

Success of Inclusion in Sri Lanka

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Introduction

Special care for disabled members of society is a convention in Sri Lanka. At the beginning of the twentieth century, missionaries and groups engaged in charitable welfare undertook significant initiatives for the welfare of disabled people. The provisions of education for children with Special Educational Needs through an institutional system can be traced back to 1912, when the Church of England established the first residential special school for the Deaf and Blind in the island.

Fifty-six years later, in 1968, Sri Lanka adopted an integrated education for the children with special educational needs. The National Education Commission (1992) emphasised 'the establishment of a pervasive pattern of social justice' as one of the national aims of education. The Salamanca Statement of 1994 also gave further impetus for adopting the concept of Inclusion of children with special educational needs. Since ratifying the conclusion of the World Conference on Special Needs Education in Salamanca, Spain in 1994, the Sri Lankan government has (only in rhetoric) indicated its intentions towards a policy on inclusion that embraces the tenets of the Salamanca Statement, UNESCO, 1994. However, in very recent years, the country's education system has begun to move beyond the rhetoric towards the practical implementation of Inclusive Education

National Disability –Specific Legislation- the Protection of the Right of Persons with Disabilities Act 1996- helped in the establishment of the National Council for Person with Disabilities, and provided for the establishment of a National Secretariat for People with disabilities to assist the council in the discharge of its function. The Educational Reforms of 1997 in Sri Lanka supported the philosophy and practice of Inclusive Education. National Policy on Disability for Sri Lanka of 2003 accepted Inclusive Education, in keeping with the philosophy of '**one school system for all**'. Proposal for a National

Policy Framework on General Education in Sri Lanka (2003) has recognised the importance of providing equal education opportunities for children with disabilities.

The University Grants Commission (UGC) recognised the need for a Department of Special Needs Education in the University system and UGC approved the establishment of such a Department in the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) in 2003. This department was expected to provide training for all teachers on Inclusive Education and produce graduates in Special Needs Education. Lopez (1999) emphasises that most teachers and principals in Sri Lankan schools are willing to support inclusive education if they are provided with training pertaining to inclusive education, time for planning and also necessary resources.

International and National Commitments

This paper reaffirms Compulsory Education Ordinance of 1939 in Sri Lanka, the right to education of every individual, as enshrined in the 1948 Human Rights Declaration, and renewing the pledge made by the World Educational Community at the World Conference on Education for All to ensure that the right for all regardless of individual differences.

The paper also reviews the several milestones in the direction of Inclusive Education, which urge states to ensure that the education of persons with disabilities is an integral part of the regular education system.

The first National Conference on Inclusive Education held in December 2003 with more than 100 participants included Secretary of the Ministries, Educators, Parents, Children, Teachers, NGOs, INGOs etc. The ultimate aim was to actively contribute to policy and practice development resulting in increased and improved Inclusive Education for all, in Sri Lanka. It was strongly suggested to formulate a National Policy on Inclusive Education and also to form a combined consensus between the political authority and the national level key bodies such as educational secretaries, directors etc; to establish a national level committee to take policy decisions towards Inclusive Education; to conduct researches on all aspects of Inclusive Education and structural changes in the education system were few of the other suggestions made at the conference.

In addition to that, some strong recommendations made at the conference were as follows;

- Ministry of Social Welfare (MOSW) and the Children Secretariat should promote the early childhood development of the children with special needs, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education (MOE) and the National Institute of Education (NIE) with the cooperation of NGOs.

- A mechanism should be evolved by the MOE to make every school an 'Inclusive School', with the help of NIE and Provincial Education Ministries with the corporation of NGOs.

After the National Conference on Inclusive Education, the MOE prepared a Concept Paper on Promoting and Developing the Processes of Implementing Inclusive Education in Sri Lanka, to submit to the Cabinet of Sri Lanka. MOE prepared a 5-year Plan of Action on Inclusive Education to strengthen the suggestions made through the Concept Paper. Priority areas identified in the Concept Paper for promotion are as follows:

- Policies and practices
- Teacher education and recruitment
- Professional development
- Family and community partnership
- School improvement
- Support services
- Assessment, and evaluation system

Policy and practices

The MOE (2003) has emphasised the importance of development of a National Policy in keeping with Salamanca Statement on Inclusive Education. That means the state may not discriminate any one directly or indirectly against one or more grounds including race, gender, sex, colour, age, disability, culture, social origin, language, religion etc. Therefore the educational legislation should recognise the principles of equality of opportunity for children, youth and adults with disabilities in early childhood, primary, secondary and tertiary education.

"...In keeping with the philosophy of 'one school system for all' these words will be changed to 'Inclusive Education' which conveys the concept of inclusion and of equity."

(National Policy on Disability for Sri Lanka, MSOW, 2003)

The MSOW has already accepted Inclusive Concept and the MOE has taken few necessary actions to expand this policy at all educational level, from the national to the provincial, to stipulate that the child with special educational needs to attend the neighbourhood school that is, the school that would be attended if the child did not have a disability.

Teacher education and recruitment

"...there must be a special trained teacher in every school..."

(MOE, 2003)

“ a scheme should be developed by the National Institute of Education, to promote teacher education curriculum for the advancement of children with special educational needs.”

(MOE, 2003)

It is essential to have a resource teacher in each school to support/implement Inclusive Education. In addition to the existing staff competent to implement Inclusive Education, It has been suggested to promote or recruit more teachers to the field.

Professional development

The importance of teacher education, particularly teachers in the regular classroom, is a major challenge. Therefore Inclusive Education should be a compulsory component for teacher education.

“...all school personnel such as principals, teachers and officers must get adopted according to the child’s need and it has to be a team approach...For gaining of international experiences relating to inclusive education, all opportunities should be made available to professionals by NGOs.

(MOE, 2003)

The MOE has given adequate training to In-Service Advisors (ISA) throughout the country, for their capacity building, to enable them to bring the concept to their respective schools in their areas. However, In-Service training should, wherever possible, be developed with the interaction of the target groups concerned and supported by trainers or relevant disciplines.

Another important turning point is the introduction of Special Needs Education the Sri Lankan Universities.

“overall, however the quantum of programmes barely impinges on the task of meeting the needs of children with disability. A striking example is the policy decision to establish a Special Education Needs Department in the Open University of Sri Lanka...”

(National Policy Framework on General Education in Sri Lanka, National Education Commission, 2003)

“The Special Needs Education Department of the Faculty of Education of the Open University of Sri Lanka should be provided with adequate resources and technical assistance to develop programmes.”

(National Policy Framework on General Education in Sri Lanka, National Education Commission, 2003)

Family and community partnership

The MOE has taken the leadership in promoting this partnership with the corporation of provincial Ministries and the NGOs.

“...Parents have to recognise that they share the responsibility with the teachers for education of their children. ...all the members of the team should act as partners of the community who are involved in the community participation, making the child the central figure in the inclusive school.”

(MOE, 2003)

School improvement

“our current school system must change for this and prepare the most suitable method on the basis of our culture, economic, religious and the available resources...a mechanism should be evolved by the Ministry of Education to make every school an ‘Inclusive School’.”

The MOE has taken several steps with the collaboration with the NIE to adopt the curricula to the needs of all children, not-vice versa. i.e. Schools should provide curricula opportunities to suit children with different abilities and interests. Children with special needs should receive additional instructional support in the context of the regular curriculum, not a different curriculum. The guiding principle is to provide the same curricula for all children, providing it with additional assistance and support.

Support services

“...the necessary human and physical resources at least at the minimum level with the corporation of NGOs...”

The MOE coordinates with the relevant government agencies such as Ministry of Health, Ministry of Social Welfare, Ministry of Rehabilitation, Ministry of Finance etc. and voluntary organisations, NGOs and INGOs to provide support services for Inclusive Education.

Support services such as early identification, assessment, treatment and follow-up, provision of aid and appliances, rehabilitation and other therapy, counselling, transportation, sponsorship to education and provisions of social benefits, technical assistance, human resources development, material and equipment etc. are essential.

Assessment and evaluation system

“Should develop an alternative evaluation system for children with SEN, in a way which is most appropriate to the child, so that they could sit for national examinations...”

(MOE, 2003)

Currently all schools use, School Based Assessment (SBA) system and this is one of the appropriate system for children with special needs also. However some other alternative evaluation systems also should be developed for children with special needs.

Degree of priority for Inclusive Education and priority areas in the system

“There should be structural changes in system such as; organisation, evaluation, teaching and community participation, teacher development, organisation of consultancy services, early childhood development programmes, preschool teacher training courses.”

(MOE, 2003)

Inclusive Education is only a means to provide Education for All in the regular education system. Therefore Inclusive Education has to be treated on an equal priority basis to enrich the regular education system.

Role of Special Schools in Sri Lanka

Special school concept is still an existing service provided for children with disabilities in Sri Lanka and it will continue to be so, in the years to come. Presently there are nearly 25 recognised special schools in the country. However, the responsibilities of special schools are likely to change in the future. Some of the desired changes are:

- to become specialised service provider to Inclusive Education.
- the special schools have a vital role to play. They are in a better position to serve children with severe disabilities in the growing concept of inclusion.
- Though inclusive is open to everyone, experiences in Sri Lanka reveal that some children may not cope with the inclusive setting. i.e. children with multiple disabilities, severe impairments, etc.

Existing strategies

- Existing integrated education system could be utilised to promote Inclusive Education.
- Role of special education teacher will change as resource teacher to school.
- Regular teacher is responsible for all children including children with special educational needs.

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