

Chapter One

Background to the Present Study

1.0 Rationale

The Grade 04 National Assessment conducted in 2002, the findings of which are presented here is the latest in a series of national assessments, undertaken to measure the achievement of “Education for All” goals at various levels, specially in respect of the two key areas of coverage and mastery. The purpose of this chapter is to examine briefly the developments in Sri Lankan education up to 2002.

1.1 The Earliest Beginnings

Education has been a major field of state and volunteer activity in Sri Lanka almost throughout her entire history. The Buddhist *pirivenas* modelled on the great Indian institutions of Taxila and Nalanda and the Brahmin Guru tradition provided both religious and secular education required by the rulers, the priests and the professional classes. Vocational education was provided in the apprenticeship mode while the majority benefited from informal education based on the mores of society.

Until the advent of the sea-faring Western invaders the royalty and the nobility had extended their patronage to the founding of historic institutions of learning benefiting both the clergy and the laity, and the production of great religious, literary and professional works, both in prose and in verse. However, with the invaders gaining control over the whole of the country even the few great monastic educational institutions that had not been destroyed in the fighting, fell into abeyance and the flood of religious, literary and professional treatises ceased.

1.2 Education Under Partial Autonomy 1931-1948

With the grant of universal franchise and partial autonomy in 1931 after four and a half centuries of foreign domination “education for all” began to flourish. During the period of partial autonomy from 1931 to 1948 education in Sri Lanka reached new heights and benefited whole classes of people who had hitherto been denied its fruits. It was during this period that the following significant developments occurred giving a major boost to ‘education for all’ in Sri Lanka:

- the establishment of 54 Central schools to extend modern secondary education, hitherto confined to urban centers, to the rural sector, and a scheme of Grade 05 scholarships to enable talented students in village primary schools to have access to these schools.
- introduction of a positive conscience clause in religious institution
- the provision of free primary, secondary and tertiary (including university) education
- the change in the medium of instruction to the mother tongue in all primary schools
- localization of the curriculum and examinations
- the establishment of an autonomous university.

(NEC 2003 P.3)

The report of the National Education Commission (2003) pays a realistic tribute to the vision of the Kannangara Report on which most of the above developments were based:

The Kannangara Report (SP XXIV of 1943) projected a vision of social change from the inequalities created by colonial education policy to recognition of the universal right to education, the need for free education as a pre-requisite of a democratic society, and the role of education as an agent of upward socio-economic mobility for all individuals. This endogenous conceptualization also preceded the rights based on UN Declarations, Covenants and Conventions, and went beyond the “Basic Needs” approach of international agencies in the 1970’s

(NEC 2003 pp. 3-4)

1.3 Developments Since Independence

The conclusion of the Second World War (1939-1945) fought for the self-determination of nations brought independence to a number of colonial territories in Asia including Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) and produced a new international organization, the United Nations Organization, which would preserve world peace and banish war from the face of this earth. The United Nations, reaffirming their faith in fundamental human rights proclaimed on 10 December 1948 the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which in Article 26 accepted the fundamental and equal human right to education.

It stated

Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.

(Article 26)

Sri Lanka had been granted her independence from British control earlier in the same year, on February 04. Now, the traditional yearning and enthusiasm for education for all came to be reinforced by the international demand for the observance of the fundamental human right to education. This strange concurrence of two significant events marked the beginning of the following series of measures and their outcomes that brought the reality of education closer to every man and woman in Sri Lanka.

- the change in the medium of instruction from English to Sinhala/Tamil in the secondary school, grade by grade, from 1953 to 1959
- the development of a network of upgraded secondary schools resulting in an increase in the educational participation rates of the 5-14 age group.
- the achievement of gender equality in access to general education.
- the change in the social composition of students with more non-affluent students entering the formal education stream.
- the nationalization in 1961 of the denominational system of schools and placing restrictions on opening new private schools.
- making Mathematics and Science compulsory in secondary grades in all schools under the 1972 Reforms which adopted one unified national curriculum.

- the policy directive in the 1978 constitution to eradicate illiteracy and to ensure universal and equal access to education at all levels. (Article 27(2))
- the provision of free textbooks from 1980, free mid-day meals from 1989 to 1994 and free uniform materials from 1993.
(NEC 2003 99.4-15)

All these significant local developments were compressed into a period of four and a half decades from 1948 most of which period was barren of any noteworthy United Nations or other international input.

1.4 Rights of the Child

On 20 November 1989 the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Articles 28 and 29 of which refer to the right of the child to education. Some of the important provisions of Article 28 are as follows:

“State parties recognize the right of the child to education, and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity, they shall in particular

- (a) Make primary education compulsory and available free to all;
- (b) Encourage the development of different forms of secondary education, including general and vocational education, make them available and accessible to every child, and take appropriate measures such as the introduction of free education and offering financial assistance in case of need”.

(Article 28)

By Article 29

State parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to

- (a) the development of the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential. (Article 29)

While Sri Lanka ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990 other important events were happening on the world stage.

1.5 Jomtien and Education for All

The participants in the World Conference on Education for All assembled in Jomtien, Thailand from 5 to 9 March 1990, noting that even forty years after the nations of the world through the Universal Declaration of Human Rights asserted that “everyone had a right to education”, the lack of basic education among a significant proportion of the population prevented societies from addressing the daunting problems they faced, and recognizing the necessity to give to present and coming generations an expanded vision of and a renewed commitment to basic education to address the scale and complexity of the challenge, proclaimed the **World Declaration on Education for All : Meeting Basic Learning Needs**.

In Article I, the **World Declaration on Education for All** defined the ‘basic learning needs’ in the following terms:

These needs comprise both essential learning tools (such as literacy, oral expression, numeracy and problem solving) and the basic learning content (such as knowledge, skills, values and attitudes) required by human beings to be able to survive, to develop their full capacities, to live and work in dignity, to participate fully in development, to improve the quality of their lives to make informed decisions and to continue learning.

(World Declaration on Education for All: p.3)

The objectives and the strategy were laid down as follows:

The ultimate goal affirmed by the World Declaration on Education for All is to meet the basic learning needs of all children, youth and adults. The main delivery system for the basic education outside the family is primary schooling. Primary education must be universal, ensure that the basic learning needs of all children are satisfied, and take into account the culture, needs and opportunities of the community. (pp.2, 6)

The importance of intermediate goals in the attainment of the final objective was also stressed:

The long-term effort to attain the affirmed goal can be maintained more effectively if intermediate goals are established and progress towards these goals is measured. Intermediate goals can usefully be formulated as specific targets that usually specify expected attainments and outcomes in reference to terminal performance specifications within an appropriate time frame, as

well as priority categories, eg. the poor, the disabled. These targets are usually formulated in terms such that progress towards them can be observed and measured.

(Framework for Action 2)

1.6 Developments in Sri Lankan Education in the Nineties

In the decade of the nineties activities under the Education for All programme appear to have been enriched and accelerated by Sri Lanka's own reform agenda. The Report of the Youth Commission (SP I of 1990) carried a recommendation for the appointment of a National Commission for Education Policy "which would aim at achieving a consensus with regard to education policy". Acting on this recommendation the government appointed a National Education Commission in 1991 with members whose appointment was approved both by the government and the opposition. This Commission in 1995 presented a set of proposals aimed at extending educational opportunity and quality improvement in education in schools. A Presidential Task Force and twelve technical committees working under the Task Force were appointed in December 1996 to prepare policy proposals for implementation.

With the acceleration of the pace of implementation Compulsory Education Regulations that came into operation in January 1998 and the Grade I Primary Education Reforms were implemented in the Gampaha district in 1998 and introduced islandwide in 1999. The same procedure was adopted in implementing the Grades 2-5 Primary Education Reforms too, first in the Gampaha district, in grade order, and islandwide in the following year in the same order. (NEC 2003 PP. 16-17)

The compulsory Education Regulations passed by Parliament as part of these reforms apply to children in the age group 5 to 14. Parents are required to ensure admission of their children to school and their continuous attendance thereafter. (General Education Reforms: 3.1.1)

All obstacles that hitherto stood in the way of admitting children to school were cleared. For instance, in cases where parents were not able to submit birth certificates of their children, Heads of schools were instructed to accept affidavits or a letter from the Grama Niladhari (Village Administrative Officer) as proof of a child's age.

In addition to textbooks, further incentives such as clothing, stationery and school needs were to be provided according to need, to families requiring such assistance. Voluntary organizations and non Governmental Organizations were encouraged to help in these programmes.

In order to encourage and enable girls of school-going age to attend school they were to be released from the domestic responsibility of looking after their younger siblings at home by the establishment of crèches and day care centres under the Early Childhood Development Programme.

During the five years of primary education the child was expected to attain the following goals of education:

- Being knowledgeable and well informed
- Being practically skilled
- Being disciplined
- Being refined
- Being able to speak well

Under these reforms a competency-based curriculum was to be implemented. A “competency” was defined as a combination of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values. It was expected that during the primary school years the child would acquire the following five basic competencies related to,

- i. communication
- ii. the natural, social and artificial environment
- iii. ethics and religion
- iv. the use of leisure, enjoyment and recreation
- v. learning to learn.

The primary stage of education was to consist of three Key Stages as follows:

- Key Stage One : Grades 1 and 2
- Key Stage Two : Grades 3 and 4
- Key Stage Three : Grade 5

In order to attain the EFA goals the following targets, among others were to be considered:

1. To ensure the initial enrolment of all boys and girls in school at the official primary school entry age of 5+ by 2004.
2. To increase the levels of learning achievement by all pupils in the Key Stages of primary education by 2004.

(General Education Reforms, Chapter 4)

1.7 Shortcomings and the Way Ahead

To the National Education Commission reviewing the situation in 2003, it did not appear from the data available that the compulsory education regulations operative with effect from 1998 have been implemented effectively. The failure was, perhaps, mainly due to an under resourced non-formal Education Division in the Ministry which in addition lacked adequate human resources being identified, as the lead agency for compulsory education.

Nevertheless, in order to achieve the universalisation of education among the younger age groups as required by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the National Education Commission has recommended that the compulsory attendance regulations operative from 1998 should be amended to require compulsory attendance from 5 to 16 years in schools or in vocational education institutions or as a transitional measure, in non-formal literacy centres from 2005. (NEC pp. 20, 85, 86)

Very unfortunately, however, there was a movement to close down small schools designated as “uneconomical units”, which was operative from 1996 onwards. Altogether around 500 schools with low student enrolment are said to have been closed or amalgamated with other institutions in order to “eliminate wastage of resources”. The National Education Commission was greatly perturbed over this development and quite justifiably so. The commission’s timely response is reported as follows:

As the indiscriminate closure of small schools is a violation of the entitlement or the right to education of the most disadvantaged segment of the population, deplorable wastage of educational resources, and a reversal of policies for “Education for All” (EFA), the National Education Commission urged the ministry to suspend the closure of schools till the situation of each school could be examined by the officers and the community. The relevant

circular was withdrawn in March 2003 but the situation of small schools is yet to receive adequate attention.

(NEC pp. 25-26)

However, one fact stands uppermost. Sri Lanka is not merely concerned with basic education delivered through primary education, but is now planning to deliver a compulsory segment of general education for the age group 5-16 through both primary and junior secondary education.

1.8 Assessment Under EFA

Meanwhile, monitoring of progress at different levels as recommended by the Framework for Action has been continued and we now turn to the progress in this field.

Sri Lanka joined the Monitoring Learning Achievement Project in 1994 and in the same year carried out a sample survey of learning achievement. Students who completed the primary cycle of education (Grade 05) in 1993 formed the target group of this study. The study highlighted the following unsatisfactory features that prevailed throughout the country:

- (i) Poor performance levels in Literacy, Numeracy and Life Skills.
- (ii) Wide disparities in performance among (a) districts and (b) school categories.

In order to remedy the above defects and raise the quality of primary education the following steps were taken:

1. Awareness programmes were conducted to bring to the notice of everyone concerned the state of primary education in the country as a whole and within the different districts/regions.
2. The structure of the Year Five scholarship Examination coming at the end of the primary cycle was changed so as to ensure a beneficial backwash effect on the classroom.
3. Essential learning levels that all students should acquire at the end of each year, in the two subject areas, Language and Mathematics were identified.

4. Attempts were made to bring about an attitudinal change in primary school teachers by de-linking them from teacher centred learning and guiding them towards child-centred learning.
5. Quality improvement projects were implemented in districts that had registered poor student achievement.

The second National Assessment of Learning Achievement was done in 1996. Students completing Grade 03 in 1995 formed the target group in this study. The third National Assessment of Learning Achievement was in 1999. The target group in this study were the students who completed the Primary Cycle (Grade 05) in 1998.

The results obtained in the three assessments are given in the Table 1.1

Table 1.1: Results of Assessment

(a) Mean Scores

	Literacy		Numeracy		Life Skills	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Grade 05 Study (1994)	61.8	21.5	45.1	18.3	26.7	9.7
Grade 03 Study (1996)	62.2	25.6	53.2	26.7	71.3	24.6
Grade 05 Study (1999)	61.3	22.5	50.3	22.2	55.1	18.0

(b) Percentages of Students Achieving Mastery

Subject Area	Grade 05 Study (1994)	Grade 03 Study (1996)	Grade 05 Study (1999)
Literacy	-	32%	24.2%
Vocabulary	32.2%	61%	31.9%
Comprehension	26.8%	37%	37.1%
Writing	21.1%	27%	16.3%
Numeracy	-	22%	9.4%
Conceptual Understanding	31.7%	30%	34.5%
Knowledge of Procedures	13.0%	27%	9.7%
Problem Solving	8.8%	14%	21.0%
Life Skills	-	51%	5.1%
Duties and Responsibilities	43.2%	40%	28.1%
Science Skills	9.4%	58%	2.0%
Environmental Skills	13.4%	37%	80.8%
Health Skills	20.4%	61%	69.7%

1.9 The Present Study

The assessment reported in the present study is on the learning achievements of students completing Grade 04 in 2002. This assessment is significant on two grounds. The reformed primary stage finishes one cycle and enters on a new cycle from grade 01 in 2004. Secondly, completing grade 04 marks the end of Key Stage Two. It is expected that this assessment will reveal much information highlighting the progress achieved and indicating areas of need for revision and/ or improvement in basic education programmes.

1.10 Summary

This chapter has attempted to provide the reader an overview of developments in 'Education for All' in Sri Lanka up to the grade 04 National Assessment of 2002.

The history of education in Sri Lanka is traced to the establishment of two of the world's greatest religions, Hinduism and Buddhism. The activities of the Buddhist monastic establishments survived and later developed to great heights under the patronage of the royalty and the nobility. The period of Western rule lasting four and a half centuries temporarily halted these advances until a limited democratic government set up under universal franchise and responsive to the needs of the masses appeared on the scene in 1931. During the next seventeen years, mainly due to the efforts of one man, an enlightened Minister of Education, major developments took place, bringing education much closer to the people than ever before. Not more than fourscore years since Benjamin Disraeli said "We must educate our masters", Christopher Kannangara of Sri Lanka, brining his noble work to a culmination in 1944 was able to say "We found education dear and left it cheap.... we found it a sealed book and left it an open letter and we found it the patrimony of the rich and left it the inheritance of the poor." This was long before the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) or the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) or the World Conference on Education for All(1990). The task facing Sri Lanka at present is to complete and build on the structure begun in the forties.

1.11 References

Convention on the Rights of the Child: Adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on 20 November 1989

General Education Reforms (1997): The Presidential Task Force on General Education, Sri Lanka.

National Education Commission, Sri Lanka (December 2003) : *Envisioning Education for Human Development Proposal for a National Framework on General Education in Sri Lanka*.

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