

Introduction to the Study

1.1 Background

There is a greater need today to uphold the fundamental principles of equality of educational opportunity and universal access to education. 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”.

The global norm for educational governance has been established by adopting evidence-based policymaking in education (Wiseman, 2010). 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 learning assessments (Kamens & McNeely, 2010). Assessment of student learning have become a major tool of governments to collect high-quality data on education in order to inform effective policies and practices (Masters, 2017).

This shift from an emphasis on education inputs to assessment of quality was influenced by the Jomtien Declaration (*World Declaration on Education for All* 1990). Article 4 of the Jomtien Declaration states that the focus of basic education should be “on actual learning acquisition and outcome, rather than exclusively upon enrolment, continued participation in organized programs and completion of certification requirements”

(*World Declaration on Education for All* 1990,p. 5). Another reason for this shift in focus was the Dakar Framework for Action (UNESCO 2000), which also highlighted the importance of learning outcomes. One of its goals was, by 2015, to improve “all aspects of the quality of education . . .especially in literacy, numeracy, and essential life skills” (UNESCO 2000, iv, 7). Over 130 Education Ministers and more than 1500 participants have now adopted the Incheon Declaration "Education 2030: Towards inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all ". The Incheon Declaration was signed at the end of the World Education Forum (WEF) held in Incheon, Republic of Korea, during the third week of May 2015. As explained in the opening paragraphs of the document, the Declaration marks an important step in the development of international education policy, continuing the Education for All (EFA) movement, started in Jomtien Thailand in 1990 and formalised by the Dakar Framework for Action (2000).

As a member country agreed on the World Declaration on Education for All, Sri Lanka strived to enhance the quality of education by implementing procedures that will provide information on students’ learning. One such measure adopted was monitoring student achievement through national assessments at different Grade levels conducted by the National Education Research and Evaluation Centre (NEREC). A national assessment “is designed to describe the achievement of students in a curriculum area aggregated to provide an estimate of the achievement level in the education system as a whole at a particular age or grade level” (Kellaghan, Greaney and Murray. 2009, p.xi).

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. Sui-chu Ho, E (2015) identifies three main purposes of National Assessment. First, is to evaluate the overall learning achievement levels of students at certain grade levels and to monitor the overall quality of basic education. Secondly, to provide feedback to the curriculum and teaching and learning practices in order to achieve better outcomes for students. Thirdly, to inform policy.

Promoting “Equity” and “excellence” and reducing disparities in the education system is one of the main focuses of the Government of Sri Lanka. In this regard a comprehensive medium term Education Sector Development Framework and Programme (ESDFP) from 2006–2010 was developed. This “framework incorporates a blend of bottom - up and top – down supportive planning process for the development of the primary and secondary education system” (Pg.2) One of the Major areas identified in this framework is “improving the quality of basic and secondary education” and “increasing equitable access to basic and secondary education” (p.2) This Framework further emphasizes that equitable access means that “each child can access an education appropriate to his /her individual learning potential and needs” (Pg.4). The plan for the second stage of the ESDFP for the period 2012 -2017 is an extension of the policy framework which comprises three policy themes as follows.

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.

1.2 National Assessment studies conducted in Sri Lanka

National Assessment of Learning Outcomes has become an important component of education policy analysis and programme monitoring in Sri Lanka. The National Education Research and Evaluation Centre (NEREC) of the Faculty of Education, University of Colombo has been the forerunner in conducting these assessments.

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, 2013 and 2015 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” (Aturupane, 2009, p.31).

1.3 Rationale for the present study

This report presents the findings of a National Assessment conducted in grade 8 in 2016 for English, Mathematics and Science.

The national assessments conducted in grade 8 in 2005 and 2008 reveal that on average there is an improvement in achievement levels of Grade 8 students in Science and Mathematics. The achievement of the English language, which is the second language of the students was not assessed. 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 provinces, 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.

On the other hand, in 2007, a new competency based curriculum was introduced at grade 6 and in 2009 in grade 8. Therefore, there was a need to find out whether the introduction of the new curriculum had an impact on the learning outcomes.

1.4 National Assessment of Learning Outcomes- 2014 and 2016

The National Assessment of Learning Outcomes of 2012 used new instruments to test cognitive skills in English, Mathematics and Science in keeping with the new curriculum. Therefore, it was not possible to compare with the previous assessments. Instead, the 2012 National Assessment served as the baseline for monitoring the level and distribution of learning outcomes over time. The same instruments were used in the National Assessment of learning outcomes in 2014 and 2016.

According to Kellaghan and Greaney 2009), all national assessments seek answers to six questions. The present Assessment seeks to find answers to four of them as follows:

- 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?
- Do the achievements of students change over time? This question may be of particular interest if reforms of the education system are being undertaken. Answering the question requires carrying out assessments that yield comparable data at different points in time

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

Chapter 2 of this report will discuss the methodology of the study. Chapters 3-5 will present the findings pertaining to the achievement of cognitive skills in Mathematics, Science and English respectively. The final chapter will discuss the lessons to be learnt and the way forward.

1.5 Summary

A worldwide concern regarding the need to achieve “Education for All” is evident. The challenge before all nations is to ensure that increased access to education is delivered in association with improvements in the conditions of schooling and student achievement levels.

Sri Lanka being a member country that has agreed to the World Declaration on Education for All, has conducted national assessments of achievement of learning outcomes of students with the aim of monitoring and evaluating the quality of its education systems.

A new competency based curriculum had been introduced at the secondary level in 2009. Therefore, it was necessary to assess student achievement in order to find out the impact of the new curriculum reforms as well as to provide a baseline for future studies. The first national assessment of learning outcomes of grade 8 students after the introduction of the new curriculum was held in 2012. Subsequent national assessments were held in 2014 and 2016. This report presents the findings of student achievement over the period 2014 -2016.