



# POLICYINSIGHTS

INSTITUTE OF POLICY STUDIES OF SRI LANKA

## SRI LANKA'S LEARNING CRISIS

*From the IPS flagship publication 'Sri Lanka: State of the Economy 2018 Report'*



While countries across the world have made significant headway in enrolling children in school, progress in ensuring that these children actually learn and acquire much needed skills - which is what truly builds human capital - is far less impressive, thus constituting a 'learning crisis'. Sri Lanka has been a notable overachiever in education in the developing world. However, disparities in performance levels by school type,

location, gender, and medium of instruction are significant. Moreover, learning outcomes at higher levels of education are weaker, and disparities are wider.

National assessment mean scores of grade eight students in 2016 were only 51 per cent for mathematics, 42 per cent for science, and 36 per cent for English, in subjects that are essential for individuals to succeed in a competitive knowledge economy. Moreover, the national mean score was only 23 per cent in a paper comprising of test items similar to the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), suggesting that Sri Lanka's education system also performs poorly in an international perspective. Constraints at both the school- and system-level can inhibit good learning outcomes.

### Schools that Fail Learners

Children often arrive in school unprepared to learn, particularly children from low socio-economic backgrounds

or those with disabilities. They are disadvantaged at the start due to poor developmental foundations stemming from malnutrition, illness, low parental investments, and lower levels of exposure to preschool education.

Teachers have been identified as the single most important factor affecting student learning outcomes. Yet, unlike in many developed countries, a professional qualification - typically covering subject knowledge, pedagogy, and supervised practical teaching experience - is not required to enter the teaching profession in Sri Lanka. This stems from the limited opportunities for pre-service teacher training, which is offered either via a Bachelor of Education (BEd) degree in only two out of the 17 state universities, or a National Diploma in Teaching (NDT) at one of the 18 National Colleges of Teacher Education in the country. While many teachers undergo in-service teacher training after joining teacher service, in the interim, students miss out on effective teaching.

### National assessment scores of grade eight students in 2016



**51%**  
Mathematics



**42%**  
Science



**36%**  
English

School infrastructure and related inputs are another important factor determining learning outcomes, provided that these are used effectively to promote learning. While Sri Lankan schools are generally well equipped with basic school infrastructure such as furniture and textbooks, the effective utilization of inputs - which is essential to have an impact on learning outcomes - is not as satisfactory, especially in underprivileged schools.

Effective school management is important in influencing learning outcomes indirectly by improving teacher quality and ensuring the effective use of resources. It is concerning to note that only 4 per cent of principals in Sri Lanka belong to the highest ranking teacher service category in terms of educational and professional qualifications, experience in

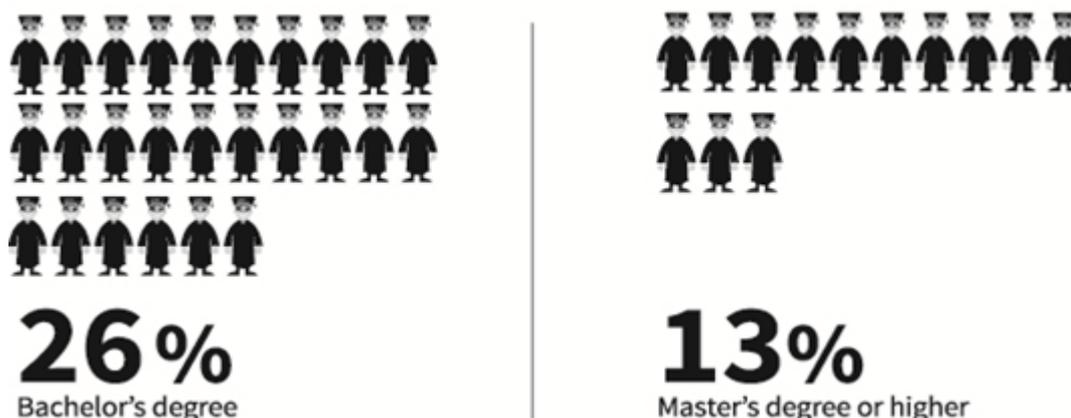
as the most important. Coherence requires all system elements to work together for a policy to have an impact. The need for coherence also makes it risky to directly borrow system elements from other countries which may not work locally.

### Policy Implications

Proper assessment of learning is a crucial first step in making learning a serious goal. Credible and reliable information generated from well-developed learning matrices, if presented in a salient and acceptable manner, can encourage active political engagement and better service delivery. Comprehensive measurement can also improve education equity by bringing to light hidden learning exclusions, which unlike exclusions from school, are invisible, as long as there is no comprehensive measurement.

For student and school-level interventions to have an impact on learning, Sri Lanka needs to tackle system-level technical and political barriers to change. As discussed earlier, better information can improve both the political and technical alignment and coherence of the system. More importantly, to ensure that better information works as a catalyst for reform and garners adequate support for prioritising learning, forming coalitions to advocate for broad-based learning as well as rebalancing political incentives of multiple stakeholders are necessary steps. Further, given the vast amount of evidence from diverse settings and the need for country-specific home-grown solutions, innovation, agility, and adaptation are essential ingredients to deciphering which approaches work best for Sri Lanka.

### Teachers with no pedagogical training



administration and teaching, as well as problem-solving, logical thinking, and communication skills, and are almost exclusively concentrated in privileged schools.

### Systems that Fail Schools

Many education systems fail in promoting effective learning due to both misalignment and incoherence. Alignment requires all components or actors of the system to share the same goal of learning, while coherence means that the components reinforce each other in achieving the goals set by the system.

Alignment becomes difficult when actors have goals other than learning, and learning is not necessarily prioritised

Addressing learner preparation - the first crucial step to better learning - requires setting children on high development trajectories through early childhood nutrition and education, stimulation, and care. Demand-side programmes that increase a student's effort and capacity to learn are also important, such as conditional cash transfers tied to student performance. To improve teacher effectiveness, it is important to expand opportunities for pre-service teacher training, in line with the current demand for teachers for different subjects. Evidence on effective school inputs and management practices highlights the importance of providing additional inputs in ways that complement, rather than substitute for, teachers, and focusing school governance reforms on improving teacher-student interactions.

*This Policy Insight is based on the comprehensive chapter on "Sri Lanka's Learning Crisis" in the 'Sri Lanka: State of the Economy 2018 Report' - the flagship publication of the Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka (IPS). The complete report can be purchased from the publications section of the IPS, located at 100/20, Independence Avenue, Colombo 7. For more information, contact the Publications Unit on 0112143107/0112143100.*




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