

*Brief Note*

**Responding to Educational Needs of Children With Disabilities: Care and Education in Special Pre-Schools in the North Western Province of Sri Lanka**

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The purpose of the present study was to investigate the care and education provided to children with disabilities by the social service sector of one province in rural Sri Lanka, where schooling of children with disabilities is not satisfactory despite a policy of free and compulsory education. Special pre-schools operated by the Social Service Department of the North Western Province were examined. Data on special pre-schoolers and the views of parents and caregivers were collected through a questionnaire survey of teachers and semi-structured interviews with parents and caregivers. It was found that the special pre-schools have responded to the needs of children, parents, and caregivers by changing their role from being pre-schools for children with hearing impairments to becoming special education or semi-formal education settings for children of pre-school and school age and also over-school-age, who have a wide range of disabilities. Also discussed were issues that may promote or hinder the participation in education of children with disabilities, such as early identification and early special education, general education, and inclusive education, information about and availability of formal schooling, social perceptions of formal education, and economic factors.

**Key Words:** Sri Lanka, children with disabilities, early special education, semi-formal education, special pre-schools

**Introduction**

The World Conference on “Education for All”, held in Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990, recognized that many children in developing countries do not have the opportunity to attend school. Therefore, the goal was set to provide basic education for all. The Conference goals specifically referred to children who were not receiving education due to their disabilities.

In 1994, the Salamanca Statement acknowledged that primary education should be compulsory and free to all, and appealed to governments to provide equal

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opportunities to children with disabilities.

In the 2000's, as Dyson (2004) noted, "both economically richer and economically poorer countries are seeing inclusion as a major strand in the development of their education system" (pp. 613-614).

However, even with inclusive education policies established by the governments of the developing countries, it is still a fact that children with disabilities constitute a group who are vulnerable to exclusion from formal education. As "inclusive education is concerned with providing appropriate responses to the broad spectrum of learning needs in formal and non-formal educational settings" (UNESCO, 2003, p. 7), it may not be correct to focus only on progress in participation in formal education. Rather, a variety of strategies fitted to the context of the specific area should be recognized as an effort to increase participation in learning for children with disabilities.

In 2000, ten years after the Jomtien conference, the World Education Forum was held and goals towards "Education for All" were set in the Dakar Framework for Action. One of its six goals was "expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children" (World Education Forum, 2000, III Goals, 1). In terms of the education of children with disabilities, one of the most important areas is early special education. Although early special education is still a relatively low priority for governments in most developing countries, some foreign-assisted as well as local projects have been initiated in the past two decades. Appropriate arrangements of early special education would differ among countries or across areas within developing countries.

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the care and education provided by the social service sector of one rural province in Sri Lanka to children with disabilities. The study examines special pre-schools that have been operated by the Social Service Department of the North Western Province. The primary aim of the present study was to provide basic data on special pre-schoolers, of both pre-school and school-age, who attend the special pre-schools. The second goal of the present study was to determine the changing role of the special pre-schools in rural Sri Lanka and to identify the reasons for any changes. The last goal of the present study was to discuss issues that promote or hinder the participation of children with disabilities in education. The reasons why children of school-age go to special pre-schools or just stay at home without attending special pre-schools or regular schools were investigated.

Sri Lanka is a developing country with a certain degree of established health and education support. For example, it has a very low childhood mortality rate, as well as a low illiteracy rate, despite its low per capita income compared to other developing countries.

Figure 1 shows the location of the North Western Province.

Special education began in Sri Lanka in 1912, when a school for deaf and blind students opened under the British colonial rule. Nearly a century later, there were 25 special schools (Non Formal and Special Education Branch, Ministry of Education,

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2006). In the late 1960s, the Ministry of Education began an integrated special education program, called “special units”, which referred to separate classes in regular Government schools (Rajapakse, 1993).

Sri Lanka’s free education policy permits all Sri Lankans to receive free public education from grade one to university. The Compulsory Education Ordinance applies equally to all children between the ages of 5–14 years (Parliament of Sri Lanka: Compulsory Education Ordinance of Sri Lanka No. 1003/5 of 1997).

However, even with this free education policy, and despite the established special education structures, as the Ministry of Social Welfare noted, “the experience of disability workers is that there is still a proportion of children who have disabilities who do not start schooling” (Ministry of Social Welfare, 2003, p. 7). Also, even after students with disabilities have been given the opportunity for free schooling, it is easy to predict that many will drop out of school and lose the chance to gain access to the education they need (Furuta, 2006).

In 1994, the Department of Social Services of the North Western Province started 11 special pre-schools for children with disabilities. These originally began as pre-schools for “the hearing impaired,” with support from Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCV), a Japanese governmental organization (Hibi, 1994). These special pre-schools were established in rural towns throughout the North Western Province, by using small rooms in Social Service Department offices, or a corner in a temple. Two special pre-schools were constructed with donations from two Japanese donors, a non-governmental organization (NGO) and an individual.

Short-term teacher training (three-months on the average) to prepare teachers of special pre-schools was initiated by the Department of Social Services in the Ministry of Social Welfare of the Central Government and the National Institute of Education, with assistance from JOCV volunteers. JOCV have continued to assist the special pre-schools by sending individual volunteers, although they have not been able to do that consistently.

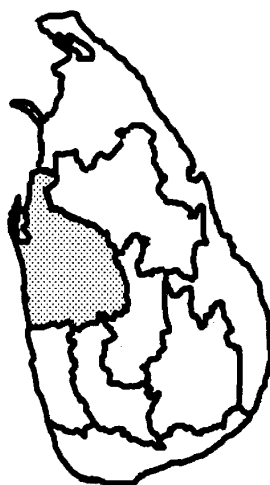


FIG. 1 Location of North Western Province

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In the past 15 years, a few changes in which children go to special pre-schools have been observed. The first change was seen in the disability categories. As mentioned above, the special pre-schools in the North Western Province were originally begun for children with hearing impairments. However, a few years after the opening of those pre-schools, around 40% of the students were identified as children with intellectual disabilities or multiple disabilities, while around 55% were those whose only disability was a hearing impairment (Furuta & Yoshino, 1999). In 2002, according to a survey of special pre-schools, the percentage of children whose only disability was a hearing impairment had decreased to 38% of the total (Nakanishi, 2003). The second change was seen in age of the children. In 2002, out of 103 children who went to these special pre-schools, 61 (59%) were school-age (that is, over five years old).

### Method

A field survey was conducted in January, 2007. First, the author distributed a questionnaire to investigate the present situation of each special pre-school and to collect basic information regarding the children who go to special pre-schools. The questionnaire, written in Sinhalese, which is used by about 73% of the population, was delivered to teachers of special pre-schools at their monthly teachers' meetings, with assistance from the Department of Social Services, North Western Province. The following information was requested: (a) A list of the children who were going to the special pre-schools, by age and disability category<sup>1)</sup>; (b) How each parent or caregiver had been introduced to the special pre-schools and the reasons for not having the child go to a regular school if the child was school-aged; (c) For the teachers in the special pre-schools, years of career as a special pre-school teacher and past training. In all, 11 special pre-schools, with a total of 143 children and also some adults with disabilities who were also found to be the recipients of the service, and 26 teachers, were surveyed.

The medium of language for almost all the special pre-schools was Sinhalese. However there was one exception in Puttalam District. There, the Tamil language, which is used by about 18% of the population in Sri Lanka, was mostly used.

Second, the present author visited two special pre-schools in Kurunegala District in the North Western Province, and conducted semi-structured interviews there with parents and caregivers.

The same semi-structured interviews were conducted with several parents and caregivers of former students who had dropped out from a special pre-school. These parents and caregivers were introduced by teachers of the special pre-schools.

The semi-structured interviews covered the following topics: (a) Basic information on the child, e.g., type of disability; (b) Information on the child's education history, including the age of identification of the disability; (c) The parent or caregiver's view of the program of the special pre-schools, and future plans for the child's education, training, and job.

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## Results

***Outline of Special Pre-Schools at the Time of the Survey***

Figure 2 shows the geographical distribution of the special pre-schools in the North Western Province at the time of the survey. Special pre-schools were located throughout the Province, except that there were none in the northernmost part of Puttalam District.

Figure 3 shows the age distribution of the 143 children and adults attending special pre-schools in the North Western Province. The children and adults who attend special pre-schools can be divided into the following categories: (a) 17 (11.9%) pre-school-age children from 1 to 4 years old; (b) 100 (69.9%) school-age children from 5 to 14 years old, the age of compulsory education; (c) 8 (5.6%) from 16 to 17 years old (age of the collegiate level in formal education); (d) 15 (10.5%) over-school-age adults, ages 18 years and older, who are eligible to be enrolled in the National Vocational Training Center for the Disabled<sup>2)</sup>; (e) 3 (2.1%), no answer.

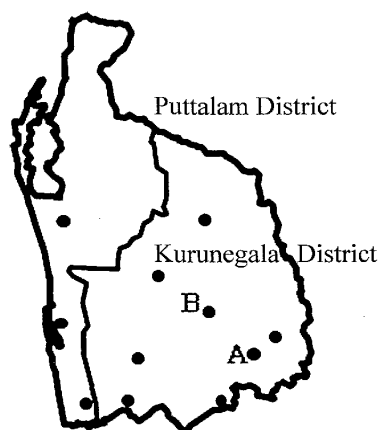
Of the 11 special pre-schools, five had, in the last two years, started pre-vocational training programs inside their premises, introducing basic activities such as sewing, knitting and cooking. One of these special pre-schools was only for girls who stay at a hostel facility inside the pre-school premises.

Figure 4 summarizes the types of disabilities of the children and adults who go to the special pre-schools, as reported by their teachers.

The disabilities of the pre-school-age children, that is, children four years old and under, were as follows: (a) intellectual disabilities, 8; (b) hearing impairments, 7; and (c) multiple disabilities, 2.

***Outline of Children Presented at Two Special Pre-Schools***

Two special pre-schools, SP-A and SP-B, were visited by the present author. SP-A is located in the semi-urban provincial capital town of Kurunegala. SP-B is



**FIG. 2** The North Western Province, Showing the Location of the Special Pre-Schools

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located in a rural town around 20 kilometers from Kurunegala. According to the results of the questionnaire survey, SP-A has 4 children with hearing impairments (17%), and 7 (29%) of the 24 pupils there are pre-school age. SP-B has 4 children (40%) with hearing impairments, and 3 (30%) of the 10 pupils there are pre-school age. SP-B, with a higher percentage of children with hearing impairment, seems to be keeping the original purpose of the special pre-schools, i.e., pre-schools for children with hearing impairments, at least to some extent.

SP-A is one of the five special pre-schools with a pre-vocational training program. It has an independent small building for pre-vocational training, with staff engaged in assisting children and adults by introducing pre-vocational skills. Eleven

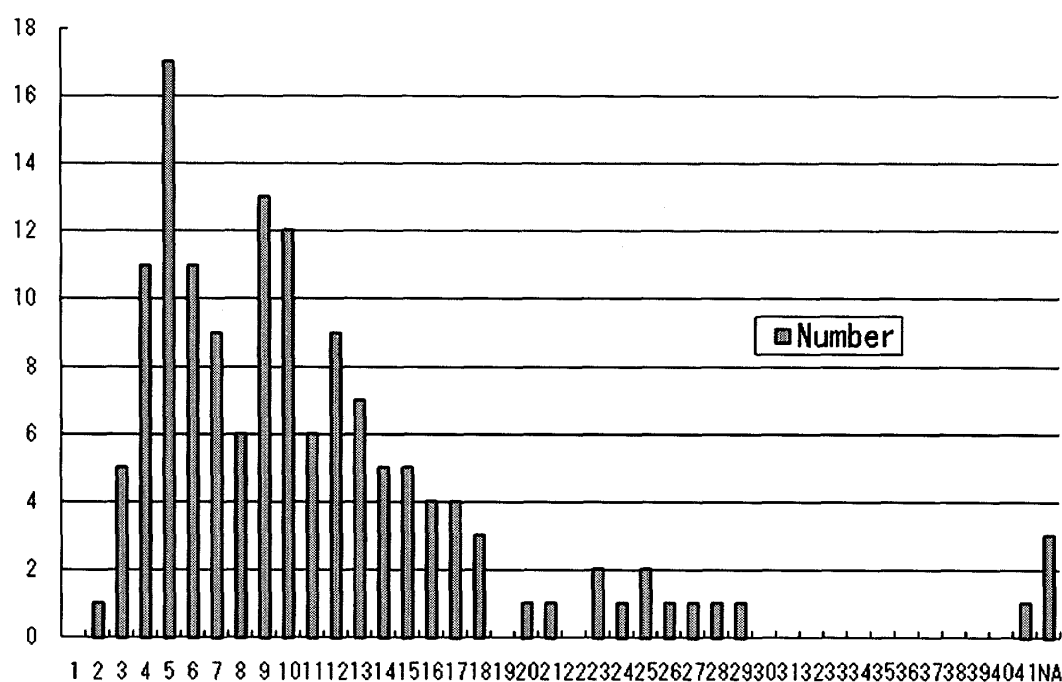


FIG. 3 Age Distribution of 143 Children and Adults Attending Special Pre-Schools in the North Western Province

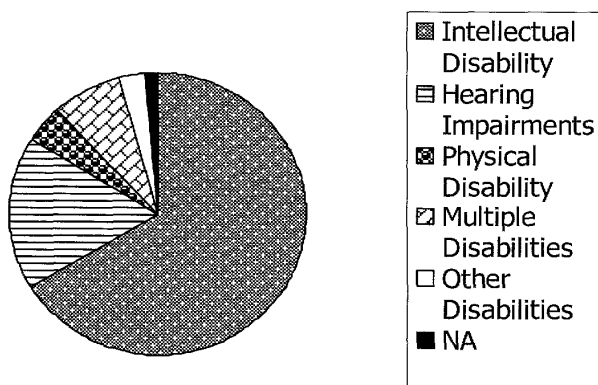


FIG. 4 Disabilities of the Children and Adults Who Attend Special Pre-Schools

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**TABLE 1** Pupils Studied at SP-A and SP-B

Disability category	Age	Reasons for not currently going to a regular school	Number at SP-A	Number at SP-B
Hearing impairments	Pre-school age	Two 3-year-olds; one 4-year-old	1	2
	School-age (5 to 6 year olds)	Hopes to get the child enrolled in the near future (one in a regular school, one in a school for the deaf) (5- year-old; 6-year-old)	0	2
Intellectual disabilities	Pre-school age	Two 4-year-olds	1	1
	School-age (5 to 6 years old)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Hopes to get the child enrolled in a special unit in the near future (2).</li> <li>- Have just started going to a special pre-school (1)</li> <li>- When the child reaches a certain developmental level, hopes to get the child enrolled (1)</li> <li>- Do not have an idea. Just follow special pre-school teacher's advice (1)</li> </ul> (Four 5-year-olds; One 6-year-old)	4	1
	School-age (over 7 years old)	- Dropped out from regular school (9-year-old)	0	1
		- School-age when started going to special pre-school (10-year-old)	0	1
		- Pre-school age when started going to special pre-school (10-year-old)	0	1
Multiple disabilities*	Pre-school age	4-year-old	1	0
Total			7	9

*Note.* \*Having both visual impairment (one eye) and hearing impairments.

youth and adults (46%) in the SP-B, aged from 14 to 29, plus one individual who was 41, were registered for pre-vocational training.

Seven out of 13 pupils at SP-A, and nine out of 10 pupils at SP-B, were present on the day of the present author's visit. Interviews were conducted with parents and caregivers of these pupils. The pupils whose parents and caregivers were interviewed are described in Table 1.

The age of the youth and adults being trained at the pre-vocational training facilities at SP-A ranged from 14 to 29. Out of 7 youth and adults who were there on the day of the present author's visit, four had attended special units in a regular school for almost all their school education, one had dropped out from a special unit in a regular school and two had not received any type of education before participat-

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**TABLE 2** Description of Three of the Children at the Special Pre-Schools Visited

Name	Age (yrs.)	Disability category	Description of educational history parent or caregiver's views of the education and future of their child
Swarna	3	Hearing impairments	Swarna's deafness was identified when she was 1 year 3 months old. She started education in a special pre-school when she was 2 and a half years old. Her mother is sure of her development after she began attending the special pre-school. She hopes to get Swarna enrolled in a regular classroom in a regular school when she turns 5.
Nayana	5	Intellectual disabilities	Nayana started going to the special pre-school 1 month ago. Her mother wants her to keep going to the special pre-school until Nayana has learned to write and walk. Her mother also thought that it would be too difficult for Nayana to be enrolled in regular school nearer to their home. The mother faces both physical and financial difficulty in taking Nayana to the special pre-school. The mother goes to both Ayurvedic treatment and a type of folk religious healing, hoping to obtain a cure for Nayana's problems.
Lal	10	Intellectual disabilities	Lal started going to a special pre-school at age 3 and a half. His mother wants him to continue going to the special pre-school as long as possible. She does not expect Lal to be engaged in academic studies. She feels the teaching at the special pre-school has suited Lal very well. In fact, she wants Lal to go to the special pre-school for as long as possible. She probably will entrust the task of judging Lal's future educational placement to the special pre-school teachers.

ing in the pre-vocational training. All 7 had intellectual disabilities.

Descriptions of three of the children at these two special pre-schools are presented in Table 2. Names of all children described in Tables 2 and 3 have been changed.

### ***Outline of Children Who Left Special Pre-Schools***

Descriptions of two children who dropped out or who left one of the two special pre-schools visited by the present author are presented in Table 3.

### ***Changes in the Role of the Special Pre-Schools***

Special pre-schools, originally started as pre-schools for children with hearing impairments, have changed their role and become special educational or semi-formal education settings for children with a wide range of disabilities and ages, from pre-school through pre-vocational training. Figure 5 illustrates some of the changes



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**TABLE 3** Children who Left a Special Pre-School

Name	Age (yrs.)	Disability category	Description of educational history parent or caregiver's views of the education and future of their child
Mahinda	8	Multiple disabilities	At the age of 4, Mahinda suffered from seizures before his parents realized that he was having difficulties. His parents almost gave up on his education, and kept him at home. Then they found out about a special pre-school not far from their home, and started taking him there. His mother stopped working so that she could take Mahinda to the special pre-school. After going to the special pre-school, Mahinda showed development to a level of grasping a toy if someone offered it to him. However, after 2 years, his parents gave up taking him to the special pre-school because Mahinda's mother decided to work again as she had a professional license and the family needed the income for expenses, such as medicines for Mahinda. Once again, Mahinda is just staying at home.
Sunil	17	Multiple disabilities	Before Sunil became 9 years old and started saying "Mom," his caregivers did not have an idea of sending him to any type of schooling. Sunil has a slight difficulty in walking and some intellectual disability. When Sunil was 9 years old, his mother started taking him to a special pre-school when she got information about it from another child's caregiver. For 2 years, Sunil attended the special pre-school. After that, Sunil started going to a regular school. But because of Sunil's difficulty in walking and the teasing he got from other students, he stopped going to that school and the, later, to another. Since then, he has just stayed at home. His mother was thinking about sending Sunil to a pre-vocational training program, though it would not be easy for the family to manage it financially.

in the mode of service delivery of special pre-schools in the past, based on data from previous studies (Furuta & Yoshino, 1999; Hibi, 1994; Nakanishi, 2003).

### Discussion

#### ***Issues That Promote or Hinder the Participation of Children With Disabilities in Education***

*Early special education: Flexibility leads to sustainability.* Swarna's case, described in Table 2, is an example of the result of providing early identification and early special education for a child with hearing impairments in a rural setting, where resources are more scarce than in Colombo and its suburban areas, where several types of early

intervention services are available, such as pre-schools in schools for the deaf or NGO-operated centers.

The special pre-schools have demonstrated a great deal of success with their original target group, children with hearing impairments, in fulfilling the special needs of this group of children. Successful early intervention for children with hearing impairments is assumed to be in accordance with a developed, free medical system.

It can be seen in Fig. 5 that as the special pre-schools have been keen in responding directly to the needs of the children with disabilities and their parents and caregivers in the area near the schools, they have changed their role to one that is more suited to the immediate situation. Price (1994) pointed out that major issues in early special education in less developed countries are a flexible approach to service delivery, personnel preparation and skill training, creation of awareness toward people with disabilities, sustainability of services, and the consultants' role.

Especially when foreign assistance is involved, sustainability of the project is a key issue. Reasons for the continued existence of the special pre-schools include: (a) they started with trained teachers, and (b) they have received consultations from JOCV volunteers, including strengthening existing services. Finally, it should be pointed out that special pre-schools have been sustained because they were flexible in their mode of service delivery.

*General education and inclusive education.* The Sri Lanka National Education Commission (2003) identified children with disabilities as vulnerable groups of children along with plantation children and working children, including those in domestic service. The Ministry of Education (2008) contends that steps have been taken to adopt the concept of inclusive education for special education. However, implementation of the concept of inclusive education in Sri Lanka has encountered

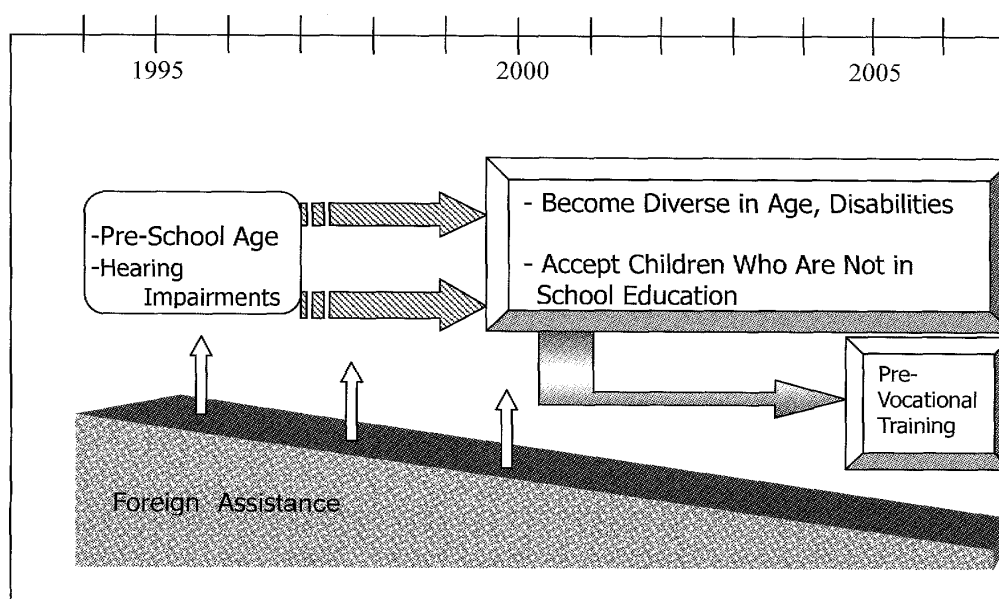


FIG. 5 Historical Changes in the Mode of Service Delivery of the Special Pre-Schools

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problems.

According to Jayaweera (1998), an examination- and rote learning-dominant system focused chiefly on the knowledge base in schools, and a rigid, uniform curriculum and limited co-curricular programs, are the norm in schools in Sri Lanka. General classrooms are normally filled with students, and the teachers focus on academic skills.

The Education Reforms of 1997, introduced through all levels of primary schooling, are supposed to be advantageous to the inclusion of children with disabilities in the regular classroom (Mendis, 2004). According to Mendis (2004), classroom teaching is supposed to change to be more learner-centered, and group- and activity-based. Introduction of a Standard Assessment and Record Form upon entering primary school further benefits children with disabilities.

One possible way to implement inclusive education for children with disabilities would be to decrease the attrition rate, which is high at present (Ministry of Social Welfare, 2003). Only 56% of children with disabilities in primary schools have been promoted to secondary schools<sup>3)</sup>. This may be a reflection of the present examination-oriented education and grade repeating system. To decrease the attrition rate for children with disabilities, especially for children with intellectual disabilities who may be most affected, it is essential to make changes in the present grade-promotion system. Also, part-time special units or resource rooms for students who have dropped out from competitive classroom learning because of their own needs to learn and/or their disabilities should be established inside regular schools.

*Information on schooling and availability: Key issues in formal schooling for children with disabilities.* Nayana's case, described above, suggests that special pre-schools are the place for some children to begin their formal education, even though the student may be older than pre-school age. Arunatilake (2006) investigated the school non-participation of children in general and pointed out that, in addition to poverty and supply-side inadequacies, such as school quality and the cost of schooling, limited know-how of parents also affects the schooling of their children. This was indicated by the fact that children with disabilities seem to start school late, rather than at the customary age.

In the case of children with disabilities, starting schooling is a much more difficult and complicated task for their parents and caregivers. The Sri Lanka National Education Commission (2003) proposed that parents of children with disabilities should make sure to be aware of and utilize the educational opportunities available for their children. To find a school or special unit where their child would be accepted is a difficult issue for most. Furuta (2006) pointed out the limitation in the capacity of the special units in regular schools, which cannot accept all the children who are supposed to go there.

Another issue is disparities across special units, related to the disability categories that they can cope with. In the past, special units in Sri Lanka have been mainly for two categories of disabilities, hearing impairments and intellectual disabilities. This is closely related to the teacher training in the traditional in-service teacher training

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system, which had trained teachers in one of three areas of specialization, visual impairments, hearing impairments, or intellectual disabilities. The number of special units for students with hearing impairments or with intellectual disabilities were almost equal until recently. This implies that there may not be enough special units for children with intellectual disabilities and/or physical or multiple disabilities. As for students with visual impairments, this category of children has been mostly assisted in regular classrooms by itinerant teachers.

In 2006, in the North Western Province, out of the 300,583 students who go to school, 2,689 (0.9%) students were receiving special education from 151 specialist teachers (Statistics Branch, Ministry of Education, 2006; Department of Education, 2006). Of those 2,689 students, 558 (20.7%) were students with visual or hearing impairments; 774 (28.8%), students with intellectual disabilities, Down's Syndrome, autism, hyperactivity, or seizures (students who are grouped as children with intellectual disabilities in this research), 167 (6.2%), students with multiple disabilities, 707 (26.3%), students with learning difficulties, and 483 (18.0%), "integrated students," that is, learning in regular classrooms.

Other than these, there are two special schools run by NGOs, one in Kurunegala District and the other in Puttalam District, serving around 250 students. Both accept children with either visual impairments or hearing impairments (Department of Education, 2006).

In short, limited information about alternatives, and not enough seats in the special units in regular schools, especially for children with intellectual disabilities, may make schooling of children with disabilities very difficult for parents and caregivers.

*Social perception of formal education.* As shown in Nayana's case in Table 2, some parents and caregivers feel that they should not send their child to school until the child has reached a certain level of development in learning. The expressions of the mother's hesitation to get her child enrolled in formal education may reflect the general idea of the purpose of formal schooling, that is, mostly for academics. Furthermore, there may be no seats available.

In Lal's case, the mother's preference for special pre-schools, rather than regular schools implies, on one hand, a parent's hesitation in sending her son to a regular school, and, on the other hand, a parent's satisfaction with the care and education provided in the special pre-schools which she may feel are more suited for her child. The parents seemed to know that activities in the pre-schools were more fitted to their children's educational needs than what is done in the special units or regular classrooms.

Finally, many superstitious beliefs stigmatize individuals who have disabilities, and sometimes even their families (Ministry of Social Welfare, 2003). As shown in Table 3, when Sunil was 9, he was successfully enrolled into a regular school after 2 years' education in a special pre-school. However, negative attitudes from his peers stopped his schooling. This is also an example of the negative effect on formal education of others' social perception, as well as culture-based attitudes towards

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children with disabilities.

*Economic factors.* As summarized in Table 3, Mahinda's case implies difficulties for children with severe and multiple disabilities to have access to education either in regular schools or even special pre-schools. Nayana's mother also faced financial difficulty because of the transportation needed to get to the special pre-school. Most people who have disabilities use the common three-wheeled taxis, but this is an added expense (Ministry of Social Welfare, 2003). The lack of available transportation severely limits educational opportunities for these children. It is often not easy for children with disabilities to use public transportation bus services, because the buses are normally very crowded, the driving is too fast, and it is dangerous for a child with disabilities to get in and out from a public bus.

## Conclusions

The present research reported a survey of the care and education provided to children with disabilities by special pre-schools in a rural setting in Sri Lanka. The investigation of special pre-schoolers and their parents' and caregivers' views revealed that special pre-schools have changed their roles from pre-schools for children with hearing impairments to special educational or semi-formal education settings for children, pre-school and school-age, and also over-school-age students, who have a wide range of disabilities. In this way, the special pre-schools have responded to the needs of children with disabilities and their parents and caregivers.

In discussing how to promote the participation of children with disabilities in education, it was pointed out that flexible modes of service delivery had led to the sustainability of the early special education program. Also, issues that now hinder participation include: (a) examination-oriented formal general education and problems in the implementation of inclusive education, (b) difficulty in collecting information on schooling and the availability of formal schooling, (c) social beliefs and parents' perceptions of formal education, and (d) economic factors.

In order to increase the participation of children with disabilities in learning in the developing countries, special settings for early care and education with flexibility in age and disability categories, like the special pre-schools in the North Western Province, may be one effective strategy. Also, to decrease the attrition rate of children with disabilities, it was proposed to make changes in the present grade-promotion system and also to establish part-time special units or resource rooms inside schools for children who have dropped out from regular school programs.

## Notes

- 1) Disability categories in the survey instrument were: (a) visual impairments, (b) hearing impairments, (c) intellectual disabilities, (d) physical disabilities, and (e) multiple disabilities.
- 2) Five vocational training centers are directly managed by the Department of

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Social Services. These centers train people with disabilities who are aged between 18 and 35 (Ministry of Social Services and Social Welfare, 2005).

- 3) Ministry of Human Resources, Education and Cultural Affairs, Special Education Unit, 2002. In Ministry of Social Welfare (2003) National Policy on Disability for Sri Lanka.

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