

Strategies for the Future Development of Special Education in Sri Lanka

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Incidence of Children with Special Needs

It has been conservatively estimated that about 30 per cent of children in Sri Lanka have special educational needs due to disabilities and other types of handicapping conditions.

According to the surveys carried out by the Special Education Unit in a number of districts in Sri Lanka, some time ago, it has been revealed that at least 12 per cent of children are suffering from various disabilities such as blindness, visual impairment, hearing impairment, mental retardation, physical disabilities, emotional problems and maladjustment etc. There are also small numbers afflicted with autism and prolonging sicknesses.

It has been found that at least another 12 percent of school attending children have learning difficulties such as dyslexia, dyscalculia and dygraphia. They also need special attention in education. Among those with learning difficulties there are children with deficient attention and hyperactive behavior.

Education of another 4 percent of the total child population especially in the remote village areas of the country has been adversely affected due to malnutrition and unfavourable environmental conditions. Another 2 per cent who are intellectually gifted need special education to develop their potential to the optimum. Unless they are

provided with special education facilities adequate to meet their talents and capacities they tend to become problem children in the class and problem creators in the society due to their high level of intelligence.

All these groups of children mentioned above have special needs in education and they constitute at least 30 per cent of the total child population in the country. According to the Warnock Report, in the U.K. one out of every five children (i.e. 20 per cent) needs special education.

Student population in Sri Lanka at present is 3,810,628. An average of about 5.3 per cent of school-age children i.e. about 200,000 are not attending school. Sample surveys carried out in 3 districts, Anuradhapura, Kurunegala and Kalutara, a few years ago revealed that about 60 per cent of those who remain out of school do not attend school due to disabilities and other handicap conditions. The population of 0-4 year old children who have not reached the school age is about 1,701,000.

The total number of school-age children including those who are in school and those who remain out of school is approximately 4,010,000. Thus the total number of school-age children, who needs special attention in education is 30 per cent and that is approximately 1,203,000. Of these, 12 per cent, that is about 481,200 need special education provision as they are either visually impaired, hearing impaired, mentally retarded or afflicted with some other impairment.

Of the 3 to 4 year old pre-school-age children and the 0-2 year old infants 12 per cent, that is, approximately 204,000, are suspected of having mild or severe impairments. It is very necessary that a suitable methodology be developed to detect and identify all of them as early as possible for early intervention as Sri Lanka and other developing countries do not have a proper system for this purpose.

Of the 200,000 children remaining out of school at least 60 per cent i.e. 120,000, could be considered not attending school through out their lives due to severe disabilities and 7.86 per cent i.e. approx. 70,000, who are already in schools drop out from schools annually due to growing disabilities in them. The number of students dropped out from Grade 1 to 10 in 2004 was 69,979 i.e. 7.86 per cent. This is a major challenge in general education. This challenge could be met through the provision of special education facilities to all of them

In the 12 per cent group of children with disabilities the population of blind and low vision children in Sri Lanka has come down to about 1 to 2 per every 1000 whereas the number of children with visual defects is on the increase and it has been found that 30 to 50 children per 1000 have visual defects. Earlier the main cause of blindness in Sri Lanka was malnutrition but today it is glaucoma or accidents. Unlike the children with

other disabilities, blind children need Braille for reading and writing. Similarly low vision children need low vision aids to improve their residual vision for learning to read and write . Many children with visual impairment have defects in distance vision, field vision, near vision and colour vision. Certain types of visual defects in a person, unless detected and prevented early, can lead to blindness..

It is very necessary that all children in schools and in the community suspected of having visual problems be screened using Snellen Chart which could be provided to all schools with the necessary instructions. In the village community too, family health workers with trained volunteers could carry out this screening test. The early detection of the visually impaired will enable Sri Lanka to reach the ICEVI's cherished goal of education for all children with visual impairment within a specific period.

It has been generally estimated that 2 or 3 children for every 1000 are deaf and another 15 to 30 children per 1000 are hearing impaired. Deaf children need sign language or lip reading or both to progress in learning. Deaf and hearing impaired children also need to be detected as early in their life as possible for early intervention.

Survey and Detection of children with Disabilities for Provision of Services

Severely disabled children such as the blind, the deaf, the mentally retarded, the physically disabled and children with learning difficulties could be identified by observation. However the mild forms of growing disabilities cannot be detected merely by observation.

It has been observed in Sri Lanka, as well as in many other developing countries, that there is no proper and uniform system developed under the Health Ministry to detect children with disabilities as early in their lives as possible and to maintain a register for the purpose of provision of services. However the Special Education Unit of the Ministry of Education in Sri Lanka has successfully experimented a workable action plan in collaboration with the Ministries of Health and Social Welfare to survey and locate children with mild or severe disabilities in the village communities as well as in the schools by observation and simple tests.

At present, a six year programme has been developed based on the previous experience in Sri Lanka for the purpose of locating pre-school-age and school-age children with disabilities and provision of necessary services for the identified. Under this Project all children with visual impairment in the schools and in the village communities will be surveyed and detected for early intervention and provision of education services and thus Sri Lanka has already developed a Plan of Action to reach the goal for education for all children with visual impairment and other disabilities.

According to the prepared Plan of Action this Project will be first implemented in 4 districts of the country and each year the programme will be extended to 4 new districts so that the entire country with the 24 districts will be covered within 6 years.

Before launching the survey and the identification programme a Coordinating Committee will be appointed with 3 members representing the Ministries of Education, Health and Social Welfare and with 2 other members representing NGOS, which will contribute to implement the Programme. The representative of the Education Ministry will chair the Co-ordinating Committee and the Health Ministry representative will be the Co-Chairperson. This Committee will coordinate the activities of the project. A Steering Committee will be set up for each district with the Government Agent as Chairperson and the Provincial Director of Education as Co-Chairperson. The other members of the Steering Committee will be the Divisional Secretaries of the district, the Regional Director of Health Services, the Zonal Directors of Education, the Chief Project Officer for Special Education at the National Institute of Education, the Asst. Director of Special Education and the Asst. Director of Social Welfare Services.

For each Division of the district a Working Committee will be set up with the Divisional Secretary as Chairperson and the Zonal Director of Education as Co-Chairperson. The other members of the Working Committee will be the Asst. Directors and the Inservice Advisors of Special Education, the Medical Officer of Health Services, the Social Service Officer, the Co-ordinating Officer of the Project, the Grama Niladhari of the Division and two other volunteers representing the NGOS of the area. The working committee will be directly responsible for the implementation of the entire project. Under the directions of the working committee the survey and the detection programme will be carried out by the trained volunteers including family health workers, special education teachers, regular school teachers and senior students. They all will be trained by a core group of trainers of the District. Two separate questionnaires to help the detection of children will be used for the school survey and for the village community survey. Records of the village community surveys will be maintained by Divisional Secretaries and the school survey records by zonal Directors.

When the survey and the detection programme is over lists will be prepared separately for kids below 5 years and children above 5 years who are out of school, and also for students who are at risk in schools. At the next stage, all these detected children in each Division will be assessed by a special team of teachers and medical personnel and then channelled for the provision of necessary services such as medical treatment, counselling and education.

For education of the pre-school-age children with disabilities the Local Government Bodies will be encouraged to start pre-school classes according to their special needs. Services of the trained volunteers could be utilized to conduct the pre-school classes.

School age children who have been detected as having severe disabilities physically or mentally or having multiple disabilities may be referred to the CBR Programme of the Social Welfare Ministry. Others will be given placement in regular schools under inclusive education.

Inclusive Education

Taking the views of different experts on inclusive education and following the trends of development of special education in Sri Lanka during the last three and a half decades Sri Lanka could use the following 'modus operandi' under inclusive education.

1. **Integrated Education Resource Units** (in these units conducted in regular schools when children with disabilities achieve reasonable progress they could be placed in the mainstream classes).
2. **Mainstreaming** (where children afflicted with disabilities sit with their normal peers in the same class-room and both the regular class teacher as well as the special teacher takes the responsibility for their education).
3. **Full Inclusion** (under full inclusion children with special education needs are placed in the regular classroom and the regular class teacher takes up the total responsibility for the child's education. This strategy in inclusive education has to be introduced and developed with caution. In the first instance, physically handicapped children and children with mild disabilities, slow learners and those having learning difficulties could be considered for full inclusion. According to the Salamanca Statement, the full inclusion of certain categories e.g. the deaf and the multiple handicapped, is difficult to be implemented).

The successful implementation of the three service delivery programmes as explained above is the only practical, effective and the professional approach to inclusive education in our schools to educate children with disabilities such as the blind, the low vision etc.

Children with disabilities and other handicapping conditions who have been detected, screened and assessed to ascertain the type and degree of disability are to be given placement under a suitable service delivery programme under inclusion.

Three of the National Colleges of Education in Sri Lanka, Hapitigama, Jaffna and Dhargatown recruit every year 90 Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim Youths qualified in education to be trained as special/ inclusive education teachers and then to be posted to regular schools after training. The National Institute of Education also is conducting a

Diploma Course on special education for 30 regular school teachers annually. University of Colombo is now planning a Post-Graduate Diploma Course for graduate teachers who are already qualified in special education. In addition a series of short-term training programmes on inclusive education will be organized and conducted for regular school teachers as they are expected to work under inclusion in their schools in the near future.

Monitoring and evaluation of the Project with the Action Plan is the direct responsibility of the District Steering Committee and the Working Committee of each Division of the district. Evaluation reports will be prepared by the Working Committee for each Division and sent to the Steering Committee of the district.

Arrangements will be made to ensure that this Programme be continued in all Secretarial Divisions of the country under the direction of District Steering Committees so as to make the programme sustainable and then it will benefit all children with disabilities who will be born in the future.

This Project is a workable one based on the previous experience in Sri Lanka. It will enable to survey and detect all pre-school and school age children and youth with visual impairment and treat them medically and educationally. Thus within a specific period of time Sri Lanka will be able to reach the much desired goal 'education for all children who are visually impaired' and others afflicted with mental and physical disabilities.