

Background

Global Picture

- The United Nations reports (2009) that there are 200 million children with disabilities in the world (Gronlund, Lim & Larsson, 2010)
- Recently, there has been an increased interest in improving special education services worldwide, particularly in developing countries
- Developing nations should identify the numbers and needs of individuals with disabilities, this was recognized as a priority by The Asian Development Bank (2002) (Kalyanpur, 2008)



Sri Lanka

- Sri Lanka is a small island located off the southern coast of India
- It is classified as a developing country (Yokotani, 2001)
- 7% of the population in Sri Lanka present with a disability, which amounts to about 1,407,000 people (UNESCAP, 2010)
- It has been reported that many children with disabilities do not attend schools (Ministry of Social Welfare, 2003)

Parents' views

- Studies have documented the importance of considering parents views regarding their children's education (Lindsay & Dockrell, 2004)

Current Study

- There has been limited research done on the special education system in Sri Lanka
- This study sought to answer the following research questions,
 - Who are the children receiving special education services? (Sampled across 3 provinces in Sri Lanka)
 - Who are the parents of these children? (Sampled across 3 provinces in Sri Lanka)
 - What are the current special educational supports and practices in these provinces?
 - Are there differences between the provinces with regard to educational supports, practices and parents' views?

Method

- Parents of children with special needs participated in a face-to-face survey interview
- Participants were recruited from three provinces in Sri Lanka; Western, Southern and Northern provinces
- The survey consisted of six sections:
 - parents' demographics, (b) child's demographics, (c) physical skills, (c) communication needs and interventions, (d) questions related to inclusion and (e) questions related to literacy

Procedure

- Interviews were conducted in three languages; Sinhala, Tamil and English
- The primary investigator conducted the interviews in Sinhala and English and interpreters were used for interviews in Tamil
- Each interview lasted between 30-60 minutes
- The interviewer read each question to the participant and based on the participant's response checked off a corresponding answer on the survey

Data Analysis

- Each survey response was coded and entered into an excel sheet
- Descriptive statistics were obtained using SPSS statistical software
- Chi square and Fisher's exact tests were done to examine differences between the three provinces
- Responses pertaining to the child's communication were entered in to the Communication Matrix online
 - This was done as an initial probe to generate each individual child's communication profile



Results

Children's Demographics and Traits

- Ages of children in private special schools in the Western and Northern provinces ranged from 5 years to adults
- None of the children who attended the special education units in government schools were older than 14 years
- There were no children in the sample who were reported to be beginning communicators and very few who had motor impairments

Parents' Demographics

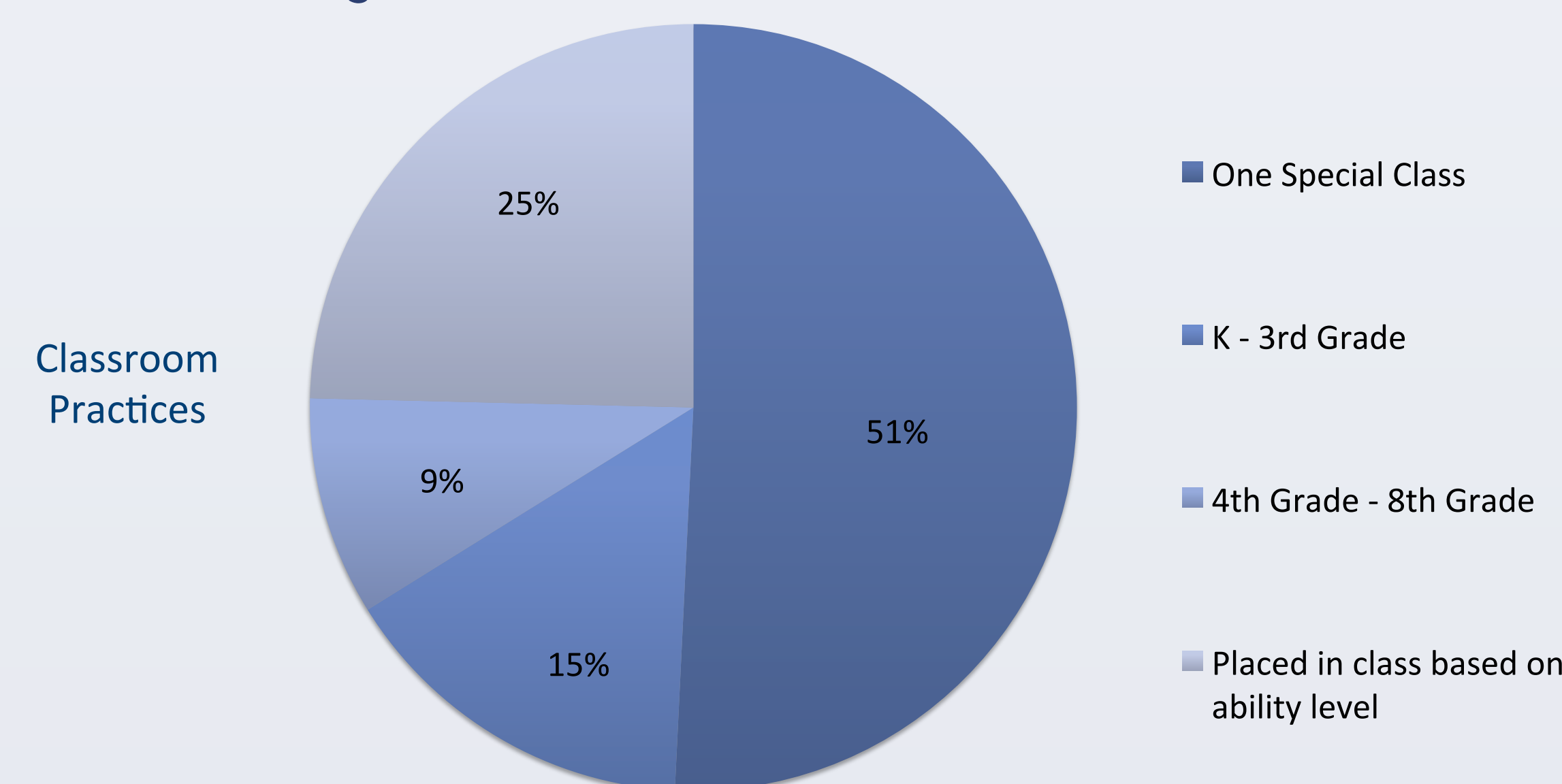
- Parents' data were representative of both ethnic and religious representations in Sri Lanka
- Parents from the Western Province had higher levels of education and income compared to the other two provinces

Education Supports and Practices

- Children were receiving communication support at school but most parents reported this was by their special education teacher
- All parents who were asked if they would like their children to receive communication support by a Speech and Language Therapist in school responded "Yes"

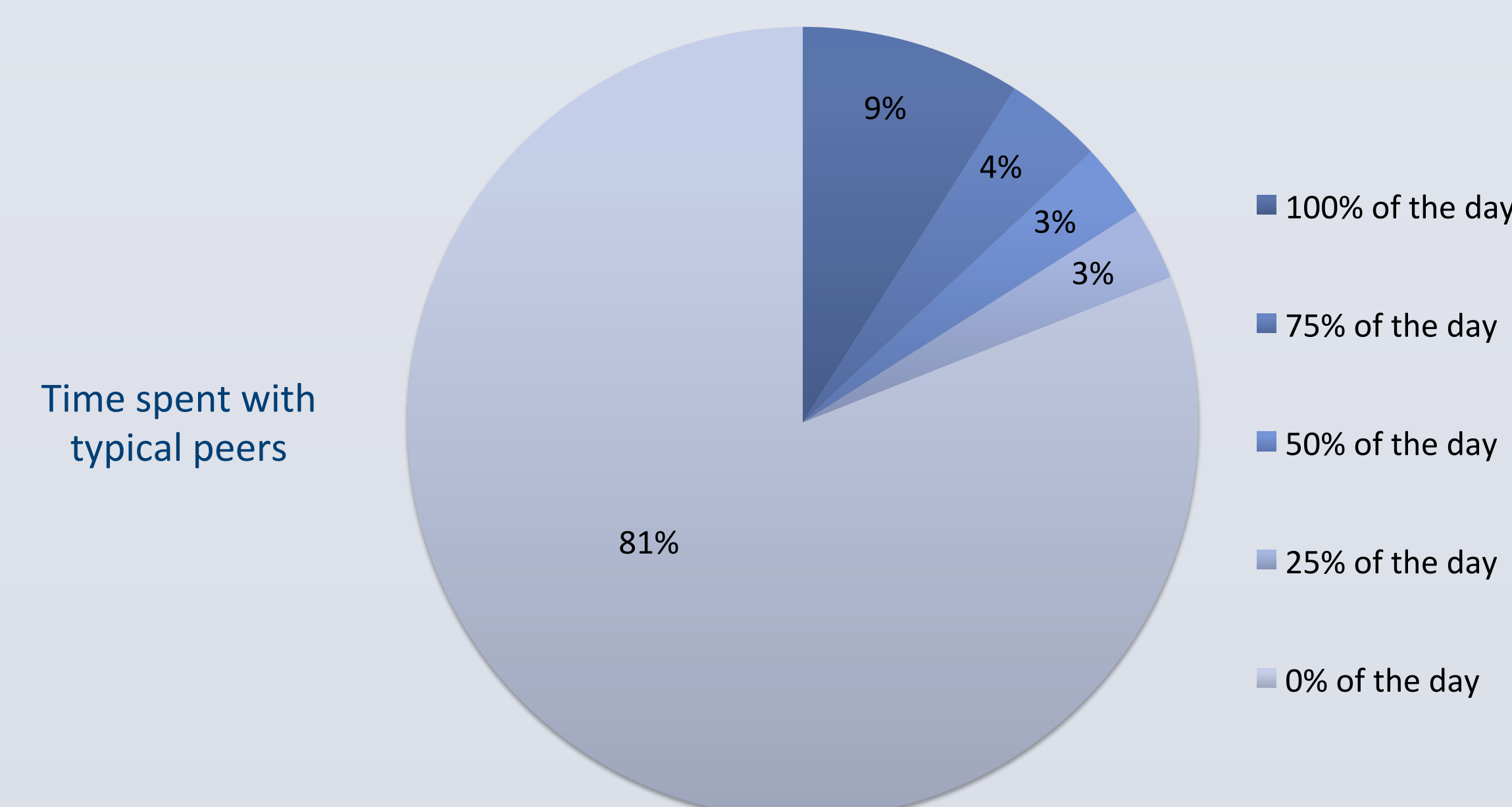
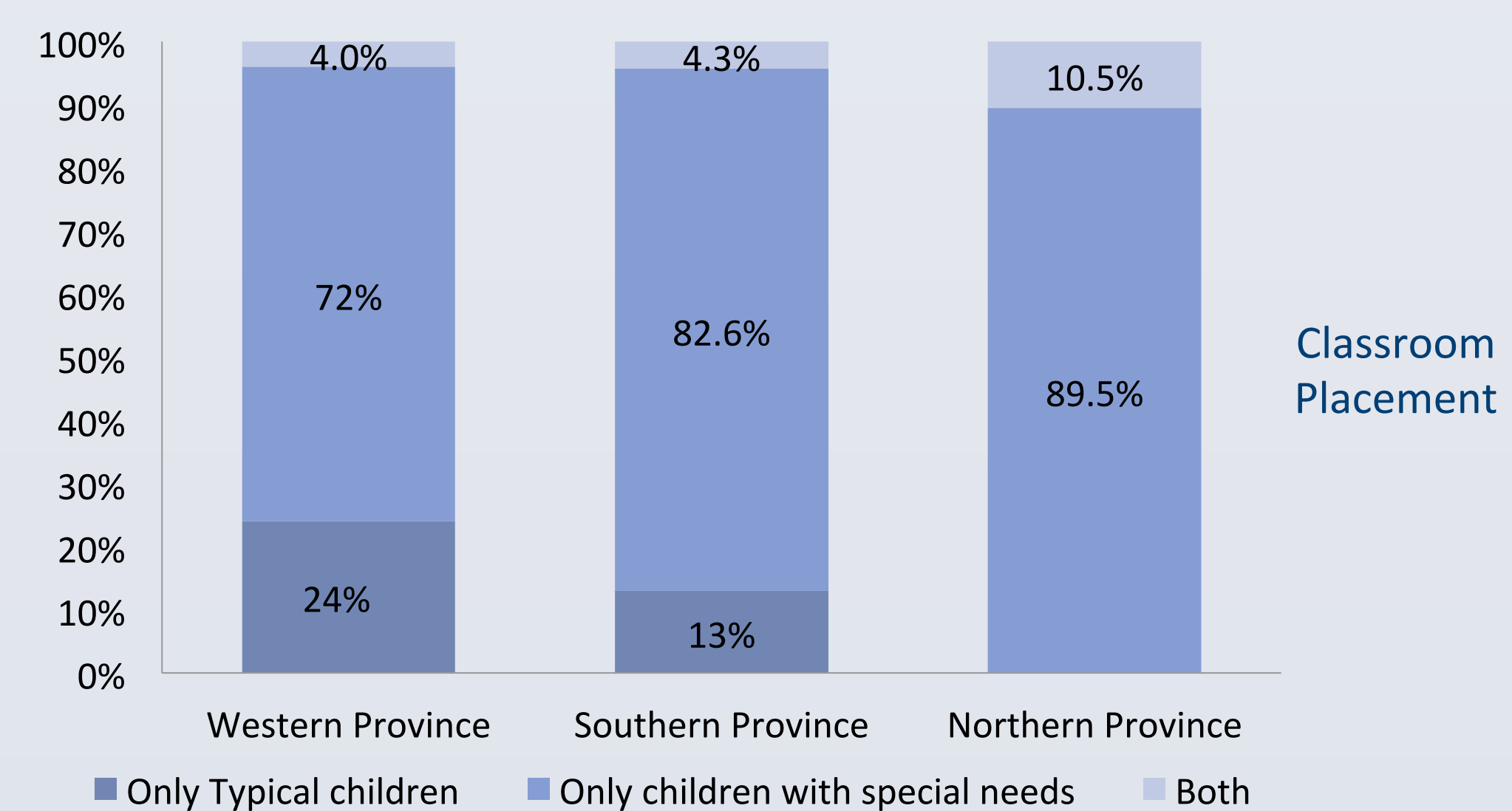
Classroom Practices

- Half of the children across all three provinces were placed in one special class, regardless of their age or abilities



Inclusionary Practices

- Most parents felt inclusion with typical children would be beneficial
- A majority of the time children were placed in classrooms with other children with special needs only
- 81% of children did not spend any time with their typical peers during the school day



Literacy Practices

- A majority of the children from all three groups either needed assistance to read (52.2%, n=35) or were unable to read (41.8%, n=28)
- Most participants responded there was "some emphasis" on teaching reading (79.1%, n=53) and writing skills (76.1%, n=51)
- Almost all parents stated that they felt it was important for their children to have literacy skills

Differences between Provinces

- The only significant differences between the provinces were on the following variables, emphasis placed on teaching writing and parents' views on inclusion being beneficial

Discussion

- Lack of services for older school-age children
 - Currently there is an age limit imposed in government schools preventing children older than 14 years from attending
 - Parents were greatly concerned about their children's future once they aged out of the school system
- Few children with severe disabilities accessing special education services
 - These children may not be accessing educational services because schools are not equipped to handle their needs
 - Teachers may also lack training to adequately support them
- No Speech and Language Therapists employed in any government schools in Sri Lanka
 - Legislature and policy changes are needed to include an allocation for Speech and Language Therapists to work in schools
- Inclusion
 - Most children received special educational services through free, regular government schools
 - Although children with disabilities were permitted access to regular schools, a majority of the time they were placed in a segregated classroom (unit) limiting their opportunities to interact with typical peers
 - There was no additional support provided for the few children placed in regular education classrooms (in government schools), they were expected to function with the help of the classroom teacher alone
 - Although more than half of the parents in the Northern province stated they felt inclusion would be beneficial for their children, this percentage was less than parents who expressed this in the Western and Southern provinces
- Literacy
 - There was a discrepancy between parents wanting their children to have literacy skills and the emphasis placed on teaching reading and writing
- Differences between Provinces
 - All three provinces were equitable on many of the variables
 - Differences that emerged could have been because of the differing life experiences of parents from the North due to the war

Limitations

- Limited number of participants, and data were collected from only three of nine provinces in Sri Lanka
- Data collection can be restricted by use of an interpreter (Lopez, 1999)

Directions for Future Research

- Investigate services being implemented for older children and adults in other developing countries and construct a service delivery model appropriate for Sri Lanka
- A qualitative evaluation of parents' satisfaction with current special education services in the country
- Further research to examine the benefits and challenges of implementing inclusive education in developing countries



Conclusions

- It is encouraging to see the growth that has taken place in the field of special education in Sri Lanka; however, it is critical to step back and evaluate current services in order to improve them further
- The issues being discussed here are not just specific to Sri Lankan parents, these are global issues that parents of children with special needs address on a daily basis
- Broadening worldwide knowledge on special education services and considering recommendations from parents will help to enhance service delivery, not just in emerging countries such as Sri Lanka, but also in developed countries such as the United States

References

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