

Brief Note

Present Status of Education of Children With Disabilities in Sri Lanka: Implications for Increasing Access to Education

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A field survey was conducted to examine the present status of education for children with disabilities in Sri Lanka. The country-specific context of the existing special education structure and the situation in the general education, that is, government schools, were examined. Next, emerging non-formal education settings for children with disabilities were described. Finally, some possibilities for increasing the access to education of children with disabilities in Sri Lanka were suggested, including the following: (1) Inclusive education should be implemented in a form that is fitted to the climate of each school; (2) For children with disabilities who do not have access to formal school education, non-formal education activities of any type should be regarded as an alternative educational opportunity; (3) Special schools can play the role of resource centers; and (4) Further research is needed on educating teachers in the spirit of inclusive education.

Key Words: Sri Lanka, increasing access to education, inclusive education, non-formal education, children with disabilities

Introduction

To meet the great and diverse needs of children with disabilities who are most at risk of exclusion from education, successful implementation of inclusive education can increase the number of children with disabilities receiving basic education. As a consequence of the World Conference on Education for All, held by four U.N. agencies in 1990, improving access to basic education has been one of the key issues in planning educational development in developing countries.

However, achieving Western models of inclusive education remains an unrealistic goal, mainly due to the economic difficulties prevailing in many developing countries (Kisanji, 1998a; Eleweke & Rodda, 2000). Therefore, as Dyson (2004) stated, instead of thinking about inclusion as a single reality, inclusion should be viewed in terms of a series of discourses or varieties. The education of children with disabilities should be planned in general in accordance with the status of educational

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H. Furuta

development in each country or area, and in particular with consideration of the past context of special education in that country. For example, countries like South Africa had fewer special education structures prior to implementing inclusive education (Engelbrecht, Forlin, Eloff, & Swart, 2000; Lomofsky & Lazarus, 2001).

When we think about inclusive education in developing countries, school-based education appears insufficient to fulfill the educational needs of children with disabilities. UNESCO (year unknown¹) defined inclusive education as education concerned with providing appropriate responses to a broad spectrum of learning needs in both formal and non-formal educational settings. In the context of this definition, both formal school education and non-formal education of children with disabilities should be examined.

The present paper examines the current status of education of children with disabilities in Sri Lanka where special education structures have existed. It also aims at distilling some implications for increasing access to education for children with disabilities in Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka was selected because of its unique status. It is known for its higher performance on education and health indices, despite its low level of per capita income. The adult literacy rate for females was 89 percent in 2000, and it has very low child mortality rates. In 1998, the net intake rate into primary school was reported to be 94% (UNESCO, 2000).

There are two types of government schools in Sri Lanka: One type is national schools, controlled directly by the Central Ministry of Education; the other is provincial schools, which are under the direction of Provincial Ministries of Education. The former represents large prestigious schools, while some of the schools in the latter category are small and impoverished (Ranaweera, 1995). In 2002, there were 320 national schools and 9509 provincial schools (Ministry of Education, year unknown).

In the past 90-some years, special education has been offered in Sri Lanka in a few special schools established by Christian missionaries. Since the 1960's, 10 additional special schools have been established, mainly by Buddhist organizations. These special schools serve a limited number of children, the majority of whom have visual or hearing impairments.

In the late 1960's, the Ministry of Education started an integrated special education program within regular government schools, called special units¹⁾ (Piyasena, 2002; Rajapakse, 1993). The number of special units was increased in the 1980's through assistance from foreign aid organizations, especially the Swedish Government. However, even with these special education structures, there is still speculation that many children with disabilities do not have access to education, though there are no confirming statistics regarding these children.

Education of Children With Disabilities in Sri Lanka

TABLE 1 Schools and Facilities Visited

School/ Facility	Type of School	Grades Served in the School	List of Schools	Special Units	Categories of Disabilities Served in the Special Units/Special Schools		
					Visual Impairment	Hearing Impairment	Mental Disabilities
Schools	National School	1-13	School A	Yes		Served	Served
		1-13	School B	Yes	Served	Served	Served
		1-13	School C	Yes			Served
		1- 5	School D	Yes			Served
		1-13	School E	Yes		Served	Served
		1-13	School F	Yes		Served (Mixed)	
	Provincial School	1-11	School G	No			
		1- 8	School H	No			
		1-11	School I	Yes			Served
		1-11	School J	Yes			Served
		1-11	School K	Yes		Served	Served
	Special School	1-11	School L	—	Served		
		1-	School M	—			Served
		1-12	School N	—		Served	
		1-11	School O	—		Served	Served
	Facilities	Provincial Pre-school for Children with Disabilities				Served	Served
Provincial Training Center for Children with Mental Disabilities						Served	
Private Home for Children with Mental Disabilities						Served	
Private Home for Children with Mental Disabilities						Served	

Method

A field survey was conducted in 2001 and 2002. After basic information relating to children with disabilities was collected through visiting and interviewing at related ministries and aid organizations, 16 schools (11 regular schools and 5 special schools), along with 4 other facilities such as pre-schools, were visited to observe the learning circumstances for students and to collect related information from teachers (see Table 1). These schools and facilities were all located in three provinces, namely, North Western, Central, and Western Provinces, except one Home for Mentally Handicapped Children located in the Southern Province.

H. Furuta

TABLE 2 Outline of the Present Special Education Programs in Sri Lanka

Province	Special Units						Number of 1st Grade Students*	
	National Schools		Provincial Schools		Special Schools			
	Teachers	Students	Teachers	Students	Schools	Teachers		Students
Western	25	228	135	1547	10	183	1118	72174
Southern	13	99	63	525	4	87	498	43107
Sabaragamuwa	21	171	74	1368	2	17	156	31813
Uva	13	105	35	266	2	21	205	25085
Central	15	101	218	1438	2	31	224	43999
North Western	9	131	217	2207	2	47	269	39607
North Central	6	71	76	1210	1	15	104	21708
North Eastern	4	60	7	57	2	15	145	57167
Total	106	966	825	8618	25	416	2719	334660

Note on Sources. Non-formal, Continuing and Special Education Branch, Ministry of Education and Higher Education (2001); *Ministry of Education and Higher Education (2000).

Results and Discussion

Existing Special Education Structure: Special Units and Special Schools

The country-specific context of the existing special education structure within Sri Lanka will be examined here.

Table 2 presents an outline of the special education programs in Sri Lanka. As Roberts (2003) pointed out, one must recognize that publicly available statistics regarding special units are estimates that cannot be taken literally, since it is likely that there are some inaccuracies.

As can be seen in Table 3, which summarizes the distribution of special units in each province, almost one-fourth of the national schools, which are located in the major cities, had special units, while only 770 (8%) out of the total of 9,564 provincial schools had them. This suggests that it is more difficult to find special units in the small provincial schools, which are often located in rural and remote villages.

A distinct difference was found among the provinces. In 3 provinces, more than 10% of schools had special units, whereas the rest of the provinces had fewer than 10% of such schools. The low percentage of schools with special units in the North Eastern province may reflect the impact of the ethnic conflict in this area during the last 20 years.

Differences were found in school circumstances in the schools observed in the field survey. For instance, two out of nine schools with special units which were visited had separate toilet facilities for students with disabilities inside the classroom building. One school was a boys-only national school, with a reputation for excellence in education. This school has elementary through higher secondary level classes in science. Another school visited was a Muslim school where the Tamil language was

Education of Children With Disabilities in Sri Lanka

TABLE 3 Distribution of Special Units in Each Province

Province	National Schools		Provincial Schools		Percentage of Schools with Special Units
	Schools	Schools with Special Units	Schools	Schools with Special Units	
Western	64	14	1347	91	7.4%
Southern	59	11	1101	63	6.4%
Sabaragamuwa	28	11	1124	74	7.4%
Uva	36	12	796	31	5.2%
Central	54	15	1436	218	15.6%
North Western	34	9	1221	214	17.8%
North Central	10	6	760	72	10.1%
North Eastern	38	4	1779	7	0.6%
Total	323	82 (25.4%)	9564	770 (8.1%)	Average 8.6%

Note on Sources. Non-formal, Continuing & Special Education Branch, Ministry of Education & Higher Education (2001).

TABLE 4 Age Distribution of Students in Two Special Units

Age	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	Moved to RC
SU for HI		1	3	3		2								1	5
SU for MD	2			4		2		1	1	1	1				3

Note. *RC=regular classrooms; SU=special units; HI=students with hearing impairments; MD=students with mental disabilities.

used as the medium for instruction. The classroom building for the special unit had been built in part with the support of money donated by the Muslim community both inside and outside of Sri Lanka.

Though diverse school circumstances are prominent characteristics in Sri Lankan schools, special units were found to share many features. For example, special units provide students with disabilities with a place to learn or to find “their own space” to stay.

In some cases, students had been in the same classroom with the same teacher for more than 10 years. This situation leads to difficulty in enrolling new students, because, since few students move from special units to regular classrooms, there is a lack of available places. Also, students with widely differing ages and abilities were in the same classroom.

Table 4 shows the age distribution of students in two special units in a provincial school that has elementary through higher secondary level classes in science.

The opportunities for co-curricular or exchange activities between students in the special units and those in the regular classrooms are very limited. This separation of setting for students with disabilities results in the students with disabilities in special

H. Furuta

education structures being kept isolated from their peers even on the same school premises.

Of the 18 teachers' positions in the special units visited, 8 were filled with teachers trained at the Teacher Training College, and 7 with teachers who had received short-term training in their province. One teacher was a volunteer, and one was on long-term leave. One post was vacant because of the difficulty in finding a qualified teacher.

Some teachers remarked that one of their goals was to help their students achieve enough learning skills in the special units that they could be transferred to a regular classroom in the same school. But the reality is that the number of students who can be transferred is very limited. Even though some students are successful in transferring, it is hard for them, after several years, to continue studying in regular classrooms.

All except one of the special schools in Sri Lanka are managed by private or charitable organizations under the Department of Social Services. Most of the special schools are called "Assisted Schools" from the Ministry of Education, because the teachers' salaries in these schools are paid by the Ministry of Education. These special schools provide education to children with disabilities, the majority of whom come from poor families.

In two of the special schools that were visited, it was found that they accepted many students who had dropped out from special units in the government schools. For example, in one Catholic school for students who are deaf, first grade students were divided into two classes. One class had 11 students, 6 of whom had moved there from special units, some of whom were over-aged. Another class had 14 students who had started education in the pre-school of the same school.

It is assumed that some students have quit going to special units not only because of academic failure, but also because of problems that the special units or their parents faced.

There is also an exceptional special school for students with mental handicaps which serves children from families in the suburban area of Colombo who can afford to send their children to the school. This school has some specialists, such as a speech therapist.

The roles played by these five special schools should not be overlooked, just because special schools are "old-fashioned" under the present international trend of inclusive education. These special schools should, however, adapt to accommodate wider needs of their students, beyond the present frame of charitable organizations. For example, the schools have many experienced teachers who potentially have the ability to play pivotal roles in providing professional support to their students not only in the special schools, but also in the public schools.

General Education for Children with Disabilities in Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka, the government schools are organized in diverse ways, such as according to the grades represented within the school, the subjects that are taught,

Education of Children With Disabilities in Sri Lanka

or the language of instruction (Sinhala or Tamil). Sri Lankan schools also vary greatly in terms of their facilities, such as libraries, science rooms, computers, and printers. The schools with more facilities are the limited number of national schools that are the elite schools at the top of the educational system. On the other end of the scale, there are many village schools among the provincial schools that have only grades one to five, with facilities that lack even the basic essentials for instruction.

Students who are successfully moved to regular classrooms from the special units are very often enrolled in grades in which the age of the majority of the students are two, three, or more years younger than they are.

In one of the elite schools, a few students with mild intellectual disabilities who were moved into a regular classroom from special units were observed making an informal return to the special units. They were returned because the students without disabilities were engaged in preparation for the grade-five national examination. In the near future, the students with mild intellectual disabilities are likely to drop out from school after they fail to succeed in regular classrooms where they get no support for their special learning needs.

When we consider the learning conditions for students with disabilities in the national schools in Sri Lanka, it is easy to predict that many students with disabilities will drop out of school and lose the chance to gain access to the education they need.

According to Jayaweera (1999), the Sri Lankan education system has been examination-centered for over a century. There are three major national examinations, which occur in grades 5, 11, and 13. Because of the extreme competition, students with disabilities are at a disadvantage to progress within the school system. Therefore, it is not easy for them to continue learning in regular classrooms.

There has not yet been a system established by the local education authorities, such as the district or zonal education offices, for identifying and investigating the situation of students with disabilities in regular classrooms. Therefore, students with disabilities may not receive from those directly responsible, such as classroom teachers the attention or support that they need. This situation was observed even for students who had been moved into regular classrooms. Once they leave the special units, it is not the special unit teacher's responsibility to follow the students' learning conditions.

In two provincial schools, schools G and H in Table 1, which were located in poor fishing communities, there were no special units. The two students with disabilities there, one with Down syndrome and the other with a hearing impairment, were not perceived by their classroom teachers as having special educational needs.

This situation can also be interpreted from a different perspective. Miles (1997) pointed out that "casual integration" of children with mild and moderate disabilities has been the cultural practice in South Asia for many years. Casual integration practice may vary from close observation of children's current abilities to allowing them more time for learning. It is more likely for students with disabilities to be in casual integration in village schools where classroom sizes are smaller, and students know each other better.

H. Furuta

This advantage of village schools has been reported in the case of education for children with already identified disabilities. Roberts (2003), who conducted a survey on education of children with visual impairments, pointed out that the smaller village schools appeared to have the benefit of more teacher time given to the students.

Emerging Non-formal Education

Non-formal education is defined as “activities or programs organized outside the framework of the established school system but directed to definite educational objectives.” (UNESCO, year unknown²). As Kisanji (1998b) noted, children and adults with special learning needs could benefit more from ecologically and culturally relevant non-formal learning.

Little has been published about non-formal education for children with disabilities in Sri Lanka, with the exception of one study conducted by Yokotani (2001), who described a community-based rehabilitation (CBR) program run by a Sri Lankan non-governmental organization in a tea plantation area.

In the present field survey, a few residential facilities for children with disabilities were found to provide education. For example, a Catholic residential facility with 50 children from ages 4 to 10, located in a rural and remote area, had an on-site professional training course of its own, which had been approved by the provincial Department of Social Services. Though the number of children served in this kind of segregated facility in Sri Lanka is very limited, it is worth helping them provide accountable education through coordination with the local education offices. That change could lead to recognition of these facilities as non-formal educational settings.

Another form of emerging non-formal education setting was found in the pre-schools for children with disabilities in the North Western Province of Sri Lanka. From the mid 1990's, the Department of Social Services of the North Western Province has run a pre-school for children with disabilities, with the support of Japanese volunteers.

According to the results of a survey conducted by Nakanishi (2003), out of 103 children going to the pre-school for children with disabilities in the North Western Province, 61 (59%) were school age or over five years old. Out of these 61, the parents or caregivers of 26 (43%) children reported that they did not send their children to government schools because they felt dissatisfied with the education provided by the government schools. Twenty-two (35%) said that they did not send their children to government schools because their children had been denied admission to special units where they had applied.

These results suggest two things. One is that some special units are not able to provide educational opportunities to all the children with disabilities who would like to be enrolled there. Another is that some parents of school-age children with disabilities prefer to send their children to these pre-schools because they know that the activities in these pre-schools are more fitted to their children's educational needs, as opposed to what is done in the special units. The pre-school programs are more oriented towards children gaining functional skills, rather than academic skills.

Education of Children With Disabilities in Sri Lanka

It seems that these parents were in search of a better place to have their children educated, and that they did not have any doubts about sending their school-age children to a pre-school. The local education authorities should have stronger linkage with these pre-schools.

Implications for Increasing Access to Education of Children with Disabilities in Sri Lanka

First, for children with disabilities who go to government schools, students with disabilities need more support to learn in an inclusive setting. At the least, there should be a teacher in the school who can attend to the students' learning situation and who can, when needed, help them solve problems they face.

If the schools have special units, the unit teachers can be resource persons for the students with disabilities who are in the regular classrooms.

Since schools are diverse in Sri Lanka, inclusive education should be implemented in forms that are fitted to each school climate. For example, in smaller village schools, finding out about the hidden practice of casual integration or inclusive education by some regular classroom teachers may be helpful to other teachers. However, considering the examination-oriented nature of general education in the government schools in Sri Lanka, it may be difficult for children with disabilities to access further education if they drop out of a regular class, for example, in grade 5. In the government schools with special units, it may be necessary to enlarge the function of the special units to cope with life skills training and pre-vocational activities for children with disabilities who had dropped out from regular classrooms and returned to the special units. Volunteer teacher aides are also recommended if that practice fits the individual school climate.

Second, for children with disabilities who do not have access to formal school education, any type of non-formal educational activities should be regarded as an alternative educational opportunity and strongly supported, under the coordination of the Ministries of Education, Health, and Social Welfare. Among those children with disabilities who do not have access to education, there may be many children who are living in extreme poverty and who have severe and/or multiple disabilities. The education of children with severe and/or multiple disabilities is an area that needs strong support from both domestic and foreign aid agencies. For example, a principal of a special school mentioned that the school could not accept many children with multiple disabilities, because the teachers feel they are not specialized enough to be able to teach these children.

Third, the special schools can play the role of resource centers for educating children with disabilities in the whole island, utilizing their experienced teachers.

Fourth, although the present study did not focus on teacher training, here are some suggestions in the area. To increase access to children with disabilities in the government schools, teacher training in elementary and secondary general education needs to include inclusive education in its curriculum. At the time of the field survey, special education teacher training was in a time of transition from the traditional

H. Furuta

in-service training to pre-service training in a College of Education with the Sinhala language as the medium of instruction.

As yet, there have not been any formal teacher-training institutes conducted in the Tamil language. As a result, in the schools in which the Tamil language is used, such as in the North Eastern Province, it is more difficult to find specialist teachers. Developing teacher training in both special and general education in the North Eastern Province should be planned in accordance with the reconstruction of this area which has suffered from a prolonged ethnic conflict. Further research is needed with particular reference to teacher training.

Endnote

- 1) Special units are separate classes in regular schools where children with disabilities spend almost all their school day. There have been special units for children with visual and hearing impairments, and for children with mental handicaps.

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Education of Children With Disabilities in Sri Lanka

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