

Teacher recruitment and teacher mobility in Sri Lanka

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Introduction

Teachers have a crucial role to play in preparing young people not only to face future challenges with confidence but also to build them up with purpose and responsibility. To carry out this mission well, teachers must have positive attitudes towards their profession. Realising the importance of this matter, authorities have taken steps to improve the quality of teachers in Sri Lanka through professional development programmes. In addition, measures such as increasing salaries are helping to upgrade the socio-economic status of teachers, while pecuniary and non-pecuniary incentives are being introduced to attract talented personnel to the profession.

Nevertheless, teachers, as part of today's competitive society, have their own personal ambitions and expectations, especially with regards to raising their living standards and carrying out their social commitments and obligations. As a result, teacher mobility has become a critical issue in many education systems.

Teacher recruitment

Each year, teachers are recruited to meet the needs arising from both enrolment increases and teacher attrition. The number to be recruited is, therefore, the difference between teacher requirements and the stock of available teachers, inclusive of trainees at national colleges of education (NCoEs).

The responsibility of appointment, disciplinary control and transfer of teachers under the central government is vested with the Public Service Commission (PSC), while each of the nine provinces has its own Provincial Public Service Commission (PPSC). Currently, all teachers are provided by the central government, even to those schools managed by PPSCs, and in most instances, are graduates from NCoEs and recognised universities.

According to the current policies relating to recruitment and deployment of teachers, it is mandatory for all teachers to serve in a 'difficult' or 'very difficult' school for a period determined by the government (minimum of three years in a 'very difficult' or 'difficult' school). However, as it is their right to move to a different category school after completion of the mandatory period of service, teachers, once they complete such periods, usually try to do so. Considering their native locations and other obligations (such as family commitments, children's education, health reasons, care of parents and location of employment of spouse), these teachers demand transfers to schools that are more convenient to them. In cases where their requests are not met,

the natural tendency is for teachers to become frustrated, leading to demoralisation.

The data available in respect of the school system of the government indicates two interesting trends: one, that the school system is becoming polarised; and two, that most small schools are either closed down or meet a natural end. Bipolarisation of the system is reflected in the fact that small schools are becoming smaller, while big schools are becoming bigger. According to current education statistics, nearly 60 per cent of the total number of schools has less than 300 pupils. This could be attributed to several reasons, including:

- A shortage of qualified teachers in schools in remote areas.
- Parents believing that schools in urban areas provide better education and therefore by attending such schools children are more likely to go on to university or find employment.
- Declining birth rates, which have resulted in reduced enrolments.
- Inadequate basic and higher-order learning spaces, infrastructure facilities, and lack of resources and other facilities that make teachers reluctant to work in difficult schools for longer periods.

At present, many newly recruited teachers prefer to obtain even their first appointment at a school closer to their home town. The paradox is that the system has an overall excess of Sinhala-medium teachers and insufficient numbers qualified to teach in Tamil-medium schools.

In 2010, the overall excess of Sinhala-medium teachers in national schools was more than 615, and the overall deficit of teachers in Tamil-medium national schools was less than 483. The deficit in Tamil-medium national schools was a common feature in all the provinces. In Sinhala-medium provincial schools, the excess of teachers was more than 19,052, while in Tamil-medium national schools, the figure was more than 2,488. The student-teacher ratio (STR) varied by province. This is largely due to the lack of proper teacher deployment practices in the system. Furthermore, when studied by subject as well as qualified STRs, the situation may be even worse. According to education economists, these STRs are unaffordable.

Schools with fewer pupils have inadequate infrastructure facilities as well as human resources. This discrimination, notably the lack of teachers, has caused a 'crisis of small schools'. Less parental demand, poor quality of teaching, low achievement levels, less attention from authorities and the parents, negative attitudes of teachers, lack of supervision, and the closing-down of small schools

have all been a consequence of this crisis. It is evident that some schools have had to be closed as a result of teacher shortages. These negative effects have badly affected pupils' attainments, especially learning outcomes, and the cumulative effect of all these inefficiencies in the system is that sizeable educational resources, both human and financial, are being wasted (Balasooriya, 2004).

Another issue worth highlighting is the mismatch between the demand for and supply of teachers. Although the NCoEs and universities provide most of the teachers to the school system, it is apparent that teacher trainee intake to NCoEs or universities does

not meet the country's real teacher requirements. Hence, over the last few decades, there have been 'subject-specific' teacher shortages. Even today, there are deficits in subjects like science, mathematics, technical subjects, English and aesthetic subjects in grades 6–11, primarily in schools located in remote areas.

In order to rectify the situation, between 1998 and 2002, the Ministry of Education (MoE) implemented a World Bank-funded Teacher Education and Teacher Deployment Project. The Ministry prepared annual teacher deployment plans that were administered with the assistance of provincial education authorities (PEAs). One

Box 1 Sri Lanka's teachers: facts and figures

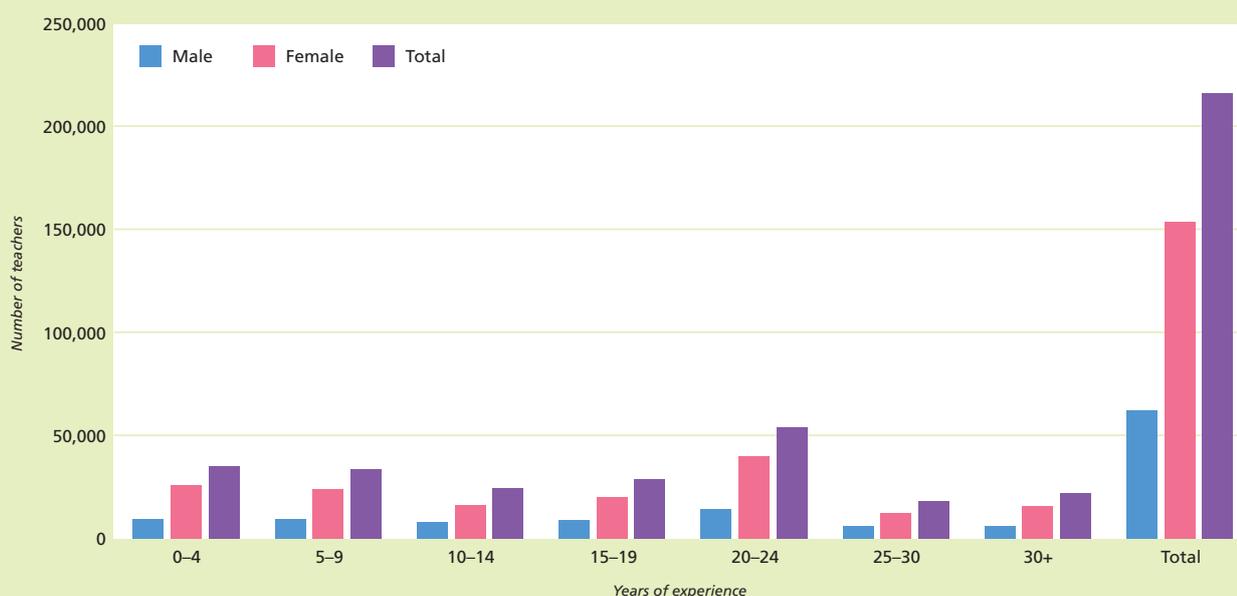
Table 1: Number of teachers by qualifications in government schools in Sri Lanka, 2010

Category	Number of teachers		
	Male	Female	Total
Untrained	10,561	29,501	40,062
Teaching certificate or equivalent	24, 229	71,258	95,487
Teaching diploma or equivalent	14,219	26,484	40,703
Teaching diploma: NCoE	9,661	20,604	30,265
Bed/First degree or equivalent	1,400	2,444	3,844
Postgraduate diploma in education	1,149	2,044	3,193
MEd/MPhil/MA in Education/MSc or equivalent	1,024	1,437	2,461
PhD or equivalent	2	1	3
Total	62,245	153,773	216,081

Source: MoE (2010)

Table 1 gives details of the total number of teachers by qualification type in Sri Lanka's government schools in 2010. It clearly shows that there are more highly qualified female teachers compared to male teachers. Data on teachers by years of teaching experience in government schools are given in Graph 1.

Graph 1: Number of teachers by years of experience in government schools in Sri Lanka, 2010



Source: MoE (2010)

As Graph 1 shows, most of Sri Lanka's female teachers have more experience than their male counterparts. This is due to the fact that the majority of the country's teachers are female.

condition imposed by the World Bank was that such plans should be implemented in order for the provinces to qualify for certain financial assistance from the Bank. Although these plans have helped to reduce excess to a certain extent, they have not been adequate to reach the desired targets.

Another current issue that corresponds with this problem is graduate unemployment. As a result of the expansion of educational opportunities, the numbers of educationally qualified personnel are high. Before the 1990s, unemployment rates were high in certain provinces and were limited to some districts. However, the situation has now changed and unemployment rates are slowly falling.

In order to overcome the problems, especially those associated with the supply of teachers, the following measures have been taken by the MoE:

- i. Providing special incentives for teachers as well as principals who serve in difficult and very difficult schools.
- ii. Giving preferential treatment for educationally disadvantaged districts (i.e. university entrance, recruitment of teacher trainees to NCoEs).
- iii. Recruiting teachers on a district/divisional basis.
- iv. Periodically determining teacher requirements of each province via a Teacher Cadre Committee.

However, these measures have still not brought the desired results. In short, all the issues discussed thus far highlight the need for a fresh approach to the problem of teacher deployment, as well as for a new teacher recruitment policy since most of the problems associated with teacher deployment are related to inappropriate teacher recruitment.

Teacher mobility

Sri Lanka has a high rate of teacher mobility, between schools, zones and provinces, which is directly related to the country's teacher deployment policy. Even though Sri Lanka is implementing a decentralised education system, regional/provincial imbalances in teacher supply and demand in terms of employing professionally qualified teachers have worsened in recent years and need to be addressed.

Mobility between countries (international teacher migration)

The MoE is not concerned with recruiting teachers from overseas, as there is no real need. It is also not involved directly in sending teachers to foreign countries. However, every year, a small number of teachers (when compared to the total number) leave to teach in other countries, such as Maldives, Nigeria, Canada, Brunei, Australia, New Zealand and a few European countries. Notably, such teachers are limited to particular disciplines, such as English, foreign languages, biology, chemistry, physics, mathematics, statistics, management, ICT, economics.

Although in the past, Maldives, Nigeria and Brunei officially requested the Sri Lanka's MoE to provide qualified teachers for their countries for a given period, there is no evidence that any such arrangements continue to be made. However, some countries do recruit Sri Lankan teachers for their international schools (for example, Oman and Saudi Arabia) and some private recruitment agencies are involved in recruiting teachers for overseas positions. The MoE is not involved in the teacher recruitment process for overseas. Further, according to education statistics, there are no foreign nationals serving as teachers in the Sri Lankan government schools.

Box 2 Implementing a school-based teacher recruitment policy

Having a school-based teacher recruitment policy (SBTRP) in place would ensure availability of adequate numbers of quality teachers. The main aim of introducing the policy would be to decentralise power and authority to school level, in order to meet the teacher requirements in adequate quantities and quality. The policy would aim to:

- Ensure the availability of adequate teacher numbers by subject categories at school.
- Improve management efficiency at school level.
- Ensure equity in the system in terms of provision of teachers.
- Minimise educational wastage (i.e. human and financial resources).
- Develop the school as a responsible management and administrative unit of the system.

Implementation of the SBTRP would be facilitated by the following positive features of Sri Lanka's current teacher recruitment system:

- Expansion of educational opportunities across the system.
- Availability of educationally qualified personnel island-wide.

- Implementation of school-based management.
- Decisions already in place of recruiting university and NCoE graduates on the basis of serving for seven and five years respectively in the school or division where they will be posted.

These positive environments demonstrate that this now is the time to initiate regional-level recruitment of teachers, with particular reference to school-based teacher recruitments.

The new policy could be implemented in two ways: (i) recruitment of teachers by the provincial-level teacher recruitment authority on behalf of the schools; and (ii) direct recruitment of teachers by the schools themselves. These options would apply to both national and provincial schools.

It must be understood, however, that implementation of one single system may not be workable, as schools are heterogeneous. Hence, it is imperative to pay special attention to schools in deprived areas considering the difficulty many of them have in retaining teachers. On the other hand, there is also a need to develop a separate scheme for recruitment of teachers for schools with large pupil populations.

Nevertheless, according to unofficial data, a growing trend for international teacher migration can be seen. Some professionally qualified teachers are applying for skilled-worker migration schemes (in Canada, the UK, Australia, New Zealand and the USA), and the majority of them are getting opportunities. Most do not return to Sri Lanka. In addition, some teachers are able to find overseas positions by going online or approaching private recruitment agencies. Some of the teachers who migrate are able to find teaching jobs in the host country, while the less successful ones end up doing unskilled jobs.

The MoE collects data related to teachers through the annual school census. However, there is no organised scheme to collect data pertaining to international teacher migration by government agencies responsible for employment. Education policy-makers, planners and technocrats are now seeing the possible advantages of teacher migration, as international experience could lead to improved teaching skills, which in turn could lead to greater learning outcomes of students.

Possible solutions

With regards to teacher recruitment, mobility and migration, two possible measures could be implemented: the first is to have a school-based teacher recruitment policy (SBTRP), as detailed in Box 2; and the second is to establish a regional council within the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) region to manage teacher migration. Member countries could enter into an agreement with developed/fast-developing/middle-income nations in the Commonwealth on the modalities of teacher recruitment – in the form of a multilateral memorandum of understanding (MoU) or as a more substantial legal document – and implement the agreement through teacher exchange programmes.

The SAARC countries would also agree to establish a separate body to oversee and monitor all teacher recruitments. This would have the power to develop criteria that could be used in relation to teacher recruitments as applicable to each country. The criteria would be based on the specific teacher needs of teachers of each country, per subject, per region, per class, per school. SAARC countries would need to agree among themselves that all recruitments would only take place with the approval of this body. This measure would also help to prevent private agencies/organisations from resorting to ad-hoc recruitments of individual teachers or groups.

Conclusions

Sri Lanka, as a middle-income country, faces many challenges with regards to its teacher numbers and quality, and action must be taken to overcome such issues. Recently, the MoE introduced a Code of Ethics and Practice for Teachers in Sri Lanka. But in order to improve the quality of the teaching profession, a teacher recruitment policy and protocol are required, to be established and implemented through the Sri Lanka Teacher Service (SLTS). Once in place, Sri Lanka's education system would see many benefits. One of them would be the sharing of professional experiences. Working in different education systems gives teachers more exposure and experience, which could then be shared with teachers in the home country. This experience sharing could be implemented through on-site teacher development programmes.

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