

Chapter One

Introduction to the study

1.1 Background

The World Declaration on Education for All, adopted in Jomtien, Thailand (1990) and the Dakar Framework for Action (2000) set out an overall vision: universalizing access to education for all children, youth and adults, and promoting equity. Evaluating the progress made towards the EFA goals since 2000 and the education related Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as well as the lessons learned, a new education agenda and the Framework for Action, Incheon Declaration, 2030 has been proposed. This declaration having examined the remaining challenges has identified on future priorities and strategies for its achievement hoping to “leave no one behind”. This new vision is embodied in the proposed Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”.

Inclusion and equity in and through education is considered the cornerstone of this new vision (SDG 4). It is committed to addressing all forms of exclusion and marginalization, disparities and inequalities in access, participation and learning outcomes. It emphasizes that no education target should be considered met unless met by all.

National assessments provide country-wide information about an array of learning outcomes according to nationally defined standards and pinpoint areas for government attention and policy intervention. Furthermore, they explicitly address the EFA quality goal that refers to ‘recognized and measurable learning outcomes’, as well as the Expanded Commentary, which discusses the need for ‘accurately assessed curricular knowledge and skills’.

A world wide emphasize on the need for timely and credible data on student learning, that may inform the design of effective mechanisms to improve educational outcomes,

rather than only on education inputs could be seen. Consequently there is a dramatic and global growth in the use of national assessments (Kamens & McNeely, 2010).

“National assessment systems provide global overviews of educational achievement for whole school systems, and also permit evaluations to be made of trends over time and the performance of sub-groups of students” (Postlethwaite and Kellaghan, 2008, p.10).

Sri Lanka has also progressed towards achieving the EFA and MDGs pertaining to education. Towards this goal the Ministry of Education adopted a sector wide approach to education planning in 2005. The first Education Sector Development Programme (ESDFP) was successfully implemented from 2006 – 2011. The plan for the second stage of ESDFP 2013-2017 is currently been implemented. The purpose is to address prevailing issues relating to equity, equality, quality and efficiency considerations in the general education sector. In order to address these issues the ESDFP (2013 -2017) is organized under the following key policy themes.

Theme 1: Increase equitable access to primary and secondary education

Theme 2: Improve the quality of primary and secondary education

Theme 3: Strengthen governance and service delivery of education

In addition it provides a foundation theme and a crosscutting activity to ensure the achievement of policy themes related results and outcomes.

The foundation: Overarching education sector development rolling plan : and

Crosscutting activity: Results – based monitoring and evaluation. (p.1)

Under theme 2 – Improving Quality of primary and secondary education, National Assessment of Learning Outcomes are expected to be utilized for program development.

Therefore, national assessment of learning outcomes has become an important component of education policy analysis and programme monitoring in Sri Lanka as well. The purpose of a national assessment is not only to provide information on the state of education, but also that information should lead to improvement in student achievement by systematically feeding into decision making.

1.2 National Assessment Studies conducted in Sri Lanka

The National Education Research and Evaluation Centre (NEREC) of the Faculty of Education, University of Colombo has been conducting National assessments since 2003. NEREC has conducted national assessment of learning outcomes both at primary as well as at secondary level. At primary level, assessments were conducted at Grade 4 in 2003, 2007, 2009 and 2013 respectively. At secondary level National Assessment of Learning Outcomes were conducted at Grade 8 in 2005, 2008, 2012 and 2014. The results from these studies, it is claimed provide “useful information for analysis of policy and the monitoring of the progress of the education system” (Aturupana, 2009, p.31).

1.3 Rationale for the present study

This report presents the findings of a national assessment conducted for students completing grade 4 in the year 2015. Students’ achievement in the first language – Sinhala or Tamil, the second language - English, and mathematics was assessed.

The national assessments conducted in grade 4 in 2003, 2007 and 2009 reveal that on average there is an improvement in achievement levels of Grade 4 students in First Language, English and mathematics. While there was an improvement in the achievement of learning outcomes, it was also revealed that there are inequalities in provision of education in relation to province, gender, medium of instruction and locality (NEREC, 2008).

Although there is a substantial increase in achievement over the period, the need “for these findings to be supported by further national assessments in the future, in order to reach a reliable and robust conclusion about the magnitude of improvement” (Aturupane, 2009, p.33) has been stressed.

Over the period of 2003-2009 the same question papers were used in the national assessment. This was to enable comparison of achievement over the period and identify patterns and trends. Even though the test items were not published, using the same test

items over a decade, it was felt may have resulted in teachers been familiar with the items and led to a wash back effect. Therefore, there was a need to construct new test items for the 2013 national assessment.

1.4 National Assessment of Learning Outcomes- 2015

The National Assessment of Learning Outcomes of 2013 used new instruments to test cognitive skills in First language, second language – English and mathematics. Therefore, it was not possible to compare with the previous assessments. Instead, the 2013 National Assessment was to serve as the baseline for monitoring the level and distribution of learning outcomes overtime.

The National Assessment of Learning Outcomes of 2015 used the same instruments used in the 2013 assessment to test cognitive skills in First language, second language – English and mathematics. Therefore, the results of this study will be compared with the baseline data of the 2013 study to identify trends in learning outcomes over the period 2013 to 2015.

A national assessment has multiple purposes. According to Kellaghan and Greaney (2009), all national assessments seek answers to six questions. The present assessment seeks to find answers to three of them.

- How well are students learning in the education system (with reference to general expectations, aims of the curriculum, preparation for further learning, or preparation for life)?
- Does evidence indicate particular strengths and weaknesses in students' knowledge and skills?
- Do particular subgroups in the population perform poorly? Do disparities exist, for example, between the achievements of (a) boys and girls, (b) students in urban and rural locations, (c) students from different language or ethnic groups, or (d) students in different regions of the country?

(Kellaghan and Greaney, 2008, p.9).

The national assessment covered the entire country and the sample was drawn to enable analysis by province, type of school, gender and medium of instruction.

Chapter 2 of this report will discuss the methodology of the study. Chapters 3-6 will present the findings pertaining to the achievement of cognitive skills in first language - Sinhala and Tamil, second language - English and mathematics respectively. These chapters will present the patterns of achievement of the three subjects as well as indicate the trends in achievement over the period 2013-2015. The final chapter will discuss the lessons to be learnt and the way forward.

1.5 Summary

A worldwide concern regarding the need to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all in association with improvements in the conditions of schooling and student achievement levels is evident.

Sri Lanka being a member country that has agreed to the World Declaration on Education for All, has conducted four national assessments of achievement of learning outcomes of grade 4 students with the aim of monitoring and evaluating the quality of its education system. Results of these studies show substantial improvements in achievement, while there are still disparities in achievement inter and intra wise provincial level. In 2013 a baseline study was conducted using new assessment tools to assess the cognitive abilities of grade 4 students. The present assessment using the same instruments will enable the comparison of achievement of learning outcomes of grade 4 students over the period 2013-2015.

