

“It’s still Possible” – Teachers’ Voice Towards Inclusive Preschool Education in Maldives

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education is a fundamental worldwide reform envisioned to include children with diverse abilities in the classroom. Maldives is in its emerging phase of inclusive preschool education. Lack of teachers’ competency, training and support system was reported as common challenges faced in inclusive education. This study explored the experiences of five regular teachers in five different inclusive preschool settings in Male’. Qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews was employed to explore the teachers’ teaching experiences along with series of issues associated in their journey of inclusive classrooms. Findings revealed teachers’ belief in inclusion as the positive teaching experiences of being grateful and hopeful amidst challenges faced. Teachers’ negative experiences are reported as feeling lost and disappointed with the lack of support over mixed disabilities of children in large classrooms. These findings revealed underpinning the policies and support required from stakeholders at all levels which have influenced the sustainability of inclusive preschool education. To overcome these challenges, teachers used team teaching, adjusted lessons to build peer support among the children and seek professional support within and beyond school. Teachers’ voices on inclusive classrooms in preschools have contributed recommendations for the school level and policymakers in modeling up the sustainable inclusive preschool education. It is recommended that funding to be allocated for in-service teachers’ training besides developing resources to provide better learning opportunities for children with disabilities. All stakeholders, teachers, parents and government should collaborate to foster positive attitudes and acceptance for all children to keep striving for a sustainable inclusive preschool education.

Keywords: Children with special needs; Inclusive education; Regular teachers; Preschools in Maldives children with special needs; inclusive education: regular teachers: preschools in Maldives.

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INTRODUCTION

Evidence collected recommends that success for better education for persons with disabilities is using the legislative tools to advocate effectively for improved laws and services within their countries (Hayes & Bulat, 2017). The most noticeable events are the international policies and legal frameworks that promote inclusive education for disabilities. Considering the importance of research findings on holistic early childhood education and its success in formal schooling, the Ministry of Education in Maldives has decided to operationalize the preschool act. The administration of this Preschool Act developed in the year 2013 identifies the significance of developmentally appropriate preschool education and mandates the Ministry of Education to monitor all preschools in the country (MOE, 2019). The Laws stated that individuals with disabilities are eligible to equal education. Subsequently, the ministry implemented a policy on inclusive education where schools are to practice inclusion. Such effort has opened opportunities for children with disabilities to have equal education whilst schools tried their effort to be accommodative to the diverse learning needs of all children. For instance,

accommodations were made to teaching strategies, accessible facilities and resources for the children where support and guidance became evident. However, since the inception of inclusive education, limited data were

found to monitor and evaluate its implementation and effectiveness, particularly in the preschool setting. Hence, this study explored the experiences of regular teachers in inclusive preschool settings by listening to a range of issues and concerns associated with their journey of inclusive education. The voices of these teachers are believed to be significant to enlighten future policy and facilitate the constant and enriched provision and sustainable practice in inclusive early childhood education.

BACKGROUND OF STUDY

Teachers' Positive Attitudes Smoothen the Delivery of Inclusion

Positive attitudes of teachers are vital to encourage and guide the delivery of inclusive education. According to Ajzen (2005), an attitude is a personality to react positively or negatively to a circumstance, person, or thing. Teaching children with assorted disabilities could be quite challenging and stressful at times. Olson (2003) asserted that a positive attitude can bring effortlessness and simplifies the process. This means that effective inclusion derives from the attitudes of teachers. Teachers are required to accept that all children regardless of their disability have the right to be in regular classrooms, to feel confident and have sufficient knowledge and skills to practice in the inclusive classroom (Florian & Hawkins, 2011).

Teachers' Negative Attitudes Limit the Opportunities

Conversely, de Boer, Pijl, and Minnaert (2011) concluded that the majority of teachers hold negative attitudes or unsteady attitudes towards inclusive education which have limited the learning of children with special needs in regular classrooms (Malinen, Savolainen, & Xu, 2012). Their evaluation done on regular teachers' in mainland China revealed that they display negative attitudes depending on the nature of the child or the disability the child holds. This has certainly limited the inclusion pathway. As specified by Olson (2003), other attitudes held by teachers concerning inclusion are that it will increase their workload especially when they are already feeling drained with their current workload.

Teachers' Professional Development

Teachers' knowledge, skills, pedagogical strategies and understanding is believed to enhance the quality of teachers for inclusion (Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2005). This implicates the importance of professional development programs for teachers in refining the process of inclusive education. It brings opportunities for teachers to learn new knowledge, skills, practices and attitudes by means of educating learners in an effective manner (Naseer, 2012; Owusu-Mensah, 2008). The aim of professional development according to Steyn (2008) develops the quality of education.

Effects of Teacher Training

Moreover, teacher training is asserted as the foundation of inclusion (Yeo, Chong, Neihart, & Huan, 2016). The key to making inclusion successful lies in teacher training and the accessibility of effective strategies for inclusion. Once teachers have developed the skills and attitude to include and accept children with special needs, they grow confident and become stronger in making inclusive education possible amidst challenges faced in the implementation of inclusion. Training to facilitate different strategies for teachers is essential in inclusive education. Gaur, Malik, & Verma (2016) implicated that training teachers about teaching strategies is the most important part of implementing inclusive education as teachers are the task force who work with children in inclusive classrooms.

Quality of Teacher Training

Teachers of high quality take over control to the success of children's development and achievement (Sims, 2018). The quality of an inclusive program depends according to the program philosophy, support from the school, teacher attitudes, beliefs and teacher training (Bakkaloglu, Akalin, Sucuoglu, & Altuntas, 2014). It is stated that the quality of a program is defined by the qualities of the teachers which include teachers' skills in creating learning environments, their personal attitudes and belief of children and their families and even themselves. Sims (2018) debated that good teaching is essential for higher performance among children with disabilities underpinning the density of teaching in today's inclusive classroom which requires innovative teaching strategies.

Teachers' Concerns and Challenges about Inclusion

The inclusion of children with different abilities can be quite challenging for a teacher. Many concerns about the implementation include identifying children with special needs and the severity or type of disabilities which need some level of knowledge (Sharma, Chari, & Chunawala, 2017). Besides accommodating the instructional needs of diverse learners, including students with a range of disabilities, teachers need to theorize and practice their

daily teaching and assessments for all children under their responsibility (Broderick, Mehta-Parekh, & Reid, 2005). Implementation concerns such as more time in preparing and accommodating the curriculum are needed besides getting appropriate teaching aids and partnerships with other professionals in the field (Forlin, Keen & Barrett, 2008). The issue is compounded when a positive school climate such as support from school leadership, collaborative teaching and learning and planning was not perceived (Sharma et al., 2012) notwithstanding getting adequate time in attending class management meetings and updating children's progress on their IEPs and meet with their parents, undertaking large class sizes of mixed dis/abilities, unmanageable behaviors insufficient material and professionals.

Safe Classroom Environment

Coping to accommodate the classroom environment is one of the significant elements of successful inclusion. A properly accommodated classroom environment goes unnoticed. But if done poorly it is in the limelight. A teacher should be educated to know to create an environment where children and teachers feel safe, valued, inviting, and comfortable, accepted and promotes positive learning (Votlz et al., 2001). There is no single strategy to teach. Each teacher can create their own teaching strategies, styles and techniques based on the children, respecting their differences and shaping appropriate physical environments and providing success for their wellbeing. For instance, exploring effective ways to teach social skills is an essential intervention for children with special needs (Ogle & Alant, 2014). One of the popular strategies which many researchers have emphasised is peer-mediated interventions and interactions (PMII) (Craig-Unkefer & Walberg, 2015; Goldstein, Kaczmarek, Pennington, & Shafer, 1992; Ogle & Alant, 2014; Utley, Greenwood, & VanScoyoc, 1997).

Partnership with Parents

Parents' opinions are considered to be critical to successful inclusive education. Krogh and Slentz, (2011) stated that teachers and families have to work together as partners for the betterment of children. This signified looking for ways to construct partnerships with parents, listening to them, consulting with them and acquiring knowledge from their experience about children. McMillan (2008) identified that 80 percent of parents accepted that their child's socio-emotional development is strengthened through the experience of inclusion. Thus, teachers must acknowledge parents' beliefs in socio-emotional development through peer learning and provide contexts that promote a range of socio-emotional skills.

METHOD

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of regular teachers in inclusive preschool settings. A qualitative, phenomenological study was used to explore regular teachers' experiences in teaching this group of children. The study took place in five different preschools in Male' and included five different teachers who have at least five years of teaching experience. The population geography in the Maldives is separated. More than twenty-five 25 percent of the population lives in Male' the capital while the rest are geographically isolated among 200 inhabited islands (MoE, 2019). Thus, the data collection was conducted in the capital city Male' where most schools are concentrated and also due to the trouble to reach other island schools. Five teachers from five different schools were chosen for this study. S, F, A, G, and M were their aliases. All of them had a background in early childhood education and at least five years of experience teaching in inclusive settings. The teachers chosen had a minimum of a diploma in early childhood education, and their experience in the field ranged from 12 to 35 years. They all have expressed willingness in contributing to the research.

Instrument

In qualitative research, the key instrument is the researcher (Creswell, 2012). In this study, I, as the researcher, collected the data through a semi-structured interview method. The benefits of semi-structured interviews include allowing the researcher to be flexible and casual (Creswell, 2013). It also allows a planning set of questions and agrees to pursue new questions based on the responses given by the participants. Additionally, it permits the participants to probe exciting ideas that arise; thus, the order of asking the question is less important (Creswell, 2012). Likewise, a semi-structured interview is extensive, and open-ended questions can be probed where participants are given opportunities to bring rich insights about their views, feelings and thoughts regarding the

research problem, which would fulfill the research purpose (Patton, 2015). It also allows participants to share their lived experiences in teaching inclusive classrooms. Besides, the researcher in a semi-structured interview setting

follows up and asks the participants unlimited curious questions in real time (Creswell, 2015). This analysis technique is widely used in phenomenological studies as it emphasizes the distinctive features of the participants as they experience a specific phenomenon.

DATA ANALYSIS

Once the data was collected it was organised and processed. Data analysis process was started by listening to the audio recording and transcribing from audio to text. Detailed notes taken and audiotapes were transcribed word for word by the researcher. Each phase of data analysis process was designed in such that it can be reduced into manageable chunks. It is important to read over again and again the written texts to get the more meaning out of it (O'Connor & Gibson, 2003). To deliver the best findings possible the key stages researcher employed were; organizing the data, developing coding, generating themes and presentation of the data.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative study the terms credibility, trustworthiness, transferability, dependability and conformability are used for validity and reliability (Creswell, 2009). To confirm the validity and reliability of this study, triangulation, members' checks, peer review, researcher's reflexivity and audit trail were used. Members' checks were conducted to review the manuscripts to reinforce the credibility of the findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). All participants were agreeable with the manuscripts. Triangulation is measured by using different data sources from regular teachers of different schools at different settings to develop understanding of the phenomenon. Confirming the validity and reliability in this research comprises carrying out the study in an ethical manner (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

RESULTS

Experiences of Teachers in Inclusive Classrooms

The answers resulting from the above topic are obtained from a mix of both positive and negative experiences from the participating teachers. The themes that emerged from question one were presented and there are four subthemes that were developed from the two main themes.

Positive Experiences

In the interview, teachers represented their positive experiences by indicating the effort they have put to gain knowledge about children with special needs. Teachers admitted that it took a while to know about the children. It did not happen over time. Teachers' acknowledged that they earned a sense of confidence while trying to help the children in their class. The following responses by the teachers demonstrated the above.

Teachers Feeling Grateful and Satisfied

Teachers have felt and described that "they are confident and prepared to accept the child" when asked "how well are you prepared?" in the interview questions regardless of the lack of training in special education. Teachers have tenderly said that they worked to gain the knowledge and meanwhile, their love; passion and confidence drive them to strive for it. Teachers have commented as follows:

"When I reflect on my teaching experience, I feel really grateful and happy in getting opportunity to teach a child who is different than others. I believe inclusive education and inclusive classrooms are really important." [Teacher M]

Teachers are Hopeful amidst Exploring Possibilities

Teachers who have participated in short training programs on special education and teachers who have not taken part in any additional training were among the teachers who were interviewed. They mentioned in the interview that they believe in inclusion and its benefits to children. Thus, they worked on their own to include the children with special needs in their classrooms and help them out.

"When he came to my class, I assessed him, searched the internet and identified what kind of activities will be suitable for his needs and asked his mother so she brings the things to the class so I can prepare his work." [Teacher M]

Negative Experiences

In explaining their negative experiences in the classroom, there were two subthemes that teachers have stressed, namely feeling lost and having difficult in managing the class, being frustrated and demotivated due to the lack of support from the parents and frustration due to the large class size.

Feeling Lost and Difficult

One of the reasons for teachers to create their negative image towards inclusive classroom was identified by the teachers as gotten off track and being burnout for not being adequately equipped to manage the classroom. One teacher mentioned:

“It is really challenging for us to make him sit, always running in the class tiptoe. Sometimes he cries, know that he is tired and frustrated and that’s why crying. This really breaks our heart.

I have to take care of everyone because it is even their right to come to the school and learn I can’t ignore them as well.” [Teacher S]

Disappointment due to Lack of Support

It is common for regular teachers to experience a lack of support for inclusive education. One teacher mentioned that her reason for showing setbacks and putting off was due to her unhealthy relationship with her parents. She commented:

“When we identify the children who needs special attention and when we tell the parents about the child they do not want to accept it. At the orientation meeting we tell the parents that when we identify a child with differences we do not highlight it to shame the child/parents in the school, it is because we want to help the child and help the parents to seek for proper and early intervention so that the child will improve at the time he goes to primary.” [Teacher F]

Frustration over Mixed Disabilities of Children

Teachers have further stressed class size as another area for creating frustration and demotivation in inclusive classrooms. These teachers believed that inclusive classrooms would be smooth and less distressing if they had smaller class sizes. One teacher said:

“It is very difficult when there is children/child with special needs in the class since the class size is big... There is lot of number of children without the disabilities in the same class, for this reason I can’t give the attention I have to give.” [Teacher M]

Concerns and Challenges

The participating teachers were asked about their concerns and challenges in teaching inclusive classrooms. In reply to that, almost all the teachers have mentioned at least one of the concerns and challenges.

Lack of Knowledge and Skills

In this study, teachers have voiced concern about their lack of knowledge and skills to cater to the children in their classes. Teacher S described it as:

“There are lots of cases of children with disabilities, hard for the teachers to handle the class... There was this one time I received a child with severe autism. It is really difficult for us to cope the whole session since he is severely autistic... it really is challenging and difficult to give time a regular class with other children. The child is sensitive to sound. He doesn’t want to hear any sound. He covers his ears and screams when he hears sound.” [Teacher S]

Lack of Teaching and Learning Resources

Teachers kept frequently commenting on the lack of resources in terms of materials, experienced teachers and suitable learning environment. The unavailability of special education-trained teachers and paraprofessionals to work with regular teachers was discussed extremely often and they believe that this inhibits the progress of the children with special needs. One teacher was concerned that:

“I have to keep this particular child in the class for the whole session. If only there is a special education trained teacher to cater these children in certain time of the day, I feel that the child will progress and improvement will be seen. Even in the outdoor we will require equipment specialized for these children isn’t it? These resources are unavailable in the school hence it is really difficult.” [Teacher M]

Lack of Support from Policy Level

In the interviews, almost all the teachers reported that professionals in the Ministry of Education with good leadership are vital to inclusive education in preschools. The subthemes that emerged in the discussion were providing guidance and mentoring, and providing funding.

Professional Support

Another major challenge facing by the regular teachers is the support from the policy level. Teachers have repeatedly stressed that for proper education for children, ample support from the Ministry is highly desired. One of the teachers concerned that:

“But the thing is that we don’t get help from the Ministry of Education (in terms of materials, teachers, and space to cater for these children)”. [Teacher G]

Teachers have also shared the importance of awareness programs for the stakeholders. Some teachers have said that in their schools they do perform awareness programs for parents but it is very limited per year. They believed that more structured and recurrent workshops are required so that the stakeholders as a team with the same mindset can work together. According to the teachers, this would be possible if the relevant departments of the Ministry of Education organize suitable workshops on areas relevant to the targeted audience. Teachers’ words were:

“It is necessary to organise awareness workshops and campaigns for the parents on children with disabilities and about the academic progress and performance of the children. Likewise, it is necessary to organize awareness session for school teachers, management and school heads.” [Teacher F]

Funding

Teachers also have revealed that the special education teacher turnover rate is an issue since the schools cannot provide reasonable pay for them. Teachers did agree that special education teachers have a huge workload, and have to work with limited resources in a limited space so it is understood that when they are being underpaid they will be moving to bigger pay. One teacher stressed:

“To improve the inclusive education, I would say that we will greatly need help from MoE to provide a teacher with the salary for us.” [Teacher F]

Coping Strategies

In the classrooms, regular teachers use various coping strategies to accommodate children with special needs in their classrooms. According to the teachers, they were required to organise to support their learning according to the children's unique learning needs. Hence, the teachers' responses when they were asked about their coping strategies to sustain the daily classrooms were as follows.

(i) Team Teaching

As much help teachers get from other teachers in planning the lessons, they also required help in delivering the lessons to accommodate the children well in their class. They believed that they needed to have a good relationship with other teachers for effective outcomes. Teacher F mentioned that collaborative lesson planning and delivery make the activities go smoothly and according to the daily schedules. She commented:

“We get help from an additional teacher besides the class teacher and helping teacher, what we do is the main teacher (class teacher) will introduce the lesson, distribute children to the work stations and give work for them and ask the helping teacher to supervise them and the main teacher will go to help the child with a disability so that more attention and care will be given to the child with severe disability.” [Teacher F]

(ii) Building Peer Support among Children

Teachers further talked about more coping strategies that eased the daily classroom activities was the rapport between the children. Teaching the children without disabilities about the children who needed help in the classroom was found to be a supportive and corporative way. One teacher remarked:

“Sometimes the child with hearing difficulty attacks other children in the class and they get panicked but later again when we make them understand, it helped. We have also talked about these children to other children in the class that they need everyone’s help and they are special but they are just like us and etc. so gradually children started to adjust.” [Teacher G]

(iii) Seeking Support

Three different subthemes were identified under seeking support. They were parents’ support, working with other professionals and the support gained from their peers.

(iv) Parents

One teacher talked about her strategies for handling a child with a severe disability in her class. She said that she was happy to find the child’s parent wanting to be involved and provide the support she could give so that her child could learn in that school. The teacher said:

“Classes that have children with severe disabilities, we request parents to bring their children late to the class. Class starts with the sharing time. Teacher needs to give attention and focus to the rest of the children. So to avoid the hassles during the sharing time we don’t encourage bringing them at the start of the session. Also some days when the child really behaves uncontrollable, we try to send them home 1 hour before the dismissal time”. [Teacher F]

(v) Other Professionals

Besides, teachers have communicated that it was common to ask help from professionals outside. They said that they called and give a little bit of background information about the child and sought professional help from them. Teacher S shared her experience as:

“To cope with them, we ask for help from different specialists outside school, we ask them the kind of attention and care we should give them or sometimes if it’s difficult to learn a particular child we talk little bit about the child to the professionals and gain knowledge.” [Teacher S]

DISCUSSION

The experiences of early childhood regular educators have enlightened the situations in today’s inclusive preschool classrooms in the Maldives.

Positive Experiences Enhance Sense of Fulfillment

It is believed that effective inclusive practices stemmed from teachers’ attitudes and how it is associated with their expectations. The central positive experiences teachers identified were a sense of confidence, satisfaction, pride, fulfillment and success. These positive teaching experiences shared by the teachers correspond with other studies commenting on the teachers’ characteristics (Bender, Vail, & Scott, 1995; Olson, 2003; Sharma, Chari & Chunawala, 2017).

Negative Experiences Create Threats to the Success of Inclusion

Teachers’ most dominant negative experiences shared about inclusion were feeling lost, frustrated, stressed, and managing the children. Having more than one child with special needs in the class has created stress and fear as sometimes when a child with behavioural issues might hurt other children, and they might hesitate to come to the class. This has caused the teachers to feel exhausted as not knowing how to attend them rightfully.

Teachers’ Concerns Highlight the Real Needs in Inclusive Classrooms

The notable factors influencing negative experiences were the concerns and challenges due to the lack of knowledge and skills among regular teachers, the lack of resources, and the lack of support from the government. These factors were the built-up experiences across these teachers’ careers in teaching inclusive classrooms.

Strong Collaboration Contributes to the Inclusion

Regular teachers employed a range of coping strategies to support and improve their inclusive practices. Participated teachers believed and chose to employ collaborative strategies as a significant element to cope and accommodate children with special needs. Besides, inclusive education depends on collaboration among school personnel, professionals, parents and peer support.

This study has provided insights into teachers' positive and negative experiences, their concerns and challenges, and coping strategies in inclusive preschool classrooms in Male' the capital city of Maldives. The data gathered from the interviews revealed the main factors that hindered the success of inclusive education through regular teachers' voices. Deprived of complete support for regular teachers who deliver teaching and learning to children with and without disabilities, inclusive education merely fails. Thus, schools and the Ministry of Education together can provide the training required for the teachers in order for them to feel confident and competent in inclusive classrooms. Likewise, the schools can explore the progression in implementing inclusive practices and act accordingly. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education can build a close connection with the preschools, monitor them, evaluate and give feedback for effective inclusive programs.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This qualitative phenomenological design on the experiences of regular teachers provided answers to the research questions and laid the groundwork for the following recommendations for future research, which are expected to improve how inclusive classrooms are applied and work towards their success. As a result, it would be worthwhile if future studies concentrated on the following topics:

1. A qualitative study could be steered that would improvise this specific study. Instead of focusing on the regular teachers in Male' the capital of Maldives, it could be expanded across other geographical schools.
2. A study based on qualitative interviews and surveys could be conducted to identify the parents' views on inclusive education.
3. A qualitative study exploring the experiences of diverse populations such as parents, other professionals and school staff viewpoints on inclusive classrooms could deliver exciting findings.
4. A study that would be valuable to investigate would be regular teachers stress level on teaching children with special needs. A mixed-method could be utilized for this study.
5. The influence of the lack of resources has impacted regular teachers' competency to teach children with special needs. Thus, a research study can focus on finding out teachers' perception and attitude about the accessibility and usefulness of the resources.

DECLARATION STATEMENT

The lead author* affirms that this manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study being reported; that no important aspects of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned (and, if relevant, registered) have been explained

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no self-interest in the study conducted.

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