

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report outlines the main findings and methodology of a survey conducted in 2015 by the Postgraduate Institute of Management to produce industry data about the ‘Identification of Special Education Needs of Primary School Children in Sri Lanka’.

Approximately 800 million young children worldwide are affected by biological, environmental and psychosocial circumstances that can limit their cognitive development. In Europe, recent estimates place the number of children with Special Educational Needs (SENs) at 15 million. Conventional estimates state that dyslexia, a learning disability that impedes a person’s ability to read, affects approximately 6% of Europe’s population, whilst the prevalence of Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASDs) is also projected to be higher than previously thought. Children with SENs regularly leave school with few qualifications and are much more likely to become unemployed or economically inactive.

Efforts to support children with SENs are at a National level by the National Action Plan for Disability Final Draft 2013, National Policy on Disability 2003 and The Compulsory Education Ordinance of Sri Lanka No. 1003/5 of 1997 applies equally to all children between the ages of 5 – 14 years. These documents give emphasis to the imperative that education systems in Sri Lanka provide for the successful inclusion of all learners. They were preceded by the UNESCO Salamanca Statement (1994), which called on the international community to endorse the approach of inclusive schooling and by the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (2006), with 144 signatories.

The team of researchers consisting of 6 members distributed a total number of 12,152 questionnaires, out of which 9,181 were for parents and 2,971 were for schools. A total of 98 schools consisting of Government, Semi-government, International and Private were covered in this survey. The three teams’ distributed and collected the questionnaires given in sealed envelopes from the responding schools.

As this is the report of team C, 4,187 questionnaires were distributed out of which 1,097 were for teachers and administrators, while 3,090 were for parents. The total number of samples collected from this survey is 2,663, of which the above numbers were under each group of participants, with 21 questionnaires rejected. In total a response of 63.1% was achieved.

The survey results revealed that most teachers and management (56%) were exposed to SENs, out of which 79% were exposed to it in the school that they were involved. However, the data shows that 80% of these teachers and management are not trained or qualified in SENs.

Further when comparing the responses of the schools there were 84.4% of the International, 72% of the Private and 42.9% of the Government sector who stated that they were aware or had experience with SENs students.

The survey revealed that most teachers and management were unaware about the policies which are prevailing in Sri Lanka and Internationally. Added to that they are not informed of the diversity and inclusion in education. As a whole only 16% of respondents were aware of diversity and inclusion.

Majority of the teachers and management (66%) were willing to undergo SENs training. However, when comparing the sectors 81.5% were from the International schools. Most teachers and management (55%) were not comfortable having SENs students in their classrooms and 59% of the respondents have said that they do not get cooperation from parents for inclusion.

The survey also revealed that most respondents (60%) felt that the curriculum is not flexible for inclusive education. Another finding was that majority of teachers and education leaders (51%) are not prepared for inclusion. This shows that there is a general unpreparedness for SEN in all these sectors.

Most have responded (47%) that there are no proper processes to identify SENs in schools and they (60%) are not given training to support SENs in schools.

Another realization was that most parents (56%) were not aware or experienced about SENs, SENs students or the policies (56%) related to them. Most participants (74%) said that Sri Lanka needs policies to include special children in general schools and they were not in favour of having SENs students in general classrooms.

According to the findings of the survey, it was evident that the level of awareness and attitude of the academics and the society has to increase to support the inclusive reforms in place. These findings reflect the implications they will have on the industry, society and the policies.

It is crucial for the education sector to proceed forward with the new systems introduced to the education industry. If proper steps are not taken to correct the deficiencies that the education in Sri Lanka have, it will reflect with poor literacy rates and a drop in the national standards of education. From the students' point of view, the lack of awareness and negative attitude would lead to teachers' misunderstanding of the students' weaknesses and requirements. This would lead to students being punished or mistreated with improper support. Outcome of this would lead to frustration of the students who will in turn leave schools without reaching the expected standard of education.

Further, the requirement for better policies and procedures to monitor the implementation and operationalization of these policies are important. This is mainly important because the policies will have implications. Therefore, this will lead to malfunction of the policies, biased operationalization of the policies or ignorance of them. The outcome would lead to once again the lack of proper support for SEN students and their parents. This will also hinder the growth and improvement of the schools towards inclusion and world education trends. Therefore, programmes should be designed to make the teachers and the management of schools aware about such policies. The programme should not be limited to a circular but a more rigorous approach with support for implementation also given.

The findings also highlighted the importance of SEN training to be provided to teachers and management on identifying and supporting SEN students. Once again there would be industrial, social and policy implications which would result in a failure of all the areas mentioned. The lack of acceptance of SEN students will lead to frustration among parent of SEN students and SEN students themselves when they are unable to be independent adults. This will be a societal burden to support, with the net income of the country dropping and development getting disturbed. Therefore, it is recommended that a successful and uniform identification process be suggested to be implemented with professional support provided wherever necessary. However, this process should also be monitored regularly to improve the evaluation process.

Providing SEN training to all teachers as a module in their training programmes and/or qualifications is also a recommendation the researchers made. It should be made compulsory for primary teachers to undergo a SEN training on identification, teaching methodology and supporting SEN students. Secondary school teachers also should be given training especially on supporting SEN student and teaching methodology.

Recognition schemes for teachers and management, grievance handling procedure for teachers, management and parents, recognitions for schools and public awareness campaigns were also recommendations made.

This survey reveals that the four areas tested for Identification of SEN in primary schools in Sri Lanka, 'awareness of teachers and management', 'attitude of teachers and management', 'steps taken in schools for SEN identification' and 'attitude of parents', were at a very low level. Therefore, it is evident that there is no formal mechanism to identify SEN students in Sri Lanka that needs to be addressed at a macro level in the school education system.