

Background paper prepared for the
Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2005
The Quality Imperative

**And that made all the difference:
innovation and reform to improve quality
of education in Sri Lanka**

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*And that
made
All the Difference*

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Abbreviations

NIE	National Institute of Education
EFA	Education For All
ECCD	Early Childhood Care and Development

“And that made all the Difference”

INNOVATION AND REFORM TO IMPROVE QUALITY OF EDUCATION IN SRI LANKA



I Quality of Education

As a basic foundation in developing quality of education Sri Lanka used two well-known sources.

The first was the basis defined in the report titled ‘Learning to be’ (1972 Edgar Faure Report ¹⁾ and further clarified at the World Conference on Education for all (EFA ²⁾ held in Jomtien Thailand in 1990. These defined

- (a) Essential Learning Tools
 - Literacy and Expression
 - Numeracy
 - Problem solving and

- (b) Basic Learning Content
 - Knowledge
 - Skills
 - Values and attitudes

The second source was the 1996 Delors Report ³ ‘Learning: The Treasure within’ which delineated the Four Pillars of Learning

- to live together
- to know
- to do and
- to be.

These basic notions imply that

- (a) quality should first be defined as aims and objectives.
- (b) action should then be taken to realize these aims or objectives and
- (c) assessment of achieving the effectiveness of these actions should be undertaken – whether they be formally through formative or summative tests or informally through

on-going observations and qualitative assessment, accompanied by constant mentoring and regular monitoring including progress control. The final aspect of quality is that

- (d) sustained efforts should be made to maintain standards and progressively improve the final outcome of the total effort.

II The Sri Lankan Case

In the context of these globally accepted notions of quality there was general consensus among the education specialists that 'quality' in education should produce individuals who could

- think rationally, analytically and critically
- find creative solutions for problems that may arise under unforeseen circumstances, and
- feel an empathy with the physical and social environment around us.

Sri Lanka gave so much emphasis to all these aspects by including them in the invitation sent in the name of Sri Lankan children at Primary level to the invitees to the inauguration of Primary level Reforms at the beginning of 1998.

The invitation reads –

please help us to

- create new ideas and solutions using our brains
- produce new tools using our hands and feet, and to
- commit ourselves with empathy toward
 - our beautiful environment (fauna and flora)
 - our fellow human beings
 - our beloved motherland and
 - the integrated unity of the Sri Lankan Nation.

The following national goals had already been developed in the First Report of the National Education Commission Sri Lanka in 1992 ⁴

- National Integration, Integrity, Cohesion
- Pervasive Patterns of Social Justice

- Sustainable Patterns of Living
- Work opportunities (dignified, satisfying and self-fulfilling)
- Human Resource Development
- Concern for one another
- Learning to learn, adapting to changing situations
- Coping with the complex and unforeseen, and
- Competencies relevant to securing an honourable place in the International Community

These National Goals gave birth to identification of basic competencies that related to communication, environment, ethics and religion, play and use of leisure and learning to learn.

III Policies and Strategies

If a description of all strategies and activities introduced anew in Sri Lanka in 1998, throughout the school systems (Grades 1-13) is to be undertaken a much longer treatise will need to be produced. Further we felt it necessary to restricting our attention in this paper to Primary Education level (Grades 1-5) where a solid frame-work was developed from the beginning and the tangible results achieved could be directly linked to prior well organized planning.

3 A Goals

Reforms at the Primary Stage focused emphatically on 5 major goals defined in the NEC Report ¹ which were

- National Cohesion and Unity
- Social Justice
- Learning to care
- Adaptability to change and
- Coping with the complex and unforeseen

3 B Basic Competencies

In relation to the above goals, the basic competencies to be promoted at the Primary level were identified by NIE in 1997 as follows:-

- Communication skills

- Following instructions
- Self assessment (where possible) and correcting errors
- Thinking skills (both analytical and creative)
- Acting in a goal directed and quality oriented manner
- Being prepared for the unforeseen
- Relaxing, recovering and recuperating
- Practising sensory awareness
- Self directed learning and experiencing ongoing improvement.

In the context of these specific goals and competencies a definite framework for action was drawn up.

3 C Framework for Action

In 1997 alarming facts came to light that Sri Lanka's standing was very poor in the Unesco sponsored EFA primary education tests conducted world wide at the end of Grade 3 and Grade 5 in 1995 and 1997 respectively. In order to support the corrective actions to be defined by the National Education Commission on this specific aspect, in 1997 A Presidential Task Force on Education was appointed. It was supported by 13 technical committees. Two of these Technical Committees were on ECCD and Primary Education. Working at great speed because corrective action was long overdue and needed to be implemented immediately, The Primary Education Committee (comprising over 45 persons) was subdivided into 7 sub committees that developed plans of action. The sub committees were on

- Proving qualitative inputs
- Human Resource Development
- Designing quantitative inputs
- Awareness creation and advocacy
- Developing plan for implementation
- Timely provision of quantitative inputs
- Efficient Provincial Implementation and intervention through communication up and down the line of control

Of all the 7 action plans (given in a 60 page booklet) for lack of resources – both material and human-only as little as 40% could be accomplished but the emerging results have been very encouraging.

Action plans were based on a number of common objectives described below with subheadings under which each sub committee worked.

Common Objectives

- To redesign content to meet the challenges of the 21st century.
- To provide quantitative inputs relevant to the change in content and methodology using indigenous and local resources wherever possible.
- To improve teaching, learning and assessment processes and the overall management, mentoring supervision and monitoring processes
- To mobilize support of all sections to implement the changes

Main Task 1 Providing Qualitative Inputs

- Curriculum & Syllabus Revision
- Text books
- Resource Materials
- Assessment
- Research

Main Task 2 Human Resource Development

- Pre-service Teacher Education
- In-service Teacher Education
- Training of Teachers and Supervisory Personnel

Main Task 3 Designing Quantitative Inputs

- Buildings) using local resources
- School Gardens) and expertise as far
- Equipment) as possible
- Teacher satisfaction including Promotional prospects and Welfare

Main Task 4 Awareness Creation

- Principals, Supervisors and Teachers
- Parents
- Youth
- Influential Groups
- General Public

Main Task 5 Management for Implementation

- Qualitative management of schools
- Classroom management
- Model and typical Primary Schools (Divisional Level)
- Primary Teacher Resource Centres (school families to meet at Divisional, zonal and Provincial levels)
- Supervision and Monitoring at School, Divisional, Zonal, Provincial levels)

Main Task 6 Providing Quantitative Inputs

- Construction and Maintenance of Capital Works
- Provision of Furniture (Procurement & Supply)
- Provision of Equipment (Consumables)

Main Task 7 Efficient Provincial Administration (lines of communication, responsibility, accountability and authority)

- National & Provincial Ministries (Responsibilities including monitoring)
- Provincial, Zonal, Divisional Offices (including Divisional, Zonal, Primary Education Development Centres (PEDC).

A further main Task which needed to be included for sustainability and improvement of quality i.e On-going Research into Quality Primary Education in Sri Lanka was envisaged but had to be left aside as a future task to be undertaken once the general implementation was stabilized.

3 D Special Innovative Features

This framework for action 5 included a number of special new features which lifted the whole programme from a regular curriculum renewal exercise-where the content of each subject is changed-into a total new way of action within and outside the classroom.

Content and Action

- There are only 4 subject areas: Language (First Language, English, Second National Language) Mathematics, Environment Related Activities (ERA) and Religion. ERA is presented in an integrated manner with freedom to combine often subject areas such use of the physical and social environment, aesthetics, constructional activities, health and physical education, civics etc. Co-curricular activities are also made a part of the curriculum.
- Activity based Oral English is introduced in Grade 1 itself while English as a second language is formally introduced in Grade 3.
- All prospective school entrants are met individually and in groups of four one week before they actually join Grade 1. A preliminary assessment of each child's competencies is made through a set of pre-designed Entry Competency Activities.
- The modes of instruction are specially designed into a proper mix of guided play, activities and desk work to match the 3 Key stages (K.S) starting with a maximum play time in Grade 1 and ending with a maximum of desk work time in Grade 5.
- The learning teaching situations are designed towards development of competencies in contrast to pure content of subject matter.
- Opportunities are provided to work with peers throughout the Primary Grades.
- Where possible opportunities are provided for K.S 1 Children to work with the support of older children from Grade 6.
- Entry competency activities help to note the strengths and weaknesses of each student and regular notes are kept about each student's progress (continuous assessment)
- A school environment and culture is developed to make school life attractive, enjoyable and child friendly.
- A period a week is set aside for optional pursuits each child may prefer to indulge in.
- Activities are to be designed to suit each local context (with common competencies in mind and within the national curriculum framework).
- A single teacher is recommended to be in charge of each key stage where suitable

- A single teacher is in charge of all subjects in each grade with the exception of English and Religion when extra expertise is needed
- Flexible Time tabling is possible with revised weekly allocations of time.

Assessment and Evaluation

School based Assessment approaches (not only restricted to the classroom) are advocated comprising a proper mix of

- Informal and formal assessments
- Formative (on going) and summative assessments
- Criterion and Ipsative referenced assessment rather than Norm referenced assessment
- Emphasis on diagnosing of learning difficulties and remediation (This aspect needs further strengthening)
- Maintenance of systematic records of assessment
- Use of teacher made assessment instruments promoted
- Effort is made to ensure attainment of mastery in Essential learning competencies (ELC) identified for each key stage
- The curriculum and implementing process for each grade was tried out on a trial basis in one district and revised thereafter before implementation at National level
- A number of evaluation studies have been and are being undertaken by many sources (Universities, National Education Commission, NGOs). These findings will be used at next review (curriculum review cycle in Sri Lanka is 8 years). It is gratifying to note that the general reaction to the innovation has been positive in most of these studies.

Learning-Teaching Resources

- New high quality text books and work books for children are in use
- New curricular materials are provided for teachers
- Infrastructure improvements are carried out and learning teaching aids are provided
- Foreign funded projects supplied expertise and infrastructure resources (specially in Mathematics and English)

Supportive Programmes

- Teacher development in-service programmes are conducted through a network of In-Service Advisors (ISAs) trained by the NIE
- Special teacher development (pre service and in service) is ensured in Mathematics and English
- Monthly Teacher meetings at divisional level, Teacher Quality Circles, Teachers' Centres support the effort to sustain the commitment
- Training for Principals and Provincial Education Officers is regularly provided
- The School Family Programme (where a few schools close to each other band together into a Family to support each other) ensures sustainability of interest
- Much publicity was given and awareness creation was achieved among schools personnel as well as for parents, general public at the inauguration of the programme. Many booklets have been produced in this regard. Relevant articles are also written periodically to newspapers and seminars are held regularly to study the successes achieved.

IV Assessment of Ongoing Reform Activities

From the inception of the Reforms on-going evaluation studies were undertaken as a part of the process of formulating final components. For this purpose in the Gampaha District a pilot programme was initiated in 1998 starting with Grade 1, for which all Grade 1 teachers were trained directly by NIE staff who designed the curriculum and some selected lecturers from a College of Teacher Education in Gampaha. Due to the urgency of implementing the Reforms not much time was allowed to trial the material in these "pilot" schools and revised for wider use. During 1998 quick revision of text books and other material (developed in 1997) and content of training programs, necessary changes in infrastructure and training of all teachers were undertaken even before the trial in Gampaha during the year was completed. This process was followed year by year. From last year (2003) the curriculum is being implemented in all Grades 1-5 island wide.

The Gampaha pilot experience was evaluated by many sources

1. One chapter in the book ' Primary Education Reform in Sri Lanka' 6 describes a study done on the Gampaha Experience, focussing on three fronts i.e. effort evaluation, process evaluation and effects evaluation.
2. At the end of 1999 The National Education Commission did an evaluation of its own, using the views of heads of schools, teachers, parents and observation of teachers' handling of classes, and the competence displayed by pupils as shown through their responses to a set of question papers in language, mathematics and environment related activities.

3. In the year 2000 after the Reforms had been expanded island-wide Unicef funded a further study on the Reforms, where selected schools in the Western Province were targeted. This study was done by Sri Lanka Association for the Advancement of Education. It used different target groups such as heads of schools and teachers and methods of study such as study of documentation, interviews, observations and surveys.
4. A later study to investigate the effectiveness of reforms in Key Stage 1 was also funded by the World Bank. This study was undertaken in 2001-2002 by NEREC using a very extensive and thorough methodology. It uses study of documentation, interviews with Principals, ISAs, curriculum specialist and experts and parents, observation of classroom and formal testing of students, as well as questionnaires with teachers.
5. The NIE primary Education unit also embarked on a qualitative assessment of student achievement using as a benchmark the results of the test administered to Grade 3 students in 1995 in language and mathematics as a part of the EFA world wide assessment undertaken by Unesco. The same test was used in 2000 with students in the Gampaha schools that participated in the original sample for purposes of comparison. At the end of 2001 this test was also given to a comparative sample of students from the same schools that were in the original sample island wide and the results are now available (see under next section)

While these different initiatives at evaluation generally reveal that the Reforms have had a salutary effect on quality improvement of primary education a few concerns have also been highlighted.

In the first study the curriculum materials were generally accepted as qualitatively rich and the infrastructure changes were welcome in the eyes of all stakeholders. The attainment levels in language were deemed to be satisfactory, only 20% of the students not reaching mastery level.

However this study highlighted a number of concerns which needed attention. For instance it states that only 20% of teachers demonstrated desired teacher competencies while there was a marked absence of task-based planning.

The NEC report on the other hand does not give an overall view on the effectiveness of Reforms. It goes into details on the basis of a situational analysis in each case proceeding to give guidelines to teachers.

The third report compiled by SLAAED gives a general complementary view of the reforms stating that 'many of the innovative aspects have begun to invigorate a hitherto static and inflexible environment in schools'. However it points to shortcomings too, such as the need to intensify training, ensure distribution of inputs, give greater emphasis to compulsory education and strengthen school based management.

The NEREC study on Key Stage 1 gave the general conclusion that the Reforms have changed the face of primary education in a welcome direction. Nevertheless it was

stressed that sustainability of the improvement of quality remains a big challenge, which needs to be met effectively.

Similarly the NIE study showed that the performance of Grade 3 students in literacy and numeracy has increased remarkably after the Reforms were introduced. But on a further breakdown the startling reality of the lack of equity was well demonstrated by the increase in performance over time in the urban schools outstripping the increase in performance in rural schools.

V Overall Impact on Primary Education Islandwide

5A Enrolment and participation

There is an evident encouraging overall impact on the basis that both primary level enrolment and participation are now high above world standards 7 & 8.

	percentage	
	World	Sri Lanka
Primary level enrolment	82	97
Primary level participation	72	95

5B EFA based test results

More specific data on higher academic achievements are also in evidence. For instance a detailed study 9 of the results of the EFA based test for Grade 3 administered at the end of 2001 showed that mastery and near mastery levels in literacy increased almost by 5% from 1997 to 2002 while the similar increase in numeracy was 3%.

Achieving mastery and near mastery levels – Grade 3 in 1997 and 2002

	1997		2002	
	Near Mastery	Mastery	Near Mastery	Mastery
Literacy	28	32	27.6	37.2
Numeracy	24	22	26.42	22.62

A similar test was given in March 2004 to pupils in the same sample of schools chosen for the EFA test for Grade 5 before Reforms. This date awaits analysis but indications are that the results will show further definite improvement in both literacy and numeracy

5C Grade 5 Scholarship Examination Results

The most recent indication showing quality improvement in Primary Education (specially in the case of children from low income families) is now available through the Grade 5 Scholarship Examination held at the end of 2003 island wide.

This examination is held to award scholarships to students from low income families as well as to select students (from all students island wide) to secondary level (Grade 6) in popular well-resourced schools in the main towns.

Grade 5 Scholarship Examination 2001, 2002 & 2003
No. Sitting & Percentage

Year	Sinhala Medium No. sat			Tamil Medium No. sat		
	Below *	All	Percentage	Below *	All	Percentage
2001	151,900	219,764	69.11	44,581	54,877	82.24
2002	157,325	227,005	69.3	45,876	56,437	81.29
2003	167,687	232,468	70.44	50,344	60,015	85.89

* Below – Family income below Rs.2400 per month

Number Qualified and Percentage

Year	Sinhala Medium			Tamil Medium		
	Below * No.	All No.	Percentage	Below * No.	All No.	Percentage
2001	7,487	20,099	37.43	2,495	4,254	58.65
2002	7,490	19,939	37.54	2,492	4,263	58.46
2003	7,495	18,945	48.06	2,488	4,260	58.85

After the full cycle of the Reforms had been implemented (Grade 1-5) the first Grade 5 Scholarship Examination was held in year 2003.

The above results indicate that in the Sinhala Medium the percentage of students with family income below R.2400/= per month has increased by over 10% although in the Tamil medium the increase was only .29%. Two inferences may be made from these results.

1. The children from low-income families who cannot afford to go for special tuition classes have been exposed to a better education in the classroom because of the Reforms. The insignificant increase of the same type of students in the Tamil medium may be due to the war situation in the North and East which has badly affected their school education altogether.
2. In addition the increase may also be due to the 30% change in the questions framed for the Scholarship Examination in 2003 wherein place of subject content – competencies (which was the focus of attention for the change in the Reforms) were tested. [Reforms concentrated on equipping the students with competencies identified carefully for each key stage]

This is clear indication that Reforms, targeted to improve quality of education through equipping students with well-formulated competencies, have brought about desired results. In the next phase of review of the curriculum, Sri Lanka needs to

further fine-tune competencies rather than heaping on subject content. We also need to give much greater attention to Catch Up Education in the Tamil Medium so that students in that medium too may profit equally from the Reforms already put in place. It is very appropriate and timely that Unicef and other agencies have already started a well formulated Catch Up Education programme in the North and East.

VI Indications for Future Action

The time is now ripe to review the Reforms – including all its components such as curricula (with emphasis on competencies), assessment, Teacher Guides and Supplementary Resource Books for Teachers, continuous training of all personnel, monitoring and impact evaluation. In addition, a model for regular gathering and using of feed back information and capacity development of personnel in curriculum development, pupil assessment and Teacher Education are other aspects that need immediate attention.

6A Suggested Future Activities in development of Primary Education

1. Review of the Primary Education Curriculum
2. Model for gathering feedback information
3. Assessment of competencies of personnel and suggestions for improvement of capacity building in curriculum development and teacher education.
4. Assessment of competencies of personnel and suggestions for improvement of capacity building in pupil assessment.
5. Projects on three relevant key areas in Primary Education
 - (a) School and Community Reciprocal Support
 - (b) Review and revision of Entry Competency Approach and Essential Levels of Competency
 - (c) Resource Booklet on Assessment for teachers
6. Research Projects in 3 key areas
 - (a) Case Studies of Well-run Primary Schools
 - (b) Interpreting the National Curricula in local contexts
 - (c) Differential Primary Education experiences based on exposure to pre-school experiences
7. Model for all-round development of small Primary Schools
8. Model for comprehensive development of 'Centres of Excellence' in Primary Education
9. Capacity Building and Training of opinion leaders in Primary Education.
10. Monitor & Supervise Vs. inspector (in training supervisory personnel)

6 B Additional Activities for sustainability

- For sustainability of gains so far achieved still other activities may be
- Assessment of the effectiveness of new features introduced
- Suggestions for developing creativity and problem solving in children at the primary level
- Roles of teachers and mentors in implementing Reforms
- Children and their all-round development
- Progress control and monitoring – Process and Functions
- A practical guide to multi-graded and multilevel learning and teaching
- Handbook on action research by classroom teachers
- Improving one's own tests – suggestions for teachers
- Aesthetic education at Primary level (practical experiences in Music, movement and dance
- The development of values and attitudes at primary education level
- Thinking games to nurture excellence and to support 'low achievers'
- Development of entry competencies as terminal competencies at pre-school level
- Study and record of best practices in Primary Education Reform Implementation
- Recording progress with a view to further curriculum review
- Teaching of language at the Primary School level

The Road to quality Primary education is indeed rocky, steep and full of pitfalls. It may often bring despair and despondency. However we can already see in the far distance the results Sri Lanka may achieve. This gives us the courage to hope that someday we may be able to say (with apologies to Robert Frost)

*" We came to a fork in the woods
We took the road less travelled by
And that made all the Difference"*

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