



COMMONWEALTH *of* LEARNING

Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

MAINSTREAMING STUDENTS WITH SPECIFIC LEARNING DISABILITIES (SLD)

By

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A THREE-DAY TRAINING PROGRAMME ON "MAINSTREAMING STUDENTS WITH SPECIFIC LEARNING DISABILITIES (SLD)"

Organised by

Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia (COL-CEMCA), New Delhi,
the Ministry of Education (MOE) Sri Lanka,
and ChangeInkk Foundation, India.

Valedictory Function

21 May, 2025

09:30 AM IST

Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia (CEMCA)

7/8 Sarva Priya Vihar,
New Delhi, 110016
India

Dear Mrs Nilamani Malaviarachchi, Mrs Ishanthie Jayawardena, Mr Samantha Gunathilaka, Ms Noopur Jhunjhunwala, Dr Tapas Ranjan Roy, teachers and teacher educators, who have gathered at the two-day training workshop on identifying, accommodating and facilitating learning among children with specific learning disabilities (SLD) in Colombo this morning.

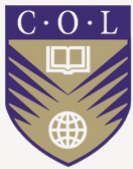
My gratitude to Mr Samantha Gunathilaka and my colleagues at the Ministry of Education, Sri Lanka, for making this event a reality. I am sure, at the end of two days, all participants will have learnt as well as shared their best practices in dealing with children with SLD.

Inclusive education in Sri Lanka aims to ensure that all students, regardless of their abilities or disabilities, have equal access to quality education within mainstream classrooms. While challenges remain, several good practices are evident.

You have an outstanding National Policy on Disability (2003): This policy promotes and protects the rights of persons with disabilities, including the right to education. It emphasizes social justice and equal opportunities. Way back in 2000 itself, the Ministry of Education provided guidelines for inclusive education, aiming to mainstream children with disabilities into regular classrooms and special education units within schools.

Your Master Plan for Inclusive Education focuses on: a) Access and participation, ensuring that all children can enroll and actively participate in education; b) Quality education, providing meaningful and effective learning opportunities for all students; c) Strengthening inclusive practices, building the capacity of the education system and schools to implement inclusive education; and d) Creating an inclusive culture, fostering acceptance and respect for diversity within the education system. In addition, your constitutional provisions mandate, by law, services for children with disabilities. The principles of equality and non-discrimination in the constitution provide a foundation for inclusive practices.

At the school level, you have been practicing inclusive education for some time now:



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- **Mainstreaming and Special Education Units:** Many schools integrate students with disabilities into regular classrooms, often with the support of special education units within the same school. This allows for both integration and specialised support where needed.
- **Individualised Education Plans (IEPs):** While the implementation faces challenges, there is a recognition of the importance of developing IEPs to cater to the specific learning needs of individual students with disabilities.
- **Teacher Training:** The National Institute of Education (NIE) and universities are increasingly incorporating inclusive education into teacher training programmes (both pre-service and in-service) to equip teachers with the necessary skills. Short-term training programmes on inclusive education strategies are also conducted.
- **Reasonable Accommodations:** Schools are beginning to make adjustments to the curriculum, teaching methods, and assessments to accommodate diverse learning needs.
- **Collaborative Efforts:** There is a growing understanding of the importance of collaboration among teachers, principals, parents, and other stakeholders (like health services and social services) to support inclusive education.
- **Peer Interaction:** Positive peer relationships and teacher-student interactions are recognised as strengths in the Sri Lankan inclusive education context, fostering a supportive learning environment.
- **Curriculum Adaptation:** Efforts are being made to adapt the national curriculum to be more inclusive and cater to a wider range of learning styles and abilities.
- **Assessment for Learning:** Monitoring student progress and providing feedback are used as strategies to improve learning outcomes for all students, including those with disabilities.
- **Early Identification and Intervention:** Community-based rehabilitation programmes play a role in identifying children with disabilities early and directing them towards pre-school education.

However, despite these positive developments, challenges persist, hindering the full realisation of inclusive education in Sri Lanka:

- **Attitudinal Barriers:** Negative societal attitudes and stigma associated with disability remain a significant obstacle.
- **Lack of Awareness:** Insufficient awareness about inclusive education among some teachers, parents, and the wider community.

- **Inadequate Teacher Training:** While improving, the training for all mainstream teachers on inclusive practices and specific disabilities is still insufficient.
- **Insufficient Resources:** Many schools lack the necessary financial resources, specialised equipment, and support staff to effectively implement inclusive education.
- **Poor Infrastructure:** Lack of accessible buildings, transportation, and facilities (like inclusive toilets) in many schools.
- **Gaps in Policy Implementation:** A disconnect between national policies and actual practices at the school level.
- **Examination-Based Education System:** A highly competitive examination system can create barriers to inclusive practices that focus on individual progress.
- **Lack of School-Level Inclusive Education Policies:** Many schools do not have specific policies to guide inclusive practices within their context.
- **Challenges in Implementing IEPs:** Difficulties in developing and effectively implementing individualised education plans for students with diverse needs.
- **Uneven Development:** Disparities in access and quality of inclusive education across different regions and between Sinhala and Tamil medium schools.

Addressing these challenges is crucial to further strengthen and expand the good practices of inclusive education in Sri Lanka, ensuring that all children have the opportunity to learn and thrive together.

Although the exact prevalence of dyslexia in Sri Lanka is not definitively known, with estimations varying, one study in a semi-urban population found that 22.5 percent of 10-year-old children had difficulties with spelling in Sinhala. Globally, the prevalence of specific learning disorders is estimated to be between 5 and 15 percent among school-aged children.

There is evidence suggesting that awareness and understanding of dyslexia are limited among teachers and caregivers in Sri Lanka. Many teachers report having minimal knowledge of dyslexia, its identification, and inclusive practices. Caregivers also demonstrate a lack of knowledge, leading to misconceptions and potential stigmatisation of children with dyslexia.



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At present, Sri Lanka stands to gain by placing a national-level programme for the identification and management of dyslexia. Many teachers are unaware of formal dyslexia identification practices or where evaluations take place.

Keeping this in mind, in consultation with Mrs Ishanthie Jayawardhane and her predecessor, Mr Neel Wathukarawatta, we decided to hold this teacher training programme to equip educators with the skills to identify and support students with dyslexia.

An effort towards mainstream education for CSN shall help overcome the difficulties children face in their educational interactions and social surroundings, potentially leading to frustration and low self-esteem. This will also address the challenges faced by the caregivers of children with dyslexia who often experience emotional pressure, stress, and a sense of isolation due to a lack of societal understanding and support. We need to strengthen support systems that involve both the ministries of education and health, and their agencies, to dispel all misconceptions surrounding the spectrum of special learning difficulties.

- We wish to learn more from the government on the prevalence and teacher readiness so that teacher training programmes such as these can be mainstreamed as well as streamlined.
- We can mount a public campaign to spread awareness and understanding of dyslexia among educators, parents, and the general public.
- We can develop and implement standardised procedures for the early identification and diagnosis of dyslexia.
- We can train trainers who would use cascading methods to train all teachers of Sri Lanka on learning disabilities and inclusive teaching practices.
- We can adapt and contextualise an online courseware that we had developed in other geographies to bring awareness among all schoolteachers and the family members
- We can strengthen the current implementation practices of inclusive education policies to better accommodate students with learning disabilities.

I wish the two-day training programme all success and the interactions between our partners, ChangeInkk and the Ministry of Education on day 3 a good planning exercise. Thank you!