

Ethnic and Identity Based Discrimination in the Education Sector of Sri Lanka



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© coalition for Educational Development (CED), Sri Lanka

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This publication reviews the identity-based discrimination in the education sector of Sri Lanka. Language barriers, unequal resources, and biased school rules create unequal learning experiences. Curriculum gaps also limit inclusion. Stronger bilingual education, fair policies, and inclusive reforms are needed to ensure equal opportunities for every child. This study was carried out by the Coalition of Educational Development (CED), Sri Lanka.

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No. 17, Dharmapala Place, Rajagiriya, Colombo, Sri Lanka

T: +94 112 887642

www.cedsrilanka.org

Introduction

The Coalition for Education Development (CED) is a consortium of organizations working at national, provincial, and local levels across Sri Lanka to strengthen the country's education system. Established in 2004, CED has been committed to promoting civil society participation in shaping and implementing education policies. Its mission is to advocate for inclusive and equitable education by ensuring the active involvement of community and civil society organizations in developing and realizing national policies that guarantee quality education for all. Through collaboration, research, and advocacy, CED works to advance innovative educational programs that promote equal opportunities and quality learning outcomes for every learner.

This position paper has been developed to share the findings of CED's recent study on ethnic and identity-based discrimination within the education sector. The purpose of this paper is to make the study's insights accessible to educators, school administrators, and other education stakeholders—especially those involved in student counselling and welfare. Through this position paper, CED aims to help teachers better understand the nature and impact of identity-based discrimination in schools, and to emphasize the importance of fostering inclusivity, sensitivity, and respect for diversity within learning environments.

Background:

Ethnicity and Education in Sri Lanka

Evolution of the Education System

Before colonial rule, education was temple-based and largely religious. Under colonial influence, missionary schools expanded in coastal areas, while temple schools continued inland. By the early 20th century, there was a mix of schools run by different religious communities and the colonial administration. The landmark decision in 1945 to provide free education from primary level to university opened the system to all children, leading to one of the highest literacy rates in South Asia. In 1961, schools run by religious groups were nationalized, further expanding access.

Language Policies and Their Impact

During the colonial period, English-medium missionary schools gave Tamil students in Jaffna a particular advantage, enabling them to gain a large share of university admissions and public service jobs. After independence, resentment grew among the Sinhala-speaking majority, who felt excluded from these opportunities. In 1956, the government introduced the “Sinhala Only” policy, making Sinhala the official language and disregarding the Tamil-speaking population. This sudden change forced non-Sinhala speakers in the civil service to either learn Sinhala quickly or resign, and many lost their positions or migrated.

University Quota System

Until the 1970s, admissions were based purely on merit, which allowed many Tamil students to secure places in higher education. To address regional disparities, a quota system was introduced: initially 70 percent of places were allocated on merit and 30 percent on district quotas, later revised to 30 percent merit, 55 percent district, and 15 percent for underdeveloped districts. While this policy widened access for rural students of all ethnicities, it reduced the number of Tamil students entering universities. For the Tamil community, especially the elite who had long benefited from the earlier system, this was perceived as deliberate discrimination.

Education and Ethnic Segregation

Many schools were originally founded by religious groups, and even after nationalization, they remained largely separated along ethnic lines. Today, most schools are either Sinhala-medium or Tamil-medium, with only a handful (just 35 out of more than 10,000 schools) offering trilingual instruction. This separation reduces opportunities for children of different communities to interact, build friendships, and learn about each other’s cultures.

Segregation by Gender

Segregation is also seen along gender lines since religious and cultural traditions have shaped a preference for single-sex schools. Many government schools have continued this practice, even after the

nationalization of education. While such schools may reflect cultural norms, they also reduce opportunities for shared experiences among boys and girls.

Language Curriculum Reforms

Recognizing the role of language in fuelling misunderstandings, the government introduced curriculum reforms to encourage bilingualism. Sinhala students were required to learn Tamil, and Tamil students to learn Sinhala, as part of the GCE Ordinary Level examinations. The goal was to promote reconciliation and understanding across ethnic groups. However, in practice, most students only achieved basic reading and writing skills, with little opportunity to use the second language meaningfully in daily life. An UN-funded project in 2017 attempted to revise the curriculum to encourage more genuine intercultural learning and dialogue, but its impact was limited by political changes and inconsistent implementation.

Recent Policy Developments

In recent decades, Sri Lanka has introduced several policies to strengthen equal access to education. Constitutional reforms enshrined fundamental rights, including Article 12.2, which prohibits discrimination based on race, religion, language, caste, sex, political opinion, or place of birth. Article 27(h) emphasizes the right to universal and equal access to education. The country has also ratified international conventions such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which affirms every child's right to education, and the Women's Charter, which commits to eliminating discrimination against women in all sectors.

Government policy, including the National Education Policy (2020–2030), highlights fostering national cohesion, unity, and respect for cultural diversity as central goals. The Ministry of National Integration and Reconciliation (established in 2015) and the Department of Languages work to promote unity through language skills and intercultural understanding.

Institutional and Programmatic Measures

The National Institute of Education develops the national curriculum, and seventeen national colleges of education focus on teacher training

and quality improvement. The National Education Commission reviews policies to meet emerging challenges. Initiatives such as Navodya Schools and Mahindodya Technical Laboratories aim to improve education quality for rural children. Access has been expanded through social welfare measures such as free textbooks and uniforms, mid-day meals for disadvantaged students, Grade 5 scholarships for high achievers, and subsidized transport. These measures aim to reduce inequality and improve learning opportunities for all.

Methodology

Sample and Data Collection: The study used a purposive sampling approach to select participants and locations. The Coalition for Educational Development (CED) consulted with its board and member organizations to identify five communities across five districts for case studies. In each community, five young researchers were selected—most of whom had previous experience in youth action research. They also participated in a one-day training to understand the study's purpose and concepts.

Challenges: The sensitive nature of identity-based discrimination required careful handling, but the limited time available for the study made building rapport and capturing detailed accounts difficult. Some case studies had to be repeated to ensure accuracy. Although the research aimed to include the disabled community, this group was excluded due to the specialized skills needed to gather information and the limited presence of disabled students in mainstream schools.

Limitations: The study also noted that discrimination in schools often extends beyond ethnicity and religion to include factors such as skin colour, physical appearance, body type, and disability. Many Sinhala respondents reported such experiences. While these issues were not analysed in detail in this study, they represent an important area for future research.

Key Findings

Religion and Identity-Based Discrimination against Muslim Students

In the Eastern Province, where Muslims are concentrated, many students must attend Sinhala or Tamil medium schools outside their communities. Despite sharing the Tamil language with many local communities, Muslim students sometimes experience discrimination from Tamil peers, and vice versa. This reflects how identity-based discrimination can occur even between groups sharing a language, highlighting that religion remains a significant factor.

- **Social Stereotypes and Their Impact:** The study found that discrimination in education often stems from broader societal stereotypes and norms about certain nationalities and religions. For example, Muslims in Sri Lanka are often perceived as self-interested, particularly because of their prominence in commerce, and are sometimes stereotyped as cunning.
- **Discrimination Triggered by Events:** Incidents such as the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks have deepened mistrust and divisions among communities, disrupting a decade of relative peace since the end of the armed conflict in 2009. The study suggests that these events can trigger identity-based discrimination in education, emphasizing the need for teachers to be prepared to address such tensions sensitively.

Caste, Ethnicity, and Discrimination in the Plantation Sector

Within the Tamil community, caste and nationality play a significant role in shaping discrimination. Plantation communities, largely composed of Indian Tamils, face prejudice from other Tamil groups. This is rooted in historical caste divisions and perceptions of citizenship. Shortages of qualified teachers in plantation areas have led to deployment of teachers from northern and eastern regions, but these teachers sometimes bring prejudices that further disadvantage plantation students.

Language and Curriculum Challenges

Tamil students reported discomfort and bullying when struggling to pronounce Sinhala words correctly, pointing to a lack of sensitivity in the school environment. In addition, some students expressed difficulty with history and social studies curricula that revisit past conflicts between Sinhalese and Tamils. These curricular approaches often fail to foster understanding and instead reinforce tensions.

Limited Opportunities in Tamil-Medium Education

One major finding of the study is that Tamil-medium students face limited opportunities for higher education in their own language. This is largely due to a shortage of qualified teachers and schools offering secondary education in Tamil medium. For example, in the estate communities of Sabaragamuwa Province, there are no Advanced Level science stream classes in Tamil. Students must travel to other districts to continue their studies. Such resource shortages contribute significantly to ethnic-based inequality in education.

Discrimination Based on Sexual Identity

Discrimination in education also extends to sexual identity. Homosexuality remains criminalized under Sri Lankan law, and societal attitudes largely view it as unacceptable, creating both legal and social barriers for LGBTQ+ individuals. These conditions make it difficult for people to openly express their identity or seek justice when their rights are violated.

Within the education system, LGBTQ+ students face various forms of discrimination and harassment. Teachers, often lacking awareness or sensitivity, sometimes label such behaviour as undisciplined or anti-social, further stigmatizing these students. Homosexual students frequently encounter teasing and exclusion from peers, and those who attempt to show sympathy toward them can also face social backlash. This reflects deep-rooted societal stereotypes and highlights a lack of understanding about sexual diversity.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed to education authorities, teacher training institutions, and schools to reduce identity-based discrimination and promote inclusivity in the education system:

1. Promote Inter-Ethnic Understanding through Education

- The Ministry of Education and National Institute of Education (NIE) should integrate peace education, multicultural learning, and inter-ethnic dialogue into the national curriculum.
- Schools should encourage joint activities and cultural exchanges between Sinhala, Tamil, and Muslim schools to build trust and understanding among students.

2. Address Multidimensional Discrimination

- Teacher education programs should include modules on identifying and addressing discrimination not only based on ethnicity and religion, but also on socio-economic status, physical appearance, and location.
- Schools should adopt anti-bullying and inclusion policies that explicitly recognize these forms of discrimination.

3. Build Teacher and School Leader Capacity

- Pre-service and in-service teacher training should include sessions on diversity, equity, and inclusion.
- Principals and teachers should be equipped to identify, respond to, and document incidents of discrimination, ensuring accountability at school level.

4. Curriculum and Textbook Reform

- The NIE and curriculum developers should review textbooks and learning materials to remove content that perpetuates bias or stereotypes.
- New content should promote equality, respect for diversity, and a shared Sri Lankan identity that values all communities.

5. Encourage Mixed and Inclusive School Structures

- The Ministry of Education could pilot multi-ethnic and multi-religious schools in selected districts to foster integrated learning environments.
- Zoning and admissions policies should also be reviewed to avoid reinforcing ethnic segregation.

6. Strengthen Student Support and Counselling Systems

- School counselling programs should be expanded and strengthened to support students who experience discrimination.
- Student councils and peer-support groups can be mobilized to promote respect, empathy, and inclusion at school level.
- Schools should collaborate with the public health system and social services to provide psychological and emotional support for affected students.

7. Promote Awareness on Gender and Sexual Diversity

- Teacher training institutions should include awareness sessions on gender and sexual orientation to build sensitivity and understanding.
- Schools should create safe spaces where all students, including LGBTQ+ youth, can learn without fear of stigma or harassment.

8. Monitor and Evaluate Equity in Education

- The Ministry of Education should establish a mechanism to regularly monitor and evaluate incidents of discrimination in schools.
- Feedback from students, teachers, and parents should inform continuous improvement in school inclusivity practices.

CONTRIBUTORS

Mentoring Support

Mr. Shantha Kulathunge,
Project Consultant, National Coordinator, Coalition for Educational Development (CED), Sri Lanka

Mr. Sachitha N. Hewage,
Chairman, Coalition for Educational Development (CED), Sri Lanka

Mr. Chaminda Piyasekara,
Treasure, Coalition for Educational Development (CED), Sri Lanka

Ms. Dinithi Alahapperuma,
Former Project Coordinator, Coalition for Educational Development (CED), Sri Lanka

Mrs. K.A.Rangani Lakmali,
Programme Coordinator, Coalition for Educational Development (CED), Sri Lanka

Youth Researchers

Nimesh Monarawila, Kalutara
Mohamed Nasran, Kalutara
Naduni Imesha, Kalutara
M. Hettiarachchi, Kalutara
Manushi Chethana, Kalutara
Rashmi Rasanji, Kalutara
Sadis Kumara, Rathnapura
Tharindu Sampath, Rathnapura
M. Naleendran, Rathnapura
S Dhanushan, Rathnapura
Sadeesh Kumara, Rathnapura
Sanjeewa Kumara, Rathnapura

Youth Advocacy Team

Mohamed Nasran, Kalutara
Lahiru Wijesinghe, Kalutara
Nawod Gunasekara, Rathnapura
Saumya, Rathnapura



Coalition for Educational Development Sri Lanka

No. 17, Dharmapala Place, Rajagiriya,

Colombo, Sri Lanka

T: +94 112 887642

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