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Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia

WELCOME NOTE

## NEED FOR INCLUSIVE SCHOOL EDUCATION: AN INTRODUCTION

By

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## WEBINAR FOR BUILDING CAPACITIES OF POLICYMAKERS & TEACHERS OF SRI LANKA

Organised by

COL-CEMCA  
in collaboration with the  
Ministry of Education, Sri Lanka & ChangeInkk Foundation

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Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia (CEMCA)

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New Delhi, 110016  
India



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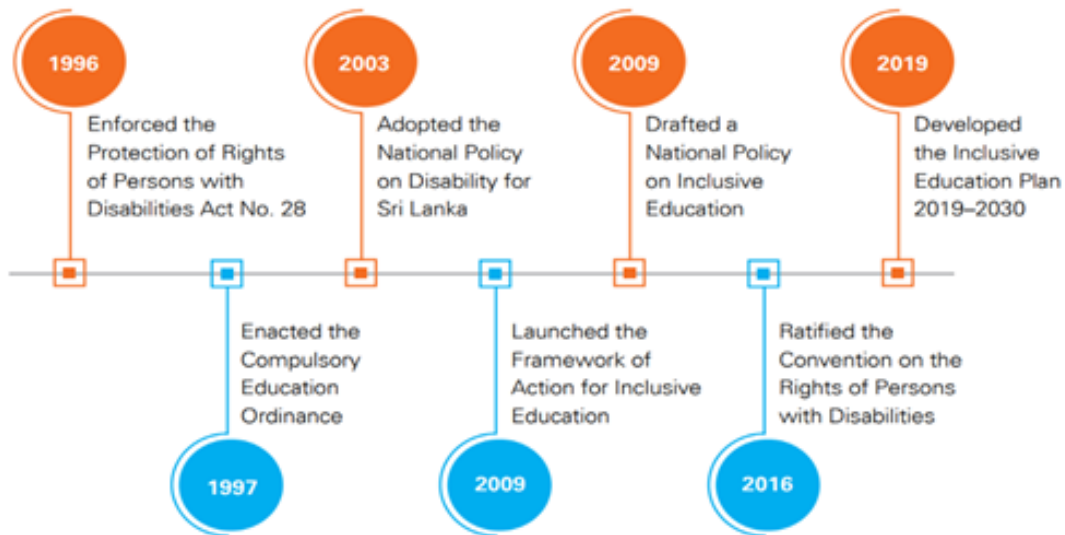
Welcome to the online training programme aimed at building the capacity of policymakers and teachers of Sri Lanka, an event well curated by the Ministry of Education, Sri Lanka, together with the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia and ChangeInkk Foundation, India. My sincere thanks to Dr Neel Wathukaruwaththa, Director, Foreign Services, Ministry of Education, Sri Lanka, who is joined by Dr Rukmali Kariyawasam, Additional Secretary at the Ministry of Education and Dr R M J C Kumara, Director in the Ministry of Education (MoE), Sri Lanka. On their behalf and on behalf of my colleagues, Ms Noopur Jhunjhunwala, Ms Aparajita Singh and Ms Poornitha Nambiar of ChangeInkk Foundation, India, and on behalf of the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia, I extend my warm welcome to all those present in today's two-hour long online training session on Inclusive Education.

We bring this event to celebrate Dyslexia and celebrate those who are termed persons with specific-learning disabilities. With this event, Sri Lanka joins the Global Go Red Campaign that promotes awareness on issues around Dyslexia, and aims to remove the stigma attached to it. By Going Red, we symbolically acknowledge that the institutions and individuals affected by Dyslexia are courageous, powerful, bold, confident, determined and above all, beloved. At this event, I declare that Sri Lanka sees Dyslexia in a different light!

Learning Disabilities (LDs) are a set of neurodivergent conditions that impact the way individuals process information and learn. These include Dyslexia, Dyscalculia, Dysgraphia, along with Dyspraxia. Individuals with LDs have average or above average IQ, but struggle with processing language, spoken or written, which may manifest as a difficulty to comprehend, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations. Despite having average or above-average IQs, they may be mislabelled as slow or lazy learners.

That said, Specific Learning Disability is one of the many forms of recognised disabilities, which that are being addressed by nations who have ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).

### Milestones in disability-inclusive education

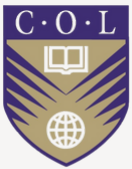


(Source: UNICEF Country Profile on Sri Lanka, 2021)

After signing in for UNCRPD in 2007, Sri Lanka ratified it nine years later on 8 February 2016. Since then, there has been no looking back. Sri Lanka has championed education for all children, endeavouring to afford equal educational opportunities for all children at all levels, irrespective of their backgrounds. The Education Sector Development Plan (ESDP) 2018–2025 of Sri Lanka promotes inclusive education in parallel with strengthening special education.

ESDP sets out broad priorities contributing to advancing disability-inclusive education including:

- improving learning facilities and resources in all schools;
- strengthening special education, inclusive education and non-formal education;
- defining inclusive education programmes and services and gradually implementing the programmes, until implementation covers 100 per cent of all schools by 2025; and
- reducing the number of out-of-school children and increasing access to special education and non-formal education.



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As noted in our background paper, the Sri Lankan Inclusive Education Plan 2019-2023 focuses on five critical areas: policy reform, curriculum adaptation, human resources development, infrastructure enhancement, and awareness promotion. A key objective is facilitating the integration of children with disabilities into mainstream classrooms through comprehensive review and revision of admission policies.

South Asia is home to about 659 million children under 18 years of age – approximately 36 percent of the total population of 1.82 billion. South Asia is home to the largest numbers of out-of-school children and youths at 31.8 million with 8.2 million at primary level (6 to 9 years) and 23.6 million at the secondary level (10 to 14 years). At the same time, millions of children are completing primary education without being able to master foundational literacy and numeracy. As one can predict, a considerable percentage of out of school population are children with disabilities.

Despite the negative impact of war on the education of children in many parts of the country, Sri Lanka has made significant progress over the years. With almost 100 per cent of pupils who start Grade 1 reaching Grade 5, the MoE reports that many children with disabilities are mainstreamed in regular classrooms and special education units in schools. However, children with disabilities continue to face several barriers to access, participation and achievement in education. These barriers include many interrelated factors, particularly limited skills of teachers on inclusive teaching, lack of appropriate and accessible infrastructure in schools and limited scope in curricula, among others.

Recently, I chanced upon at least four papers in scholarly journal, written by Sri Lankan authors who confer with the above challenges:

Naina Mohamed, et al., in their paper titled, *Analysing the requirement for module-based reading intervention for children with reading difficulties in Sri Lanka*, infer from their study that some children continue to encounter reading difficulties stemming from decoding or linguistic comprehension challenges.



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Darshani Hettiarachchi from Ministry of Health, Sri Lanka, reports that Dyslexia is a specific learning disorder which persists lifelong. Due to its impact on academic performance, the majority of affected children can experience long term educational, societal, psychological, emotional and financial adversities. Sri Lanka, still does not have a national level programme for identification and management of dyslexia. Very limited knowledge of healthcare workers, preschool and primary school teachers have resulted in delayed identification. It is vital to diagnose the condition as early as possible and initiate early intervention for a better prognosis. Therefore, it is timely for clinicians who work with children to be aware of the condition, its early identification and implementing early interventions.

Senarath Samudra from University of Colombo states that her survey among 100 teachers from 15 schools revealed that special education teachers had positive attitude and self confidence when working with dyslexic children, as compared to the other group of teachers. The study also revealed that more teacher training programmes, facilities and learning aids are required and the ratio of trained teachers to dyslexic students should be increased.

Similarly, W. A. Nadhee N. Peries from University of York and the fellow authors state in a survey carried out amongst some 705 primary school teachers on their readiness to identify learners with Dyslexia that many of them had minimal readiness to identify and engage with children who may have dyslexia type learning difficulties, in order to facilitate early intervention. However, they showed a very positive attitude towards learning and dealing with the situation.

It is, in this context, in discussion with Drs Thilaka Jayasundara and Neela Wathukaruwaththa that the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia, together with ChangeInkk Foundation is organising this special event, just as the beginning of a long journey in which all schoolteachers in Sri Lanka will be able to undertake the following:

- Get involved in the identification of SLD
- Develop inclusive classroom strategies



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- Support children who struggle to unlock their potential
- Identify SLD with certain technological tools that are already available.

I, once again, welcome each one of you to this important event, and thank Dr Geet Oberoi, our resource person for her contribution and the time spent with my colleagues in Sri Lanka. Let me also thank Ms Nabeela Ata, Mr T Khalid, Ms Suman Choudhary and Mr Aflaq Shah of CEMCA and Ms Poornitha Nambiar, Ms Aparajita Singh and Ms Noopur Jhunjhunwala who have worked as a team to make this online session a reality.

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