stayed home and studied until he was not allowed to enter the final grade for A level examinations. We didn't fight for it, anyway there was no point (Karuna's parent, 2024).

  A special educator shared that some CWD have trouble walking or biking to school, and others manage to find inclusive schools far away. Children who are not provided the facility of being picked up from home, end up losing their right to accessible, inclusive education. As per the WHO website, 'Persons with disabilities find inaccessible and unaffordable transportation 15 times more difficult than for those without disabilities' (WHO, 2023). This poses a physical barrier as a result of 'a system of interrelationships between a dysfunction, an individual response to this dysfunction and the environment' (Sztobryn-Giercuszkiewicz, 2017: 4).

4.3.2 Parents on their Economic Circumstances

During my five weeks in Sri Lanka, the adverse impact of the crushing economic crisis was visible in the houses I visited in the rural, village regions with mostly one working parent with a daily wage job. The challenges were mainly visible in groceries and medication expenses, and in general a stressful, anxious environment worrying about exorbitant prices everywhere. The parents in the study reported added financial pressure due to their children's medical and transport needs. Richard (2014) cited the words of Reichman et al. (2008) and Sen and Yurtsever (2007) in explaining how having a child with disability can negatively impact the parents' economic conditions, work opportunities, time and health. Gendered economic institutions and gendered familial roles affect the mothers' opportunity for employment, which affects the home's financial wellbeing and thereby the child with disability embedded in the family. Neerja, a 7-10 year old girl CWD is from a lower social class and raised by her single, working mother and extended family. Both her mother's work and her education have been paused due to health reasons, and her grandparents play the role of care-providers as seen in many global south communitarian interdependent families (Field notes, 2024). During our conversation, her grandfather regretfully shared: 'I am too old and weak to drop and pick her from school, and we cannot afford to hire help, otherwise I would have supported her [Neerja]' (Neerja's Grandfather, 2024).

CDT's first assumption on the social model helps in paying attention to the socio-economic-political factors that have deteriorated the financial wellbeing of the family and inhibits the child's access to education making it a negative experience.

4.3.3 Parents Views on Government Policies and Programs Regarding CWD' Education

The government offers the provision of claiming a disability welfare fund of 5000 SLR (Sri Lankan Rupees) per month. This comes with the caveat of a huge waitlist and the amount is barely enough to cover major expenses, especially during the economic crisis induced inflation. This fund amounts to roughly 17 USD, and a few parents used it to partially cover the tuk-tuk transport charges for their children's travel to school.

Many parents could not claim the fund. The Aunt of Tanusha said: 'We have not received any disability funds. We tried asking the Village Officer to no effect. We are not even sure whom to ask about it anymore' (Aunt of Tanusha, 2024).

The connection between health and education for some CWD has been previously established. The Sri Lankan government offers free healthcare, making it a positive opportunity for CWD that require the service. However, oftentimes the needs and expenses go beyond the free services. Regarding extended expenses. Vedantan's (11-14 year old boy) mother shared the need for the post maintenance expenses after a government funded cochlear implant surgery: 'It has been two months since the batteries died, and he is no longer able to hear people. This is affecting his interaction and learning. I am so worried for him. Please help me find sponsors for replacing the batteries' (Vedantan's mother, 2024).

Although the presence of policies and programs can be inferred from these cases, there are inevitable challenges in implementation at the ground level. The biomedical factor of sensory impairment, and socioeconomic factors according to the social model assumption of CDT have hampered Vedantan's learning experience and social interactions. Situations like this embolden the intention of CDT to challenge the tensions between the biomedical and social model (Sztobryn-Giercuszkiewicz, 2017).

4.3.4 The Question: 'What happens to my child after my life?'

Over the years of my teaching practice in India, I have heard this question echoed by parents. During field work in Sri Lanka, I was not surprised to hear the same question repeated in many of the conversations, although the conversations were around education.

Towards the end of the conversations, when I asked if there was anything else the parents wanted to share, six out of twenty parents raised the concern on how their children would survive after their lives, and looked at education with hope to answer the question. This is a major aspect of parents' navigation of their children's education.

Vedantan's mother in seeking solutions expressed:

> God has sent him to me. It is now my responsibility to equip him with the skills he needs to survive after I die. He is so talented with mechanical skills like fixing bikes or electric wires, I hope he gets the necessary skills and support at school, to find work and sustain himself (Vedantan's mother, 2024).

While many parents proposed seeking education, vocational skills training, and livelihood arrangements as solutions to the question, one of the senior government officers shared her thoughts on persons with severe disabilities: 'There is no solution as of now. Somehow society is taking care of them' (Senior government officer, 2024).

This underlying anxiety shapes the experiences of parents, teachers and policy makers while navigating education of CWD. Discussing disability and social justice, Mladenov (2016) argued that a just society is one that provides people with disabilities with accessible and sufficient support.

4.4 Teachers' Views on the Opportunities and Challenges to Educational Inclusion of Children with Disabilities

Teachers are the professionals working directly with children in their education journey, therefore their inputs were collected on the role of family in CWD's education, children's experiences in different kinds of education model schools, the associated opportunities and challenges.

> The travel and accommodation expenses are too high when we travel for training.. We still do it to get better at our jobs. The children trust in us, so we have to do it, isn't it?
> (Yamini, 2024)

Quote by a Special Educator

4.4.1 Teachers' observations of challenges at home that impact inclusive education of CWD

All the teachers and principals interviewed agreed that the role of the family and home environment are central to the children's education in many ways: getting to school; the children's focus on learning; and staying at school without dropping out. A few challenges faced by the parents that impact the children's education are as follows.

- **Economic Challenges**
  Mr Banda (SEU-1) stressed on this factor in the current environment: 'The families are dealing with the economic crisis at a serious level. They are struggling for basic expenses. This can lead to poor attendance and even dropping out' (Mr Banda, 2024). This corroborates with the ideas shared by the parents on economic barriers, and how it connects to the child's possibility of receiving education and continuing it. This also includes managing transport and medical expenses.

- **Family Environment**
  Mr Banda (SEU-1) also cited an example of a family impacted by the drug addiction of the father:

  > The child with disability did not attend school for a prolonged period of time. We reported it to the authorities and got someone to visit the home to find

> out about the child. The father was found unconscious due to intoxication by consuming drugs, and the poor child just sat idle nearby (Mr Banda, 2024).

Ms Premavati ((SEU-3) cited challenges in the home environment too, and shared examples of single parent households where the parent balanced between working to provide for the family and raising the child.

- **Societal Stigma – Attitudinal Barrier**

  The Vice Principal (SEU-2) complained how children with disabilities were often hidden at home due to shame and reflected how this attitude needs to change. Ms Premawati added her thoughts on this: 'Many parents are so ignorant that they send their child with disability to a school with an SEU as far as possible so that their community does not find out, thereby 'saving' their reputation. This societal attitude needs to change' (Ms Premavati, 2024).

  Many children with disabilities are denied the right to access education due to cultural factors pertinent to the South Asian region. A tendency for families to isolate their children at home to avoid social stigma– which is more pronounced in middle class and upper class families. This resonates with this statement: 'It is close family members, not children alone, who experience stigma related to disabilIty' (Richard, 2014: 318). The attitudinal and cultural barriers unfortunately put a stop to the children's education experience and rights.

- **Gender Related Barriers: Absence/ Dropout due to Menstruation**

  The study showed that girls with disabilities stayed home for three to five days during menstruation. The cause for this as explained by the parents and the teachers is the lack of resources to provide care. A special educator mentioned,

  > The girls who can manage themselves come to school. Girls with severe disabilities can get restless and throw away the napkins, uncomfortable with the damp feeling of it, or experience higher mood swings and cramps. With the lack of resources to deal with this, the only option for now is to let them stay at home (Ms Suhana, 2024).

  Going back to isolating CWD at home, the practice stems from cultural and religious notions based on the inputs received from members of all three major ethnicities. While Hindu and Buddhist religions denote this to *karma* (repercussions from past lives) and superstitions, similar beliefs were found in the Muslim communities in Ampara where the isolation is more pronounced with girl children – from childhood or as soon as they reached puberty. One of the special educators worried:

  We try convincing the families to continue sending their girls to school at least on non-menstruating days, to no effect. The communal practice is beyond us and hard

to change. We managed to convince one girl citing her aptitude for vocational skills and how that could lead to economic benefits, and she resumed at the age of 20 (Ramya, 2024).

While intersectionality allows for uncovering marginalisations, multidimensionality relates to all of us with varying amalgamations of privileges and disadvantages and how this disproportionately affects the experiences of various CWD in intersections with gender or culture (Hosking, 2008).

4.4.2 Teachers' Inputs on CWD's Experiences in Various Education Model Schools

Special Educators On Students Experiences with Mainstream Government Schools

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009 in Sri Lanka ensures free and compulsory education to every child between six and fourteen years. This includes all the children including children with disabilities and children from lower socioeconomic classes. This national law, and international frameworks such as UNCRC and UNCRPD are examples of the fourth assumption of CDT – a rights-based approach. The huge dropout rate and challenges in accessing inclusive education for children with disabilities raises questions about compulsory education to 'all'. The teachers shared their views on how the children with disabilities navigate these opportunities and gaps in the inclusive education structures. Ms Yamini at SEU-3 highlighted aspects of the compulsory education act: 'It mandates every child up to 18 years to attend school, and no child less than 16 years is allowed to work. Authorities and police visit home if a child is absent from school. The same cannot be said for children with disabilities though' (Ms Yamini, 2024). Notwithstanding the local and international legal provisions, mainstream schools continue to reject and marginalise CWD, as observed in many children in the study who dropped out of

- **Highly competitive environment and indirect elimination of children with disabilities**

  Teacher Ms Preksha (SEU-2) critiqued the mainstream education model that focuses more on theory over practical skills. Ms Yamini (SEU-3) explained how children with mild to moderate disabilities somehow get through the O level examinations. Then they struggle or miss meeting the strict entry criteria prerequisite, leading to the removal of children with disabilities from the system. She raised questions on the relevance of such an education system that rejects children with disabilities. Reflecting on this, the Tamil Montessori teacher said: 'There needs to be a shift in this competitive marks producing mindset and focus on children with disabilities too within the mainstream classes' (Ms Ahalya, 2024). As shown earlier, the diversity of

the child is rejected and the child is marginalised based on the third CDT assumption – diversity as a value (Sztobryn-Giercuszkiewicz, 2017).

- **Discrimination of children with disabilities**

  Within such high academic pressure, the challenges experienced by the children with disabilities, as per Mr Banda (SEU-1), include overlooking the child with disability in the class and telling the child to drop out – high forms of discrimination. This violation of The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009 as reiterated in earlier examples makes the child's education experience meaningless or absent. Another issue as explained by him is the application of corporal punishment.

Special Educators On Students Experiences with the Integration model – SEUs within Mainstream Schools

- **Social Impact**

A major advantage of the SEU's was concurred by many members in the study – the social cohesion through interactions. Mr Banda (SEU-1) shared his observation on social interactions:

> The students from the SEU and the mainstream classes play with each other during the interval breaks and the common programs. Every now and then we talk to the mainstream students to sensitise them about inclusive spaces and encourage values like empathy and kindness (Mr Banda, 2024).

On the social impact of SEU's, a special educator explained:

> Earlier the social stigma in the society was way higher, and people would refer to the kids as '*paithyakara pullaigal*' ('mad' children in Tamil) and the special educators as '*paithyakara pullaigal teacher*'. A lot has changed over the years. In these spaces, the children and teachers from the mainstream classes mingle with the children with disabilities and they reflect this attitude outside the school. The usage of such language and labels have reduced now (Ms Yamini, 2024).

This can be linked to the fifth assumption of critical disability theory: the effects of language in the way it impacts the conceptualisation of disability in people's minds, and people with disabilities' social status (Hosking, 2008). This is done through the way daily language is used to refer to people with disabilities, and the way disability is portrayed in the media; this way language has a direct impact on social attitudes (Hosking, 2008). A special educator shared: 'When the children with disabilities participate in common dance and drama performances, and sports events like paralympics, people notice their strengths, and gradually there is social change' (Ms

Yamini, 2024). This cycle of positive change is a significant factor in the social environment of the child where learning happens

- **Educational Focus Areas in the SEU (Special Education Unit)**

The common curriculum focus areas in the three SEU's include:

- ➔ Setting a routine with a series of activities: prayer, exercise, and sessions
- ➔ Language and Maths skills
- ➔ Sensory activities
- ➔ Art and Craft
- ➔ Practical skills like making tea or juice
- ➔ Self-care and hygiene
- ➔ Eating etiquette
- ➔ Toilet training
- ➔ Placing belongings in an organised manner
- ➔ Reinforcements the same at home

I received orientation on the two routes for CWD at the SEU's: the academic path by shifting to the mainstream class, or the vocational route that aspires to connect with livelihood opportunities. The students in the participants of the study that went to special schools expressed their enthusiasm over the variety of activities. During my brief interaction with students at an SEU, they expressed excitement over upcoming performances. This connects to

- **Limitations of SEUs**

Reflecting on the child's experience in the classroom, all the teachers shared that they were not happy with the space (size and lack of teaching facilities) to suit different kinds of disabilities at the SEU and cited lack of government funds and support for this situation. They disapproved of how the current environment was lacking in assistive devices and communication methods making it insufficient for children with disabilities. Ms Yamini (2024) revealed: 'On most days we just use whatever little is available and make the most out of it' (Ms Yamini, 2024).

All the teachers repeated the parents' aspirations for curriculum improvement to enable CWD to function independently in society, and earn their living through high quality vocational skills training and livelihood arrangements.

The Debate of Special Schools vs Special Education Units

The Special Educators at the Special Schools critiqued the SEUs for its space insufficiency, lack of multisensorial teaching strategies, and required adaptations to teach children with various disabilities, while the two Special Schools I visited were comparatively spacious and better equipped. The Principal of a special school pointed out:

> 'We use individualised education plans based on the child's strengths and partner with the parents in a consistent manner. The spaces are designed to suit the needs of diverse learners and have well equipped vocational skills training units with links to livelihoods programs. The SEU is more like special education happening beside the mainstream school, it can't be called truly inclusive' (Principal of SS-1, 2024).

The Principal of a special school and a special educator at an SEU acknowledged the shortcomings of both the Special Schools and the Special Education Units for the lack of skillbuilding towards job readiness. The principal critiqued, 'Neither model of schools is equipped to prepare a student with disability towards securing work in the 5% reservation for persons with disabilities in government jobs' (Principal of SS-1, 2024).

Discussing peer pressure in the integrated mainstream model, the vice principal at an SEU indicated a dangerous pattern in middle school. Children with disabilities in mainstream schools that struggle with academic pressure and peer pressure become vulnerable to mental health challenges. These children then turn to drugs to cope up with the stress, as narrated by the special educator (Vice Principal at SEU-2, 2024). In comparison, the special schools perform better in providing specialised care, meaningful learning, and skill building (Principal of SS-2, 2024). The findings reveal that special schools have more value for diversity, whereas SEU's facilitate higher social interactions with society (Hosking, 2008)

4.4.3 Challenges of the Special Educators – Training Needs

All the special educators in the Special Schools as well SEU's agreed on the need for further training to develop their knowledge to serve the children with disabilities efficiently. For this purpose, they attended short training courses at Maharagama, near the capital city (Colombo), hosted by the National Institute of Education. Despite the workload, economic challenges, and effort of travelling, the special educators seem to travel often to take these courses – demonstrating commitment to their work. Ms Yamini and her colleagues at the SEU who shared similar views reflected their dedication:

> The costs of travel and accommodation have increased exponentially. It is extra financial pressure to travel and attend these courses. (Upon being asked why she still did it then) I still do it out of my commitment to the child who has come under my care. We see them as our own and must do the best for them' (Ms Yamini, 2024).

Ms Ramya at the Special School insisted:

There is an urgent need for training the teachers. There aren't sufficient workshops and training programs locally and that puts undue pressure on the senior teachers to train the new staff. A lot of times, special educators feel underprepared to do this job and training is crucial to develop ourselves as better professionals' (Ms Ramya, 2024)

Adequate training is fundamental to the special educators as it can be the deciding factor to the child's well-being and learning, through their efforts to enhance social cohesion, provide quality education, and sensitise community members. The teachers at the Special Schools and SEU's demonstrated inclusive attitudes, acceptance and willingness to learn – that benefit the CWD.

4.4.4 Special Educators' Thoughts on Government Policies and Programs for Educational Inclusion of Children with Disabilities

- **Opportunities**

Along the inclusive education trajectory, the Sri Lankan government and Ministry of Education have implemented many policies and programs to make education accessible for children with disabilities. Critical Disability Theory considers the human rights model a valuable tool towards promoting the equality and integration of people with disabilities into society, while acknowledging and appreciating their individual diversity in it (Hosking, 2008). The findings and analysis from the conversations with the teachers display the following provisions to advance the rights of children with disabilities:

- An array of facilities for all the children (CWD and non-disabled) going to school, such as free tuition, food, bags and books.
- Government appointed special educators to work in the special education units and and incremented salary of 10% more than the mainstream teacher
- The disability welfare fund of SLR 5000 per month is provided to a selected list
- Healthcare is provided to children with disabilities with monthly visits to the clinic
- Combined efforts of government officers, healthcare professionals and educational professionals in disseminating information and social awareness and on accessing services. Regarding the combined efforts, Ms Yamini shared:

The other actors contributing to sensitisation about inclusive education, are government officers, Midwives and Doctors (in advising parents to send their children with disabilities to special schools or SEU's), the role of NGO's, and Policies such as Disability Welfare fund and reservation for Persons with Disabilities in government

positions and universities. I am hopeful to witness continued positive changes despite the many areas to work on (Ms Yamini, 2024).

The above mentioned socio-economic-political elements benefit CWD directly or indirectly in their learning journey.

- **Special Educators On the Gaps in Implementation at the Ground Level**

The special educators expressed their aspirations for the role of government in improving the educational experience of children with disabilities. All the special educators expressed a pressing need for better teacher training opportunities. All three SEU's teachers expected more support from the government in setting up the SEU's and more facilities in the classroom to suit the needs of children with different disabilities. Ms Premavati enumerated the support required at their SEU: 'We need proper ramps, sufficient spaces to teach smaller groups instead of the verandah outside the class, audio/video devices for activities, music and dance, assistive devices, and adaptations for access and language needs' (Ms Premavati, 2024).

On the issue of children with disabilities missing in the education system, the Principal of a Special School suggested:

> The invisibilisation of children with disabilities by being isolated by their families at home, or dropping out later is a serious issue. How is it possible for so many CWD to dropout? How can so many children be isolated at home? The government needs to conduct research to find out where these missing children are, expose the barriers, then take concrete steps to create social awareness (Principal of SS-1l, 2024).

Regarding children with severe disabilities, one of the special educators proposed:

> Not all the children with severe disabilities can be trained in vocational skills and expected to engage in livelihood activities to sustain themselves. The government must introduce better welfare, and residential facilities with vocational activities to the extent possible for purposeful activities (Ms Yamini, 2024).

These findings from the teachers and principals reveal how children with disabilities experience the opportunities and barriers of different models of educational model schools, the gaps between policy and practice, and the support required by the teachers (both SEU's and Special Schools) to improve the learning experience of children with disabilities.

4.5 Government Officers and Policy Makers' Views on Educational Inclusion of Children with Disabilities

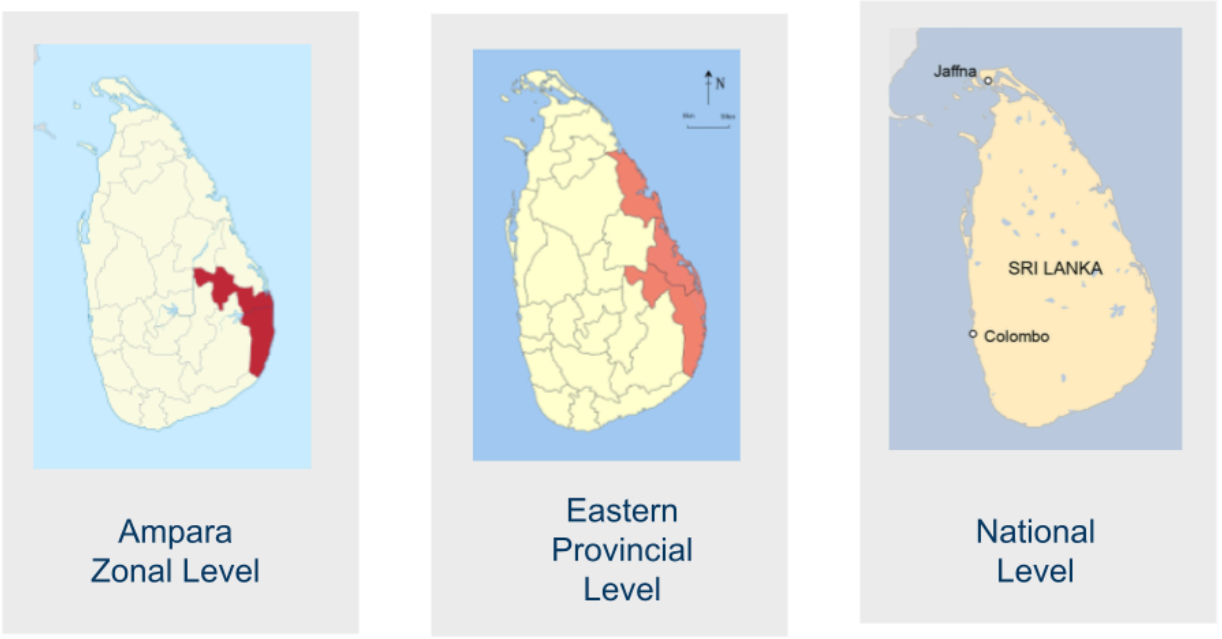
> 'Children (with disabilities) just want to play and participate. In the end they need love and care. They don't suffer thinking about the concepts of ability and disability,'
> (Government Officer of Education, 2024).

Quote by a government officer

Introduction

This section discusses the perspective and knowledge of the government officials on the experiences of children with disabilities and inclusive education – at the Zonal, Provincial and National level. The officers were welcoming and participated in enriching conversations on different models of education for children with disabilities, their opportunities and barriers, the role of family, and opportunities and challenges in government policies and programs towards children with disabilities.

Map 1 Ampara, Eastern Province and Sri Lanka



Source: Wikipedia

Overview of a few significant International and National Policies related to Inclusive education for children with disabilities in Sri Lanka

Table 6 - Notable International and National Laws towards Inclusive Education in SL

Impact of CWW Kannangara on educational policies and reforms - Education for all
Salamanca Agreement 1994
Protection of Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act No. 28 in 1996
UNCRC - Ratified by Sri Lanka in 1991
UNCRPD -Ratified by Sri Lanka in 2016
National Policy on Disability for Sri Lanka - 2003
Compulsory Education Orders - 2016

(Source of text: Grimes, 2021: 8)

These international and national laws have paved the way for the increasingly trending model of setting up SEU's in the mainstream schools for inclusive education, thereby making educational inclusion to children with disabilities an achievable right.

4.5.1 Government Officers Views On Children's experiences with various Education Models

- **Mainstream Government Schools**

  All the children in this study who went to a government mainstream school at some point, faced negative experiences. The government officers were privy to this information and emphasised the role of National Policy on Disability for Sri Lanka -2003 in forbidding a school from turning away a child with disability. An advocacy expert shared that these cases still happen, but the law can help the children and families fight against the injustice (Advocacy expert, 2024). She shared another policy update on the mandatory special education training as a part of the mainstream teacher training qualification. This comes as a response to the instances of children with disabilities being overlooked or rejected in class. Adding to that, more SEU's and Special Education Courses are on the way (Advocacy expert, 2024).These are examples of the opportunities in the rights based approach in the direction of advancing equity for CWD in education. As mentioned by a few teachers earlier, two government officers pointed out the competitive nature of the

mainstream school, right from primary level, that pushes the children with disabilities away from the system.

- **SEUs – A Work in Progress**

  A senior special education officer exclaimed that he was witnessing massive changes in inclusive education over the years with SEUs and special educators, and specifically the dispatch of instruction manuals on implementation of inclusive strategies at school – with direct reach of the CWD. Amidst these positive strides, the government officers were transparent in communicating the gaps between policy and implementation in many areas. A senior government officer noted that the Special Education Units have several issues (Government officer, 2024). They encountered challenges with acquiring teachers, little to no physical resources, and lack of funding. Disapproving of the current state, she said:'How can children with disabilities learn like this? It is not an ideal place for them' (Senior government officer, 2024).

  Mismanagement of resources by using the government appointed special educators in the mainstream classes, delay in appointing educators, and lack of trained professionals in signing or braille are other reasons impacting the learning of CWD according to the officer (Government officer, 2024). These inadequacies impede the child's learning experience, according to an advocacy expert (2024). They also stressed the necessity for the government to ensure effective, accessible training programs for teachers (advocacy expert. 2024). The principal of a special school earlier proposed, 'More training opportunities, better salaries, and motivation programs' as ways to support the teachers (Principal SS 2, 2024).

- **Special Schools for Specialised Training**

  An advocacy expert just like the principals of the special schools commented on how within the current conditions, special schools seemed to be doing good work in specialised support such as teaching children with hearing, speech or visual impairment (Advocacy expert, 2024). Adding to the downside to this model they shared:'With all the extra help and support they experience there, the children develop a kind of dependency mindset which is not good, you know. This is like the charity model of disability' (Advocacy expert, 2024).

4.5.2 Government Officers Views On the Cross-Cutting Barriers Faced by CWD in Accessing Inclusive Education

- **Gender-related Challenges**

  In addition to social and biomedical causes like economic needs, medical treatment, and transport challenges, the senior government official elaborated on gender

related challenges. We discussed the findings from field work, and a senior advocacy expert commented:

> The way in which schools currently deal with Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights is a big problem. The knowledge does not reach the children with communication challenges, and that leads to increased chances for health issues, sexual abuse, and issues during pregnancy. There needs to be a policy level change for Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights education (Government official, 2024).

Here the intersection of gender and disability exacerbates the challenges faced due to lack of access to knowledge. To enable CDT to bring out these complex barriers causing elements, '[w]e remain attentive to considerations of disability, matter and discourse as more intersectional analyses are preferred' (Goodley et al, 2019: 988).

- **Cultural Isolation of the Children with Disabilities at Home**
  When a child or specifically a girl child with disability is hidden at home citing social stigma or ignorance, 'violation of the child's right begins at home' (Senior government official, 2024). Cultural reasons here intersect with disability and gender to create unequal barriers to inclusive education of CWD.

4.5.3 Challenges Faced by the Government Officials and Policymakers in Implementing Policies and Programs Towards the Education of CWD

- **COVID Pandemic and Economic Crisis**
  During field work, the economic crisis in Sri Lanka was rife and no one was an exception to experiencing its adverse effects. According to the UN: 'The education sector of Sri Lanka has been hard hit by the COVID-19 pandemic at first and then the economic crisis worsened with the impact of the pandemic' (United Nations, 2022). This has halted several beneficial programs such as the annual sports meet and concert events in Ampara, which are usually opportunities for positive social changes (2024). Another government officer referred to the lack of funding from the centre due to the COVID pandemic and economic crisis as causes for the insufficient funding (Government officer, 2024).

- **Aftereffects of the Civil war**
  This remains a sensitive topic and was rarely broached in my meetings. The reduced social cohesion could be observed within the ethnically segregated regions. One of the government officers worried: 'Children are growing up segregated and this is a

risk to our future societal fabric'. This could impact children with disabilities in accessing inter-ethnical information, (Government officer, 2024).
From the interviews of the children and families in this study (Sinhala and Tamil) no explicit differences were found based on ethnicity. This could also be connoted to the segregated societies and lack of opportunity for interaction and comparison to begin with.

- **Delay in passing policy to legislation**
  A policymaker elaborated this challenge:

> Although we put in the work by doing research and submitting reports, there is a delay in discussing it in the parliament and then getting it signed by the president. Funding is the main problem, then prioritisation choices which could be due to lack of awareness (Policymaker, 2024).

Another government officer called attention to a top-bottom approach from the national to zonal level as a problem attributed to overlooking information from the grassroots (Government officer, 2024).

4.6 The Role of INGOs/ NGOs in Supporting the Government and Community Towards Inclusive Education for Children with Disabilities

This study finds that all the six government officers agreed on the positive role of INGO's and NGO's in augmenting the government structures in several ways: offering assistive devices, sponsoring government teachers' salaries, and building infrastructure (Government officers, 2024). An officer emphasised the importance of valuing local voices and local knowledge to adapt the programs to local contexts by citing cases of failing projects designed in a western country (Government officer, 2024). This is a decolonial point that focuses on local, situated knowledges. The success or failure of the development projects on inclusive education directly impacts the children and their education.

In this manner, the rights-based approach is helpful in promoting international and national rights, by creating the potential structures for inclusive education. In 2014, there were 525 special units, and during my interview with a policymaker, she mentioned the fast paced increase in setting up new SEU's (Grimes, 2021, 2022: 26). The CDT is congruent with the rights-based approach and encourages individual and community rights of CWD and their education (Sztobryn-Giercuszkiewicz, 2017).

• Chapter 5 Conclusion

This chapter sketches out the inferences and discussions of the research to answer the research question of how children with disabilities in Ampara experience Inclusive education. The widely encompassing critical disability theory uncovered factors that cause disability, by examining the social model of disability (ableist perspectives and socio-economic factors), a human rights approach, and decolonial perspectives that focuses on the lived experiences and existing structures in the Global South. Four categories of participants were interviewed (CWD, parents and caretakers, educational professionals, and government officers) to put forth the opportunities and barriers faced by Children with disabilities in different models of education.

The findings and discussions revealed children with disabilities faced marginalisation in the **mainstream schools** through narrow competitive curriculums, lack of assistive devices and communication barriers, bullying, corporal punishment, exclusion by the teachers, and rejection by the institution leading to high numbers of dropouts or shifting schools.

The first and second sub-questions on the experiences of CWD in three different educational model schools, and the opportunities and challenges faced by them are summed up here. The study revealed that experiences of the children with disabilities in the **Special Education Units** were more positive with the presence of special educators, an exclusive learning space, alternate curriculum, dedicated teachers, and the biggest opportunity of social interactions with the non-disabled children, leading to social cohesion and extended societal change. The barriers in this space are underequipped classrooms and the teachers' dire need for training.

According to this research, in the **Special Schools**, children with disabilities received more specialised education, better infrastructure and communication access, dedicated special educators, better quality vocational training and links to setting up livelihood activities. The advantage in special schools is its segregated nature and a tendency to develop a dependency mindset.

To answer the second research sub-question from the parents and caregivers"s perspectives, the study examined the opportunities and challenges faced by them in facilitating their children's inclusive education experience. The focus on the family was attributed to the value of wellness of the family leading to the child's well-being and learning experience. The following opportunities and challenges were elaborated: family support, and provision to apply for government social welfare programs such as the disability welfare funds and monthly clinic visits for the child. The primary challenge of families living in rural regions was the economic impact of the COVID pandemic and the economic crisis that put a strain on their daily expenses, as well as extra expenses for their children's transport and extended medical expenses. Lack of access to information and

deep concerns over their children's futures were other challenges that formed the background for the child's learning experiences.

Addressing the third category in the second sub-question, the **Special Educators and Principals** from Special Education Units and Special Schools were interviewed. Both spaces had the opportunity of passionate, dedicated teachers which is key to the child's experience at school. Both categories of teachers expressed a dire need for teacher training and were burdened with expenses and travel requirements to participate in training courses far away. The Special Schools offered comparatively better services in specialised education, more facilities, and individualised education plans, while the Special Education Units provided the advantage of increased social interactions. All these components directly affect the child's experience in education.

The last category in the second sub-question – **government officers** were interviewed to understand their opportunities and barriers in facilitating inclusive education to children with disabilities. The main advantage is a robust base of mainstream education structures. Against this background Sri Lanka has committed to several international frameworks such as the UNCRC and UNCRPD, and several national policies that protect the child with disability's right to inclusive education. A plethora of new policies for inclusive education of children with disabilities have been implemented and ongoing lobbying and research facilitates the making of new policies. According to the officers, one of the causes for gaps between policy and practice regarding children's education is insufficient funding, exacerbated by the adverse effects of COVID pandemic and the economic crisis. The highly ethnically segregated nature of Sri Lankan societies was a threat according to two officers who thought it impacts the children's opportunity to grow up in culturally diverse environments and solidarity. Slow or sceptic passing of policy to legislation due to prioritisation issues, is another major barrier revealed in the study. The political environment and policies dictate the opportunities and possibilities for children with disabilities to exercise their right to inclusive education.

To answer the last research sub-question on intersectional factors (gender, ethnicity and economic status) that influence the inclusive education experiences of CWD were studied using critical disability theory. CDT guided the research to examine intersectional and multidimensional elements that relate to the education experience of CWD.

Examining **gender and disability** revealed a major finding of girls with moderate and severe disabilities staying at home for three to five days every month during menstruation – in Special Education Units as well as Special Schools. The reason behind it was lack of care providers to assist the girls with menstrual care.

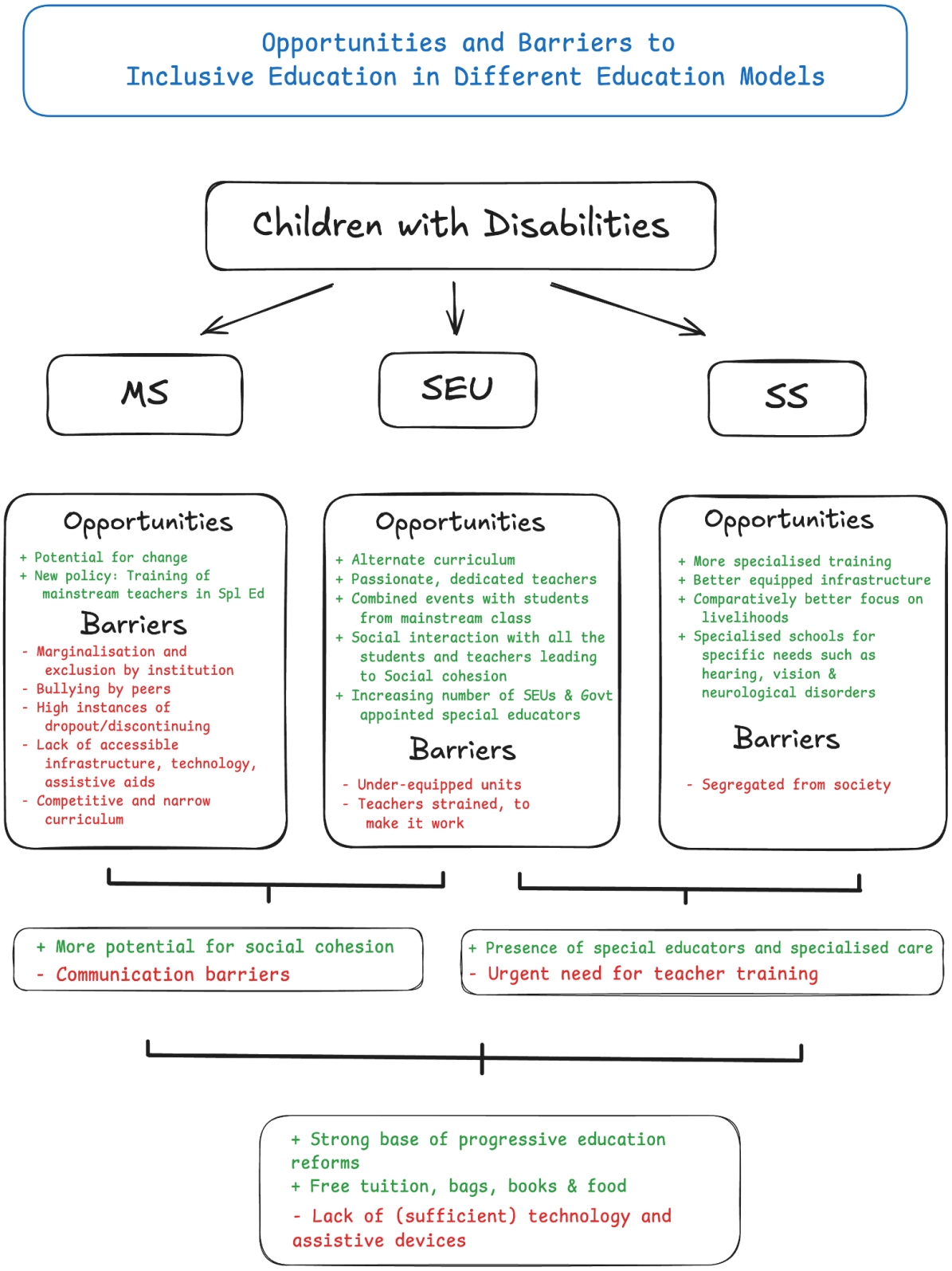
Looking into **disability and cultural/ ethnical** factors, many families tend to isolate their children with disabilities at home due to religious connotations (karma in Hindu and Buddhist religions) and societal stigma. When girls with disabilities start puberty, many

families discontinued their education, and this was more pronounced in the Muslim community albeit being in more developed regions than rural Sinhala and Tamil areas visited during the study – denoting CDT's assumption of multidimensionality which is a combination of privileges and disadvantages. In this case it influences diverse children with disabilities's accessibility to education in various ways.

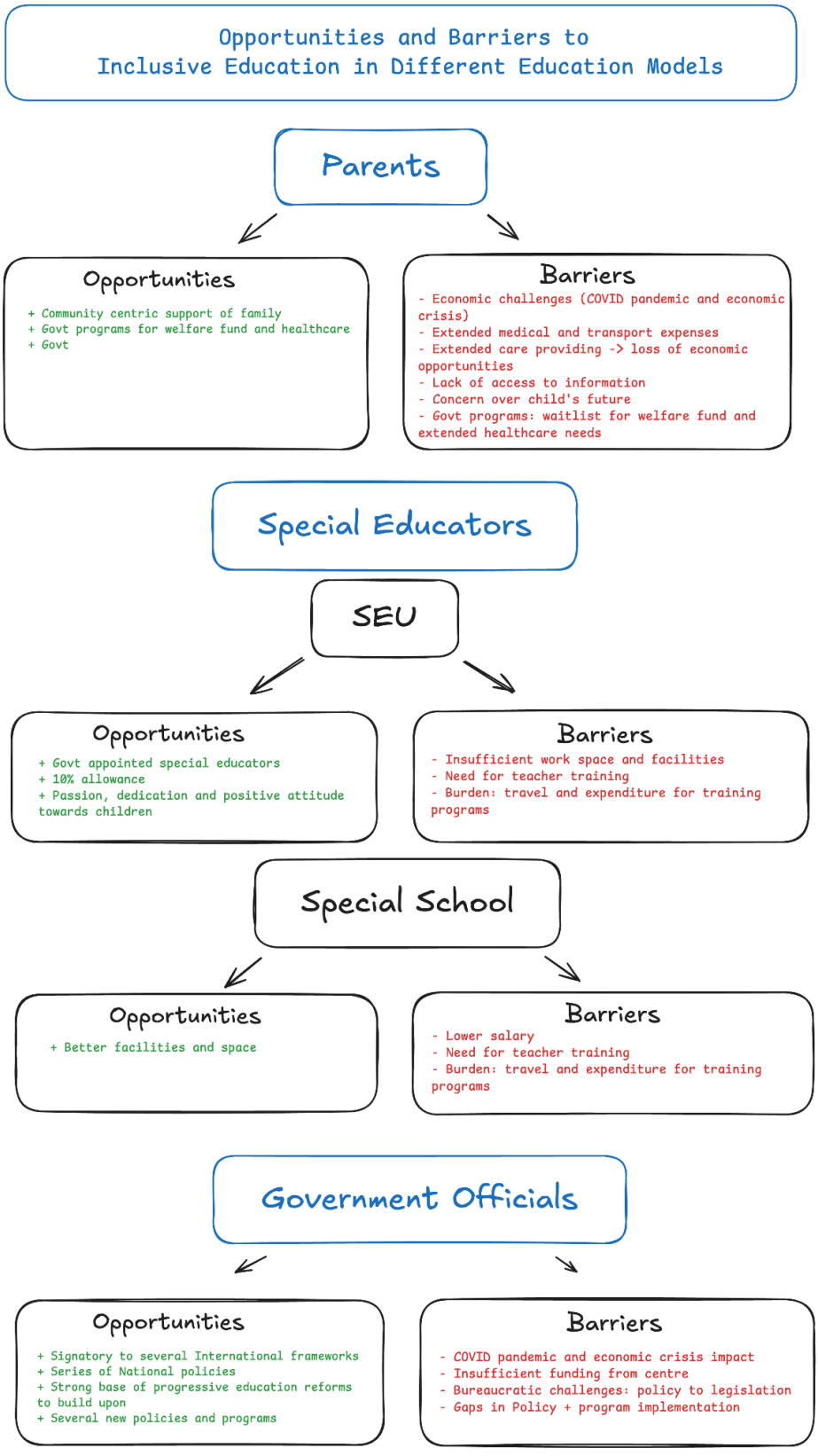
Lastly the intersectionality of **economic status and disability** in rural regions were examined to report high financial pressure on the family as many children with disabilities have increased medical needs and travel support requirements. This pressure influences the child's access to healthcare and transport, therefore deciding the child's participation in learning.

The study's objective to understand children with disabilities experiences in various setups through diverse dimensions gave an overall picture of inclusive education in their lives; the struggles and hopes; and multidimensional factors that influence their experiences. The critical disability theory emphasises following a reflexive approach in listening to the child and communities' voices in learning about their education experiences, paying attention to how language shapes their internal and societal perspectives, and valuing equity for diversity in disability – in addition to divulging socioeconomic factors causing disability, examining multidimensionality to understand differences in experiences, and adopting a human rights approach to studying the lives of CWD in education. The study has therefore led to amplifying the voices of children with disabilities through a child-centric research approach. It has also responded to the research question and sub-questions by investigating their experiences in inclusive education To conclude, the final assumption of CDT claims the theory's merit in transformative politics for the purpose of guiding future directions in enabling children with disabilities – to find their right to education.

Appendix 1 Flowchart of opportunities and barriers to IE for CWD



Appendix 2 Flowchart of opportunities and barriers to IE of CWD – for caregivers, special educators and govt officers



Appendix 3 Questionnaire guide for children with disabilities

1. Verbal consent.

Explaining the consent form in simple instructions.
And ask the child for a handshake if they agree.

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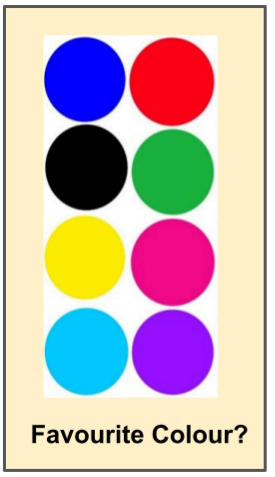
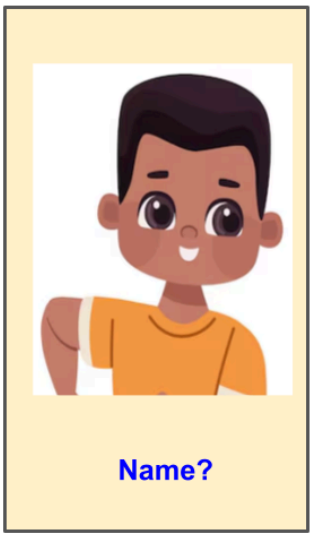
2. Warm up game – Card game:

- The interviewer and child hold three cards with pictures and questions and ask each other the questions.
- **There are no right/ wrong answers**





3. Choose a character and answer the questions:

Cartoon images of family members are cut and displayed and the child will be asked:

- Which toy are you among this?
- What do you do in an entire day? Where do you go?

- Can you choose the people that look like your family members?
- What does (each member) do everyday? Where does (each member) go?
- What do you do with (each member) everyday?

- Can you choose your friends?
- What do you do with them?









4. Vignettes

Specific situation is presented to the child as it is happening to a story character, and the child is asked for opinions and solutions:

Images are displayed on the laptop and a story is narrated:

- (A name relatable to the child's gender and ethnicity) lives in Ampara
- He/she wakes up in the morning at _____. (Choose the timing based on earlier responses)
- Then he/she does (Choose activities based on earlier responses)
- If he/she needs to go to school, how can he/she go?
- What will he/she do there?
- Who will be there at the school? How will they behave with (the character)?
- What would they learn there?
- How would (the character) feel there?
- Is there anything else you want to say about (the character)?

Appendix 4 Questionnaire guide for parents/ caregivers

A. Introduction and Warm Up

1. How long have you lived here?

2. What is special about this place?

B. About the Child

1. Tell me about ***(child's name***). When and where was he born?

2. What does he/she like? (food/ toys/ games)

3. What is her/his routine in a day?

4. What are things _____ is good at doing?

5. What are things _____ has challenges with?

6. How did you know about his/her disability?

7. Were you able to talk to someone about this? When you have questions, whom do you ask?

8. Whom does ***(child's name***) spend more time with? Does he interact/ play with friends or neighbours?

About the Family and Community

1. What job do members in this family do?

2. After having _____, have there been changes in the work?

3. Do you get any support from relatives, community or government?

4. How do relatives and the community interact with the child?

About Education and Inclusion

1. What do you think about sending ***(child's name***) to school?

2. What are the challenges in this? Other than the disability? (economic status/ ethnicity/ support/ people's attitude)

– (If girl) Are there different challenges because ***(child's name)*** is a girl?

3. Do you think ***(child's name***) would like to go to school? (If yes) What do you think is needed for the child to go to school?

4. What kind of support do you think ***(child's name***) should get at school to feel included?

– (If girl) How do you think the school should support ***(child's name)*** as a girl?

5. What do you think schools should focus on for ***(child's name***) to learn?

6. Who do you think should take steps for ***(child's name***) to be able to go to an inclusive school?

7. If ***(child's name***) goes to school, how do you think this will change their life?

8. If ***(child's name***) goes to school, do you think this will have any changes in your life?

9. Is there anything else you would like to share?

Appendix 5 Questionnaire guide for special educators and principals

INTRODUCTION

VERBAL CONSENT

A. Warming up

1. I'm curious to hear about your experiences in Special Education? How did it all start Madam/Sir?

2. Sri Lanka has a high literacy rate of **94**% for men and **92**% for women. Global literacy rate is **87**%. I heard about the efforts of the **Ministry of Education** and the **Free Education Policy** since 1945. In your experience how have you seen this inspiring record being implemented and achieved?

B. Children's Perspective and Environmental Challenges

1. Globally, inclusive education is a field continuously being researched and improved. How would you describe the inclusive education system in Sri Lanka?

2. How do children with disabilities experience special education/ inclusive education?

3. What are the challenges in accessing inclusive education? Other than the disability?

- financial
- ethnicity
- society's attitude and support
- access to information

- access to the school location and infrastructure
- appropriate curriculum
- gender

EDUCATION

1. Sri Lankan legislations in inclusive education have gone through a journey

- **UNCRPD** (United Nations Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities) Article 24
- (Ratified 2016)
- **SDG's** (Sustainable Development Goals) - Goal 4 – signed in 2015
- **Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act** No. 28 of 1996
- **National Policy on Disability** (NPD) (2003)
- and a **National Action Plan on Disability** (NAPD) (2014).

In your experience how do you see the relationship between the policy and implementation at the ground level?

Do you think Education for Children with Disabilities is seen as a child right? (Probe into how, by different stakeholders)

2. How do you think children with disabilities perceive going to school?

- How do **teachers** perceive it? (more probing into experiences and challenges)
- How does the **family and society** perceive it?
- What is the **Ministry of Education's** perspective towards it?

3. What is required for children with disabilities to access and reach school?

4. What kind of support do children with disabilities require at school to feel included?

Thoughts on strength based approach, differentiated instructions, challenges faced by teachers and the support they require.

– Is there specific support required for girl children?

5. What learning objectives and skills do you think schools should focus on for children with disabilities?

6. What are your thoughts on connecting academic pedagogy and practice in the classroom?

7. Who are the stakeholders that need to take steps for children with disabilities to reach and access an inclusive school?

8. When children with disabilities go to school, what impact does this have on their life?
What impact does this have on their families?

D. Sharing the findings

These are the major findings of the interviews of the students and the parents
It would be very valuable to hear your thoughts on this from your experiences.

CHILDREN:

- Conveyed interest to go to school
- Enjoyed hands on activities, vocational training skills, and art and culture
- Shared concerns over bullying by peers and being ignored by teachers in class

PARENTS:
Barriers in accessing inclusive education:

- Transportation challenges to special schools or SEU
- Financial difficulties in arranging private transportation
- Financial difficulties in managing the medical expenses for the child
- Teachers corporal punishment
- Lack of attention towards the child in class
- School instructing the child with disability to discontinue education citing poor academic performance of the child
- Lack of motivation of the child and choosing to discontinue school themself

- Gender related concerns: menstrual care for girls
- Bullying by peers

Positive impact:

- The disability welfare fund
- Two cases of children with hearing impairment – surgery organised by the government hospital and Australian donors

General

- Fear of child's future after their lives
- Vocational skills training and Activities of Daily Living

Is there anything else you would like to share?

Appendix 6 Questionnaire guide government officers

VERBAL CONSENT

A. Warming up

1. I'm curious to hear about your positions and experiences in Special Education? How did it all start Madam/Sir?

2. Sri Lanka has a high literacy rate of **94**% for men and **92**% for women. Global literacy rate is **87**%. I heard about the efforts of the **Ministry of Education** and the **Free Education Policy** since 1945. In your experience how have you seen this inspiring record being implemented and achieved?

B. Children's Perspective and Environmental Challenges

1. Globally, inclusive education is still being researched and improved. How would you describe the inclusive education system in Sri Lanka?

2. How do children with disabilities experience special education/ inclusive education?

C. EDUCATION

1. Sri Lankan legislations in inclusive education have gone through a journey

- **UNCRPD** (United Nations Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities) Article 24
- (Ratified 2016)
- **SDG's** (Sustainable Development Goals) - Goal 4 – signed in 2015
- **Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act** No. 28 of 1996
- **National Policy on Disability** (NPD) (2003)
- and a **National Action Plan on Disability** (NAPD) (2014).

In your experience how do you see the relationship between the policy and implementation at the ground level?

I. Is Inclusive education for CWD seen as a child rights topic?

Ii. Please share your knowledge and experience on the policy making process on Special Education.

Iii. What are the opportunities and challenges in this?

2. How do you think children with disabilities perceive going to school?

- How do **teachers** perceive it?
- How does the **family and society** perceive it?
- What is the **Ministry of Education's** perspective towards it?

3. What are the challenges in accessing inclusive education? Other than the disability?

- financial
- ethnicity
- society's attitude and support
- access to information
- access to the school location and infrastructure
- appropriate curriculum
- gender

4. What kind of support do children with disabilities require **at school** to feel included?

– Is there specific support required for girl children?

5. What learning objectives and skills do you think schools should focus on for children with disabilities?

6. Who are the stakeholders that need to take steps for children with disabilities to reach and access an inclusive school?

7. When children with disabilities go to school, what impact does this have on their life?
What impact does this have on their families?

D. Sharing the findings

1. These are the major findings of the interviews of the students and the parents
It would be very valuable to hear your thoughts on this from your experiences

CHILDREN:

- Shared interest to go to school
- Enjoyed hands on activities, vocational training skills, and art and culture
- Shared concerns over bullying by peers and being ignored by teachers in class

PARENTS:
Barriers in accessing inclusive education:

- Transportation challenges to special schools or SEU
- Financial difficulties in arranging private transportation
- Financial difficulties in managing the medical expenses for the child
- Teachers apply corporal punishment
- Lack of attention towards the child in class
- School instructing the child with disability to discontinue education citing poor academic performance of the child
- Lack of motivation of the child and choosing to discontinue school themselves

- Bullying by peers
- Gender-related concerns: menstrual care for girls

Positive impact:

- The disability welfare fund
- Two cases of children with hearing impairment – surgery organised by the government hospital and Australian donors

General

- Fear of child's future after their lives
- Vocational skills training and Activities of Daily Living

2. What are your thoughts on bridging the gap between policy and implementation?

3. Is there anything else you would like to share?

Appendix 7 Information about Dutch Lanka Friendship Foundation and Friendship Foundation

Overview of the Dutch Lanka Friendship Foundation (DLFF)

The DLFF is an International Non-Governmental Organization (INGO) that has been working in the Ampara district of Sri Lanka since 2007. Registered under FL-119616 in the National NGO Secretariat of Sri Lanka. DLFF is committed to supporting CWD and PWD through inclusive education, livelihood development, and community-based initiatives. DLFF's ultimate goal is to create a fully accepted Disabled Friendly Society in Sri Lanka, where individuals with disabilities are empowered, included, and respected as equal members of the community.

About Friendship Foundation

The Friendship Foundation (FF) is the origin organisation of DLFF. Based in the Netherlands, FF supports DLFF by providing funding, strategic guidance, and oversight. It also maintains relationships with donors and partners, ensuring that DLFF's projects in Sri Lanka are effectively implemented and aligned with its mission of building a Disabled Friendly Society.

Main activities

The DLFF is currently implementing two major projects in the Ampara District: the Education Project, launched in 2012, and the Work & Income Project, started in 2019. As part of the Education Project, DLFF operates the Dutch Lanka Special School (DLSS), which empowers children with disabilities through day care, inclusive education, and vocational training, aiming to create an inclusive society where every child has the opportunity to learn and grow. The Work & Income Project focuses on improving the livelihoods of persons with physical disabilities by promoting self-employment, enhancing financial and business skills, providing sustainable livelihood assets, and raising awareness on inclusive economic development. DLFF aims for long-term sustainability by strengthening existing government structures through these future plans:

Education 2.0: Dutch Lanka Friendship Foundation (DLFF) aims to launch Education 2.0 to address the educational barriers faced by CWD, by focusing on strengthening and creating SEUs in government schools. The project includes building infrastructure, training teachers, and working with the Ministry of Education to ensure sustainability.

Skilled SL: The Skilled SL project aims to empower persons with disabilities, women-headed families, and school dropouts through improved vocational training. By partnering with government and private sectors, DLFF plans to upgrade training centers, provide inclusive teaching, and create strong industry links to secure jobs. This fosters economic independence and social inclusion.

Through these initiatives, DLFF remains dedicated to building an inclusive, empowered, and sustainable future where all individuals with disabilities can thrive as equal members of society.

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