

Chapter One

Introduction to the Study

1.1 Background

Quality of education has been accepted as a crucial component in achieving “Education for All” (EFA). The Jomtien Declaration in 1990 and the follow-up Framework for Action adopted at the World Education Forum in Dakar 2000, which states that all aspects of education quality should be improved “so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills”. As a result, there is broad consensus worldwide that the achievement of the education Millennium Development Goals (MDG) requires improvements in learning outcomes.

A world wide emphasis 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).

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).

Sri Lanka is also progressing 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 to 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 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 and 2009 respectively. At secondary level National Assessment of Learning Outcomes were conducted at Grade 8 in 2005, 2008, 2012. 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 2013. 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 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.

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, it was felt that the use of the same test items over a decade may have resulted in teachers being familiar with them creating 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- 2013

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 is not possible to compare with the previous assessments. Instead, the 2013 National Assessment will serve as the baseline for monitoring the level and distribution of learning outcomes overtime.

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, medium of instruction and location.

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 first language - Sinhala and Tamil, second language- English, and mathematics 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 three national assessments of achievement of learning outcomes of grade 4 students with the aim of monitoring and evaluating the quality of its education systems. Results of these studies show substantial improvements in

achievement, while there are still disparities in achievement at both inter and intra provincial level. The present assessment is designed to describe the level of achievement, not of individual students, but of a whole education system. Therefore, it is necessary to assess student achievement in order to find out the impact of the policy initiatives as well as to provide a baseline for future studies.

