A RIGHT TO SPEAK AND A RIGHT TO BE HEARD

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ABSTRACT
The study reported in this article is based on the premise that listening to the voices of students with Speech, Language and Communication Needs (SLCN) and reflecting and acting on student views is essential within inclusive education. Six primary grade students and six teachers participated in this action research project. Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews, informal interview techniques and classroom observations. Data was analyzed using a mixed methods approach. Findings suggest that teachers’ knowledge and understanding regarding students with SLCN increase when they listen to students. This makes the teachers amenable to invest time and energy to learn. Teachers also require to be supported through continuous professional development programs.

KEYWORDS: Action research, inclusive education, professional development, speech, language and communication needs, teacher-student communication

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND
The research on which this article is based was conducted for the purpose of enhancing the experience of inclusive education for students with Speech, Language and Communication Needs (SLCN) in Sri Lanka. This article explores the journey of six teachers as they consider the views of their students with SLCN and alter teacher-student communication. The research was based on Article 12 of the UN convention of rights for children (UNICEF, 1989) which states that students with disabilities including students with SLCN, must be provided with every opportunity to express their views as their peers.

Inclusive Education
The principle of inclusive education was adopted at the World Conference on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994). The idea of inclusive education for an inclusive society was promoted by researchers and institutions interested in lessons learned through
integration, the long-term effects of special education placement (Thomazet, 2009) and rights of disabled individuals (Rioux, 2007). The Americans with Disabilities Act (1990, USA) and the Disability Discrimination Act (1995, UK) were influential in moving inclusive educational practices at a global scale (Peters, 2003). Discourse on inclusion continues because diversity in societies due to migration is widespread (Lenney, 2006).

Inclusive education emphasizes the fundamental right of people to receive “equal recognition, respect and treatment regardless of difference” (Armstrong, 2008, p. 12). It is viewed as a political solution to exclusion (Moore & Slee, 2012) and discourages exclusion of children and individuals from education due to differences (O’Hanlon, 2003). Inclusive education therefore demands that all children regardless of their health or social conditions be educated alongside their nondisabled peers (UNESCO, 2001).

The voices of students are considered important in inclusive school settings. Students feel that they belong to the school community when they are listened to. Hence, they are more willing to participate in school life (Gillies & Carrington, 2004). Article 12 of the UN convention of rights of children, states that “respecting them, making it possible for them to express themselves and giving their opinions and views due weight” (UNICEF, 1989) is paramount. The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) and the UN Standard Rule 6, also endorses the view that all disabled individuals must participate in the decision making processes within education.

Teachers are key players in a school transformation process (Vlachou, 1997) because they are in a unique position to demonstrate acceptance of diversity through changes in communication practices, expectations of students, flexibility and adaptability (Sebba & Sachdev, 1997). Teachers however, like any other professionals, learn and work within limitations set by intellect, society and culture in which they live in (Day, 2002). They are also influenced by personal beliefs, values, their exposure to learning opportunities, the school environment and their private lives (Day, 2002).

**Students with Speech, Language and Communication Needs (SLCN)**

A significant number of children with SLCN attend inclusive schools (Wellington & Wellington, 2002). Children are diagnosed with SLCN when there is a mismatch between age appropriate developmental expectations and development of their ability to communicate (Beitchman & Brownlie, 2010). SLCN may manifest as a delay or a disorder (Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists, 2009).

Difficulties arise due to three causes; a primary impairment in the absence of neuro-developmental problems or social causes or a secondary condition associated with another primary disorder or with socio-economic disadvantage (Gascoigne, 2006). SLCN refer to problems including disfluency of speech, articulation and phonological difficulties, voice disorders, inability to express thoughts effectively when speaking, deficits in understanding verbal, non-verbal and graphic symbol systems and concepts, and difficulties encountered when using language in social situations (Bercow, 2008).
Background
The research was based in Sri Lanka, an island located in the Indian Ocean in South Asia. Statistics reveal that 1.6 percent of Sri Lanka’s 20 million population is disabled. Almost 11.5 percent of the disabled population is considered to be children under the age of 14 years and 26.7 percent of the disabled population has hearing and speech disorders (UN-ESCAP, 2012). Although prevalence of individuals with only SLCN is currently unavailable by considering the global trend it is estimated that at least ten percent of the population display SLCN (Wickremesooriya, 2012).


The research was conducted in a Christian private school for boys, located in the suburbs of the commercial city, Colombo. The school had for almost a decade sought to improve the quality of experiences for its disabled student population through physical and social integration. In 2004, the administrators decided to expand the support services to include ALL learners within an inclusive classroom environment.

RESEARCH AIMS
This paper focuses on three aims:
- To access students’ views regarding practices in teacher-student communication;
- To identify existing teacher-student communication practices;
- To empower teachers to critically evaluate their teacher-student communication practices to enable them to ultimately engage exclusively in inclusive communication practices.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY
Action Research
The research was conducted by engaging in an action research methodology. Action research blends the two processes of research and action to bring social change (Neuman, 2006). Within action research the researcher is an insider, as opposed to other research methodologies where researchers are considered outsiders studying a situation (Smith, Todd & Waldman, 2009). Action research therefore diminishes the distance between those who decide and those who execute plans (Dick, 2002).

The dual processes of action and research are achieved through a cyclical process first introduced by John Collier and Kurt Lewin in 1946 (Ferrence, 2000). By considering the varied models I designed a model with two action cycles; the minimum required to witness
transformation (Kember, 2000). Each cycle involved four phases: Critical reflection, planning, action and monitoring and evaluation (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: My action research model**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Critical reflection</th>
<th>Planning</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Monitoring &amp; Evaluation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Data Collection**

Individuals with SLCN have difficulties when communicating their ideas (Beitchman & Brownlie, 2010). Hence, accessing their views is a challenge, requiring adults to find avenues of communication that will lead to an understanding of students’ needs and wishes (Wertheimer, 1997). By studying data collection instruments commonly used when researching in educational settings and acknowledging that a single instrument may not produce sufficient information, I selected four instruments. These included semi-structured interviews with a predetermined set of questions that can be amended according to the type of responses given by the interviewees (Kember, 2000), storytelling, an informal interviewing technique sometimes used to gain access to children’s perspectives (Lewis & Lindsay, 2000), informal conversations (Tangen, 2008) and visual representations that directly speak to the audience (O’Neill, Giddens, Breathnach, Bagley, Bourne, & Judge, 2002).

Observing classrooms is considered an effective method to study teacher-student talk (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorensen, 2009). Hence, classroom observations were conducted to verify student views.

**Data Analysis**

A mixed methods approach was opted for because a combined approach of qualitative and quantitative analysis provides different and useful perspectives and enriches decisions made during the research process (Axinn & Pearce, 2006). The method was also conducive to the school administrators’ preference for quantitative analysis and my own perception of the suitability of qualitative analysis.

**PREPARING FOR ACTION RESEARCH**

Prior to embarking on the action cycles it was essential that the following criteria were in place.

**Gaining Ethical Approval**

Ethical clearance from the department of human communication sciences, faculty of medicine, University of Sheffield was obtained prior to commencing this research.

**Identifying the Writing Style**

Post-modern action researchers elect to apply a first person narration (MacIntyre, 2000; Oliver, 2004) since they believe that the traditional view regarding silent authorship does not acknowledge the active role that the researcher plays when carrying out the research.
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(McNiff & Whitehead, 2002). My personal belief coincides with this school of thought. Hence, I elected to write using a first person narrative approach.

**Selecting Research Participants**
The potential recruits were identified as primary grade students aged between 6-12 years currently receiving student support. It was determined that SLCN could be the primary or secondary impairment.

Each student’s degree of difficulty was measured through a rating scale comprising of four levels (0-3). The skill level descriptions were never (0), sometimes (1), often (2) and always (3). The skills were extracted from the Bercow Report (2008) definition. They included; speaks fluently, speaks without articulation errors, narrates sequentially, uses grammar and vocabulary appropriate for age, expresses needs clearly, follows whole class instructions perfectly, answers questions accurately, communicates with peers and participates in language based group activities.

Eight students of different ages with the lowest total scores were selected. The student profile organized in alphabetical order comprised of pseudonyms to maintain anonymity (Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Name (Pseudonym)</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amal</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charitha</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heshan</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josh</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samuel</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shanuth</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yadesh</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yovaan</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Obtaining Consent from Student Participants**
Respecting the cultural norms, parents were enlisted to obtain student consent. A parents meeting was organised to provide information including research aims, selection of students, the research process, benefits to be derived, confidentiality, study review and future actions. The parents were invited to voice concerns, pose queries and seek clarification. They were thereafter entrusted with a model narrative to explain the research activity to the children at home (Figure 2).
Ms. S is going to study the way the teacher and you talk to each other in the classroom. She will tell you what she is going to do. She will also ask you a few questions. When she is talking to you she will record the conversations on her Dictaphone just like she does sometimes when you go for therapy. If you want to be part of this activity we need to fill in this form. If you don’t like to take part in this activity you can tell Mummy and Daddy and we will tell Ms. S. Remember that if you don’t like to continue doing the activity you can stop at any time. You don’t have to.

**Figure 2: Model narrative to explain the research**

Student consent forms (Figure 3) were designed by using written and visual representations to aid comprehension. Tick boxes were included for students to record acknowledgements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>My parents have explained what I will have to do</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Eight students were identified. Seven students agreed to be part of the research. Questions were not posed to Charitha who was unwilling to participate.

**Inviting Teacher Participants**
The teachers of the seven students, all female, a common feature in primary schools in Sri Lanka, were invited to participate in the research. The teachers were presented with an information sheet and explanations. Six teachers accepted the invitation. Although Samuel’s teacher declined, she was not required to give reasons for her decision.

**Collecting Pre-Action Data**
Data regarding current practices in teacher-student communication was required to commence the first phase; critical reflection, in the action research process. A twofold approach involving student participants and classroom observations was initiated for this purpose.

**Interviewing students**
Students were interviewed in groups of three because they feel comfortable, secure and supported when peers are present (Gwynn, 2004). Shanuth, Josh and Yadesh were in Group P, while Amal, Heshan and Yovaan formed group Q. One hour was allocated for each interview. The exact times and days were decided in concurrence with the respective class teachers.
Interviews were conducted at the Student Support Unit, a place familiar to the students. The students sat in a semi-circle, while I sat in close proximity and directly opposite them to capture their attention, encourage active participation and reduce opportunities of students getting embroiled in other activities and losing focus of the interview.

Interview questions were designed by using simple and precise language. Questions were rephrased in the students’ first languages (i.e., Sinhalese or Tamil) for comprehension. Students in group Q responded with enthusiasm and ease. Josh and Shanuth in Group P were quiet and unresponsive.

Hence, attempts were made to gather data made through storytelling. A folktale about a slow rabbit was selected and modified for the purpose of eliciting necessary information. The location was shifted to outdoors.

Some students such as Yadesh simultaneously associated their experiences, with the slow rabbit as I (Researcher) related the story (Excerpt 1).

**Excerpt 1:**

Researcher: That’s right. So, a slow rabbit is unusual. This rabbit was different from the rest of his family and friends because he was slow. He was always picked on. All everybody told him was that he must hurry up.

Yadesh: I am also like that rabbit. Teacher is always telling me to hurry up, and Amma (Mother) is always shouting that I take long to finish my homework.

Josh responded only when questions were directly addressed to him.

Researcher: So, would you also like if someone helps you? Like Owly helped rabbit?

Josh: Malan helps me.

Shanuth listened attentively but did not utter a word.

Since storytelling also did not bring on the desired results from Josh and Shanuth I decided to become alert to turn informal occasions to rich data collection opportunities. A conversation between Josh (J) and me (R) brings another dimension to student views (Figure 4).

I also filed sketches drawn by the students. One illustration belonged to Yovaan (Figure 5) who sketched his class teacher bearing a cane and threatening punishment when asked to illustrate one event that stood out in his learning environment.

Having completed student interviews I moved on to collecting data via classroom observations.
R: Sometimes it’s hard for you to finish the work in class. Would you like if someone helps you?
J: (Nods head vigorously and smiles shyly) then I can play in the interval? (Josh often has to forgo interval and playtime to complete the day’s work.)
R: Yes, of course. That would be lovely wouldn’t it? Is it alright if I ask Miss Mendis (pseudonym for the assistant teacher) to help you a little?
J: (With a frown creasing his brow. He seems very worried) Will Miss (class teacher) get angry?
R: I am sure she will be happy to see you finish your work soon.
J: (Lowers voice to a whisper) Please, don’t tell Miss that I said this!
R: No, I won’t.
J: Can I tell you a secret?
R: Yes, only if you want to.
J: Will you bend down?
R: (I oblige)
J: (Speaks with hands cupped to my ears) I don’t like when she shouts “Nichola, s” (Imitating the class teacher who calls him by his last name; a feature practiced in most boys’ schools) then I forget what I have to do.
R: Hmm. I know it can be hard. Let me see what I can do? (We reach my office) Let’s keep the books on this table. Thank you for helping me.
(I quickly write a note for the teacher who might punish him for being late to class) Take this note for Miss and run to your class now. I will see you tomorrow.
J: Bye, Miss. (runs quickly weaving his way through a throng of students pretending to drive a car) Brrmm, brrmmm peep peep
Conducting classroom observations

Six classrooms that the student participants belonged to was observed to record teacher-student communication practices. Although the research did not focus on teacher communication directed at the whole classroom, data pertaining to whole classrooms were collected because the teachers and student participants communicate within the broader context of their classrooms.

A grid was designed to document the interactional dimension that enables quantitative and qualitative analysis (Table 2). The data collection grid comprised of Time, Turn, Speaker Direction, Dialogue, Code and Commentary.

Table 2: Data collection grid for classroom observations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Turn</th>
<th>Speaker Direction</th>
<th>Dialogue</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Commentary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Time was recorded at five minute intervals since manual recording is time consuming. Turn was records of each turn of talk, represented by a numerical value. A turn comprised of a single or more moves. For instance;
Teacher (a): Show me your books (Single move)
Teacher (b): I don't want any noise. Sit down and start writing (two moves).

Speaker Direction was indicated by using the sign “>”. Speakers were identified with abbreviations: Teacher (T), Student who is been observed (S), Peers (P) and Whole Class (C). If the T addressed S it was recorded as T>S. The dialogue column was a record of the exact words spoken. Codes for each exchange type and its sub-categories were designed by focusing on broad categories of “exchange types”: Teacher initiation, teacher feedback and evaluation, pupil response and pupil initiation. Each “exchange type” was further split into 18 sub-categories, eight for teacher initiation, three for teacher feedback and evaluation, one for pupil response and six for pupil initiation. A unique numeral “Code” was used to tag the sub-categories of exchange types. For instance if the teacher initiated communication and informed the student participant by personalizing the lecture, the code read as “2b” [Table 3].

Table 3: Example of coding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Exchange type</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Sub-categories</th>
<th>Details</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Initiation</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Informs / Lectures</td>
<td>a. Generalises</td>
<td>This is number ‘5’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>b. Personalises</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The social dimensions were recorded in the commentary column.

Each classroom was observed on two separate occasions, for half an hour each. I chose unobtrusive seating locations to avoid disturbing the classroom proceedings and to gain a
clear view of student participants. Since manual recording is unable to capture all interactions I recorded as many interactions teachers directed at participant students and the participant students contributions to classroom talk. I word processed the manually recorded data and then allocated exchange type codes in the data collection grids, post-observation. To ensure reliability of analysis, the validation group, two trained special needs teachers, also coded the dialogue independently. Finally, comparisons were made, commentary notes were considered and amendments carried out.

**Analysing Pre-action Data**

Data from the group interviews, storytelling, informal conversations and sketches were arranged to identify themes related to teacher-student communication.

Six themes emerged. The themes were classified as inclusionary and exclusionary practices. The inclusionary communication practices included assigning peer buddies and direct communication with the students. The exclusionary communication practices were, teacher speaking in a very loud voice, using ‘big’ or complex words that are beyond students’ level of comprehension, threatening students with punishment for non-completion of tasks during allocated time and speaking fast.

The coded classroom observation data was scrutinized to identify communication strategies teachers’ use when communicating with student participants. The frequency of incidence was also counted to determine the most popular and the least. Analysis highlighted seven inclusionary and four exclusionary communication strategies. The inclusionary strategies engaged in most often to the least were providing reminders to keep the student on task, conveying modified expectations to the student, asking questions to engage the student, answering student questions, engaging the student in “whole class” lessons, stating expectations firmly, articulating positive evaluative remarks, and giving explanations briefly and clearly. The exclusionary strategies witnessed most frequently to the least were providing negative evaluative remarks, ignoring student initiated conversations, rushing through explanations with several steps in a single turn and using threats to move students to act.

With the conclusion of pre-action data analysis it was time to embark on the first action cycle.

**ACTION CYCLE 1 (AC1)**

AC1 commenced with critical reflection and moved onto the phases of planning, action, monitoring and evaluation.

**Critical Reflection**

As teachers scrutinized the outcomes of the data analysis process they realized that the data gathered from student participants and classroom observations were similar. They also realized the high incidence inclusionary strategies and the most frequently noted exclusionary strategies.
Post Critical Reflection
The teachers in a single voice agreed to include more inclusionary communication strategies and to refrain from engaging in exclusionary strategies.

Planning
Teachers chose inclusive communication strategies as a collaborative team effort. They personally identified exclusionary communication strategies, currently practiced that they wished to avoid. The team then tabulated the broad aims for change [Table 4].

Table 4: Example - broad aims for change

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Teacher: Inclusionary Strategies to follow</th>
<th>Teacher: Exclusionary Strategies to avoid</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shanuth</td>
<td>1. Make eye contact</td>
<td>1. Rushing to Shanuth’s side and making him engage in tasks by speaking very fast.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Give single directions.</td>
<td>2. Using negative evaluation and threats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Praise any attempts by Shanuth during in-class activities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Encourage communication via picture cards/single word answers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Use a buddy system to encourage participation during art/singing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Action
Plans were implemented by the teachers for two months. Teachers were supported via weekly meetings and alternative modes of communication such as telephone and e-mail.

Monitoring and Evaluation
This phase was a two-step process.

Data collection
At the conclusion of the action phase, data was collected from the six participant teachers’ classrooms via observations. Classrooms were observed twice for half an hour each. Data was recorded on the observation grid whilst observing and coded thereafter.

Data analysis
Teachers implemented inclusionary strategies with variations in frequency of occurrence. Success rates ranged from 0%-100%. The strategies practiced most often to the least were, maintaining eye contact, giving single directions, praising student attempts to communicate and assigning a communication buddy. Failure to avoid exclusionary strategies also ranged from 0%-100%. The strategies noted most often to the least were ignoring student-initiated conversation, providing negative evaluative remarks and using threats.

The conclusion of the monitoring and evaluation phase also heralded the end of AC1. In keeping with the cyclical process of action research the participants moved onto AC2.
ACTION CYCLE 2 (AC2)

AC2 commenced with critical reflection on the outcomes of AC1. Planning, action and monitoring and evaluation phases followed.

Critical Reflection

As teachers focused on data collected and analyzed, they realized the extent to which they succeeded in changing teacher-student communication practices within the busy school day. The teachers concluded that two months was too short to witness significant changes in practice.

Planning

The teachers decided to continue to implement the same plan as in AC1. They also requested a professional development program because they believed that lack of success rate in AC1 was partly due to limited knowledge and understanding regarding speech and language disorders.

Prior to designing a professional development program I proceeded to gather student views, believing that their opinions can influence what their teachers learn. For this purpose I met with the six student participants as a single group. Their views were sought by presenting them with photographs of three types of classrooms; the familiar formal [I] and semi-formal [II] classrooms and a learner centered [III] classroom (figure 6).

Figure 6: Types of classrooms

When asked for preferences, students unanimously chose the learner centered classroom [III] stating reasons like: ‘more fun’, ‘not boring’, ‘wow’, ‘then teacher can’t punish me’ and ‘free’. The pictures also provoked active dialogue amongst the students. I listened with care and recorded their views (Excerpt 2).

Excerpt 2:

Yadesh: Are these real classrooms or just pictures?
(He was fascinated with classroom III and kept looking at it for a long time)
Can you really put your legs up and sleep on the floor?
(This query was quickly followed by)
Don’t they have to do tests in these classes?
(When I explained that assessment takes place in a variety of ways he promptly answered with a cheeky grin)
You teach my teacher to do like that. Then I will come to school every day.
Amal: Me too.
Shanuth and Josh: (smiling nod their heads in agreement)

Student views and teachers’ requirements were incorporated when designing the program. The plan was discussed with the teachers prior to finalizing.

**Action**
The two-pronged plan was implemented simultaneously for a period of 2 months. The teachers were supported through monthly and informal meetings as in AC1.

The professional development program was scheduled after school, every other Friday. The program was designed to focus on the types of speech and language disorders most prevalent in school settings and strategies that would enable successful inclusion including but not limited to teacher-student communication.

**Monitoring and Evaluation**
This phase progressed in two steps.

*Data collection*
Data was collected via classroom observations. Further, questionnaires were utilized to gain feedback regarding the professional development program.

*Data analysis*
Implementation of inclusionary strategies in AC2 varied with success rates ranging from 80%-0%. The strategies practiced from often to least were: Praising student attempts to communicate, giving single directions, maintaining eye contact, rephrasing instructions in simple language, assigning a communication buddy and giving specific feedback. Failure to avoid exclusionary strategies varied from 20%-100%. The strategies practiced from often to least were: Providing negative evaluative remarks, ignoring student-initiated conversation, using threats and rushing through explanations.

Analysis of questionnaires concerning the professional development program highlighted that all teachers were positively influenced. Further, they had an increased awareness and knowledge regarding SLCN. All teachers were willing to continue with addressing teacher-student communication routines even though the research activity had ceased. They were also keen to incorporate reflection to improve classroom practice, but requested that the administrators consider providing time for this activity when designing timetables.

With the monitoring and evaluation phase concluded in AC2, the dual cyclical process of this action research project drew to an end.
DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS
The research activity was conducted to enable teachers to listen to students with SLCN and to make suitable changes in teacher-student communication in a non-threatening, non-judgmental atmosphere. As the research moved through the cycles the teachers learned to reflect on practices in teacher-student communication and to experiment different ways of altering practices to meet the needs of students with SLCN.

The reflective conversations that took place post AC2 revealed two factors that influenced the outcomes of the research. Firstly, although teachers were involved in a process of change other factors within the school remained the same. Teachers had to deal with daily schedules, manage large classrooms, deliver extensive curriculums and train students for examinations held every four months. Hence, the opportunities to practice new strategies and avoid exclusionary strategies varied according to the level of challenges each teacher faced. Secondly, even though they voluntarily chose to change, the long engaged communication behaviors surfaced unconsciously.

Discussing further the teachers were confident that they now possessed a better understanding regarding students with SLCN and teacher-student communication. They were also of the view that they ought to cultivate the practice of reflection as a self-appointed activity on a more frequent basis.

Hence, the key findings of the action research process can be stated as follows:

- Teachers’ knowledge and understanding regarding needs of students with SLCN increases when they listen to students with SLCN.
- Teachers are amenable to invest time and energy to learn when they are empowered to critically evaluate their practice.
- Teachers require continual professional development programs to enhance knowledge and skills, to be successful partners in inclusion.

IMPLICATIONS
Inclusive education is a philosophy, a way of life that cannot be achieved solely by articulating mission statements, setting up structures and implementing systems. Whilst these elements and more are necessary schools can move towards the goal of inclusion by endorsing that listening is an important aspect for successful inclusion. For this purpose the voices of all concerned, students, parents, teachers, support staff and professionals are of absolute importance. As schools recognize the fact that inclusive education is a collaborative exercise and honour the voices of its entire community, students will receive a holistic education.

Teachers hold the power for student success. Therefore administrators need to plan for systematic and well organized professional development programs for teachers and support them on a day-to-day basis by engaging a coordinator or a consultant who is sensitive to the difficulties faced by both the students and the teachers. This will boost teacher morale and make the teachers feel valued and taken care of.
The sample size in this study is small and limited to a private school of a single gender; hence, generalization of the outcomes is difficult. However, the study endorses the view that every school that is seeking to be inclusive ought to listen to student voices and ensure professional development and support for teachers to create an emotionally secure environment for both teachers and students.

CONCLUSION
This study was located in a country which is seeking to implement inclusive ideals within its education system. Students with SLCN, one category of students whose needs must be taken into consideration within inclusive school settings, were identified for the purpose of carrying out an action research project. As article 12 of the UN conventions of the rights of students (UNICEF, 1989) has articulated students with SLCN have the same rights as their peers to express their views regarding what is best for them within an inclusive educational setting. Six students with SLCN and each of their teachers were invited as participants to the research.

Student voices were listened to and their views were considered as plans were drawn up for each action cycle. As the teacher participants moved through the action cycles they were neither cajoled nor pressurized to display results but were empowered to change. Hence, the distance between the teachers who were executing lessons and the researcher as a consultant attempting to implement inclusive ideals within the school diminished. The students with SLCN were empowered as they were given opportunities in varied ways to express their views.

The action research approach therefore brought about social change as teachers volunteered to change their communication practices by including more inclusionary communication strategies whilst refraining from engaging in exclusionary communication strategies. The action research process also established the fact that listening to student voices is vital within inclusive school settings. The key findings and implications can be applied to many situations.

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**Biographical Note:**

Dr. Shalini Felicity Wickremesooriya is a qualified Speech and Language Pathologist and a Counseling Psychologist. She is a certified member of The Royal College of Speech & Language Therapists (UK). She is also a Speech and Language Therapist licensed by the Sri Lanka Medical Council and a licensed member of the Sri Lankan Association of Psychology, Counseling and Psychotherapy. She completed her Doctoral Studies in Human Communication Sciences at the University of Sheffield, UK in 2012. Wickremesooriya has worked predominantly in Sri Lanka, in varied contexts and with clients from varied economic strata, in the city, suburbs and in rural villages and amongst people of different races and religions. She is fluent in the Sinhalese language, the dominant language of the land and in the English language, the language of her forefathers. She very recently moved to Canada where she hopes to be involved in further research activities.