

**Individual Reflection on the Challenges of Inclusion in the Multi-stakeholder Landscape in
Sri Lanka**

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EDUC 5130 - 02 -Managing Multiple Systems: Policy and Practice

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Week-2

Educational Setting of Sri Lanka

My home country, Sri Lanka, consists of nine provinces, and every region has the same education system due to the country's size, which is 61,860 sq. km by 2020, as reported by the World Bank open data source (2023). The education system of the country consists of four cycles within 13 years. Students who are 5-10 years of age attend primary school (Grades 1-5), while the students who are 11-14 (Grades 6-9) attend junior secondary education. Then, the next cycle begins at age 15 and ends at 16 (Grade 10 and 11), marking the senior secondary level of education. This stage prepares the students for the General Certificate Examination / Ordinary Level. The final years of school focus on collegiate-level education, which prepares students from 17-18 years (Grade 12 and 13) for the General certificate examination/Advanced Level. All children of 5-14 years must attend school to receive the mandatory knowledge for junior secondary education. (Liyanage, I.M.K., 2014, The Present Situation Analysis).

After the successful completion of these levels, students can choose to follow tertiary level education at any of the 17 universities, two campuses, and nine institutes, which are governed by the University Grants Commission (UGC) of Sri Lanka, established on 22nd December 1978 under the Universities Act No. 16 of 1978. Those who do not get the opportunity to enter those institutions can attend the country's 1138 technical and vocational institutions (Liyanage, I.M.K., 2014, The Present Situation Analysis).

The Sri Lankan government established a free education system for the whole population without discrimination in 1944, marking a paradigm shift in Sri Lanka's educational system (Alawattegama, K.K., 2020, p.2).

The literacy rate of Sri Lanka is at a high level, recording 98.7% for males and 99.2% for females between the ages of 15 and 24. The category of 15 years and older records a rate of 93% for males and 91.6% for females (UNESCO, Institute for Statistics [UIS], 2023).

Due to the diverse ethnicities in the country, Sri Lanka provides its education in three languages: Sinhala and Tamil, the official languages of Sri Lanka, and English. The bilingual medium of education allows the students to merge any of the preferred official languages with English to study for their General Certificate Examinations.

The Policies and Practices in Sri Lanka concerning the inclusion of diverse learners

Disability inclusive education

The educational philosophy, practices, and curriculum in Sri Lanka were radically changed by the General Education Reforms of 1997. Three of the 19 improvements in educational opportunity—access to special education for children with disabilities, curriculum development, and teacher preparation—were proposed. There was to be improved access to educational opportunities in terms of special education through the development of programs to encourage the integration of kids with disabilities in regular schools (Hettiaarachi S. et al., 2018, The Sri Lankan Context).

The Milestones in disability-inclusive education (see Figure 1) helps one to understand how the policies evolved in Sri Lanka.

Milestones in disability-inclusive education

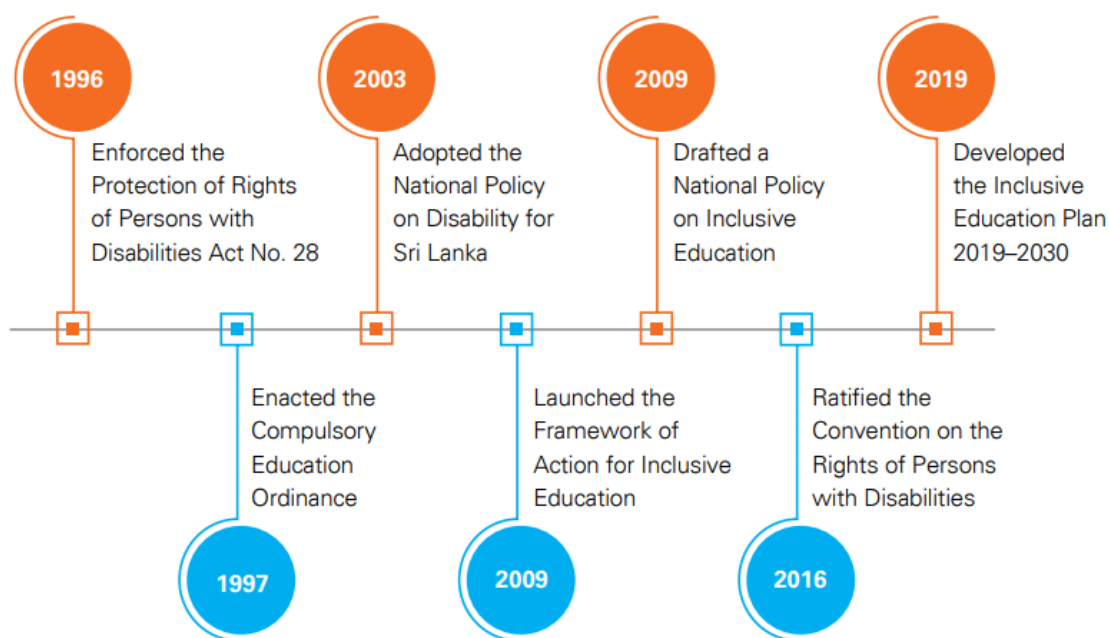


Figure 1. UNICEF. (2021). Milestones in disability-inclusive education. Retrieved from

<https://www.unicef.org/rosa/media/17016/file/Country%20Profile%20-%20Sri%20Lanka.pdf>

According to the country profile by UNICEF (2021), Implementing inclusive education at the school and classroom levels is governed by the 2009 Framework of Action for Inclusive Education. It supports lifelong learning and improvement by outlining changes in school cultures, classroom procedures, and learning environments. The framework promotes early detection of any disability, quality circles, and continual in-service training for teachers to educate them on the necessities of special education needs, parent and community engagement, mentorship, and support staff. It also directs the creation of an inclusive environment, which includes removing access obstacles and ensuring that school buildings and essential services are

accessible. Additionally, the framework establishes requirements for learning materials, teacher qualifications, and other aspects of inclusive education. (p.10)

In order to fulfill these needs, the Sri Lankan government has allocated 11.3% of its expenditure in 2017. (p.15) Furthermore, the same report discusses the Inclusive Education Plan 2019–2030, which prioritizes policy, curriculum, human resources, infrastructure, and awareness of inclusive education to modify admissions standards for students with disabilities.

Gender Inclusive education

Equal rights and respect for one another in the classroom are highlighted in the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report (2021) as they refer to the Education Sector Development Framework and Programme (ESDFP, 2013 – 2017). The improvement of educational facilities and early marriage regulations address gender concerns. However, there are still gender disparities in programs for careers. In order to address this, the 2010 National Strategy on TVET (Tertiary and Vocational Education Commission governed by the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Skills Development) Provision for Vulnerable People established childcare facilities, offered flexible vocational training, and provided a participation stipend for economically disadvantaged women.

Ethnic and language-inclusive education

The 2013 Education First Policy seeks to foster student diversity by hiring teachers from various racial and ethnic backgrounds and expanding school extracurricular activities. The Ministry of National Languages and Social Integration actively promotes local languages in Sri Lanka.

The various stakeholders and systems that come into play in the implementation of these policies on inclusion

Multiple stakeholders and systems in the Sri Lankan education system carry out the duty and responsibility of implementing the policies mentioned above. The government agencies, the Ministry of Education (MOE), and the National Institute of Education (NIE) implement the policies, the developed curriculum, and teacher training. The principals, head teachers, and vice principals will then direct these to the school level. The duties of micro-management of these policies fall into the hands of classroom teachers, who can even be assisted by special education teachers and resource teachers who are aware of the method of developing Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). The outcome of these policies will be mainly experienced by the diverse learners in the classrooms, including able students, students with disabilities, students with special needs, students who belong to multiple genders, and those of various cultural and linguistic backgrounds, as a part of inclusive education. Apart from them, Parents, non-governmental organizations (NGO), Academics and researchers from the universities,

international organizations such as UNICEF and UNESCO, and local communities support the policy implementation in Sri Lanka.

Together, they have introduced curriculum changes, training programs for teachers to equip them with skills for inclusive education, support services such as Occupational therapy and speech therapy based at government hospitals of the country, counseling, and many other infrastructural changes to the school buildings, allowing accessibility.

The specific challenges faced by Sri Lanka in the implementation of inclusive policies

Inclusive education is at a successful stage when referring to government sources and other valid information sources. However, in my experience as a teacher in the Sri Lankan education system for nearly four years, many of these practices and policies are merely written. For instance, the schools and the Higher Education College I have worked with do not have accessibility for physically disabled students as it is culturally not prioritized by people. Furthermore, it is prevalent to see gender-based schools in the country, and many of these schools criticize the LGBTQ+ communities in schools. They have to either be male or female during their school life. As a teacher, I was not provided with the specific education needed to cater to diverse learners in a classroom as there are 'special' schools for them. Even if the government discusses and emphasizes mainstreaming in Sri Lankan schools, it has been nearly impossible due to the lack of resources and teacher training.

The significant challenges faced when it comes to the Sri Lankan inclusive education system can be a lack of funds, resources, and infrastructure, shortage of trained teachers and their

workload, which does not allow training, lack of parental involvement, cultural practices, and limited monitoring and data on the topic.

The country is currently experiencing ‘unsustainable debts’ as described by the report of The World Bank in 2022. They mention that according “to the latest South Asia Economic Focus and the Sri Lanka Development Update, Sri Lanka’s real GDP is expected to fall by 9.2 percent in 2022 and a further 4.2 percent in 2023.” (The World Bank, 2022, para.1-2)

In such a situation, the funds are mainly allocated to the primary needs of the poverty-stricken majority of the country. Then, the education needs and the funding needed for inclusive education are given less priority. It will further cause the need for more infrastructural development and the inability to allocate funds for the cause.

Inclusion should become a practice rather than a theory in Sri Lanka by addressing the training needs of mainstream instructors and teachers by providing them with mandated pre-service training and ongoing in-service training, a massive loophole in the Sri Lankan system. The inability to accept diverse learners in a classroom is mainly due to a lack of such training and skills (Hettiaarachi, S. 2018). Most challenges of welcoming and understanding diversity in the classroom can be solved if addressed.

Limited knowledge of inclusive education and the lack of updated resources available to the community has led people to disregard the needs of diverse learners. For instance, knowledge is meagerly shared about the disabilities of the children, and most of the parents in Sri Lanka do not want to admit that their children have disabilities or special needs. Moreover, religion-based schools do not include those of other religions in their schools, hindering inclusivity. (e.g., Buddhist schools do not accept Islamic or Hindu students). This situation was aggravated mainly during the 30 years of humanitarian conflict in Sri Lanka. Furthermore, traditional patriarchal

practices of the country disrupt the chances for many female students to continue their studies due to child- marriages and poverty (UNICEF, 2021).

Conclusion

Sri Lanka has a well-established education system in the Asian region, recording high literacy rates. Moreover, the government introduced multiple policies, systems, and practices to improve inclusive education in the country. Even though multiple stakeholders are included in the policy implementation system regarding inclusive education, mainstreaming these diverse learners is heavily challenged in practice. Suppose the multiple challenges of inclusive educational practice could be addressed in the Sri Lankan education system, as mentioned in the countries' policies. In that case, there is hope for a successful inclusive education in the country.

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