

# THE CURRENT STATE OF EDUCATION IN SRI LANKA



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## Introduction

Article 27 of Sri Lanka's Constitution states "Complete eradication of illiteracy and assurance to all persons of the right to universal and equal access to education at all levels."

All successive Sri Lankan governments since Independence have launched various programmes to improve school enrolment and to reduce educational disparities. These include free education from the Kindergarten to University, expansion of education through a network of primary and secondary schools spread throughout the island, introduction of mother tongue as a medium of instruction at all levels, provision of scholarships, common curriculums including Science and English; and provision of free text books and mid day meal. These programmes have contributed to the rapid expansion in school enrolment over the last five decades.

In 1989 about 2.1 million children were enrolled from school year 1 to year 5 and about 1.4 million children were enrolled from school year 6 to year 10. Total number of children who were in school from school year 1 to 10 in that year was about 3.5 million. School participation rate among children in compulsory school going age group of 5-14 years have increased from 57.6% in 1946 to 71.6% in 1953 and 75.1% in 1963 and decreased to 65.3% in 1971 and again increased to 83.7% in 1981. This indicates a general increase of 26.1% in school participation among 5-14 years age group over the past three-and-a half decades. The decrease in

1971 was mainly due to the change in the minimum school admission age. School participation rate of 15-19 age group has increased by about four fold from about 11% in 1946 to about 42% in 1981.

Apart from this general increase at national level there have been improvements in enrolment at the level of sub sectors of gender, age, geographical sectors and districts - see Table 1 and 2. However, school participation rates in almost all the districts in Northern

ing universal level of school participation among children in 5-14 age group. In 1981 16% or one out of every 6 children within this age group was not in school. Further 58% or 6 out of every 10 children of 15-19 age group were out of school. There seems to be a stagnation or a slight decrease in child literacy in 1980's. Literacy rate of children within 10-14 age group has decreased by 1% from 89.8% in 1981 to 88.8% in 1985/86.

During the same period literacy rate of those who are within 15-19 age group has decreased by 1.4%. (See table 3).

## Non admittance and dropouts

Children who are not attending school can be divided into two main categories - children who have not been admitted to school and school drop outs. In 1985/86 of the children within 5-14 age group 13% had not been admitted to

Table 1  
Percentage of Children Attending School by Age Group and Sex 1971 & 1981

Age Group	1971				1981			
	All Island	Male	Female	Difference	All Island	Male	Female	Difference
5-14	65.3	66.8	63.7	3.1	83.7	83.8	83.7	0.1
15-19	34.5	36.5	32.4	4.1	41.9	41.2	42.7	-1.5

Source: Census of Population and Housing 1971 and 1981.

and Eastern provinces would have come down during the last few years owing to the violent conflict in those areas.

Disparities in school participation among the sub groups have also gone down over the last few decades. For instance hardly any difference can be seen in school enrolment between boys and girls. This goes for urban and rural children as well.

Despite all these positive developments Sri Lanka is still far from achiev-

school or had not received any school education (See table 4). However part of these children who belong to 5-9 age group were admitted to school later as late comers. Children who had not received school education till they reached 10 years of age generally will never be admitted to the school in the future. In 1985/86 of the total number of children within 10-14 age group 4.2% had not received any school education. In 15-19 age group this percentage was 6.5.

During the School Census year 1986/87 4.25% of the total student popula-

Table 2  
Percentage of Children Attending School by Age Group and Sector 1971 & 1981

Age Group	1971				1981			
	All Island	Urban Sector	Rural Sector	Difference	All Island	Urban Sector	Rural Sector	Difference
5-9	60.5	63.8	60.2	3.6	84.0	86.8	83.8	2.9
10-14	89.9	75.5	88.3	7.2	82.4	86.5	81.6	3.9
15-19	35.3	39.7	34.1	5.6	43.1	45.0	42.7	2.3
15-19	34.5	41.9	32.5	9.4	41.9	48.4	40.9	7.5

Source: Census of Population and Housing 1971 and 1981.

tion from school year 1 to 9 (which corresponds to the 5-14 age group) had dropped out. (See table 5). This rate varied from year to year. Relatively



### Reasons for Non Schooling

At the national level analysis many studies indicated that the main reason for children not attending school are the cost and the opportunity cost of education. Mass poverty prevent the utilization of available educational facilities. Although free education, text books and mid day meals are provided, it is difficult for poor parents to spend money on childrens' admission fees, facilities fees, clothes, stationery and other requirements.

The existence of child labour in its various forms is another factor which prevents these children from schooling. The drop out rate is higher among boys than among girls mainly because more employment opportunities are available for boys than for girls.

Lack of adequate interest on the part of parents or guardians is another main reason for children not attending school. Indifference towards education is linked to the low educational level of these adults and their awareness as to how to use the educational facilities available in their areas.

a large percentage of children leave the school system after G.C.E (O.L.) and G.C.E. (A.L.) examinations. This reveals that drop out rates are higher among older children. The drop out rate among boys is higher than among girls - unlike other Asian and developing countries. In addition to non enrolment there is an educational wastage consisting of repetition and absenteeism. These incidences take place more among children from poor socio-economic background attending schools which have relatively less facilities.

The enrolment rate is at a low level at the beginning of the school admission age - 5 years. After the peak level at age 9 enrolment rate begins to decrease due to increasing drop out rates and absence of new admissions.

Since the education of children is highly formalised in Sri Lanka for proper development of literacy and numeracy, a child should complete primary education. Any changes in the enrolment rate of primary level, particularly at early primary level, reflect corresponding changes in the literacy rate in the same age group currently and in younger age groups in the future. School education develops skills and provide a foundation for self learning. Therefore children who do not complete at least primary education lose these opportunities of acquiring knowledge and information which will serve to improve the quality of their lives. To obtain any vocational training successfully primary or secondary education is a pre requirement.

Therefore a child who does not complete primary education becomes relatively more disadvantaged even at the lowest level of the labour market.

Contrary to the general trends there are pockets in the country consisting of children who are most disadvantaged - economically and educationally such as urban slums and shanties, estates, settlements and remote villages. A study

Table 4  
Percentage of Children who Received no School Education by Age Group Sector and Sex 1985/86

Age Group	All Island			Urban Sector			Rural Sector			Estate Sector		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
5-9	21.5	21.1	22.0	18.0	17.5	18.5	20.3	20.8	19.7	48.8	58.7	36.4
10-14	4.2	3.6	4.8	4.1	3.8	4.2	2.9	2.8	3.1	24.8	15.8	31.8
5-14	13.0	12.4	13.6	10.7	10.8	10.3	11.7	11.8	11.7	37.7	28.8	46.6
15-19	6.6	6.0	7.1	6.6	6.8	6.7	5.1	5.2	5.0	23.1	28.4	17.0

Source: Labour Force and Socio-Economic Survey, 1985/86

on the educational needs of non-school going children of selected slums and shanties in Colombo city in 1984 shows that 19.3% of the sample of children within 6 - 8 age group and 9.8% of children within 9 - 14 age group had never been to school. A similar study conducted in a set of interior villages (old villages and colonies) in 1985 reveals that 14.4% of the children within 6 - 8 age group and 19.9% of the children within 6-14 age group were not in school. According to the Labour Force and Socio-economic Survey 1985 / 86 in the estate sector 46.6% of the 5-9 age group and 24.9% of 10 -14 age group had never been to school.

Table 5  
Dropout Rates by School year in government Schools 1986/87

School year	Male	Female	Total
2	0.71	1.07	0.88
3	2.18	2.05	2.12
4	3.40	2.69	3.06
5	5.85	4.52	5.21
6	6.67	5.30	6.01
7	7.60	4.98	6.30
8	7.14	5.29	6.21
9	8.24	6.03	7.11
2-5	2.98	2.50	2.72
6-8	7.12	5.19	6.17
2-9	4.74	3.73	4.25

Source: School Census 1987, Ministry of Education

Health facilities too contribute to the non schooling of children. It is estimated that 0.5% and 11.8% of the children in the 6 - 11 age group are suffering from acute malnutrition and chronic malnutrition respectively. These percentages for those who are in the 12 - 23 age group are 10.8% and 24.8%. Poverty and indifference of parents have a strong impact on child malnutrition. Provision of mid day meal in the form of biscuits, kola-kenda (and later granting money for mid day meal) to school going children has not yet had the desired impact on strengthening their nutritional status.

Inadequacies of the formal education system too contributes to keeping children out of school. Children of low income families are mostly concentrated in disadvantaged schools - schools without proper material facilities, a qualified teaching staff and adequate sanitary facilities. In addition to these, class room environment and teaching methods in these schools are unattractive to retain pupils. Though such schools can be seen in both the urban sector and the rural sector they are more common in remote areas and estates. The long distance between the school and home in remote villages also contribute to children (particularly small children who are too young to walk long distances alone) not being able to attend school. Though 95% of the 9805 schools in the country have primary classes, nearly 15% of primary school going age children have no schools within two miles of their homes. (1989 figures)

In settlements and in some rural areas where paddy cultivation is the main economic activity a child is a high valuable economic input. Since school calendar is not adjusted according to the economic activities, high absenteeism is recorded during peak cultivation seasons in these areas. This also results in these children dropping out from school at early stages. In estates, there is a high demand for children as paid labour and domestic workers. Schools in this sector generally have only primary grades. These result in low school enrolment / participation and early drop outs.



Absence of parents as a result of death, migration to Middle East for employment and desertion also adversely affects the schooling of children - specially in the socially and economically disadvantaged families. Non availability of Birth Certificates for children is a common incidence in these families and as a result children are not admitted to school at all. Low aspirations, negative feelings towards education and lack of hope about the future of their children are relatively higher among these parents. The educational level and occupation of parents, home environment and material facilities available and the size of the family are also contributory factors.

#### Non Formal Education

Non formal education can play a very important role among these children who are not going to school. In 1981 the Non Formal Education Unit of the Ministry of Education introduced a non formal education programme - part time 'literacy classes' for out of school children. However, by now the number of these centres has increased only upto 325 and a large percentage of them are limited to low income neighbourhoods in the Colombo city. Therefore only about 2% of out of school children in the country benefit from these centres. An evaluation of these centres in 1986 revealed that the drop out rates in these centres were as high as 28% ( at level II ) and 78% ( at level III ). The rapid expansion and development of these centres is needed today.

#### Pre Schools

Pre-schools prepare children for their next stage-school-by developing their attitudes and psychological abilities to adapt to the new environment in the school. In Sri Lanka though pre schools are expanding and at present they cater to less than 25% of the children within pre school going age group of 1 - 4 years. While most of these institutions are conducted by private sector and non governmental organizations, majority of the best pre schools are limited

to upper class and middle class children in the urban areas. The majority of the children of pre school going age in socially and economically disadvantaged families in the rural sector and estate sector do not have this opportunity. Even in the available pre schools in these sectors most of the teachers do not have any training or the adequate knowledge and skills. Since there is a clear gap between school environment and home environment of disadvantaged and under privileged families in these sectors, lack of proper pre school facilities contributes to the high rate of early school drop outs among these children.

#### Tuition

Over the last decade tuition classes for school children have rapidly expanded. Earlier tuition was given to a very limited number of children for the subjects only in which their performance was inadequate. But today the majority of school going children (even from early primary grades) attend tuition classes - sometimes for all the subjects they learn in school. Peak levels of participation in tuition are at Grade 4 (School year 5) where the government examinations are held to select children for scholarship and in grades 9, 10, 11 and 12 where the children prepare for G.C.E (O.L.) and G.C.E. (A. L.) examinations. This type of mass participation in tuition is partly a result of increased competition for the limited number of opportunities for higher education and for jobs. Tuition also has become a fashion and a psychological need of both parents and children to a certain extent. According to a study on tuition in 1982 children in high income families in urban areas have access to more efficient tuition than their counterparts.

Most of the tuition classes prepare children for examinations and train them to learn things for a short period of time instead of developing their knowledge properly. Since tuition takes up a considerable time in a child's life the child has no time for leisure, recreation and for the development of other skills. Thus the way it is currently constructed the tuition system partly distorts the school system.

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### Expenditure on education

Expenditure on education is no longer considered only as social expenditure but also as long term capital investment. It reduces future expenditure on health and increased the efficiency of the labour force. Studies have revealed that investment in primary education in developing countries gives 100 per cent more economic returns than the same investment in physical assets.

Expenditure on general education per pupil at current prices has shown a considerable increase from Rs 183 - 350 in 1970's to Rs. 426 - 1200 in 1980's. However, national expenditure on general education as a share of total government expenditure has declined from 9% in early 1970's to 5% in late 1980's. Educational expenditure has declined from 5% of GNP in 1960's to 2.5% in 1980's. If defence expenditure has not increased in mid 80's more resources could have been channelled for qualitative and quantitative improvements in the education system.

There are considerable imbalances in resource allocation between privi-

leged and under-privileged schools and resource constraints adversely affect the improvement of infrastructural facilities in ill equipped schools. However many disadvantaged schools are provided with some support in the form of infrastructural facilities by SIDA, UNICEF and Integrated Rural Development Programme.

### Conclusion

It is more difficult to increase school participation and literacy from a high rate than from a low rate. For instance increase of school enrolment rate of 5

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- 14 age group from 84% to 90% is more difficult than had it been say an increase from 42% to 50%. Identification of educationally most disadvantaged pockets and making more attempts to increase school enrolment and 'non formal' education for out of school children in these areas is much needed today. This will not only reduce the existing educational disparities but will also serve to increase school enrolment rate and literacy rate at a national level. ■

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