

Trends in Sri Lanka's Education System

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The purpose of this paper is to identify trends in the Sri Lankan Education System. Sri Lanka has undertaken several educational reforms and increased literacy rates. Inclusive education has been reformed since 1997 and there is an inclusive education system in special schools, special needs units and regular classes. Fear of incapacity, concerns about limited training schemes, lack of incentives for inclusive education and pressure to pass students' (GCE) examinations were observed among some regular class teachers.

Keywords: Inclusive education, Sri Lanka, teacher attitudes, education system

Issues and objectives

Sri Lanka won independence from the UK in 1948 and included the right to free education in its constitution some 30 years later; despite the devastation of 27 years of civil war, which began in 1983 and ended in 2009, the country has maintained some of the highest literacy rates in South Asia. It also performs well on other education indicators, such as primary school enrolment and average years of schooling. Public primary and secondary education and higher education studies are free for all citizens; in 2017, the country obtained a USD 100 million World Bank loan to expand research opportunities at the higher education level and improve the quality of degree programs (Souza and Moore, 2017).

Sri Lanka's national education system has undergone some reform efforts over the past 70 years. According to the Ministry of Education, Sri Lanka enacted 'comprehensive education reforms' in 1947, 1960-61, 1972, 1981, 1997 and 2006. Most reforms are summarized below. Sri Lankan children first attended school at the age of five and they would study until the age of 16. Languages of instruction include Sinhala, Tamil, and English.

History of education reforms

The following is a summary of education reforms by Souza and Moore, (2017).

1947: Introduce free education from kindergarten till university level.

1961: Government organizes sectarian schools to establish a national education system.

1972: Attempts to make secondary education more applicable by adding mandatory pre-vocational courses at secondary level. The reform renamed the secondary examinations to ordinary (O-level) and advanced (A-level) levels. Ordinary level (O level) is the level at which high school is completed. Advanced level (A-level) refers to university entrance qualifications. By 'localizing' the content (making it acceptable to all), Sri Lanka was considered unique and different from the UK education system. Science, social studies, and mathematics courses were introduced to all students. Eventually, however, the government re-introduced O and A levels. This was due to public criticism. Pre-vocational courses were also made optional.

1981: Decentralization of education administration and reforms to bring together schools with fewer resources and schools with more resources.

1985: Establishment of the National Institute of Education.

1986: Establishment of the National University of Education.

1987: Delegation of powers to state councils.

1991: Establishment of the State Board of Education [teacher training].

1997: Reforms included modernizing the curriculum, textbooks, and teaching methods, and distributing funds to improve school facilities. It also included 'four strategies' for providing management training to principals. The reforms also included revisions to bring examinations at par with 'developed countries'. Regarding special needs education, programs were developed to integrate children with disabilities into mainstream education and to expand access to educational opportunities. Furthermore, the development of curricula for special needs education and teacher training were proposed.

1998: Compulsory Education Regulations were established.

2006: Utilized UN funds to improve the flexibility of the Education Sector Development Program (2006-2010), increase transparency, prioritize community needs and improve efficiency in the use of school resources.

Many Sri Lankan youth migrated to international schools as opportunities to improve their employment prospects.

Higher education in Sri Lanka has inadequate capacity to meet student demand, particularly at undergraduate level.

Primary and secondary education

Most public schools provide primary and secondary education at the same location. The primary education system in Sri Lanka is from grades one to five. Only 4% of schools in Sri Lanka are secondary only. At the secondary level, the government provides students with textbooks, uniforms, and other welfare benefits such as subsidized transport and medical services to assist students from disadvantaged families. Sri Lanka has achieved near universal primary school attendance, youth literacy and gender equality in schools (Sulanka Ministry of Education, 2022).

The level of education expenditure on education at home is low (2.1%). This is below the level of expenditure in other South Asian low- and middle-income countries such as India and Pakistan (World Bank). Primary and secondary education follows a national curriculum. Subjects include first and second languages, English, Mathematics, Religion, and Environment (a combination of social, biological, and physical sciences). These subjects are mixed with non-academic activities such as play. However, lectures increase gradually each year from grade one to grade five; at the end of grade 5, students have a scholarship exam for admission to a prestigious state secondary school.

There are 98 recognized private schools, many of which are fee-paying international schools. Private international schools are seen as an effective way for Sri Lankan students to prepare for study. Sri Lanka also has 560 'pirivenas' or Buddhist centres that focus primarily on monastic studies (Sulanka Ministry of Education, 2022). 'Pirivenas' include primary, secondary, and higher education.

Secondary education

Students attend secondary education levels from grade six to nine. Students take coursework in first language, English, second language, Mathematics, Religion, History, Science and Technology, Health and Physical Education, Practical and Technical Skills, Social Studies, Life Skills, and Aesthetic Studies. Progression is based on examinations at the end of each school year. The entry to secondary school is usually based on the pupil's place of residence. Exceptions are children who win a scholarship to a state school at the end of Grade five and those attending private schools (Sulanka Ministry of Education, 2022).

High school

Pupils attend upper secondary school from grade 10 to 11. Admission to upper secondary school is highly competitive. Students do not pay for schooling, but many families pay for tutoring and preparatory courses so that they can succeed in the General Certificate of Education (GCE) examination. According to the Ministry of Education, the curriculum consists of 'six core

subjects and three or four elective subjects'. Compulsory subjects include first and second languages, Mathematics, Science, History and Religion. Other subjects include civics, Arts, Dance, Entrepreneurship, Commerce and Agriculture. Grade 11 is awarded for General Certificate of Education, Ordinary Level (GCE O Level). Students who pass examinations in their native language, mathematics and three other subjects with high or equal credit can progress to the GCE, advanced level phase. According to a 2013 report by the Ministry of Education, about 60% of students pass O-levels and progress to A-levels. The rest study vocational education or enter the labour market.

University level and higher education

University level, or GCE A-level, lasts for two years and is a prerequisite for entry to higher education; only about 17% of the GCE(A) level group are admitted to university-level institutions. Sri Lanka's 15 state universities admit only 23,000 successful candidates out of the 220,000 appearing for the University Entrance (A-level) examination each year.

For the small number of students who enter Sri Lankan universities, the Ministry of Higher Education offers various scholarship opportunities to offset the price of school supplies and other related costs (Sri Lanka Ministry of Higher Education, 2022).

Studying Abroad for Higher Education

The Australian Government (2022) reports that in Sri Lanka, 'a strong migration culture has developed in which migration, particularly international migration, is intertwined with prosperity. Migration is seen as a normal way of improving economic conditions or as a means of surviving a crisis', it reports. Around 19,041 Sri Lankan students have sought university education abroad (UNESCO, 2017). UNESCO (2017) reports that of the approximately 17,790 degree students who were overseas in 2016, approximately 4,403 received their degrees in Australia. According to the US Embassy in Sri Lanka (2021), 50% of Sri Lankan students studying in the US have postgraduate degrees up to PhD level and 16% are engaged in US companies, using what they have learned after completing their degree.

Inclusive education

In 1994, the Salamanca Declaration was adopted in Salamanca, Spain, as the Principles for Special Needs Education. It emphasized the term 'schools for all' based on the principle of inclusion. This means that learning support should be inclusive of all, including not only those with developmental disabilities, but also those with economic difficulties, children whose parents speak different languages from their own, and so on. In response to this trend, UNESCO, OECD, WHO and other organizations have recently been aiding children with special needs education (SEN) around the world, aiming to achieve their goals while summarizing the actual situation of individual special needs education. The successful implementation of inclusion education plays a vital role in the education of pupils with SEN. Developed countries have therefore developed inclusion education practices (The World Economic Forum, 2017). However, developing countries, particularly South Asian countries including Sri Lanka, are still in the developmental stage of inclusive education systems (Ishikawa, 2018; Ketheeswaran, 2021; Ishikawa, Ramalingam, Kamal and Sameem, 2023).

The literacy rate of the population in Sri Lanka is 91.9% (Geck, 2017). According to a report by the Sri Lankan Ministry of Education (2018), 10,194 public schools employ 241,591 teachers and cater for 4,165,964 students. Table 1 shows the number of school types and the number of pupils and teachers in Sri Lanka.

In Sri Lanka, the special education unit system has played a significant role in integrating children with SEN into the school community since the 1960s (Ministry of Education, 2006). According to this system, pupils with SEN can be enrolled in special education units that operate within schools and, depending on the pupil's ability, can join the regular classroom in certain subjects and activities. Some pupils gradually join regular classrooms as they become active throughout the day. Teachers in the special education unit may also support teachers in the regular classroom as required. Furthermore, Piyasena (2003) emphasizes that in Sri Lanka, children who made reasonable progress in

Table 1. School types and number of pupils and teachers in Sri Lanka

	(Number of schools)	Special Needs Teachers	Students with special needs
Assisted Special Needs Schools	26	415	2613
Special Education Unit: SEU (Special Education Unit)	704 National Schools 104 County Schools 600	206	1220 6233
Inclusive education system in regular schools			90689
All over Sri Lanka	Public schools 10,194 private schools (some international schools and private schools supported by the government that do not charge school fees) 98		Total number of pupils 4165964

special education units were eventually able to join regular schools. In the Sri Lankan context, educational reforms, white papers, reports, international instruments, and conventions support the philosophy and practice of integration and inclusive education (Ketheeswaran, 2021).

However, in the school system in Ampara province, teachers in regular classes sometimes try to send underachieving students in regular classes to special education units without understanding the purpose of the special education unit system. On the other hand, SEN pupils housed in special education units are rarely sent to regular classrooms, even though they can learn alongside able-bodied pupils in an inclusive environment (Ketheeswaran, 2021). Ketheeswaran (2021) found that some special education units are segregated from the regular classrooms in the school. He states that this is a challenge for the integration of pupils with diverse needs who are accommodated in special education units.

Furthermore, Hettiaarachi, Ranaweera, Walisundara et al. (2018) conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 regular classroom teachers in the Western Province of Sri Lanka to determine their perceptions of 'inclusive education'. The main issue themes included disagreement with 'inclusive education' and 'integration', inconsistent use of terminology, fear of lack of competence, concerns about limited

training schemes, lack of incentives for inclusive education, pressure on students to pass exams and lack of policy awareness.

Future challenges.

Inclusive education is widespread in South Asia. Future validity may need to be enhanced by participatory observation and teacher interviews in Sri Lanka.

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