



‘Every Mind’ Creating Equal Learning Opportunities for Children with Learning Disabilities in Sri Lanka

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE STUDY ON CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES
IN SRI LANKA – UNICEF 2016

INTRODUCTION

In line with provisions in international conventions, Sri Lanka is committed to supporting “Education for All,” and has achieved many significant milestones such as a primary enrollment rate of 98% (World Bank, 2013). Amidst this positivity however, a disturbing fact remains where many children with Learning Disabilities (LD) are still unaccounted for, unwelcomed, or simply ignored.

In Sri Lanka, 23.5% of schooling-aged children (aged 5-14) with disabilities are excluded from mainstream education. Attrition rates too, are high where participation in educational activity reduces with age. Of the disabled population around 55.4% aged 15-19 and 86% aged 20-24¹ are not engaged in any educational activity or vocational training, which places a severe financial burden on the family unit.

Sri Lanka currently has 27 special schools and 704 special education units throughout the island catering to students with a variety of learning disabilities. 8 special schools and 450 special units cater to children with learning disabilities such as Down syndrome, Cerebral Palsy, and Autism. The number of schools however are sorely inadequate with many improvements required to the quality of education.

To understand the issues further, Unicef conducted a research study in 2016 on the **Provisions in Education for Children with Learning Disabilities in Sri Lanka**² to explore the existing landscape, key challenges and areas for change. Some of the main issues cited were: social stigma and prejudice, inconsistency in policies, lack of skilled teachers, lack of appropriate infrastructure in schools, inadequate number of schools, limited scope in curricula and the overall quality of education.

This paper will describe the key challenges in access to education for children with LD and more importantly outline a set of recommendations that need to be evaluated and implemented by a range of stakeholders, to realize the right of each and every child with a disability to quality education. It is imperative that governments invest in the education of children with disabilities in order that they can become effective members of the labour force as they grow up.

Learning disabilities range in severity and may interfere with the acquisition and use of one or more of the following:

- Oral language
- Reading
- Written language
- Mathematics

The most common disabilities that affect Sri Lankan children include:

- Reading disorders (Dyslexia)
- Difficulties in performing quantitative tasks (Dyscalculia)
- Disorders of written expression



¹ DCS (2012), Sri Lanka Census of Population and Housing)

² Barriers and Opportunities in the Provision of Education for Children with Learning Disabilities in Sri Lanka: Priyanka Jayawardena, Manavee Abeyawickrama, Colombo, August 2016

KEY CHALLENGES IN ACCESS TO SPECIAL EDUCATION IN SRI LANKA

1. Difficulty in identifying children with Special Needs/LD

- Most children with LD are not diagnosed at an early age due to the lack of awareness and knowledge on the subject across stakeholders (health, education, welfare).
- Parents especially in rural areas are unaware of the child's exact condition since initial medical consultations do not provide proper guidance. Socio-economic constraints inhibit further investigations and the children of these families go undiagnosed until it is too late for intervention.

A process for assessing children with LD has been developed by the Ministry of Education (MoE) and National Institute of Education (NiE), but it is not operationalized in a systematic manner, due to lack of resources at the provincial and zonal level.

2. Stigmatization and negative attitude towards disability

- Societal prejudice towards children with Special Needs/LD leads to some parents not enrolling their children in school at all. Most parents believe it is 'karma' and the re-visitation of past sins which leads to a sense of acceptance and inertia to improve the quality of life of the child.
- Negative pressure from members of the community further contributes towards the withdrawal from society and isolation of the child.

There was hardly any evidence on any interventions which would create a shift in underlying values and beliefs held across the system towards children with disabilities.

3. Disparity between Policy and Practice

- Although the right to education is protected under compulsory education legislation, very few schools display a concerted effort to provide facilities for children with LD since Principals and teachers of schools tend to prioritize students' results at national examinations.
- Out of the 365 national schools only about 30 show an interest in facilitating such learning. Overall only 7% of the schools have provisions for special education.
- Negative perception on Inclusive Education. Though most agree that integration will improve practical abilities of students due to peer interaction many issues tend to arise. Mainstream teachers are reluctant to include students with DL as they have to cover the syllabus, and teach over 50 students, while catering to the needs of both slow learners and integrated students. Except for a few cases, integration in general has not been successful in these schools.

Although the Government has put in place the policies and processes at the National level, the support structures at the Provincial and Zonal level is weak. Lack of subject specific owners i.e. less than 10 qualified Special Education Directors in the country is another contributing factor.

4. Dearth of qualified teachers and low retention rates

- A low interest profession - evidenced by the poor teacher enrollment rates and the number of teachers' in-service (i.e. only 90/300 enrollments in the Hapitigama National College of Education in 2016, only 158 special education teachers for the 1200 students with LD in Western Province).
- High attrition - teachers who are trained in Special Education opt out to teach general subjects due to challenging teaching conditions (i.e. stress placed on teachers when children with a variety of disabilities are placed in once class).
- Ambiguous recruiting procedures - i.e. Principals recruiting trained special education teachers as regular primary teachers since Special Education is not a priority.
- Recognition issue for some training programmes - not all training courses offered by teaching institutes (namely the NIE and Open University) are recognized by the MoE.

Teaching children with LD is deemed as a tedious task by most, with low opportunities for professional development. Lack of attractive incentives to compensate for the extra effort required was also cited as a deterrent to remain in the profession. Support and commitment from those in leadership positions to encourage teachers to pursue the vocation is also low.

5. Lack of curriculum, learning materials and other facilities

- A curriculum designed specifically for children with LDs is currently not available. Teachers need to reference books published by the NIE/experts in the field, teacher guides for mainstream education and develop their own lesson plans. Individual Education Plans (IEP) too have to be developed based on the review of a child's capabilities which further adds to the teachers' workload.
- Some special units have the bare minimum facilities where some of the teachers personally bear the cost of stationary and special learning material (i.e. North Western and Eastern provinces).
- Transport and residential facilities are also lacking in these schools and most mothers have to give up their jobs to bring the child to school. This in turn increases the financial burden on the family.
- Children with special needs are prone to illness and require constant medical care. The associated costs place a high financial burden on the parents. Although welfare systems and financial support is available due to the lack of research and monitoring by the Social Welfare Departments and the Grama Seva, very few receive the said benefits.

Curriculum development, infrastructure facilities and support services need to be revamped with equity in access addressed.

PROPOSED WAY FORWARD

A) LEGAL REFORM

A disability-specific policy to be developed in the country following a system-wide approach

The policy should directly address those with learning disabilities, with strong support systems for delivery established at the provincial and zonal level. Devolving government responsibilities to the local level is a must whilst empowering all officials with the required capacity development and resources. Some of the key service areas identified for improvement were:

- Early assessment and identification of the impairment/LD with resulting interventions at all levels (health, education, social welfare)
- Authorities to support and engage with parents to build parental awareness, self-esteem and participation
- Welfare support for parents disseminated in a targeted manner - covering aspects such as transport, medical support
- Improve access to schools for special needs children i.e. a dedicated school bus service



Revisit the concept of Inclusive Education

- Although deemed as challenging and ineffective in Sri Lanka, establishing such schools is a crucial step in helping to change discriminatory attitudes, in creating welcoming communities and in developing an inclusive society.
- Furthermore, a growing body of evidence undertaken during the 1990s points to inclusion as being more cost effective, and academically and socially effective, than segregated schooling³.

B) ATTITUDINAL AND CULTURAL CHANGE

Raise awareness about children with disabilities, create tolerance and emphasize the value of inclusion

- There is a need for targeted awareness campaigns that debunk myths about disability and present disability in a positive light to change attitudes and raise general awareness about the importance of inclusive education. With a greater understanding about the nature of disability, parents, both with and without children with disabilities, can become more accepting of inclusion of children with disability into mainstream schools and society at large.

³ Inclusive Education at Work: Students with Disabilities in Mainstream Schools. OECD , 1999, Paris.

C) TRAINING AND SUPPORT FOR TEACHERS

Incorporate Special Education training across general primary teacher training

- So, that teachers possess the skills to identify children with LDs at the onset and each school should have access to a specialized ISA/counselor to support the teachers on how to adjust their teaching approach to suit the needs of the students.
- Utilizing persons with disabilities could also be considered to train the teachers.

Review existing curricula and develop curricula catering to different levels of disabilities in children

- Teacher guides should include alternative approaches in teaching the basic curriculum to suit diverse needs. On the job training, should be a pre-requisite for teachers entering the system.
- The teacher training curricula and certification should also be standardized and matched with the type of disability taught at the school level.
- More interactive methods and equipment to be evaluated and included i.e. Physical Resources, ICTs.
- Life skills development and vocational training should be incorporated into the curriculum to recognize children as contributors and not burdens to society. Public private partnerships could be considered to widen job opportunities.

Develop a career path for teachers in Special Education

- Create more career opportunities for teachers in this demanding field i.e. Employ trained teachers as ISAs and Educational Directors to guide new teachers, especially since there is already a deficiency of trained personnel in these positions.
- Ongoing Professional Development and establish communities of practice with recognition and rewards to motivate and minimize attrition.

Educating children with disabilities is a good investment. A 2005 World Bank paper notes that it reduces welfare costs and current and future dependence. It also frees other household members from caring responsibilities, allowing them to increase employment or other productive activities

(1993 World Bank Development Report, as reported in Robert Metts, Issues, Trends, and Recommendations for the World Bank)
