



Educational Reforms and the New System of Primary Education



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The new primary education process consists of a structure of 3 key stages which include grade one to five in the primary school and a curricula and programmes prepared in accordance with that structure.

Grades 1 and 2 have been identified as the first key stage, grades 3 and 4 as the second key stage and grade 5 as the third key stage in primary education.

Accordingly, a curriculum suitable for each of these key stages, teaching modules and a special programme have been designed. This classification facilitates the development of curricula, teacher training and education, initiation of special programmes and meets management requirements.

A considerable amount of changes have occurred in the existing curriculum with the introduction of educational reforms. Big changes can be seen of the vision under which the new curricula is structured. Departing from the conventional knowledge-imparting syllabus it has as its objectives the introduction of a child-centered syllabus, which combines knowledge, skills and attitudes.

The National Education Commission has proposed five sets of competencies that should be developed in children. They are competencies selected to communication, competencies selected to environment, competencies related to ethics and religion, competencies related to play

and leisure and competencies related to learning to learn. The primary education syllabus provides the basis for the development of these competencies in children.

Attention has been given to develop competencies related to communication with formation of syllabi of the mother tongue (Sinhala/Tamil), the second national language (Tamil/Sinhala) and English along with mathematics.

The syllabus for the mother tongue has been designed with the objective of providing all children with the necessary competencies to use it correctly and quickly. Accordingly, thinking, listening, clear, comprehension, correct and lucid writing, functional literacy and interpersonal competencies will be developed. Textbooks, workbooks and teaching guides have been prepared to achieve these objectives.

Up to now teaching of English commenced in grade 3. Under the reorganised new system, a new programme of Activity Based Oral English will be introduced in grade 1. The teacher in charge of the class will be responsible for this programme which will be based on the themes of Environment. The aims and objectives of the English programme will be to lay the groundwork to commence the systematic study of the English language by developing in the children a vocabulary related to the child's immediate environment. It will also aim at developing in the children the capacity to comprehend and to speak simple English sentences. This will not be combined with reading and writing of the

language. It is an oral activity, one that is connected with listening and speaking of the language. The teachers will be made aware of the development of the children's English vocabulary and how opportunities can be created for the children to use the language under the subject "Environment related Activities." A special handbook will be provided to the teachers for this purpose.

Among the common national objectives presented by the National Education Commission, a number of activities will be undertaken to achieve the objectives of "national integration, national reconciliation and building national harmony." Among these, the teaching of Tamil to children whose mother tongue is Sinhala and teaching of Sinhala to children whose mother tongue is Tamil is a priority. This is expected to contribute to the development of communication skills necessary for mutual understanding and national integration. This programme will commence in Grade 3.

Another area of focus in the new programme is Mathematics. A variety of programmes are to be implemented for this purpose. The new perspective in teaching mathematics to students is to make the subject enjoyable and not drudgery. Some guidelines, which the NIE has provided, are already being followed in the classroom. Teacher guidebooks clearly present how planned games and enjoyable activities are to be used in imparting mathematical concepts and developing skills of children. In





addition, a high quality workbook printed in colour has been introduced for Grade 1. It is also proposed to provide a similar mathematics workbook of high quality for Grade 2. These workbooks are expected to promote the development of mathematical skills in children while at the same time reducing the amount of homework given by teachers. These workbooks, which are given free of charge to every school-going child will promote the achievement of the goal "Education for All." In addition, a series of high quality mathematical books will be issued for grade 3 and above. Further, teachers in grades 1 and 2 will be provided with source books and teachers in grade 3 and above will be given special handbooks.

A new subject named "Environment related Activities" will be introduced to the primary school syllabus. With the introduction of this subject, the existing subjects of physical education, creative activities, aesthetics, Environment and us, and introductory science, which were introduced in grade 4 will be removed from the syllabus.

This subject comprises several themes related to the child's environment. The first stage includes 16 themes, and the 2nd and 3rd 15 themes. The competencies that the NIE has considered appropriate to be developed in children relates to social environment, living environment and physical environment. Knowledge necessary for the development of the senses and physical and mental faculties, information and habits required for the maintenance of good health and nutrition, the development of aesthetic and leisure activities, encouragements of scientific thinking are the objectives of introducing this subject.

These activities will facilitate the sharpening of inquiry and research skills, use of instruments, maintenance of notes and documentation, and the use of the faculties to achieve a rounded personality, and will create an awareness in the children about bio-diversity, impact of the environment and climatic changes. A wide variety of learning experiences will be available to the children.

The new syllabus also provides space for subject specific activities and alternative activities within the class timetable to provide the children the opportunity to develop their different abilities. Up to now the children's studies were confined to that defined by those formulating the syllabus. However, the new syllabus is child-centered. It allows children to choose those subjects that they like to study, for example aesthetics, sports, languages or another subject within the school hours. This is provided for under the subject "Alternative Activities" and is specially aimed at developing the innate skills and liking of children.

New syllabi of all religions of the primary education has been prepared with an aim of fulfilling of the five sets of competencies introduced by the National Education Commission. It is prepared with the aim of building up values within children so that they will enable to follow religious rites and practices, day to day customs and practices properly. With the new programme it is expected a clear change in the teaching-learning process in our school system. A series of books with colour printing have been published for children of all faiths. This series of books have been prepared on the basis that the only method teaching religion is not reading of text books but practice religious rites and values as well.

It is expected to implement this new syllabus, which has a qualitative aspect in all schools throughout the country. For this purpose it would be necessary

to develop an equitable primary school system to make 'Education for All' meaningful. It aims at providing all children who enter grade 1 an education up to secondary school level. All teachers have the responsibility and commitment of creating and sustaining the interest of children in education and directing them towards study areas that they are interested in pursuing. There are a large number of activities that are designed to achieve these objectives.

While the children who enter grade one have different abilities, they also come from different and varied home backgrounds. A research study carried out in 1988 on the entry competencies of grade one entrant's shows that they have varied competencies and abilities. These are as follows: The number unable to study the grade 1 syllabus - 8% The number requiring special assistance to follow the grade 1 syllabus - 22% The number able to follow the grade 1 syllabus - 62% The number able to follow the grade 2 syllabus - 7.5%

It would be necessary to recognise the existence of such variations in performance and ability and devise alternative strategies to overcome obstacles to make all children go ahead in their studies. Therefore the creation of awareness among teachers within the primary educational programme can be regarded as an innovation in educational history of Sri Lanka.

The programme entitled "Identification of Children" is the first activity in this effort. The initial play activities that should be undertaken with new entrants to grade one consist of 14 items. The objective of this exercise is to make the child comfortable and build a rapport with the teacher. It is expected that even the child that comes to school reluctantly will get over her/his inhibitions and





take a liking to attend school. At the same time, the play activities provide the teacher an opportunity to recognise the different abilities of the children. There is no categorisation of children as clever or unintelligent or able or unable in this situation. It is only a recognition of the varied abilities of children. Further, it also makes it possible for the teacher to ascertain the children's family background. The 'Identification of Children' programmes thus enables the teachers to assess the children and to assist them in their future studies. It also enables the teachers to look at the children in a more humane manner.

A new teaching method has been introduced to ascertain the varied abilities of grade one entrants and to teach them accordingly. Under this concept, three aspects have been focused on. They are

1. planned play activities and enjoyable work
2. activities, and
3. desk work.

It can be seen that in grade one there is more emphasis on planned play activities and enjoyable work rather than on book learning. Under this system, while a teacher is attempting to develop the knowledge, skills & attitudes of the children on a particular subject it will be introduced through a planned play activity that includes the skills relevant to that subject. Thus children will be engaged in play. All the children will participate willingly in such play activities. At the end of such activities, the children would have reached the required achievement levels.

Children will not be aware that they have been taught a lesson under a particular subject. They were engaged in an enjoyable activity. It is for this reason that the focus of teaching in

grade one is child-centered and through planned play and enjoyable activities so that a pleasant environment is created and that children will become more and more interested in attending school.

Through these planned play activities children will become attached to the school, develop self-discipline and interpersonal relationships, respect social norms and rules and regulations, think logically and develop the personality in a variety of ways.

Another aspect that has been introduced into all three key stages of primary education is Essential Learning Competencies. Accordingly, the teacher is expected to impart these competencies to all the children in class. This shows the commitment to the achievement of the global goal of Education for All.

Essential Learning Competencies are those skills that a student should possess to proceed to the next key stage of learning. The responsibility for imparting such competencies lie with the teacher. To ensure that this is achieved the school principal has the authority to entrust the development of children in key one stage to one teacher. Accordingly, 40 competencies have been identified as being essential for children in grade one. Thus during the period of the primary education, it should be possible to ensure that children have specified basic competencies. While this concept has ushered in a new era in the educational history of Sri Lanka it will also ensure a qualitative improvement in primary education. This will reduce the incidence of school drop-out due to the inability to learn according to the syllabus. A handbook explaining these concepts will be provided to the teachers. A special training course will also be conducted for them.

An islandwide programme has been launched to implement the new primary

education system in all the schools in the country in an equitable manner. The NIE has already provided at least 15 day training on grade 1 and 2 programmes to all Sinhala and Tamil medium Deputy/Assistant Directors of Education and Primary Inservice Advisors. Therefore provincial and zonal facilitators who provide leadership to the implementation of the programme have provided a comprehensive training. All the education officers in charge of educational divisions have been participated in at least a day's awareness programme. At the zonal level awareness programmes have been organized at which all the Deputy/Assistant Directors of Education and all Inservice Advisors of other subjects have participated and all the Sinhala and Tamil medium teachers of grade 1 are given a training of 6 days and all the teachers of grade 2 has been trained.

In recent times children in rural areas are being increasingly admitted to 'popular' schools in the cities without seeking admission to a school near home. One reason for this is the lack of confidence in the quality of education in rural schools. If parental aspirations to enter their children to city schools continue it would invariably lead to the closure of rural schools and non-use of resources while at the same time straining the financial resources of the parents and impacting adversely on the children. Further the mothers who accompany children to school and stay till school closes to bring them back home waste valuable time that could be used profitably to develop the domestic economy. While it would the rural economy it could in certain circumstances lead to discord within the family.

Therefore recognising the need to create equal primary educational





opportunity in all schools throughout the country, several other units have been associated with this exercise. All teachers in charge of grade one meet once a month to exchange information and experience and to plan for the month following. The Deputy/Assistant Directors of Education in charge of primary education and Primary Inservice Advisors give leadership for these meetings. Accordingly it is expected that all schools in an educational division will work in conformity to one plan and standard.

A programme under the heading School Families has also been introduced. Under this scheme 5-7 schools which have been identified in accordance with their geographical situation in proximity to each other work together as a 'family' to develop the schools. This feature also helps in setting standards in all schools.

A work programme carried out by the children in the key stage one of primary education and children in grade 6 can also be seen. This can be viewed as an interaction between these two sets of students with the main objective of developing the skills of grade one children and the leadership abilities of grade 6 students. The teachers training programme includes an evaluation component as well. It is necessary to systematically collect information to assess the progress of students and for decision-making. The methodology used for this purpose is assessment.

Instead of grading the primary student as first place and second place or deciding on fail or pass according to the marks he obtained, the evaluation is being done on the basis of competencies. Here the strengths and weaknesses of the student is identified, so it is done in the aim of

discovering him. Teachers are expected to take immediate action to address the weaknesses that have been identified without delay and to bring such students to the expected stand.

When the students are engaged in group activities together, when they are engaged in enjoyable activities, as well as they engaged in individual activities it is possible to pay special attention to each and every student. Further, assessment can also be made using informal methods such as marking of assignments and homework, conversing with the students, oral questioning, listening to students, assessing the presentations of students, examining their creative work, and examining their assignments and special documents. It is expected that an informal assessment system will be maintained without having recourse to the conventional method of testing through written questions and answers.

Mid term tests and end of term examinations will not be conducted under the new system. The assessment system that has been introduced will collect information on the student's strengths and weaknesses continuously. Under this system there will be no comparisons among students. The teachers will be expected to assess the student against his/her own level at the time of entry or against the standard set for the subject. This new system of assessment will develop the qualitative aspects of a child's education and make Education for All a reality.

Another important aspect of the reform is the introduction of a suitable class-room for primary children in each and every school of the country. It comprises an average space of 1 m² for every child. It is also wire meshed, sheltered and safe and comprises a lowered blackboard which could be used by the teacher as well as the students. It also

comprises places, which could be used to exhibit the articles created by the children. It encourages the children in creating activities. The work-table is another novel feature in the new classroom. It comprises with a water tap and wash basin too. It helps the children engage in creating work and develop social competencies in the children. Each and every Key Stage - I Class room will have all these features and necessary adjustments will be made in class room in Key Stages II and III. The central government and provincial council provided a large sum of fund towards the construction of the new class. Parents and well wishes immensely participated in these activities. Further to all these an activity area also provided for the key I stage children to engage in activities of their choice such as jumping, hanging etc. The normal play each of the school has been generally occupied by the senior students. This new event has gained a great opportunity to the small children for the developments of their talents.

The basic objective of the educational reforms is to make the child a good individual. It is expected that the implementation of the following will

- ◆ rich in informations (collection, sorting, storing, analysing and using information)
- ◆ rich in practical skills
- ◆ disciplined, and
- ◆ use of pleasant language that will show kindness and friendliness

The educational reforms have been initiated with the objective of developing a society in which there is co-operation and mutual understanding, mutual respect, value for all types of work, appreciation of the fine interaction between living beings, haughtiness and value for humility, and recognition of the value of culture. ■

