

# Introduction to the Study

## 1.1 Background

A trend in improving not only access to education but also quality of the education provided is observed worldwide.

“Measuring student learning outcomes is increasingly recognized as necessary, not only for monitoring a school system’s success but also for improving education quality”

(Kellaghan and Greaney, 2008, p.7)

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). This shift in focus was further strengthened by 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).

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 two national assessments at Grade 04 level in 2003 and 2007 respectively, 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. Therefore, this chapter while summarizing the findings of the 2007 study, also identifies the measures taken to reduce the disparities and sustain the developments.

## 1.2 Findings of the National Assessment 2007

There had been an overall improvement over 2003, in average performance levels of students in all three subjects assessed. According to the 2007 study, mean values of the achievement scores of First Language, Mathematics and English language were 71.9, 74.4 and 53.5 respectively. This achievement shows a considerable improvement in all three subjects even though the English achievement level could be considered low. On the other hand, the performance of students in the TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) was average.

The pattern that had been observed in the provincial wise performance in 2003 could be observed in 2007 as well. According to the composite index, Western, North Western and Southern provinces ranked first, second and third respectively. On the other hand, Uva, Eastern and Northern provinces were identified as the low scoring provinces.

Disparities in achievement were observed according to medium of study, school type and gender as well. While there was an improvement in the performance over 2003, Tamil medium students continued to perform below the standard of Sinhala medium students. While the rural students continued to perform below the achievement level of the urban students, the difference between averages were wider between urban and rural students, in the achievement of English language learning outcomes. Clear differences among school types were also observed. While 1AB schools continued to show the best performance, Type 2 schools displayed the lowest achievement. On the other hand, Type 3 and 1C schools showed average performance. Female students outperformed their male counterparts, in both studies in the achievement of learning outcomes in all three subjects.

Section 1.3 of this chapter examines how these findings have been fed into decision making and monitoring at policy level.

## 1.3 Responses to the national assessments 2003 and 2007

### 1.3.1 World Bank Response

Based on the NEREC (2003) findings it has been claimed that there was a high degree of regional variation in average learning achievement in the primary education cycle. In addition the intra regional variation within provinces was also high. While Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu, the two districts most severely affected by the secessionist conflict performed worst in the country, Colombo District performed the best.

In the backdrop of the above findings, the World Bank Report (2005) states that the geographical disparities in achievement can be attributed to several factors. The report further lists out some of the factors such as;

- i. variations in the quality of education across regions, including teacher capabilities, availability and attendance, classroom practices, school leadership, physical facilities and quality inputs.
- ii. variations in social and economic conditions of households and students, with lower education participation and achievement in poorer districts and provinces and higher education participation and achievement in wealthier districts and provinces; and
- iii. the impact of the secessionist conflict, which disrupted the education system in the North Eastern province and the surrounding regions of neighbouring provinces.

(Treasures of the Education System in Sri Lanka, 2005, p.26)

### 1.3.2 Education Sector Development Framework and Programme

Promoting “Equity” and “excellence” and reducing disparities in the education system in Sri Lanka has been the key theme identified by the National Education Commission (NEC) in its report in 2003 (Proposals for a National Policy Framework in General Education in Sri Lanka, 2003).

The NEC (2003) also recommends the need for planning at school level in order to reduce disparities among students in response to the needs identified. The Government of Sri Lanka has developed a comprehensive medium term Education Sector Development Framework and Programme (ESDFP) from 2005 - 2010. 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) Two 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 ESDFP is organized under four main themes which are interrelated. They are

- Theme 1: Promoting equitable Access to basic and secondary Education
- Theme 2: Improving the Quality of Education
- Theme 3: Enhancing the Economic Efficiency and Equity of Resource Allocation
- Theme 4: strengthening education Governance and service Delivery

ESDFP has identified several strategies to address the four themes. For the present study the most relevant theme is “improving the quality of Education”. Under this theme seven objectives are identified. Of these, the second objective is directly related to the findings of the national assessment. That is:

Reduce disparity in achievement levels through divisional and school level planning and allocation of resource to divisions (ESDFP.2006, P.38).

In order to achieve this objective four strategies are identified.

- i. Introduce divisional level teacher recruitment and deployment to ensure availability of the required teachers to all schools.
- ii. Ensure efficient school leadership by appointing school principals through correct procedures at all levels on a regular annual basis to provide managerial leadership and providing them with regular training at the staff College.
- iii. Establish an annual assessment system of all schools at Grade 5 and Grade 8 to establish performance profiles for schools and divisions to monitor learning.
- iv. Strengthening divisional level planning and enhancing resource to promote student learning at all levels.

(ESDFP, 2006, p.38)

### 1.3.3 NEREC activities

In addition to the Ministry of Education policy framework, NEREC also adopted measures to disseminate the findings of the National Assessment. Dissemination was undertaken mainly through three approaches.

- i. Series of workshops organized for dissemination
- ii. Distribution of research reports to various stakeholders.
- iii. Dissemination through research articles.

## 1.4 Rationale for the present study

A national assessment has multiple purposes. According to Kellaghan and Greaney (2008), all national assessments seek answers to one or more of the following questions:

- 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?
- What factors are associated with student achievement? To what extent does achievement vary with characteristics of the learning environment (for example, school resources, teacher preparation and competence, and type of school) or with students' home and community circumstances?
- Are government standards being met in the provision of resources (for example, textbooks, teacher qualifications, and other quality inputs)?
- 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).

The National Assessment 2007, was conducted by NEREC to achieve some of the above mentioned purposes. It has been claimed that the overall findings of the Grade 4 studies in 2003 and 2007 suggest that the quality of primary education in the country is improving. Therefore, it could be assumed that the “education reform programmes of the 1990s and the twenty first century, including the ESDFP, appear to be working, given the increases seen in the cognitive achievement performance of students in both mathematics and English, and in all types of schools” (Aturupane, 2009, p.33).

According to the findings of the 2009 study, during the four years from 2003 to 2007 a considerable improvement in achievement can be seen. 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, the disparities in the achievement of students across gender, medium of instruction, district and zones have also become a trend.

Therefore, the present study conducted in 2009 by NEREC was to find out whether the positive trends observed over time is sustained and to identify areas for further improvement.

## 1.5 Summary

There is a worldwide concern regarding the need to achieve “Education for All”. 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 two national assessments with the aim of monitoring and evaluating the quality of its education system.

Results of the second study show substantial improvements in achievement, while there are still disparities in achievement inter and intra wise provincial level. Based on the findings, policy framework is being implemented for further improvement. Thus, there is a need for further national assessments for monitoring and evaluating the sustainability of quality enhancement.