

Executive summary

This report outlines the main findings of a survey conducted on ‘Identification of Special Education Needs (SENs) of Primary School Children in Sri Lanka’ by the Postgraduate Institute of Management (PIM) in 2015.

Children have special education needs if they have a learning difficulty, which calls for a special educational provision to be made for them. A learning difficulty is, if children have a greater difficulty in learning than the majority of children of the same age or have a disability, which prevents or hinders them from making use of educational facilities generally provided for children of the same age in schools. The primary focus of this study is on children with learning difficulties, mild to moderate, where such needs cannot be identified through appearance, as they do not fall under the ‘Disabled’ umbrella.

Educational reforms in Sri Lanka during the last three decades have been concerned with the improvement in the quality of education, especially, making the curriculum more relevant to the needs of the country. Sri Lanka has a near universal adult literacy rate and a high primary school enrolment, primarily due to the free education policy and the Compulsory Education Ordinance (Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 1996). However, despite the provisions made, out of the 10.6% population of schooling aged children with disabilities, only 4.6% children have access to education (UNICEF, 2003). Therefore, by 2005, there were 907 Special Education Units (SEUs) catering to children with disabilities in Sri Lanka (Asian Development Bank, 2006).

According to a report published by the European Commission in 2013, children with SENs commonly leave school with few qualifications and/or generally become unemployed or economically inactive. Hence, it is very important for a country to have a mechanism to identify these children and guide them to reach their full potential where they will not be a burden to the society they live in.

Segregated educational environments are arguable, as students are educated in separate schools. However, most developing countries implement integrated education as an initiative towards inclusion (UNICEF, 2003). Integrated education involves relocating students into mainstream classes for several hours a day, based on their ability to cope with academic activities alongside their peers in regular classrooms. Therefore, inclusive education is in discussion among school administrators, teachers and parents as to the effect

it may have on general students and SEN students. Therefore, students of PIM investigated into the depth and gravity of inclusion and to see whether SEN is appropriately identified in primary schools.

The report is an outcome of a quantitative research conducted by a team of researchers consisting of six members. There were a total of 12,152 questionnaires distributed among 9,181 parents and 2,971 teachers and school management of 98 schools in Gampaha and Colombo districts of Western Province, Sri Lanka. The sample was a mix of respondents from government, semi government, international and private schools.

The total number of samples collected from this survey was 8,284, of which 6,265 were from parents and 2,019 were from teachers and management. After rejecting 1,562 questionnaires, due to lack of sufficient data and credibility, the overall response rate was 68.17%.

The survey was carried out under four main areas identified in special education needs identification process. Namely, ‘awareness of teachers and management’, ‘attitude of teachers and management’, ‘steps taken in schools to support SEN’ and ‘attitude of parents towards SEN’.

The survey findings revealed in overall a very disheartening picture of the current environment for nurturing children with special education needs in Sri Lanka. The people who should be responsible for identifying special education needs in the children, i.e. the parents and the teacher were both unaware about the subject. Leaving apart parents who might have different education levels and comprehension levels, the teachers whom we believe would guide our children are also in darkness regarding the special education needs that need attention. Despite the majority of the teachers stating that they have had some sort of encounter with SEN student mostly at school, a large majority did not possess the requires skills, knowledge and the training required to identify and guide the students. The teachers and management were also not aware about the local policies and provisions that has been made for SEN students. Further, most of the teachers and management did not have an idea what diversity and inclusion meant. This suggest that even the basics are not met with regard to inclusion in the education sector.

The attitude of the teachers also has a significant influence towards inclusion. Majority of teachers have expressed their concerns over the inability to provide special attention to SEN

students and the strain they would go through in supporting them. However, majority of the respondents have expressed their willingness to undergo SEN training.

Also, the whole education system as a whole lacked a standard framework where such needs identified, assessed and attended to. The policies have been only limited paper and are not in practice.

Awareness of parents was also at a very low level and their attitude did not support inclusion to great extent. Parents believe that it is hard to give special attention to SEN students in an inclusive classroom and lack of adequate resources and special materials hinder the performance of the teacher and will badly affect to other students' learning. Further, the majority view was that children with special education needs should be separately educated. However, larger portion of the parents have stated that there should be a policy for inclusive education.

After considering the survey findings, it is evident that there is a dire need for the authorities should make necessary arrangements to introduce a policy enforcement mechanism. Also, a specially designed training programme should be developed to educate the teacher on identifying special education needs of children, teaching methods to be used on such students and also to develop the skills required to guide them, communicate with them.

Further, a uniform methodology for identifying special education needs should be developed and the same should be introduced to all schools. Relevant officers should be trained on the methodology and required competencies and skills and qualifications should be defined for such job roles.

Steps should be taken to build the public awareness where the society will be able to look at children with special education needs in a new light and in a more compassionate manner, where they would also help them to reach their maximum potential.

Also, the survey findings stress the need of a common monitoring system in the education system, which would help monitoring the normal students as well as children with special education needs in schools.