

## **Rights Based Approach on Education and Management of the Open School to promote child rights of learners (Sri Lanka)**

### **Abstract**

Establishment of the Open School in Sri Lanka is a crucial step for achievement of the Millennium Development Goals of Education for All by year 2015 as this a low cost, non-formal, innovative channel to bring education to the doorsteps of children in thousands, youths and adults who have not benefited from the formal school system due to diverse reasons. On the other hand the out-of-school children's group is the most vulnerable group that has had their child rights violated in Sri Lanka. Even though they have the right to education and becoming good citizens, a majority these children have sacrificed their childhood for the survival of their families. Although the Open School is established as an alternative path for them to continue their education without any barriers, the issue is how to create learning the environment to promote children's rights, to retain children in mainstream education than becoming drop outs. This paper will discuss how a child based approach could be applied to education and the management of the Open School system to create a learning environment with focus on the protection of child rights and for their retention in education.

### **RATIONALE**

The problem of 'being out of school; is a quite critical issue that creates not only problems of an uneducated future generation, but also contributes to the proliferation of antisocial elements in the country. Most of the out-of school children work as child labourers to ensure the survival of their families. Especially children who live in remote regions and the plantation sector are employed as domestic servants by their parents to earn money for the family ( ). Street children are the most vulnerable group facing the worst forms of abuse and exploitation at all levels, from the family, work place and the antisocial elements in and around their environment. The ongoing war in the country is another critical reason, not only for the increasing numbers of dropouts from schools but also for serious violations against children's life itself. Growing up displaced and in a heavily militarised environment leads to psychological stress, family break-up, despair, alcoholism, violence and suicides (UNICEF, 2001). According to the above the out-of-school children's group is the most vulnerable group that has their child rights violated in Sri Lanka. Therefore, these children need to be protected and provided with the means for survival and their optimum development as good citizens. The Open School is suggested as an alternative channel to provide educational opportunities for the above groups to continue their education without consideration of any barriers whatsoever.

The survey carried out on non-school going children (PHQ 2003) reveals that the majority of school drop outs come from shattered families. Further it shows that 8.3% of mothers have gone abroad for foreign employment. Nearly 20% of school drop outs are single parent while 10% children are abandoned by their parents. It is found 4% parents are in prison. Furthermore, more than 14% of the children do not live with their parents. According to the Needs Survey on dropouts (Open School, 2006) 28% of the children are single parent and 5% of the children are orphans.

According to this family background children may grow up without parental love, care and security. Although these children deserve the right to obtain adequate foods, shelter, good medical care, decent clothing and education, they do not enjoy any of these facilities. Instead, children left and isolated. There is no-one to guide or motivate these children to education or their survival and development.

Their family background does not motivate these children in any form to pursue their education. Due to their being single parent and low the income of the family prevent some children obtaining the necessary stationary and accessories such as pens, pencils, school bags, exercise books and shoes for their schooling. On account of the absence of these basic necessities the children are neglected by their teachers. In face of such a background these the fail to attend their class regularly. There is no system in the class room to fill the learning gaps of students who get absent in this manner. The ultimate result is that the children do not like school and dropout from their formal schooling. The survey of non school going children (PHQ 2003) states that 8.6% children drop out from schools due to their dislike to go to school.

If teachers in the school are not aware of these critical situations they fail to pay any special attention to the above children. They do not consider the best interests of students. There is no classroom environment for the children to tell their family stories or problems. These students do not fit into the class room situation either psychically or mentally. On the other hand, there are many ills that children are exposed to which are not good for their well being; abuse, neglect, discrimination, cruelty etc. According to Prison Report (2005) 9% of school-going-age children were sent to prisons in year 2005. Especially the majority of them have come from urban slums areas.

Thus, children should be protected from all forms of abuse and negligence resulting from their helpless position in the family or society. Even though families are unable to protect their children's rights due to poverty and other reasons related to it the Open School can take some action to cater to their child rights. Child rights embody a clear vision of what the needs of children are in order to survive and to lead a life of dignity and fulfilment. This includes protection from violence and discrimination, the opportunity to participate in decision making about them themselves, an adequate standard of living and access to basic services such as health and education. As such , the children above must be protected and provide the opportunity at least for their survival and their maximum development as good citizens. Thus the purpose of this study is to introduce a child based approach to education and management to safeguard child rights and reduce the dropout rate of disadvantaged children for creating a child friendly learning environment and management through the Open School system.

### **FOCUSED QUESTIONS**

- What are the rights of disadvantaged children that are violated in the deprived home environment?
- What are the rights based strategies suitable to create a child friendly learning environment which promotes the rights of the learners in the Open School system?

### **METHODS**

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With the aim of identifying the rights that are violated in the deprived home environment of disadvantaged children a needs assessment was carried out.

### **Target groups of the Study**

The target group of this study are the Open School learners who belong to families that are educationally, economically, socially and culturally disadvantaged.

### **NEEDS ASSESSMENT**

With the aim of devising a learner profile of the Open School a needs assessment was carried out. The objectives of the needs assessment as follow:

- Analysing the family background of the children who live in urban slums and in rural areas
- Identifying the rights of children subjected to instance of violation in the deprived home environment

ground and environment were collected through informal discussion. from four children through informal discussions and interviewing the class teachers, separately . The collected data were organized as case studies. The following diagrams shows finding of each case study..

### **CASE STUDY 1 (PIYAL'S STORY)**

#### **Family Background**

Piyal is a 16 year old out of school child who joined the Open School to continue his education. He is the youngest in a family of four children. Two of his older brothers have left home in search of employment. But Piyal is not aware where his older brothers are living. His sister is married. Piyal's mother has been working in a Middle East country for some time now. Piyal's father led a very carefree life with his wife money. His wife used to with another woman.

As a result of all these, Piyal is all alone at home and he s sometimes stays with his sister. Piyal's sister has two daughters and they are studying in a reputed school in the suburb. Piyal's sister and the brother in law are running a fruit stall close to their house.

After stall till late in the evening. He is given only the meals and clothes by his sister. Other than this the sister does not show any interest in Piyal's education.

Although, Piyal has attended a school in a semi urban area his attendance was poor. Without any particular reason he kept away from school. His uniform was not clean, his hair was not neatly combed and he was not clean. Piyal always sat in the back row of the classroom and he received little attention from teachers in the School. He displayed a depressed mood in the classroom. He is taller than the rest of the boys and engages in violent activities.

His participation in the classroom activities was not satisfactory. Piyal was not interested very much with his studies. During the tea interval he was almost left alone Sometimes he can be seen loafing around the canteen. It was reported that he had snatched money from other children. He used to snatch money from others near the canteen counter, when the students were trying their best to buy something quickly. When Piyal was asked about this, he had told that he had a desire to eat all the classy food that his sister

sends her daughters. And also he added that some night he went to sleep on an empty stomach.

He is branded as a thief inside the school. The other students look down upon him, and he finds it difficult to face his fellow students. Piyal was more and more ostracised every day and ultimately he stopped his schooling.

## **CASE STUDY 2**

Ruwani is a 16 year old girl. Although she lives in an area of slums and shanties she is a very pleasant child. Currently her father is imprisoned for 3 years, for the offence of selling drugs. He is on-and –off in jail. When he is out he is engaged in all sorts of illegal activities.

aged 33 years. Unfortunately, she was carrying on an affair with a man in the neighbourhood. As a result of this she ran away with her paramour and lived together for about six months; far away from her children. During that time the helpless children were looked after by their aunt. After six months, Ruwani's mother returned to her neighborhood and started work as a street –sweeper. Now she is living with her children and earns a wage of Rs.7000/= (USD 70) a month. It is not adequate for their living. In addition to all this unfortunate woman has developed a heart disease.

Ruwani attended to a school where there are not sufficient facilities or the background for healthy education. Although, Ruwani was a very keen student, she does not attend school regularly. Inside the classroom she interacted well with her class mates. And at the same time, she showed interest in extracurricular activities.

She was ostracized by the others as a result of her poor economic condition. She was also fond of a subject and her ability in languages and mathematics is average.

Her interest in class-room participation was not satisfactory, Ruwani was depressed and ashamed of her parents' behaviour and she was looked down upon by her own classmates. As a result Ruwani was mentally depressed. Physically too she was frequently fell ill affecting her studies. She stopped her schooling in face of this background. After two years she joined to the Open School continue her studies.

## **CASE STUDY 3**

### ***Family Environment***

Mala is in Grade 8 and she is 13 years old. She is the eldest in the family. Her younger brother is in Grad 3. Mala is a very quiet and well disciplined girl.

Her does odd jobs and does not earn an adequate income. They live in a small hut which is not very secure. Mala's mother is employed abroad to earn money. As the mother is not there her father has also stopped coming home gradually, saying that he is working in a place far away.

Now Mala is burdened with the housework and she has to look after her little brother as well. But she aces all these challenges. She wakes up early in the morning and helps

her brother to get ready for school. After school, Mala comes home with her brother and does the domestic work and goes to their grandmother's house to spend the night.

There grandparents also lead a very difficult life. Mala wakes up again early in the morning and she has to come back her home and get dressed to go to school with her brother. Mala says that her father visits them and gives them some money once a month. But according to Mala's class teacher, the father has never come to visit them.

### **School Environment**

Mala attended a school in the village where there are classes from year 1 to 9 year. Her school is situated on the summit of a hill and there is hardly any space to run around and play.

Malais a mewhat clever student and she always likes to sit close to her teacher. During the interval she did not move with her colleagues to play and she liked to stay all alone. She did not have the required learning instruments at least. She did not even bring anything to eat during the interval. Some times her teacher used to give something to eat when others were away. She did not mother death she stopped her schooling. Through the guidance of the monk in the village Mala is studying in the Open School now.

## **CASE STUDY 4 (MAADAWAN'S STORY)**

### **Family Background**

Maadawan is a pleasant boy of 14 years. He prefers to remain rather than in a group. He is from urban Slums. His parents work as labourers. He is the 4<sup>th</sup> in a family of five members. They are so poor that his parents cannot afford to fulfill the needs of his brothers and sisters. Normally he attends school even without his breakfast. His school attendance is so poor.

He finished his schooling after Grade 7 since he had to attend to the work in his fathers's vegetable plot. Every morning he does the watering of the vegetable plot and in the evening he played with his friends. However he preferred to earn money to ease poor economic condition of his family. Therefore he used to help the owner of a nearby shop. Anyhow the little money earned by Maadawa was mostly spent on buying fast foods and also to have a good time with his friends.

As time goes on this shop owner used Maadawa for drug trafficking. As a result Maadawa was taken into custody by the police and sent him into a corrective centre.

His new colleagues in the centre are also of the same category. But in this centre they have to work under a rigid time table and strict rules and regulations where there is hardly any physical or mental rest. In this centre there is no facility to communicate with outsiders nor time for leisure activities or entertainment.

In the corrective centre he had opportunity to engage in educational activities but he is still not in the position to get used to it. Most of the time, he prefers to look outside the classroom rather than to engage in educational activities. Sometimes he complains of a headache and tries to get away from others. His memories are always with his parents and other family members. He is waiting for his parents and is highly worried about his future.

Through the above stories the learners at the Open School, the findings can be summarized as follows.



The needs assessment reveals that a majority of the learners in the Open school belong to the disadvantaged group that has their child rights violated in Sri Lanka. Thus, the issue is how to provide education for them with the protection of their child rights. It is important to plan, organise and implement the educational programme focusing on protection of child rights. In this sense, Open and Distance learning could be adapted to protect child rights and retain learners in the system than drop outs. The following table demonstrates how Right Based Strategies could be utilised with Open school activities.

## RIGHT -BASED APPROACH ON EDUCATION SYSTEM ON OPEN SCHOOL

Activity	Objective	Strategies	How relate to child rights
Design and Develop learner material	Provide quality learner friendly learning material	<p><b>* Related to learner context</b> (interests, experiences, needs and environment)</p> <p><b>Interests</b> (pictures, cartoon, map, graph, chart, activities, games, drama, group work, individual work)</p> <p><b>Experience</b> (real life experience, problem situation)</p> <p><b>Needs</b> (relate to world of work, challenges, gender)</p> <p><b>Engage interactive learning</b> ( learner-content learner-learner, learner-teacher/instructor, learner-community)</p>	<p>*Considering age, gender, education level, social capability so on protect learner interests, non discrimination participation</p> <p>*Cater for individual differences (different level of activities, multiple options activity, group activity, pictures, demonstration and Hints, highlighting underline, size of letters)</p> <p>*Promote thinking, argue encourage express their views</p>
learner centred learning environment	Create learner friendly learning environment	<p>* Flexible learning (no rigid rules and regulation)</p> <p>* Learner autonomy</p> <p>* Learner control</p> <p>* Multiple option for learning (self learning material, visiting teaching, face to contact programme, collaborative learning, situational learning , multimedia -Audio cassettes, Compact disk, video, Radio and television programmes)</p> <p>*Space for friendly learning - study centres (Resources, facilitators, place for exhibit learner production, wall news paper )</p>	<p>*Opportunity for learner interests, active participation decision making, promote and conversational skills, nondiscrimination, consent opportunity for differences and you</p> <p>*Nondiscrimination, equality Friendly communication with each others,</p>
Learner Parent Community Association (LPCA)	Create supportive healthy learning environment	<p>* Support learners for social activities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Plastic free environment</li> <li>- My tree programme</li> </ul>	<p>*listen to children voice their perspective to influence decision of others</p> <p>Active involvement of</p>

		- Sramadana activities – * Support community for learning Provide meals, health care, space for learning centres, resources	interests Involving children in planning organizing programmes community members and
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## CONCLUSION

Addressing the issue of access to quality education is a matter of urgency, and yet the formal education system has not tended to provide education for all. For out-of school children, therefore, distance and open learning methodologies have been adopted by developing countries as an alternative path to address their educational needs. The out of school children's is the most vulnerable group that has their child rights violated. The challenge is how to develop suitable programs and learning materials to protect child rights and retain them in the education system than drop outs. Thus, it is crucial take into consider child rights when planing, designing, developing and implementing education programmes for out of school children. The right based strategies could be adopted for developing learner friendly learning materials and creating friendly learning environment which lead to protect child rights,

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