

CHALLENGES OF REGULAR TEACHERS IN IMPLEMENTING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS OF MALDIVES

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Abstract: *Inclusive education is in the early stages of implementation in the Republic of Maldives. Exploring the challenges faced by regular teachers will contribute greatly to the policymakers. This study explored the challenges faced by regular teachers (RTs) in implementing inclusive education in government primary schools in the Republic of Maldives. The instruments used in this mixed method research was a survey questionnaire and interviews. A survey questionnaire of three sections with an open-ended question on teachers' challenges was administered to randomly selected regular teachers (N=125) from 11 schools and six geographical locations. A semi-structured interview guide was used for regular teachers (N=12). The data from the open-ended question was analysed for categories and the interview transcripts were thematically analysed. The challenges of RTs in implementing inclusive education in mainstream schools of Maldives were found to be lack of resources, large class size, lack of time, lack of trained teachers, and lack of knowledge. It is recommended for policymakers to provide necessary resources, bring changes to current policy of teacher allocation, provide regular teachers with skills and knowledge through professional development programs and conduct awareness programs to foster positive attitudes. It is proposed for policymakers to build partnerships with higher education institutions to develop innovative teacher education programs in preparing skilled teachers for implementing inclusive education in the Republic of Maldives.*

Keywords: *Inclusive Education, Barriers, Challenges, Regular Teachers*

Introduction

In the past ten years, milestones were reached in providing education by Ministry of Education (MoE) of Republic of Maldives. A national policy on inclusive education was implemented by MoE in 2013 for all government schools to adopt inclusive education. Investigating the challenges of regular teachers in the early years of implementing inclusive education can be integral in providing inclusive education successfully in the future. While the limited research on inclusive education in the Maldives focused mainly on the schools in the capital city, Male',

research studies including schools in other geographical locations can yield many interesting findings for the development of inclusive education in the Maldives.

Objective

The barriers, challenges, and the factors that lead to positive outcomes in inclusive schools since the enforcement of the inclusive education policy in 2013 were not identified across different geographical school locations in the Maldives. Although small case studies such as the work of Naseer (2012) were conducted based on inclusive education in the Maldives there is lack of large-scale research findings. Due to lack of such important findings, this study was conducted to bridge the gap between stakeholders' experiences of inclusive education to lead to successful inclusion in primary schools. This large-scale study investigated the stakeholders' perceptions, of teacher factors, school factors, supports and challenges in implementing inclusive education in the Maldives. This paper presents one part of this study; the challenges of regular teachers in implementing inclusive education in government schools in the Republic of Maldives.

Literature Review

Inclusion has been defined and understood in many different ways. It is stated that there is no one perspective on inclusion within a single country or school (Dyson & Millward as cited in Ainscow & César, 2006). Likewise, in some countries, inclusive education is thought as an approach to aid children with disabilities within the general education setting (Ainscow & César, 2006). Save the Children (2016) recognized inclusive education as education welcoming all students, by ensuring they are not discriminated by teachers, parents, policies, schools and curricula. Also, Clough and Corbett (2000) stated inclusive education is providing the opportunity to all children in a normal classroom environment. A similar view was shared by UNESCO (2009) that inclusive education seeks to address the learning needs of all children, with a special focus on those children who are vulnerable to marginalization and exclusion. Comprehensively, inclusion has been defined with emphasis on the participation of children and people with disabilities. Booth and Ainscow (2011) defined inclusion as participation for all children and adults. Therefore, it can be said inclusive education is understood as providing equal opportunities for learners' of diverse needs to study alongside their peers in general educational settings.

Efforts to provide all children free basic education were made globally by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Convention of Rights of Children (UN, 1989), Education for all Initiative, Millennium Development Goals (UNESCO, 2000), the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (UNESCO, 1994) and Dakar Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2000). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2007) laid out specific rights of people with disabilities and their entitlement to fully participate in the society. As a result, children with disabilities have the right to be included in the education system and therefore, inclusive education requires to be set up for children with disabilities (UNICEF, 2013).

Inclusion as A Process

Inclusive education has been also described as a long-term process (Azzopardi as cited in Tsokova & Tarr, 2012; Clough & Corbett, 2000; Corbett, 2001;). As stated by (UNICEF, 2010), it is an on-going process which requires a long-term vision with the end goal of every child being fully included in child-friendly schools and general society. Other researchers have also explained inclusion as a process. For example, Ainscow (2000) stated that inclusive education

is a process of people enquiring into their own context to see how it can be developed and inclusive education is a process of growth. Clough and Corbett (2000) too stated that inclusive education is not a single movement but different and countless forms of practices. In the opinion of Barton (as cited in Clough & Corbett 2000), inclusion is a process. Barton further explained the concept of inclusive education as not just only about providing access to mainstream school for pupils who have previously been excluded. As a result of the full inclusion of students with disabilities in general education system, many benefits have been identified.

Benefits of Inclusive Education

Inclusive education plays a major role in helping all children to develop to their full potential. Over the decades, with the contribution from educational research on inclusive education, there is mounting evidence that inclusive education benefits children with and without special needs. McMillan (2008), denoted some of the benefits of inclusive education including acceptance, higher academic standards, and removal of the social prejudice that exists for people with special needs. Other studies also highlight the benefits of inclusive education. It was found that when students with disabilities are provided with the opportunity to interact with same age peers lead to acceptance and development of social skills. McMillan (2008) found that when students with disabilities become part of a general education classroom, they are more likely to become socially accepted by their peers. In a like manner, McCarty, (2006) stated that in inclusive settings, students with special needs get the opportunity to develop their social skills and behaviour by following their peers as an example. Another reason in the view of Voltz and Brazil (2001) was students with special needs in general classroom being socially accepted. Thus, inclusive education helps to build positive attitudes in students to accept their peers with disabilities.

Inclusive Education in the Maldives

The Constitution of the Maldives protects the rights of persons with disabilities. According to Article 17 of the Constitution of the Maldives, everyone including those with a mental or physical disability is entitled to the rights and freedom in the Constitution without discrimination of any kind (Human Rights Commission of the Maldives, 2015). Article 17 also specifies that special assistance or protection to disadvantaged individuals or groups, who require special social assistance, as provided in law shall not be deemed to be discrimination (Human Rights Commission of the Maldives, 2015). The first major step towards inclusive education from integrated special education was initiated in 1985 (National Institute of Education, 2018), when a class for speech and hearing-impaired children was included in a mainstream primary school, in the capital city, Male'. However, inclusive education and integration did not happen until recent years, with an inclusive policy being implemented in 2013. Up to the date of this study, there are no special schools in the Maldives. All mainstream schools are now inclusive schools with some schools having integrated special classes for specific disabilities.

Primary Teachers

In the Maldives, regular primary teachers are teachers who are certified and registered to teach grades one to seven. All primary teachers must have a diploma or degree in Primary Teaching from Maldives National University (MNU) or other private or international institutes. Markedly, some schools have one teacher assisting the primary teacher during the primary teacher contact hours. In like manner, some private schools have two trained primary teachers in each classroom, one assisting students with work, while the other teacher is teaching.

Teachers play an integral part in helping children with diverse needs by modifying teaching methods. It is important for teachers to be equipped with skills to cater to the diverse needs of students. Similarly, all teachers, including special educators should be prepared to teach students with disabilities (Hardin & Hardin, 2013). As class teachers need to facilitate the learning process of the students, it is vital for them to be aware and able to identify students with different disabilities to provide inclusive education. Savic (2005) stated that class teachers are responsible for the progress in education for all pupils in the class. While the number of students being included in the general classroom is increasing rapidly in the Maldives and many other countries, it is important to realize that teachers have their own opinions and beliefs about inclusive education. Research suggests that teacher beliefs and attitudes are important factors in inclusive education. Likewise, Savic (2005), and McMillian (2008) stated that teachers' attitudes and beliefs are critical factors in determining the success or failure of inclusive education.

Teacher Beliefs

Teachers' beliefs is an important factor in inclusive education. Some studies have found that most mainstream teachers believed they had insufficient skills and knowledge for inclusive education (Forlin, 2004, & Rouse, 2007) and that they believed "there is an army of 'experts' out there to deal with these students on a one-to-one basis or in small more manageable groups" (Rouse, 2007, pg. 12). Similarly, Hardin and Hardin (2013) stated that thousands of teachers, at all career stages, teach students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms every day, but many do not believe they are competent or confident in that role. Also, Sharma, Chunawala and Chari, (2017) found from their study the under-preparedness to deal with inclusive classrooms was a major concern raised by teachers having experiences with students with special needs. It was proposed by Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) that in order to successfully achieve implementation of inclusive education, the teachers need to believe that all students have the right to belong in regular classrooms, feel confident and have adequate knowledge and skills to practice in the inclusive classroom. Therefore, it can be stated that teachers' belief is one of the crucial elements that influence teachers' practices in inclusive education.

Teacher Attitudes

Teacher attitudes have an important role in inclusive education. While teaching students with special needs can be quite challenging at times, a positive attitude can become a means to facilitate it. Although there is numerous research on teacher attitudes, different studies have found different results. Monje (2017) stated that studies concluding with differing results are not surprising as special education differs across schools systems. Shade and Stewart (2000) indicated that one of the main factors that influenced the successful implementation of inclusive policy is the positive attitude of teachers. Additionally, Engelbrecht, Nel, Nel, and Tlale (2015) stated that teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion model and children with special needs appear to be an important predictor of the level of success. Moreover, teachers' attitudes towards students with disabilities and special education in regular education classrooms have been internationally identified as a key factor in the implementation of inclusive education (Nketsia, 2016). Further, in a study investigating teacher attitudes towards inclusive practices by Murphy (2014), it was found teachers generally had positive attitudes towards inclusion and a correlation was found between teachers' beliefs regarding school factors, such as support from their administrations and teacher attitudes towards inclusion.

Teacher Training

Training teachers to be equipped with skills and knowledge in inclusive education is critical for successful implementation of inclusive education. Research has found that teachers feel they are ill-equipped for inclusive education (Burstein et al., 2004). For the social and academic progress of the learners to be understood, individual teachers require a context (Tsokova & Tarr, 2012). Also, lack of adequate teacher preparation has been identified as a major barrier to inclusive education in the South Asian countries, including India (Sharma, Forlin, Deppeler, & Yang, 2013; Singal, 2005). Additionally, pre-service teacher education is seen as the principal vehicle to ensuring teachers acquire the appropriate attitudes and skills to enable inclusive education to be successful (Sharma, Forlin, Loreman, & Earle, 2006). In a study, Salisbury (2006), found that teachers' attitude towards inclusion were mostly influenced by their education and academic preparation. This is further supported by the study of Lambe and Bones (2006), who stated that teachers who did not have specific training for inclusive education when compared with teachers who had specific training to teach students with special needs expressed more positive attitude towards inclusion. Similarly, Oswald and Swart (2011) found that after completing a course on inclusion, student teachers' attitudes towards inclusion improved and also their general attitude towards people with special needs. Other studies show that brief courses on inclusion can make a difference in teachers' attitudes (Campbell, Gilmore, & Cuskelly, 2003; Sharma, 2012). On the other hand, the greatest barrier to the development of inclusion is found to be teachers lacking knowledge, attitudes, and skills (Forlin, 2001). The overall picture is that teachers have many roles in such a rapidly changing field as teaching. Hence, it is essential for teachers to have necessary skills and knowledge to provide inclusive education, as each child is different, and teachers must be able to identify and address their uniqueness in nature. As a result, a wide range of differences can be made ordinary in the general classroom (McLeskey & Waldron, 2013).

Challenges for Teachers

The inclusion of students with different abilities can be quite challenging for a teacher. There are many suggested reasons for this, such as accommodating instructional needs of diverse learners (Voltz et al., 2001), including students with wide range of disabilities (Hardin & Hardin, 2013), demand for teachers to theorise and practice their daily teaching and assessments for all students under their responsibility (Symeonidou & Phtiaka, 2009), lack of commitment of teachers as a result of low or no incentives, and inclusive education being stressful to most teachers (Chaula, 2014).

In a study, Bhatnagar and Das (2014) found the barriers that obstructed the successful implementation of inclusive education as stated by the teachers were a lack of inclusion policy, lack of trained teachers and para-professionals and a fear of downfall of academic achievement. In other words, regular teachers in this study faced challenges as a result of lack of resources (Bhatnagar & Das, 2014). Similar findings were made by Sharma (2001) whose study indicated that principals and para-professional staff and special education teachers were concerned about the lack of resources, lack of instructional materials, lack of funding and lack of training for the implementation of inclusive education. Equally similar findings were found in the study by, Sharma, Moore, and Sonawane (2009) from the results of the survey of pre-service teachers in India which indicated that teachers were moderately concerned about including students with disabilities in their classrooms, mostly concerned about the lack of resources necessary for the implementation of inclusive education. Additionally, in a case study of a school in the Maldives, mainstream teachers stressed on the need for knowledge of SEN and suggested teachers be trained with background knowledge of SEN (Naseer, 2012). Another finding by Hettiarachchi

and Das (2014) was a high percentage of the teachers in their study received some training to assist children with special educational needs, however, the need for on-going professional development and training was voiced by all the participants. Further, in numerous surveys, general education teachers have reported that their skills are insufficient to cater to students with special needs (Bradshaw & Mundia, 2006; Burstein et al., 2004; Pugach, & Florian, 2011; Smith, Tyler & Skow, 2003; Subban & Sharma, 2005).

Theoretical Framework

This study adopted relevant theoretical orientations such as Teacher Efficacy by Bandura (1994) and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Models of Human Development (1979). Bronfenbrenner (1979) described five environmental factors that impact an individual's growth and development: the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macro-system and the chronosystem. Each of this system depended on the contextual nature of the person's life and states options and sources of growth (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bandura's (1994) Teacher Self-Efficacy deals with values, goals, actions of professional functioning and the loyalty of the person in performing a task. The feeling of self- efficacy is based on a system of beliefs holding an interaction with the environment and helping the individual to cope with realizing his/her skills effectively (Bandura, 1994). The theories of Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Bandura (1994) focus on building an inclusive environment for the learners.

Methodology

This study examined the challenges of regular teachers' inclusion of students with special needs in primary grades one to five, in 11 government schools in the Maldives. A mixed-method approach with random sampling technique was employed for this study. A total of 125 Regular Teachers (RTs) from 11 schools in six different geographical locations were included in this study.

Instruments

Data were collected by using a survey questionnaire of three sections and a semi-structured interview guide. The survey questionnaire comprised of three sections. Section A of the survey questionnaire was constructed to collect various demographic information of the respondents and Section B comprised of closed-ended items on teacher beliefs, teacher attitudes, school supports and teacher self-efficacy on a six-point Likert scale. Section C comprised of three opened-ended questions: (a) teachers' understanding of inclusive education, (b) listing three supports for inclusive education, and (c) listing three challenges in inclusive education. This paper reported the findings of part (c) of Section C of the survey questionnaire.

Validity and Reliability

To enhance the validity of the survey questionnaire, it was checked by two supervisors of the faculty and a teacher trainer of inclusive education of Maldives National University (MNU) and also pilot tested. The reliability test was performed to verify the measurement of items in the Likert scale using the Cronbach's alpha measurements. Cronbach's alpha value for the construct was .88. For the qualitative data collection, a semi-structured interview guide was also pilot tested.

Data Analysis

After reading the responses to the question on teachers' challenges in the open-ended survey questions, the researcher created relevant categories. The responses from open-ended survey questions of RTs ($N=125$), were coded following the steps stated by Tesch (1990). The coded

responses of the RTs were analyzed, and the main five challenges found are reported in this paper.

Findings

Demographic Analysis

For this study 125 RTs consented to complete the survey questionnaire. The qualifications of RTs ranged from master's level to inclusive education certificate level. From the 125 RTs, 49 RTs (39.2%) had Diploma in teaching certificate, 36 RTs (28.8%) had a degree in primary teaching certificate, 35 RTs (28.0%) had bachelor's degrees, and 3 RTs (2.4%) had Masters' degrees. A total of 108 RTs (86.4%) stated they had experience teaching students with SEN. It was found that 80 RTs (64.0%) attended professional development (PD) sessions in the past two years, 52 RTs (41.6%) found the PD sessions very helpful and 26 RTs (20.8%) found the PD sessions moderately helpful.

A total of 256 responses from RTs were obtained from the open-ended survey question. The responses from the interview and open-ended survey question on teacher challenges were categorized and thematically analysed. The responses were collapsed and grouped into categories and ranked in order of highest to lowest. Findings from the responses of the RTs are summarized according to top five challenges in Table 1.

Table 1- Challenges of RTs in implementing inclusive education

Rank	RTs Challenges	Number of responses	%
1	Lack of resources	91	35.5
2	Large class size	47	18.4
3	Lack of time	45	17.6
4	Lack of trained teachers	44	17.2
5	Lack of knowledge	29	11.3

The top five ranked challenges of RTs in implementing inclusive education in the Maldives were found to be lack of resources, large class size, lack of time, lack of trained teachers, and lack of knowledge.

Lack of Resources

A total of 91 responses (35.5%) indicated RTs main challenge was lack of resources pertaining to teaching-learning materials and physical resources. Teachers seemed to try and manage with resources that were available. However, this was not feasible for different ability students always as stated by RT2 below.

We used to get the local resources available from the island and also we try to get community help. To some extent we do get, but we don't get very much. We need more resources and different ways to cater for students.

Resources needed for differentiated teaching-learning for students with SEN in inclusive classrooms to maintain their interest was also found to be a concern.

"We prepare the worksheet for the students even, but the students don't like to do those kinds of work. They need to do something else but we don't have much" (RT4).

Large Class Size

The second challenge of RTs was found to be large class size. A total of 47 responses (18.4%) stated large class size as a challenge in providing inclusive education. Explaining that the class size was too big for a mainstream teacher to provide inclusive education without a teacher assistant, one teacher stated:

There are like 32 students in a class and only one teacher. We get like 35 minutes per period. So after giving the lesson, after explaining and everything –after ensuring that they are in their places, then giving attention to those students is not that easy (RT6).

The challenge of mainstream teachers in providing individual attention to students with SEN due to large class size was emphasized. Teachers stated there were too many students than they can provide attention to.

"One teacher when attending to 30 students and trying to give individual attention, it is quite difficult to give special attention to such a student" (RT3).

Lack of Time

RTs found time as a challenge hindering their teaching process. A total of 45 responses (17.6%) stated lack of time as a challenge in implementing inclusive education.

RTs expressed having students with SEN in the mainstream class diverted them from their planned teaching process.

"Any student like that in a class means we have to give individual time to them. We are just taking time from our period especially for that child and the other children are lacking that time" (RT7).

Lack of Trained Teachers

From the responses of RTs, 44 responses (17.2%) stated lack of trained teachers as a challenge in inclusive education. The interviewees highlighted the lack of trained SEN teachers and teacher assistants in class was challenging when providing inclusive education in mainstream class.

One interviewee explained the inability to provide individual attention due to lack of teachers. She stated:

"There are students who need individual attention within the classroom also, within the inclusive environment. However, as they don't have enough teachers they are unable to provide the assistance" (RT1).

Teachers also were not confident with students with SEN in the class, without the help of a teacher assistant.

"One of the challenges I face is lack of teachers. We need a teacher assistant in the class because anything may happen in any situation" (RT3).

Also, teachers were optimistic about having a teacher assistant to help them in the class.

"It would be so nice if we could have a teacher assistant in each class" (RT8).

Furthermore, in some schools, the RTs attending to students with SEN were not trained teachers.

"The other thing is we have got very few teachers, very few. Only two teachers I would say. And those two teachers are not very well trained to cater to the special needs" (RT2).

It is also found that the current policy of allocating teachers was limiting trained teachers for schools to implement inclusive education.

"The current policy is counting the number of heads or number of students studying in the particular school and allocating teachers. There are not considering the severity of the disability" (RT 1).

When asked how this was a disadvantage for the school, the teacher stated:

The disadvantage is they are allocating the teachers to the number of students, but all students do not have similar disabilities. So two to three teachers cannot handle multiple disabilities [in the school] at one time. So that is the main problem. (RT1).

One teacher suggested how the policymakers could solve the issue of teacher allocation.

"So I think the Ministry [MOE] needs to think about it and change some policies and consider the number of cases of different needs we have, not the number of heads when allocating teachers" (RT2).

Lack of Knowledge

A total of 29 responses of RTs (11.3%) stated lack of knowledge as a challenge when implementing inclusive education. Teachers lacking knowledge of inclusive education could result in teachers' lack of confidence and ability for classroom management. RTs voiced they did not have enough knowledge of inclusive education.

"Teachers lacking knowledge about special needs or inclusivity and not having enough information is an issue we have" (RT5).

Teachers did not know how to attend to the needs of students with SEN in the mainstream class.

"Sometimes we see that if any hyperactive students are there in the class other students are also joining and we are unable to control them. We do not have such expertise and therefore it is very difficult" (RT7).

Discussion

From the findings, the main challenges of regular teachers were found to be lack of resources. Lack of teaching-learning materials not only hinder the teaching process, it also prevents the student who needs individual attention from engaging in learning. It is important to realize that

lack of resources such as teaching materials (curriculum) for diverse learners limits teachers' instruction and as a result, effective learning cannot take place. This is one reason emphasis has been made on creating an inclusive environment for the learners by Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Bandura (1994). A proper learning environment should be created for inclusion so that all children can learn well and achieve their potential (UNESCO, 2009). Physical resources such as more classrooms, accessibility and technical items should be in schools for full inclusion to occur. Also, schools should focus providing learner-centred teaching methods and develop learning materials (OECD, 2003), to cater to the needs of all children. Consequently, for effective inclusion, these resources should be maintained in regular schools where students with disabilities are enrolled (OECD, 2003). However, lack of funding and budget constraints, administrative and policy level support pose challenges that can slow down this progress (CRS Vietnam, 2010). Another challenge in inclusive education is lack of trained teachers.

Lack of trained teachers has a huge impact on both SEN units and mainstream classes. Hettiarachchi and Das (2014), suggested that an evolving concept needs to be addressed in pre-service and in-service teacher training and also provide training for special education teachers at special units and mainstream teachers, and strengthen the curricula for teacher training programs in higher education institutions. Hence, teacher training courses need to include modules and training for inclusive education to prepare teachers well ahead of entering the teaching field. Pre-service preparation is a crucial factor in guiding teachers to form positive beliefs about inclusive education (McMillan, 2008). Teachers equipped with the knowledge and skills to cater to diverse students help students to adapt to their environment and student performance (Maheshwari & Shapurkar, 2015), leading to successful inclusion. Preparing the teachers with the skills, knowledge, and attitudes to ensure a challenging learning and motivating classroom environment (Blanton, Pugach, & Florian, 2011), should be a commitment of all accountable parties (CRS Vietnam, 2010). To be an effective teacher in an inclusive classroom, teachers need to be up-to-date with the type of disabilities, methodologies, and policy (Maheshwari & Shapurkar, 2015). Additionally, Sharma et al., (2017) recommended teachers with prior experience of inclusive teaching to be included in pre-service and in-service teacher training programs so that their experiences with students with SEN could be shared with novice teachers. As a result, positivity towards disabilities could be built. Further, it was suggested to provide opportunities for pre-service and in-service teachers to observe classrooms where actual inclusive education occurs as pre-service training will equip teachers with practical experiences.

Moreover, prospective teachers need current skills and knowledge (Torombe, 2013), to cater to diverse learners. It is suggested that teacher education programmes should make an attempt to evaluate the impact of the training, make clear emphasis on knowledge, skills and practice in order to result in a significant shift in new graduates' thinking about inclusion (Sharma & Das, 2015; Sharma et al., 2013; Sharma, 2012). Furthermore, there is a need to make changes to the current policy of allocating teachers to the number of students in the Maldives. Policymakers should consider the severity and type of disability of students when allocating teachers for schools. As found in this study, lack of teacher assistants in the class to support the regular teacher was very challenging. Therefore, a teacher assistant should be available in all schools to assist in the mainstream class. In making schools inclusive, it is a common pattern for an assistant to work in the class with students with SEN, within the general curriculum (OECD, 2003).

A common concern of teachers is managing students with disruptive behaviour in the class (Willis, 2007), and teachers have reported feeling frustrated and guilt when the time is taken away from the majority of students when having to accommodate students with SEN in the class (Cassaday, 2011). The routine work of lesson planning, teaching, other extra and co-curricular activities and attending meetings consumes teachers daily hours. Additional time for regular teachers to complete paperwork and collaborate with SEN teachers is seen as unfair in comparison to time devoted to other students in the class (Cassaday, 2011). However, establishing a good support system within the school and education system, the issue with time can be resolved. Strategic training, specialist support team and a teacher assistant in class are found to be the most beneficial support system for teachers to successfully implement inclusive education (Willis, 2007).

Another challenge many teachers implementing inclusive education faced was a large class size. A large class size can overload teachers and pose difficulties for them to attend to individual children's needs (Torombe, 2013). Studies show that this can contribute to teachers developing negative feelings and even being annoyed to have students with special needs in class (Torombe, 2013). Also, a large class size is seen as a barrier to successful inclusion (Save the Children, 2002). While a large class can create many issues for a teacher, a small class can, on the other hand, have benefits. For example, a smaller class is always desired by many teachers and show a higher level of engagement and individualization (Zarghami & Schnellert, 2004). However, a small class has not shown to be a significant factor in successful inclusion (Save the Children, 2002). Although a large class in inclusive education may seem to be problematic for teachers, there is no evidence from research that a small class has any benefits on achievements of students with SEN (Zarghami & Schnellert, 2004). Hence, a large class may pose the issue of more work for the regular teacher, but if teaching assistants or teaching-learning resources are available, then the regular teachers could manage their time better.

Additionally, lack of teacher collaboration between regular teachers and special education teachers could undermine the whole inclusion process of the school. Hence, there are many important reasons to encourage teacher collaboration. It is found that teacher collaboration enhances learning outcomes (CRS Vietnam, 2010) and collaboration among whole staff contributes to successful inclusion as inclusion cannot happen in isolation (Maheshwari & Shapurkar, 2015). Also, high level of collaboration contributes to building a conducive environment (Blanton et al., 2011). Bouillet (2013) stated that collaborative schools are the heart of inclusive schools. Similarly, Mărgărițoiu (2010), expressed that one of the important roles in supporting inclusive education is played by teamwork, developing positive relationships between all educational actors by sharing experiences. In addition, collaborative schools promote cooperative relationships, within a school and between school and community (Bouillet, 2013). When teachers work collaboratively, they can create a more diverse and engaging lesson for students with different interests and intelligence (Villa & Thousand, 2003). There is also evidence suggesting that diversity in teamwork promotes innovation, which leads to a higher level of creativity in problem-solving (Voutsas, 2011).

Correspondingly, awareness of inclusive education at school level and community level is needed to foster positive attitudes. Since the policy on inclusive education in the Maldives is quite recent, it is important to involve educational authorities, in this case, the Ministry of Education. Awareness about the rights of the child, their needs, and aspiration (Save the Children, 2002) should be created in the society so that society becomes more understanding and tolerant (UNESCO, 2009). Teachers need to be made aware of the extra input (Maheshwari

& Shapurkar, 2015). This can be achieved by integrated pre-service and in-service teacher training programs to support students with disabilities in regular classrooms (CRS Vietnam, 2010). Additionally, a positive attitude towards inclusive education can be instilled from the top management of the schools. Teachers, school leaders, and other stakeholders should maintain and emphasize positive attitudes towards inclusion (CRS Vietnam, 2010) or inclusion will never succeed. Also, teachers' attitudes have a crucial role in inclusive education (Maheshwari & Shapurkar, 2015) and are found to affect the inclusion process and its outcomes (Torombe, 2013). Negative attitudes can build up from the teachers' experiences of teaching challenged students and as a result, changing attitudes can take time (UNESCO, 2009). Furthermore, studies have indicated that teachers' attitudes are impacted by factors such as teachers' beliefs about self-efficacy, prior training, institutional support, professional development training, and also the severity of the disability of students (Sharma, Chunawala, & Chari, 2017).

Conclusion

This study investigated the challenges of regular teachers in implementing inclusive education in government schools in the Republic of Maldives. The main challenges which hindered successful implementation of inclusive education were identified. Schools needed trained teachers, teaching assistants and extra support for teachers. It is recommended that the policymakers take necessary measures to provide resources and make changes to current policy in teacher allocation and class size. Also, steps should be taken to support general teachers with skills and knowledge through continued professional development programs and awareness programs to foster positive attitudes and teacher collaboration. Furthermore, it is proposed for policymakers to build partnerships with higher education institutions to develop innovative teacher education programs to ensure all teachers are equipped with skills, knowledge, and experience to implement inclusive education.

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