

Pre-primary Education in Sri Lanka: How Inclusive Is It?

W. Indralal De Silva¹, Maringa Sumanadasa^{2*}, Dharshani Samaranayake³

¹*Department of Demography, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka*

²*Faculty of Graduate Studies, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka*

³*Plan Sri Lanka*

It is undebatable that pre-school education contributes vitally for the mental and physical development of the 4-5 year olds. Scientific and systematic exposure of children to pre-primary education helps building the necessary foundation of their formal education later on. Pre-primary education in Sri Lanka is provided by pre-schools (Pre-schools function as Montessori, kindergarten, nursery school, early childhood centre) also known as early childhood development centers (ECCD) as a devolved function of Provincial Councils and maintaining quality entirely falls on local authorities under them. Though national Children's Secretariat (CS) has set minimum standards for preschools, there are serious doubts whether pre-schools provide an inclusive and quality pre-primary education to all 4-5 year olds. The main objective of this paper is to examine the overall inclusiveness of pre-school education in Sri Lanka, specifically focusing on the status of enrolment across districts, training and competency of teachers. Secondary data of national survey of pre-schools in 2008-09 and Census 2012 and data collected by state agencies have been analyzed following descriptive methods.

The study has found a high concentration of functioning pre-schools (over 40-50 per cent in five provinces, namely, Western, Central, North Central and North Western. Western province account for 1/5 of the total while the share of each of the other eight provinces is around 10 percent. Contrary to formal education, the great majority (62 per cent) of pre-schools are managed by private individuals. The district wise distribution of pre-school children shows high concentration within Colombo, Gampaha, Kurunegala and Kalutara districts, accounting for 32.8 per cent. Number of pre-school teachers in 2008-2009 was 23,525. Of the total of 23,525, 17.5 per cent teachers had no training while another 14.0 per cent had only less than 3 months of training. 6.9 per cent of pre-school children suffer physical and or mental disability; of them 2.9 per cent fall to the category of slow learning. There is neither properly coordinated organizational arrangement to train pre-school teachers nor proper arrangement to regulate pre-schools. Gender equality is present at pre-school level similar to primary, secondary and collegiate levels. Overall, gender is not a significant factor in non-attendance with the exception of estate sector where the proportion was 71.5 per cent and 88.5 per cent of female and male children respectively. Serious issues pertaining to pre-school education compel a re-visit of the vital aspects of pre-school education by the policy makers.

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