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Inclusive Education: Exploring The Roles, Leadership, and Recognition of Special Educators As Agents of Inclusion

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ABSTRACT

Regular schools are moving towards inclusion and redefining their policies, vision, and mission to include diverse populations. In this shift, the roles of special educators have undergone significant evolution. They not only teach students with disabilities, but they also support the entire school in implementing the inclusive practices. They have become guides, collaborators, co-teachers advocates, and facilitators to manage the school's inclusion requirements. Through these contributions, they have become the school's agent of inclusion and informal leaders.

This qualitative study, conducted through semi structured interviews and reflective questionnaires, highlights the shift in roles, the leadership behaviours and the recognition they receive from their school. Findings reveal how special educators are central to the inclusive transformation of schools and the need for recognising their contributions in building inclusive schools.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Special Educators, Roles and Responsibilities, Leadership, Perception, Recognition

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1. Introduction

Primarily, special educators were associated with special schools, where their basic responsibility was to teach children with disabilities. Their responsibilities mainly focused on developing individualised education programs, training children to meet daily living activities, teaching functional academics and preparing them for a vocation. In this context, special educators were considered case managers. They collaborated with the therapist and parents to work on the student's goals and progress. Special educators had limited opportunities to interact with other staff and were rarely seen in the regular schools.

With the initiation of inclusive education, the traditional role of special educators underwent a complete shift. Inclusive education policies and frameworks require schools to be inclusive and provide a supportive learning environment for children with disabilities. As inclusive schools begin to evolve, teachers are expected to understand the various disabilities and teach students with diverse learning, behavioural, and developmental needs (Heward, 2013). This shift required them to use differentiation, Universal Design for Learning and behavioural support (Friend, M. 2011). In inclusive settings, special educators have become vital members of the school community, supporting students with disabilities and teachers. This expanded role of special educators requires them to be part of a team, modify curriculum, develop individualised education plans, coordinate and collaborate, and work in inclusive settings (Ferguson, D., & Ralph, G. R., 1996).

Today, special educators, in addition to their remedial teaching, actively contribute to planning lessons with subject teachers, helping them differentiate and scaffold the content, counselling parents, advocating for students with disabilities and organising professional development for teachers. Furthermore, they are collaborators, mentors, facilitators, and teachers within schools. This expanded role closely aligns with distributed leadership concepts, where various stakeholders share leadership responsibilities.

This paper, through listening to the voices of special educators, studies how they perceive themselves in this evolving role, how others perceive them, and whether they feel their informal leadership is recognised in inclusive schools. It also explores their expectations from school and how schools can better support them in their roles as "invisible leaders" of inclusion.

2. Review of Literature

The development of inclusive education has led to a shift in the role of special educators.

Traditionally, special educators work in special schools and teach children with disabilities. They develop an IEP with goals that include daily living, functional academics and vocational skills. They are assigned a class of children with special

needs, or they serve as case managers for a few students. They interact with their students' therapist or the parents to share the progress and goals. They have fewer opportunities to interact with other special educators or the school staff to discuss their learners. According to Takala et al. (2009), special educators work with children with disabilities, and they seldom work in inclusive schools to meet and collaborate with teachers. The special educators who have been addressing the individual needs of children with disabilities in special schools have begun transitioning to inclusive schools since the enactment of inclusion policies and Acts. Every child has the right to learn in a school where his/her peers learn. They have the right to experience and explore the same education as their classmates. Children with disabilities also have the same right to learn and participate in all class activities as their peers.

The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education declares," all children, including those with disabilities, should be included in schools". This vision has introduced a new perspective on special education and has led to the establishment of inclusive schools. Inclusive education offers students with disabilities to participate in regular schools within their local community (Sharma et al. 2017). The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act 2016 emphasise that schools should be welcoming and supportive of all learners, regardless of their disabilities. The policy recommends that schools adopt an inclusive approach by establishing resource centres, employing special educators, providing professional development training for teachers and special educators, and utilising inclusive teaching and learning materials along with co-curricular activities.

Their new role establishes them as a key person in promoting inclusivity within schools.

Special educators meet the needs of inclusive schools and become the key person in supporting the school in implementing the inclusive practices. According to Heward (2013), in inclusive schools, some learners may require support in their academics and behaviours, and Friend(2011) suggests that to address these needs, the school should be provided with instructional strategies and a behavioural support program. These interventions are implemented with the assistance of special educators, and the school should have special educators to support students with disabilities in participating in regular classrooms (Liasidou & Svensson, 2014; Whalley, 2018). The special educators collaborate (Friend, 2011), develop policies and learning plans for students with disabilities (Angelides et al., 2010; Liasidou & Svensson, 2014; Poon-McBrayer & Wong, 2013) and assist other educators in examining the cause for a student's struggle and identifying possible interventions (Ferguson & Ralph, 1996). According to Devecchi et al. (2012) and Hedegaard-Soerensen et al. (2018), the contributions of special educators establish them as key persons in promoting inclusivity within schools.

The key person demonstrates strong leadership qualities

Special educators who previously focused solely on helping children with disabilities in their daily living and functional academics have begun to consider how these children can achieve the same learning objectives as their peers. This change has made the role of special educators more complex (Reynolds et al.,

1987; Stainback, Stainback & Jackson, 1992). To achieve the goal of students with disabilities learning the same lessons as their peers, the special educator stepped into multiple roles.

a. Mentoring colleagues

Special educators transitioned from teaching children with disabilities in a separate class to co-teaching with the regular teachers in the classroom. They work together with the teachers in preparing the lesson plan and scaffolding the content based on the needs. They equip teachers with strategies and techniques that suit the diverse needs of the whole class. They help teachers incorporate differentiation and Universal Design Learning in their lesson plans and model the strategy. They monitor students' progress, provide feedback on the methods implemented, and offer suggestions for improvement. This aligns with Whittaker and Taylor's (1995) findings that in the effective inclusion models, special educators modify tasks, team-teach, develop alternative instructional strategies, and assist in preparing for the assessments. Thus, the special educator empowers teachers in building their capacity.

b. Collaboration

The special educator collaborates with the homeroom and subject teachers to draft the ILP goals, decide instructional strategies and monitor the progress. They co-plan the lesson and co-teach the class. The educator also meets the cocurricular teachers, external professionals or therapists and explains the goals, ensuring that all are on the same page and avoiding methodological conflicts. The special educators invite them to be co-observers and partners in the inclusion process. They also encourage them to act as strength spotters, helping to identify the strengths of students with disabilities in co-curricular activities. This information can help in making informed decisions about subject choices in school. Besides teachers and other professionals, the special educators collaborate with parents. They provide home programs, behaviour management strategies and emotional regulation tips. In addition to this, they guide parents in finding a suitable therapist and offer counselling. (Friend, 2007, p. 515) says that special educators regularly collaborate with families, teachers, therapists, and other related professionals. This shows that the special educator fosters teamwork and shared responsibility.

a. Problem-solving and Innovation

The special educator promotes inclusion in the school by identifying areas of challenge and addressing them. The educator helps teachers in early identification and observes any red flags. This enables the child to receive early intervention, allowing the school to plan the right support in the early years. The special educator observes the learning gaps of children, identifies the root cause and works with teachers to meet the needs of those children who do not fall in the disability category. They develop individual interventions, such as quick check-ins, mentoring and a peer buddy program to reduce the academic gaps of these students. In addition to students in Tier 3 who receive an IEP, the educator works with the class to identify students who might fall under Tier 2. These children need short goals to bridge their academic gaps and modify their behaviour. She keeps track of the progress and consistently refines solutions. She also follows up

with children who have been weaned off from the support and closely monitors them so that they do not fall through the cracks again. Research shows that special educators play a key role in early identification, analysing learning gaps, and designing targeted interventions within Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports (Vaughn, Wanzek & Fletcher, 2020; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017).

In addition to identifying learning disabilities and learning gaps, the special educator also recognises the community needs and challenges, such as attitudes and barriers towards inclusion. They design and conduct workshops and training to build awareness and promote inclusion. They serve as schoolwide leaders who address attitudinal barriers and create inclusive cultures through training and capacity-building (Brock & Schaefer, 2015).

b. Decision Making and Advocacy The special educator, after identifying students with disabilities, helps the school recommend the diagnostic centres for the standardised evaluation. They also convince the parents, if they are in denial, to accept their child's disability and recommend counselling when required. They help parents, teachers and schools understand the diagnostic report and select the right intervention plan (Fish, 2006; Turnbull, Turnbull, Wehmeyer, & Shogren, 2015). They guide students in choosing appropriate pathways, such as subject and career choices (Kohler, Gothberg, Fowler, & Coyle, 2016).

Studies have highlighted that special educators assist schools in drafting their inclusion policies, auditing inclusive practices, planning and providing accommodations and access arrangements for the students (McLeskey & Waldron, 2011; Ainscow, 2005). The special educator also advocates for the child's rights and needs in the school, such as the need for braille and audio books, as well as tactile teaching aids. They also contribute to the school's admission policies and help in resource allocation (Morningstar et al., 2017).

Literature has well-documented evidence that special educators are the central facilitators of assistive technology (Almalki & Drahošová, 2022), motivating peer buddy support programs (Carter et al., 2015) and modifying the environment from building ramps to individual seating arrangements in the classroom (Wehmeyer & Shogren, 2017).

In recent years, the roles of special educators have undergone significant changes. They have transitioned from teaching basic skills to the role of an advocate, involved in decision-making, collaborating, counselling, mentoring, facilitating and monitoring the inclusive education program of the school. All of these demonstrate that they have naturally taken up leadership roles. This aligns with the concept of distributed leadership, where everyone is involved in a leadership role and assumes the leadership responsibility regardless of their position in the school. They could be the formal or informal leaders of the school. The special educator also takes responsibility for guiding and implementing the inclusive practices in the school. Studies explain that leadership can come from anyone who makes a meaningful contribution to the school's work (Ainscow, 2005).

Perception and Recognition of these roles

Special educators are aware that they play multiple roles that are considered leadership qualities; however, most of them perceive their role primarily as a teacher who remediates students with disabilities. Studies show that special educators are key leaders in inclusive schools, even if their position does not state them as leaders (Waldron & McLeskey, 2010; Ainscow, 2005), and special educators often underestimate their own leadership (York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

General education teachers, parents and children view special educators as magicians who expect to provide immediate solutions to address the issues and find a remedy quickly. When that doesn't work, they assume the special educator is ineffective. Some general education teachers view the special educator's role as restricted to supporting students with disabilities and helping them in class. They also think that a special educator should possess enough knowledge about the disabilities. These unrealistic expectations also shape the perception of leadership qualities (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013).

3. Methodology

The role of special educators shifted from traditional remedial teaching in special schools to inclusive education. They collaborate, advocate, facilitate, and enhance the effective implementation of inclusive teaching and learning practices in the schools. As their roles expand, special educators also demonstrate leadership attributes that often remain unnoticed. This qualitative study examines the evolving roles of special educators in inclusive schools and the informal leadership qualities they demonstrate. The study also aims to understand how the school, including teachers and others, recognise the special educator's roles and their leadership qualities. Additionally, this study examines the expectations special educators have of their school and suggestions for meeting those expectations. Accordingly, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the roles and leadership qualities demonstrated by special educators in inclusive schools?

2. How are the roles of special educators perceived and recognised by themselves and other members of the school community?

3. What are the expectations they have, and how can the school implement them?

The tool is a self-constructed questionnaire developed from the concepts of teacher leadership (York-Barr & Duke, 2004) and inclusive practices (Sharma, 2021). The questionnaire includes multiple-choice items, a Likert scale and open-ended questions to explore the roles, leadership, and recognition of special educators in inclusive schools. Using a mix of question types enables researchers to gather both quantifiable information and descriptive insights (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). The experts in inclusive education reviewed the tool and provided their feedback. The input was included, and the tool was revised.

Participants

In this study, 11 Special educators were selected through purposive sampling.

The special educators are from various school boards, including the State Board, the Central Board of Secondary Education, the Cambridge Board, and the International Baccalaureate, based in Chennai, Tamil Nadu. They all have more than 3 years of work experience serving in the primary and secondary sections of the school.

Data Collection

The data were collected through a Google form. Considering the busy schedule of the special educators, a Google Form was used to collect the information. The educators were informed about the study, and their names and email addresses were not collected to maintain their privacy. Informed consent was included in the description of the form.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the Likert-scale responses were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequency and percentage distribution). Qualitative responses were analysed through thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework to identify recurring patterns in participants' perceptions and practices and summarise the key ideas. The researcher familiarised herself with the data, generated initial codes, and grouped them into broader themes: Roles and Leadership Qualities, Perception and Recognition, Challenges, Expectations and Implementations. Themes were refined through iterative review, and representative participant quotes were used to support interpretation.

Although Likert-scale items were included to gauge the extent of agreement with various challenges, responses were analysed thematically rather than statistically. Themes were formed by identifying patterns from agreement and disagreement responses, open-ended responses and participant narratives. This approach was taken to incorporate both quantitative and qualitative insights.

AI-assisted tools were used to enhance the visual presentation of the figures. The analysis and interpretation of both the qualitative and quantitative data were carried out entirely by the researcher.

4. Findings and Discussion

This section discusses the study findings by examining the roles, leadership and recognition of special educators in inclusive school settings. The discussion first explores the primary roles of special educators and the other roles they have taken for effective inclusion practices. Next, it discusses the leadership qualities they demonstrate and the extent to which they are involved in inclusion-related decision-making at the school level. Then, the section explores how special educators perceive their role and how they believe others perceive it. Finally, the section addresses the special educators' expectations and how the school can meaningfully implement them to strengthen the inclusive practices.

4.1 Roles of the Special Educator

The primary role of special educators, as most of them stated, is to support students with disabilities in their schools. In Table 1, 81.8% of them reported that

Primary Role of Special Educators	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Supporting individual students with disabilities	9	81.8
Collaborating with general education teachers	9	81.8
Designing and implementing inclusive practices	7	63.6
Advocacy and awareness-building	6	54.5
Administrative/ coordination role	3	27.3

Table 1. Primary role in the school

their primary role is to work with students with disabilities in creating and executing individualised programs. They have also mentioned that to create a program, they collaborate with the general education teachers. Sixty-three point six per cent of them stated that they design and implement inclusive practices in their school. 54.5% of special educators advocate for inclusion and create awareness, and 27.3% of them perform administrative roles. The primary role of the special educator in inclusive schools in Chennai is to support children with disabilities. Still, they also take on other roles, such as collaborating with general education teachers, designing and implementing inclusive practices, advocating, building awareness and some administrative roles. Studies show that the primary role of special educators is to teach children with disabilities and work on individualised education programs (Friend, M., & Cook, L., 2013). They also collaborate, advocate and influence inclusive practices (York-Barr et al., 2005).

4.2 Leadership Qualities

Though special educators' primary role is to teach students with disabilities, they also collaborate, advocate, mentor and support the school in problem-solving. Figure 1 illustrates the leadership qualities the special educators demonstrate, such as collaborating with other teachers, advocating for students with disabilities and their families, mentoring their colleagues and supporting problem-solving. Thirty-six point four per cent of special educators are involved in the school's policy and decision-making processes.

The participants were asked to describe the instances when they acted as leaders

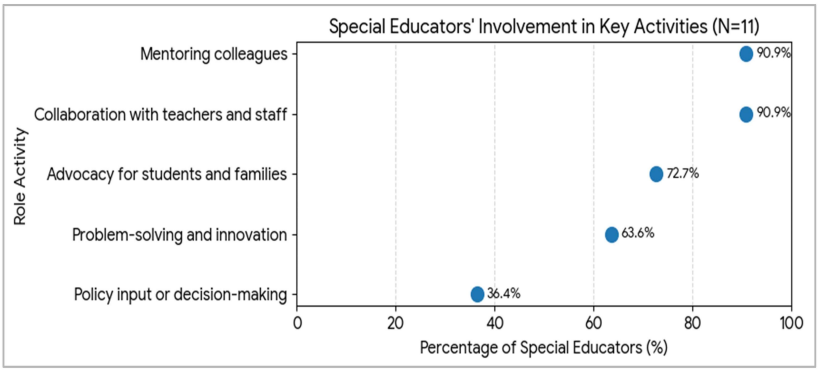

Figure 1. Leadership Qualities Demonstrated

in their school. One of the special educators shared, "I took the initiative to design differentiated lesson plans and shared them with colleagues to support students with diverse learning needs. I also mentored teachers on using multisensory strategies in their classrooms, advocated for accommodations during assessments, and provided input for shaping the school's inclusive education policy." The other special educator mentioned, "when parents are in denial, talking to them and helping them in accepting their child's challenges and strengths." Another added, "Preparing question papers based on the level of students with learning difficulties and helping them in reading out the papers. Helping teachers to include certain methodologies for the benefit of all the students, including the children with learning difficulties." One of them shared, "To decide whether the curriculum suits the child or not and inform the stakeholders at the right time." One special educator shared, "In my earlier workplace, I was fairly successful in curating a curriculum for students with profound needs, which was teacher-friendly and student-friendly. As a team, we brought in many new initiatives, including the identification of students with possible giftedness in the nonverbal student population." Another mentioned, "I had been a coordinator in my school for a particular group of teachers, mentoring and guiding them in the field of special education."

These findings align with those of York-Barr et al. (2005). They noted that special educators' routines include leadership qualities such as coordination, advocacy, and professional mentoring. Likewise, Friend (2011)emphasised that collaboration and discussion with mainstream teachers are the keystones of inclusive education. The results from this study acknowledge that special educators act not only as instructional experts but also as catalysts for inclusion—bridging classroom practices and school-level decision-making.

Figure 2 illustrates the frequency with which special educators are involved in school-level decision-making related to inclusive practices. 18.2% of special educators reported being involved in decision-making relating to admission policies, placement and pathway decisions for students with disabilities, adapting and modifying curriculum, planning accommodations and access arrangements, supporting staff training, or advising on resource allocation. None of them reported that they were never involved in decision-making. 36.4% of special educators mentioned that they are often involved in decision-making related to inclusion.

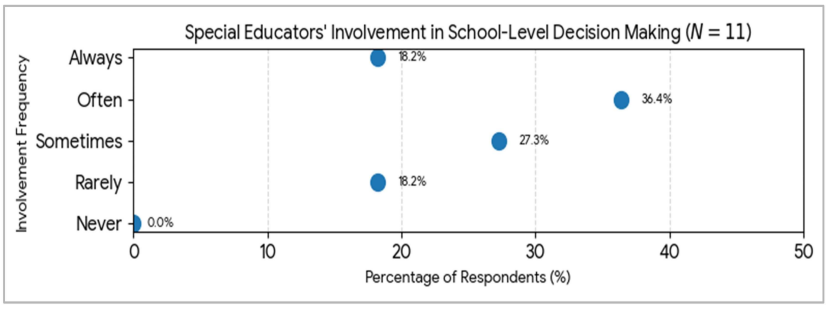

Figure 2. Involvement in Decision Making

Regardless of the type of school or curriculum board, the special educator's primary role is to support students with disabilities, collaborate with general education teachers, and participate in decision-making related to inclusion. The findings highlight that the special educator's primary role of remedial teaching has evolved, and they take on multiple leadership roles such as collaboration, advocacy, mentorship and instructional design. Although they take up new roles and are considered key agents in the inclusive practices, the staff and colleagues perceive them differently. The following section explores the perceptions and recognition they receive in their school.

4.3 Perception and Recognition

Special educators in the inclusive schools play multiple roles that reflect leadership qualities. It is essential to study how special educators themselves perceive their role, how others perceive and how the school recognizes their roles, as this has a direct influence on the inclusive practices of the school. Studies have found that self-perception plays a key role in teacher leadership, and depending on their perception, they initiate collaboration and the decision-making process (York-Barr & Duke, 2004; Bagley & Tang, 2019). Also, how others perceive their role directly shapes the special educator's role. When their expertise is valued, they are invited to collaborate and participate in discussions, and when their suggestions are considered, their contribution to the school increases (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2017). When the special educator's work is either formally or informally recognised, they are motivated and encouraged to contribute to the school's inclusive practices(York-Barr et al., 2005). The following section discusses how special educators perceive their role, how others perceive them, and the recognition they get from their school.

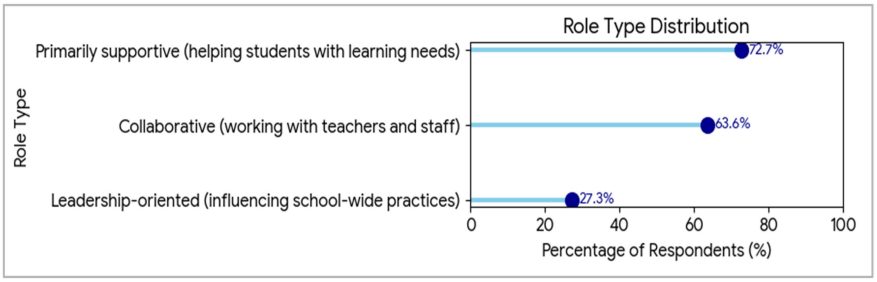

Figure 3. Special Educators' Self Perception

Special educators were asked how they perceive themselves in the leadership roles they play. Approximately 72.7% recorded that they primarily see themselves as supporting or helping students with their learning needs and then as collaborators. 27.3% only viewed themselves as leaders influencing the school-wide practices. Figure 3 illustrates that many of them agreed that their role has expanded beyond the traditional teaching and evolved to collaboration.

Special educators were asked about how others perceived their roles; most participants responded that they were viewed as both helpers and collaborators. Only 3 participants mentioned that they were seen as having leadership qualities in their school.

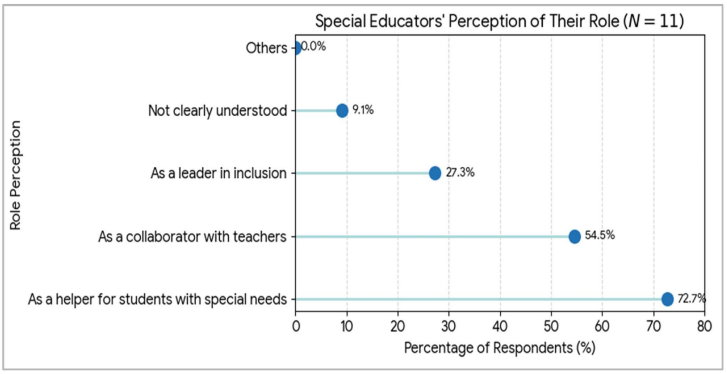

Figure 4. Others' Perception

When asked whether their contributions were formally recognised by their schools, the responses revealed a mixed picture. From Figure 5, out of the eleven special educators, five reported that the school administration officially recognised their contribution. Four of them indicated that their work was recognised informally through verbal appreciation or peer acknowledgement rather than through official channels, and two shared that their efforts were rarely recognised.

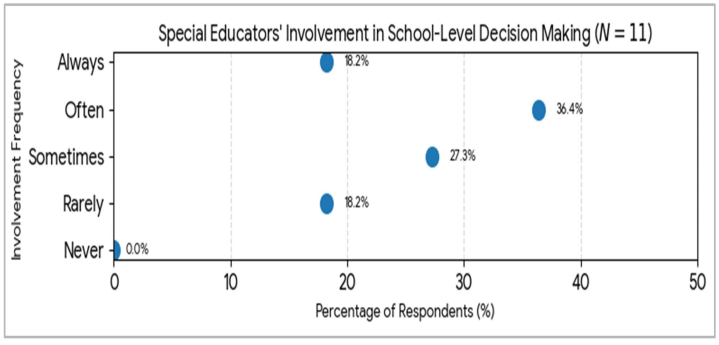

Figure 5. School's Recognition

Overall, the findings suggest that special educators are taking various responsibilities in inclusive schools, but they still tend to view themselves as people who support students rather than as leaders. Many shared that their work now includes a lot of collaboration, yet only a few felt they were influencing school-wide

decisions. This matches how others in the school perceive them. Most of them perceive special educators as helpers and collaborators, while a few of them recognise their leadership qualities. The recognition they receive is also mixed. Many of the educators' efforts are overlooked. These findings reveal that although special educators significantly contribute and demonstrate leadership roles, their value is yet to be fully recognised within the school community.

4.4 Voices from Special Educators: Expectations and Pathways

This section features the voices of the special educators. They share what they need from their school to perform their duties effectively and practical ideas for implementing them.

a. Clear roles and responsibilities: Special educators face challenges due to unclear and overlapping roles and responsibilities. They wanted their school to define the roles and list all the responsibilities. Special Educators expect their school to sit with the special education team and decide the roles, as each school will have its way of working and implementing inclusion practices. They believe that providing a shared understanding of the roles and responsibilities will create a structure, and inclusion will become effective.

b. Inclusion in decision making (e.g.,during admissions): Special educators emphasised the need to be included in key decisions, especially during the admissions process. They felt that their input was essential because the special education department is aware of the available resources and the department's capacity to support new students with disabilities. Involving them early helps in realistic planning and appropriate placement decisions.

c. Open-mindedness from School Leadership: Participants wanted school leaders to understand the nature of their work and recognise that a child's progress depends on several factors and not just the special educator's efforts. They wish that their school's leadership team were open-minded and understanding of the challenges involved in working with children with disabilities, which could be addressed through conducting section-wise department meetings, sharing challenges and best practices, and reflecting.

d. Disability awareness for parents and teachers: The special educators highlighted the need for their schools to organise training and workshops for parents and teachers to understand disabilities, the importance of intervention, and to set realistic, achievable goals for students with disabilities. This would help the school community gain scientific knowledge about the disabilities and suitable teaching methods to promote effective inclusion.

5. Limitations of The Study

This study has certain limitations that should be acknowledged. The study collected data only from special educators, and perspectives from other stakeholders, such as the leadership team, parents, teachers and students, were not included. The sample size was small and may introduce subjective bias and affect the transferability of the findings. Another limitation was that the data was

collected using a Google Form, which may have restricted opportunity for follow-up and clarification of responses, particularly for the open-ended questions.

6. Implications

The practical implications are that the school should formally recognise the various leadership roles played by special educators and include them in the decision-making process. The professional development program can focus on teacher collaboration, co-teaching and problem-solving between the mainstream teachers and special educators. The special educators should receive training on upscaling their instructional methods.

At the policy level, the school clearly defines the role of special educators and their responsibilities and supports professional development training. The education department should consider creating support teams in each school, and special educators are the core members.

7. Conclusion

This study explored the various leadership roles played by the special educators and the recognition they receive from the school. Their voices spoke about the expectations they have from the school and practical ways to implement them. Recognising and supporting special educators will be one of the central ideas in enhancing inclusive practices.

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