

Inclusive education policy in Sri Lanka: Implications for Low- and Middle-Income Countries

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine some critical points that need consideration in the formulation of inclusive education policies in low- and middle-income countries, based on the example of Sri Lanka. Upon reviewing the education of children with disabilities and looking back at the history of special education in Sri Lanka, this paper reviewed the introduction of inclusive education and policy formation with a focus on the 1997 Education Reform, National Policy on Disability for Sri Lanka (2023), as well as two policy documents, the 2009 NEREC (National Center for Educational Research Evaluation) Report and 2014 NEC (National Education Commission) Report. Secondly, the 2020 Circular and Guidance Manual, which is the first formal government document on inclusive education, was examined from the viewpoints of 1) the process of identification and assessment of children with disabilities to enrollment in school, and 2) the reorganization of special education units in the whole education system. Finally, this paper suggests a few implications for low- and middle-income countries regarding the formulation of inclusive education policies.

Key words: Inclusive Education, Policy, Sri Lanka, Low- and Middle-Income Countries

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine some critical points that should be considered in the formulation of inclusive education policies in low- and middle-income countries, based on the example of Sri Lanka. The concept of inclusive education was proposed at The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education in 1994, and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which 186 countries have ratified as of 2023, also stipulates that inclusive education should be an objective of educational provisions. In addition, inclusion and equity are key concepts in achieving the SDGs, which are goals of the entire international community. Therefore, the question of how to enhance the inclusiveness of education has become an important issue in education. Under the above-mentioned background, many low- and middle-income countries introduced inclusive education as an education policy.

Inclusive education is a form of education in which the supply side, governments, schools, and teachers who provide education, respond to the individual needs of learners. However, in low- and middle-income countries in particular, the governments, schools, teachers, and other supply-side factors that provide education are weak, e.g., many countries face a shortage of teachers. Furthermore, few countries have provided special teacher training for teachers who intend to accept children with special needs, and many countries lack in adequate teacher training policies. In many low- and middle-income countries, teachers accept children with special needs into regular classes but fall into the practice of "dumping" because they do not know how to meet the needs of children. Thus, it seems that in low- and middle-income countries, the aspect of quantitative expansion has taken precedence over qualitative improvement in the process of introducing inclusive education.

Under these circumstances, what kind of inclusive education policies are being formed in low- and middle-income

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countries by their respective contexts, and what are the implications we obtain from this? This study will focus on the following two points and use them as clues to elucidate this problem.

First, in what way does inclusive education policy describe how to identify and enroll children who have been excluded from education and stayed at home until the introduction of inclusive policies, as well as to establish criteria for their educational settings, and to collaborate with the health and welfare sectors essential to these policies?

Second, in countries with an array of special education services, such as special classes and special schools being established, how are these being reorganized and restructured in inclusive education policies?

This paper examines Sri Lanka, a country in South Asia. In Sri Lanka, the momentum for social justice increased in the decade before independence in 1948, with the commitment of the Minister of Education, C. W. W. Kannangara (1931-47), who is known as the father of free education in Sri Lanka (Sumathipala, 1968, National Institute of Education, 2016). Education continued to be central to the welfare nationalist policy that emphasized education, along with the policy of free medical care and food distribution (Jayaweera, 1998). Free education opened the door for poor peasant children who spoke only Sinhala to be amongst the chosen elite who earned university degrees (Dore, 1976), which later, in turn, became a cause of intense academic competition.

A Sri Lankan context

1) Overview of education of children with disabilities

The school-age in Sri Lanka is 5 years old, and 5 years of elementary school and 4 years of lower junior high school together comprise compulsory education. Starting with the grade 5 scholarship examination¹, students must pass the nationwide standardized examination held at the time of completion of each grade in order to graduate from the upper junior high school (two years) and high school (two years).

The net enrolment ratio in primary school increased from 95% in 2010 to 99% in 2018, while the net enrolment ratio in early secondary school increased from 84% in 2010 to 91% in 2018 (UNESCO, 2019). With the end of the ethnic conflict in the North and East in 2009, and before the Coronavirus pandemic and the 2022 economic crisis, education was approaching full coverage, at least in primary schools. The fact that the percentage of students who reach the final grade is 96% in lower junior high school means that in the last four years of the compulsory education stage, the structure remains such that the last 5%, including children with disabilities, are ejected in the middle of the school year.

According to the 2012 census, for every 1,000 people in the five to nineteen age group, 18.5 boys (1.9%) and 17 girls (1.7%) reported having physical or intellectual disabilities. Of these, 20.3% of 5-9 years, 27.1% of 10-14 years, and 55.4% of 15 years and older do not engage in educational activities in kindergartens, schools, vocational training, or other educational institutions (Nanayakkara, 2018).

Children with disabilities are educated in the following four settings. The first is Government Schools. In national/provincial schools, students may attend regular classes or attend special education (SE) units². In regular classes, children may be enrolled in regular classes from the beginning, or they may go through SE units³.

Second, there are special schools. Special schools are run by private organizations, except for one provincial school. Teachers in special schools are hired by the School Board of each school. In 2022, there were 27 assisted special schools in which the Ministry of Education provides salaries for teachers who have obtained a teaching license awarded by the government (Ministry of Education, 2022). These schools are registered with the Department of Social Services, and most of them are attached to facilities for children with disabilities, which are dormitories that guarantee food and shelter for children. On the other hand, little is known about non-assisted schools that are neither subsidized by the Ministry of Education nor registered with the Department of Social Services.

Third, the number of private and international schools, equipped with a support room staffed with teachers with a diploma in special education and speech pathologists, has increased in recent years.

Fourth, there are more facilities for children with disabilities, excluding the above-mentioned special schools and their dormitories, such as community-based rehabilitation (CBR) programs⁴.

There are school-age children with disabilities who are simply staying at home or in institutions or long-term

hospitalizations who do not have access to educational facilities. Reasons for lack of access include refusal to attend from nearby schools, overcapacity of SE units, and incidence of dropping out due to difficulty in learning while seated in the classroom (Furuta, 2009).

The educational circumstances of children with disabilities have deteriorated due to long-term school closures caused by the coronavirus pandemic (JICA Sri Lanka Office, 2021) and the economic crisis of 2022.

2) History of Special Education in Sri Lanka

The founding of the Ceylon School for the Deaf and Blind in 1912 by Anglicans in Ratmalana, a suburb of Colombo, during the British colonial period, represented the beginnings of education for children with disabilities. Table 1 describes the development of special and integrated education from the establishment of the school before the introduction of inclusive education. The process of localization began in 1958 with the establishment of a school for the deaf and blind by a Buddhist organization (the biggest religion in Sri Lanka), followed by the spread of special schools throughout the island. Many special schools continue to cater to children with visual or hearing impairments. The nationalization of schools in 1960 brought the Missionary's influence to the government, but the special schools, along with the few private schools and Pilivena (monk training schools), were not converted into government schools.

The establishment of SE units began in the late 1960s with the introduction of teacher training. In the 1980s and 1990s, official development assistance from two countries, Japan and Sweden, was provided in the field of education for children with disabilities, mainly at the National Institute of Education (NIE).

Table 1 Development of Special Education in Sri Lanka

Year	Event	Notes
1912	Ceylon School for the Deaf and Blind (CSDB)	Anglican Church
1949	First Ceylonese principal for the CSDB	Independence (1948)
1958	Siviraja School for the Deaf and Blind	First by a Buddhist organization
1960	Nationalization of Schools	Special schools not included
1967	Diploma in Special Education by an International NGO	First teacher training
1968	First Special Education Unit at a government school	Integrated education
1970	Commencement of formal special education teacher training	In-service training at a National Teacher Training College
1989	Construction of buildings of the NIE	Department of Special Education
1993	Bachelor of Education degree course	SIDA assistance to the NIE

Prepared by the authors.

Introduction of Inclusive Education and Process of Policy Formation

1) Course of Events towards Inclusive Education

Table 2 describes the development of inclusive education in Sri Lanka.

Table 2 The development of Inclusive Education in Sri Lanka

Year	Event	Notes
1997	1997 Education Reform	
	Master's degree course for two batches	SIDA assistance to the NIE
1998	Compulsory Education Decree	
2001	Special Education as a selective subject in higher education	Postgraduate Diploma course: Peradeniya University
2002	Preservice training at a National College of Education	Sinhala medium
2003	National Policy on Disability for Sri Lanka	Ministry of Social Welfare
2004	Department of Inclusive Education at the NIE	Change of the department name
	First professional department in higher education	The Open University of Sri Lanka
2009	"Study on Inclusive Education in Sri Lanka"	NEREC Report
2014	"Study on Special Education and Non-Formal Education in Sri Lanka"	NEC Report
2016	Ratification of UNCRPD	
2017-	Technical assistance by KOICA (-2019)	MoE
2018-	General Education Modernization Project by World Bank	MoE and Provincial Council
2019-	Technical assistance by JICA (-2024)	MoE
2020	Circular and Guideline Manual (37/2020)	MoE

Prepared by the authors.

2) 1997 Education Reform

Based on the report submitted by the National Education Commission (NEC) established in 1991, the 1997 Education Reform was implemented with the objective of fostering a competency-based curriculum. The 1997 Circular of the President's Special Committee on General Education on Education Reform lists special education as the eleventh of the nineteen items (Ministry of Education and Higher Education, 1997). The notification stated that the educational environment for children with disabilities should be in regular education, and in addition, indicated the option of special schools and institutions.

3) National Policy on Disability for Sri Lanka

In 2003, the Ministry of Social Welfare formulated the National Policy on Disability for Sri Lanka (NPDSL). The plan raised concerns that many children with disabilities do not have access to schooling and a high proportion of children drop out mid-career.

Based on the premise of promoting inclusive education, the NPDSL has assumed three stages of education for children with disabilities: (1) regular schools, (2) special schools when it is difficult to study at regular schools, and (3) learning at home or in the community when the degree of disability is so severe that it is difficult to study at a special school. From the perspective of welfare for persons with disabilities, the NPDSL works to guarantee education for children with disabilities, ensure quality education. NPDSL has long been a pioneer in this field by presenting solutions to deficiencies in the current system.

4) Two Policy Documents on Inclusive Education

Following the NPDSL, two governmental policy documents on inclusive education were published.

The first is a report issued by the National Center for Educational Research Evaluation (NEREC) at the University of Colombo in 2009. The NEREC report is based on relatively large-scale surveys conducted in 2007 by the Department of Monitoring and Development for Education for All and the Millennium Development Goals (MDEAMDG) of the

Ministry of Education⁵. The findings were commissioned by two researchers and a report was published in 2009 with the support of UNICEF and the MDEAMDG Department (Gunawardana & Ekanayake, 2009).

After conducting surveys covering urban, rural, estate, and post-conflict reconstruction areas, this NEREC report expressed concern about the early dropping out of children with disabilities from education even after the 1997 education reform. In addition, in response to the recommendations of the NPDSL, it called on the National Education Commission to develop a policy on inclusive education.

The NEREC report finally made fourteen recommendations. Among them, the recommendations went further than those of NPDSL on the following five points: 1) NIE and the Open University should start to modify the curriculum for children with disabilities in regular classes, 2) The role of SE unit teachers should be transferred to facilitators for the whole school, 3) Fostering an awareness of symbiosis should be promoted in schools, 4) The transition from special schools to regular schools should be facilitated, and 5) Access to schools through CBR should be promoted and necessary assistive devices and equipment should be procured."

The second is a report published by the NEC in 2014. The 2014 NEC report on the future of special education and non-formal education is based on a survey commissioned by domestic researchers with the support of the World Bank (NEC, 2014). Although the title is Special Education, its content focuses primarily on the transition to inclusive education.

According to the 2014 NEC report, education for children with disabilities is separated into four categories: special schools, special education resource centers (established by several states to provide teacher training, etc.), SE units, and inclusive regular classes. It is worth mentioning that the scope of the survey is broader than that of previous surveys, ranging from private schools to international schools, and related agencies such as the Department of Social Services and the Ministry of Health, as well as the National Vocational Training Center for Persons with Disabilities, the early intervention and rehabilitation institutes, and the National Institute of Social Development⁶.

There were thirteen recommendations in the 2014 NEC report. Table 3 shows eight major categories among them the first three—national policies, Reforms in schools, and Professional development & availability—took large portions in the recommendations.

Table 3 Recommendations of the 2014 NEC Report

Category	Items	Suggestions
National policies	Inclusive education policy	-Formulation
	Inclusive education framework	-“Twin track” adopted as a transitional phase
Reforms in schools	Reorganization of settings	-A model-inclusive school in each zone
		-Special schools upgraded to be resource centers
Professional development & availability	Training on inclusive education	-Both preservice and in-service teachers
	Development of a degree program	-Higher education
	Deployment of teachers and staff	-Incentives to SE* teachers
		-Trained SE teachers should be deployed in SE
		-Using assistants, sign language interpreters
Curriculum	Development and modification	-More inclusive curriculum
Assessment	Flexible inclusive assessment	-i.e., using AAC
Collaborations with stakeholder organizations		-With the Dept. of Social Services, NGOs, etc.
Promotion of research		-Conduct research and update data
Awareness raising		-Elimination of stigma attached to SE teachers

* SE refers to Special Education.

Prepared by the authors according to NEC (2016)

Table 4 shows that the 2014 NEC Report, first of all, requested a national policy document on inclusive education. It also proposed a “twin track” approach (full or partial inclusion and small number of special schools) as full or partial inclusion within a mainstream education where a model inclusive school should be set up in each zone, with a parallel stream of a small number of special schools in a transition phase and later special schools should be upgraded to resource centers. Compared to the NPDSL and the 2007 NEREC report, the content of the proposals of professional development and availability in the 2014 NEC Report is more concrete, i.e., trying to correct the mismatch of teacher deployment of SE-trained teachers. Other than the above, the recommendations on curriculum, assessment, collaborations with stakeholder organizations, promotion of research, and awareness raising are stated rather succinctly. It is concluded that this report paved the way for formulating an inclusive education policy.

5) Assistance from International Agencies and Overseas Aid Organizations

The Swedish government's International Development Cooperation Agency, Sida, had been providing development assistance in the education of children with disabilities since the 1980s. In 1997, it implemented a master's program in special needs education⁷ by distance classes in two batches each two years (Gunasekara, 2000) before terminating this contract.

The international cooperation agency of the Korean government, KOICA, implemented a three-year project with the aim of building the capacity of specialists such as special education teachers. From 2018 to 2024, the World Bank is implementing the "General Education Modernization Project," one of which is inclusive education, with goals such as assigning qualified teachers to all schools (World Bank, n. d.). Finally, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) of the Japanese Government has provided technical assistance to the Ministry of Education's Non-Formal and Special Education Department from 2019 to 2024 to build an inclusive education system.

As mentioned, in recent years, development assistance has been provided by international organizations and overseas official development assistance. These must be evaluated together with aid from private organizations, which is examined further in a separate article.

2020 Circular and Guidance Manual

The Circular and Guidance Manual (37/2020) was issued in the Sinhala and Tamil languages in 2020⁸. The English translation has not been released as of September 2023.

The Circular text states that while the Constitution requires the provision of quality education to (1) students with special needs and difficulties, (2) gifted children, and (3) home-based and long-term hospitalized children, many children remain unable to enroll in school. It instructs the stakeholders to provide education in the form of integrated education, inclusive education, with amendments in line with the Sri Lankan context, and to read and implement the Guidance Manual carefully.

Next, the Guidance Manual, which is a rather large amount of documentation, with Chapter 1, Introduction, Chapter 2, Compulsory Education, Chapter 3, Identifying and Registration of Children with Special Needs, and the final Chapter 25, Interim Provisions. In the following, we will describe two points that shed light on the development of the educational environment for inclusive education in this Guidance Manual: (1) the process spanning the identification and assessment of children with disabilities to school and special education in preschool, and (2) reorganization of SE units in the whole education system.

First, regarding the process from the identification to the assessment of children with disabilities and the establishment of special education in preschoolers, the Guidance Manual states that the School Committee held in accordance with the Compulsory Education Decree collects information on the identification of children with special needs with the support of the Special Education and Primary Education Officer of the Zone Education Office. In doing so, the Guidance Manual noted the government would seek the cooperation of parents, school development associations, alumni organizations, and volunteer and welfare organizations to find children with disabilities.

In addition, regarding the start of education, it states that a child with a medical certificate noting a disability can receive education from the age of three. On the other hand, for children with severe and multiple disabilities, the Non-Formal Education Department of the Zone Education Office will work with the Ministry of Health, the Department of

Social Services, and the Women's and Children's Bureau to implement community programs using volunteers (Chapter 3).

With regard to the assessment, the Educational Assessment Committee should be held with the participation of many qualified educators, including the director of the Zone Education Office, and the order of operation was clarified such that the appropriate place of study would be recommended to the target children in one of the following: (1) visiting education, (2) assisted special schools, (3) SE units, and (4) regular classes (Chapter 4). As described above, this Guidance Manual clearly states that the Zone Education Office plays a crucial role in the procedures leading up to the enrollment of children with disabilities and that the education assessment committee determines the degree of disability.

In addition, children with special needs registered with the Zone Education Office at the age of three may receive education up to the age of four at the special care centers or special pre-schools run by the Central/ Provincial Department of Social Services. However, these children are not allowed to continue attending these centers after the school-age of five. Their needs would be dealt with under the education sector (Chapter 6).

The second is the reorganization of SE units in the whole education system. By making it compulsory to register for school admission prior to the SE unit admission, a requirement that had been in the preparatory stage before entering the first year, the SE unit was systematically positioned as regular enrollment. In addition, the scope of the program was clarified by clearly stating that children with needs other than disabilities and children who do not have a letter of recommendation from the Educational Assessment Committee will not be permitted to enroll in the SE unit (Chapter 5). While designating the period for children attending SE units to two years in principle and indicating the path after that, it also indicates the unconditional award of educational completion certificates by stipulating that certificates of completion at the junior secondary stage are awarded without examination (Chapter 7).

In addition, it also stated that arrangements of the necessary facilities and equipment in the SE units shall be assigned to school engineers, principals, and persons in charge of the Zone Education Offices, etc., by showing the legal basis for this (Chapter 14). Regarding the number of teachers in the SE unit, the standard for the number of students per teacher is five, and when the number exceeds five, additional teachers are assigned (Chapter 10). Regarding the class formation of the SE unit, it was clarified that two classrooms, one for younger children (4-year-olds) and one for older children, should be set up and that the class for older children will be for students who remain in the SE unit, and that other students visit the SE unit when necessary as they are integrated into regular classes. Finally, it states the Special and Inclusive Education Coordinating committee will provide support at schools without SE units (Chapter 5), and it is the responsibility of all teachers to respond appropriately to such children (Chapter 9).

In this way, the Guidance Manual shows the path from the identification of children with disabilities up to education and clearly reorganizes the SE unit in regular education. In particular, the large number of references to SE units will change the teaching content of SE units, in which students have been stagnant for many years. On the other hand, the expertise of the special educators of the Zone Education Office focuses on the needs of school-age children over five years old, and it is not specified how to ensure the expertise need to accommodate three- and four-year-old children who require early intervention rather than education.

Other than government agencies such as the Department of Social Services, the number of early intervention institutions operated by private organizations is increasing, especially in urban areas. However, since there is no mention presented in the Guidance Manual, the path to securing expertise in cooperation with social welfare and health sectors is unclear. The Manual does not address the educational content of special schools, which are essentially social welfare organizations whose governing body is the board of each school.

Although the ideas of SE unit teachers engaging in co-teaching in regular classes and reorganizing SE units into resource units (Chapter 10) are visionary enough, they may be "borrowing" from other countries and therefore need to be examined in the future for purposes of localization. By suggesting that the Non-Formal Education Department of the zone education office responds in the community, it indicated a willingness to provide education to children with disabilities who are out of school. However, the description is fragmentary and needs further effective measures in the future.

Conclusions: Implications for Low- and Middle-income Income Countries

In this study, firstly, we reviewed the trend of policy formation towards inclusive education in Sri Lanka, which boasts high educational indicators and significant resources for special education, but the reality that school-age children with disabilities are excluded from education remains. Secondly, we examined the inclusive education policy issued in 2020. The results indicated that the shift towards inclusive education specified in the 1997 education reform, through the NPDSL (2003), raised the issue of children with disabilities who were out of school. In 2009, the MDEMDG Department of the Ministry of Education took the lead in presenting a policy proposal, but it failed to policy formation. Subsequently, a 2014 NEC report made some more specific recommendations, leading to the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2016.

The 2020 Circular and Guidance Manual made significant progress in establishing the organizational foundations of SE units, clearly describing the process from the identification to the assessment of children with disabilities at special pre-schools followed by enrollment. However, there may be some limitations regarding the expertise of education sector professionals handling children under or around the age of three. Recently, there is a report of a culturally and linguistically adapted development assessment tool has been designed by health sector professionals in Sri Lanka (Caldera, et al., 2023). Lynch, et al. (2023) suggested that the best conduit for early identification and provision of essential support may be through both education and health. Further cooperation with the health and social welfare sectors will be required in the future. In addition, since the Guidance Manual does not describe much about assisted special schools, fundamental system reform or strengthening of cooperation with special schools has been postponed.

In the formulation of inclusive education policies in low- and middle-income countries based on the example of Sri Lanka, it was suggested that: (1) if early intervention for children with disabilities has not yet been developed, a link between the medical, health, welfare and education sectors should be established, and (2) if there is an accumulation of special education systems and practices separate from mainstream education, a viewpoint on the construction of a mechanism for transforming to a new system by utilizing existing systems and practices is crucial.

Finally, the possibilities of development assistance from foreign government agencies and international organizations provided for inclusive education in Sri Lanka should be explored in the future.

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Notes:

- (1) There is a nationwide grade five scholarship examination at the time of graduating from elementary school, which was originally intended to provide children of poor farmers with educational opportunities at prestigious government national schools. However, at present, each school competes for the number of children eligible for scholarships. In the upper grades of elementary school, this is a big hurdle for children with disabilities to continue learning due to the fact that the focus is on rote learning for exam preparation.
- (2) Government Schools are divided into four types of schools depending on the conditions of the year of education provided and the presence or absence of science subjects in high school. National School is a relatively well-equipped school for children who score high on the grade five scholarship exam. Among provincial schools, those that only offer grades up to elementary or lower secondary school are unpopular; thus the number of their students is declining due to inadequate educational facilities and a lack of teachers. With prominent regional characteristics such as urban areas, estates (plantation areas), and post-conflict reconstruction areas, government schools offer a wide variety of educational opportunities.
- (3) The SE Unit had the status of a preparatory course to be taken prior to enrollment in elementary school and was not recognized as a regular admission.
- (4) There is also a facility for children with disabilities that is known for providing care for children with severe multiple disabilities that has been in operation for 50 years. The Department of Social Service has been intensively working on CBR programs for persons with disabilities, and the Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers has dispatched volunteers to these programs in the past (Higashida, 2016).

- (5) As of August 2013, the department name was Monitoring & Planning of Education for All and Millennium Development Goal Branch.
- (6) A national social worker training institution at the undergraduate and graduate level.
- (7) About 10 people were selected for each batch. At the time of writing, several former students confirmed that all of them had retired.
- (8) Since it was issued during the coronavirus pandemic, it was printed and distributed to each educational office around August 2022.

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