

Educational Opportunity, Post-School Life and CBR: A Multisectoral Approach in Rural Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: *Inclusive education and post-school life are crossover issues that cut across societal lines and therefore need a multisectoral approach. This study examines the educational opportunities of children with disability and their post-school life in rural Sri Lanka.*

Methods: *The research was implemented with multiple sectors in a rural area of the North Central Province, from January - November 2014. Mixed methods were applied as follows: surveys with children with disability aged 2 to 18 years (n=103); case studies of children with disability who dropped out of or did not attend school (n=3); semi-structured interviews with ex-students with disability who had attended special needs classes (n=13); and, informal interviews with a CBR core group officer. Data was mainly analysed with qualitative procedures.*

Results: *The study consists of 3 parts. The first part revealed that in terms of the current educational opportunities among children with disability aged 2 to 18 years, approximately 31.1% utilised educational resources whereas 38.8% were at home with no special social activities. The case studies in the second part revealed the reasons for limited educational opportunities in the area and the barriers to educational access, which included family members' attitudes and socio-economic aspects such as poverty. The third part, consisting of semi-structured interviews with ex-students with disability who received education but did not participate in the CBR activities, revealed 3 types of post-school lifestyle: 'time mostly spent at home', 'household chores' and 'temporary agricultural work'. The interviews also indicated other barriers to post-school participation, such as a lack of network and information, negative experiences during the schooling period, and families' priorities.*

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***Conclusions:** Inadequate educational opportunities among children with disability and barriers to post-school social participation in rural Sri Lanka are revealed. This study argues the importance of the multisectoral approach to find unidentified children as well as to conduct comprehensive programmes.*

***Key words:** inclusive education, local resources, social participation, mixed methods*

INTRODUCTION

‘Disability is one of the least visible but most potent factors in educational marginalization’ (EFA-GMR, 2010). Collaboration between all sectors in this crosscutting issue is essential in order to promote ‘Education for All’ (World Education Forum, 2000) and inclusive education in each country.

As the basis of discussion, it is fundamental to consider the universal frameworks related to education and disability. The United Nations (2006) adopted the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and its Optional Protocol, stating that ‘[w]ith a view to realizing this right without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity, States Parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning’ (Article 24). Many possible factors are related to marginalisation of children with disability in education, including social, cultural, financial, physical and household aspects (Park et al, 2002; Abosi and Koay, 2008). In order to overcome these issues, the World Health Organisation (WHO) has promoted CBR, which has been strengthened by the CRPD. The WHO et al (2010) shows the CBR Matrix, which comprises 5 main components: health, education, livelihood, social, and empowerment. The component of education consists of 5 elements: early childhood, primary, secondary and higher, non-formal and lifelong learning. The CRPD and CBR guidelines therefore provide the basic perspective to examine education and disability issues across the globe.

Post-school life of ex-students with disability is also an important issue with which school-aged children’s experiences would overlap, as the CBR guidelines (WHO et al, 2010) cover the interrelated aspects of education, livelihood and social components. In the western world, post-school life of people with disability appears to be well-documented, although research might face difficulties to measure the outcomes due to complex variables (Levine and Nourse, 1998). Bouck’s (2014) longitudinal study, for instance, explores the post-school outcomes

of students with intellectual disabilities in the United States. However, the number of studies that are conducted in developing countries, including Asia, is limited (Poon, 2013).

Regarding the crossover issues between education and post-school life, a multisectoral approach, which is a bottom-up strategy with various stakeholders including the health, education, livelihood and social sectors for community development (WHO et al, 2010), would be one of the most important perspectives for developing an inclusive society. The Declaration of Alma-Ata (WHO, 1978), which focusses on public health, also emphasises the comprehensive strategy with all sectors, including not only health but also the agriculture, food, education and industry sectors.

In Sri Lanka, developments are taking place with regard to the educational situation of people with disability. In 1996, Parliament issued the Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, including the right to receive education without discrimination. The government signed the CRPD in March 2007 and ratified it in February 2016. With regard to CBR in Sri Lanka, the government has developed the national programme since 1994. In accordance with the CBR Matrix and Guidelines, the Ministry of Social Services (2012) describes the role of CBR as promoting participation of people with disability in education at all levels, including lifelong learning, while the plan facilitates development of inclusive educational institutions. However, whereas the rate of literacy (for those 15 - 24 years old) was around 98.2% as of 2010, and the net rate of enrolment in primary school was approximately 93.8% (World Bank, 2014), out of the 10.6% of school-aged children with disability, the proportion who access education is estimated at 4.6% (Asian Programme of Educational Innovation for Development - APEID, 1994; United Nations Children's Fund, 2003). Hence, it is significant to improve educational opportunities for people with disability at the policy, as well as community, levels.

As the CBR guidelines (WHO et al, 2010) show, education is not limited to a formal system such as school, although this would be the most important resource in Sri Lanka. In her research on the educational situation of students with disability in the North Western, Central and Western Provinces, Furuta (2006) reveals the condition of special units and special schools, as well as alternative education services. Furuta underlines the importance of not only formal education but also non-formal educational resources such as the pre-schools for children with

disability conducted by the Department of Social Services of the North West Province. It is therefore important for stakeholders to collaborate with various sectors even on educational issues, while utilising and developing local resources.

Education from the viewpoint of CBR and disability issues, however, has rarely been studied and presented in Sri Lanka. Among the few such studies, Abeywickrama et al (2013) studied the exclusion experiences of pupils with disability in schools and mentioned the need to develop culturally compatible inclusive education. A local non-government organisation—Association of Women with Disabilities—reported on the issues affecting women with disability, including challenges in education (AKASA, 2011). Higashida (2014a) has also stated the challenges of providing an inclusive education in a CBR programme in a rural area.

Objective

The aim of the current study is to examine the educational opportunities of children with disability and post-school life of ex-students with disability in a rural area of Sri Lanka from the viewpoint of a multi-sectoral approach to community-based rehabilitation. The study addresses the following research questions:

- (1) What are the current educational opportunities of children with disability, 2 - 18 years of age, in a rural area?
- (2) What are the reasons that children with disability do not attend school?
- (3) What are the post-school lives of ex-students with disability who have attended special needs classes?

The first question is mainly related to the 'Education' component of the CBR Guidelines, and seeks to examine the current educational opportunities. The second is also related to the 'Education' component, and explores the reasons for limited educational opportunities. The third question is associated with the 'Livelihood' and 'Social' components, and examines the post-school life of ex-students with disability.

METHODS

Mixed methods were applied to examine the lives and experiences of people with disability in different time periods: currently and post-school. This study follows previous action research at the study site (Higashida, 2014a, 2014b; Higashida et

al, 2015b). Research on the educational issue was conducted from 1st January - 30th November 2014.

Study Site and Local Resources

The study site was the R-division (pseudonym), one of the model administrative divisions of the national programme, which is located to the south of Anuradhapura district and around 7 hours away from Colombo by public transportation. The population in R-division was estimated at 32,684 as of December 2013.

The educational resources in R-division consist of 10 public schools, including 2 that have special needs classes. Compulsory education is provided for all pupils until grade 9 (age 14) in Sri Lanka, although the Ministry of Education highly recommends that all pupils continue to study up to the General Certificate of Education (G.C.E) Ordinary Level (Grade 11) (Ministry of Education, 2004). Montessori, an educational facility for preschool children, is also an important resource in the community. Thirty-one Montessori schools were registered in R-division as of December 2014. In addition, there is the religious educational system ('Pirivena'), under which a Buddhist education is imparted in the temple.

In this division, the CBR programme began in 1998 and the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) volunteers commenced support activities in 2008. In particular, community workshops for children and youth are unique programmes in the country (Higashida, 2014a; Higashida et al, 2015a). There are 2 types of workshops: one is for youth and adults with disability to generate income and promote empowerment, while the other provides educational opportunities for children with disability.

Data Collection

Data was collected from inquiring surveys on children with disability aged 2 to 18 years (n=103); investigations of dropouts and children not attending school (hereafter 'non-attending children'), including children with disability (n=35); semi-structured interviews with ex-students with disability (n=13) who had experience in attending special needs classes; and the authors' field notes.

Table 1 shows the characteristics of 103 children with disability, from information gathered through home visits and an inquiring survey in multiple sectors. The information pertaining to children with disability, 2 - 18 years of age in R-division, was collected through the survey (covering all the villages of the division)

conducted with the CBR core group officer, the Medical Officers of Health (MOH), the zonal educational section and CBR volunteers, as well as documented data which JICA volunteers had collected and updated since 2008.

In addition to the 103 children with disability, information on non-attending children, 6 - 18 years of age, including children with disability, was collected through inquiring surveys in multiple sectors (n=35, see Table 2). After planning to collect and integrate information on all villages with the development officers, Grama Niladhari (one of the positions in a local government office), teachers and counsellors in schools, as well as midwives, non-attending children—including children with disability and children with borderline intellectual disabilities—were identified on the survey (Higashida, 2014b). The officers from various sectors collaboratively implemented home visits to refer the children to the proper existing resources. A face-to-face survey was conducted with the children and their family members to clarify why the children did not attend school and other related circumstances. Out of 13 children with disability, 3 children and their parents were interviewed. The number of interviews was limited due to difficulties in making first contact with them because of scarcity of information and time.

As shown in Table 3, semi-structured interviews were conducted with ex-students with disability who had experienced studying in a special needs class in R-division (n=13). The interviewees were identified by snowball sampling, since the official information such as lists of former pupils with disabilities was not found in the education-related office and in the schools in question. The sample overlaps with the sample in previous research (Higashida, 2014a; Higashida et al, 2015b), although the interviews in this study focussed on educational experiences and were implemented separately using different questions. Eight interviewees (nos. 6–13) did not participate in social activities at the time. The interviews were conducted in Sinhalese, which is the mother tongue of the study sample, and the 2 interviewers guided the interviews with semi-structured questions in order to promote dialogue.

Data from other methods, such as field notes in social work practice, was also used to analyse the issues raised in the study. The narrative data of informal interviews with a CBR core group officer was utilised in the process of interpretation and analysis.

Table 1: Characteristics of Children with Disability (2 - 18 years of age)

Characteristic	Value	n	%
Age group (years)	2-5	15	14.6
	6-14	62	60.2
	15-18	26	25.2
Gender	Female	47	45.6
	Male	56	54.4
Disabilities	Intellectual/ Developmental	48	46.6
	Physical	27	26.2
	Visual/Hearing/Speech	12	11.7
	Multiple	11	10.7
	Other/Unclear	5	4.9

Table 2: Non-Attending Children (6 - 18 years of age)

	Female	Male	Total	Average age
Children (total)	11	24	35	11.5
Children with Disability	2	11	13	13.8

Table 3: Characteristics of Interviewees^a

No.	Age	Sex	Type of Disability	CBR Activities ^b
1	17	F	Intellectual disability	C
2	26	F	Intellectual disability	C
3	26	M	Auditory disability	C
4	27	F	Intellectual disability	C
5	37	F	Down syndrome	C
6	13	M	Intellectual disability	-
7	22	F	Down syndrome	-
8	28	M	Down syndrome	-
9	20	M	Down syndrome, Epilepsy	-
10	16	M	Down syndrome	-
11	12	M	Autism	-
12	24	F	Intellectual disability	-
13	24	M	Intellectual disability	-

a The participants were also interviewed in previous research (Higashida, 2014a; Higashida et al, 2015b)

b C = Community workshop and steering committee

Data Analysis

Data in this study was mainly analysed using qualitative methodology, except for the survey data (Table 1) with descriptive calculation. The data on non-attending children, including children with disability (Table 2), was analysed by case study. The interview data on people with disability who had attended special needs classes (Table 3) was analysed with reference to the KJ method (Kawakita, 1967). This approach emphasises the significance of context in analysing and understanding data. Two raters conducted the analysis, which consisted of 7 steps: careful transcribing, putting transcribed data onto sticky notes, putting sticky notes on a floor, grouping similar notes, naming each group, drawing lines between groups according to relevance, and considering appropriate labels.

Ethical Consideration

The study was approved by the Department of Social Services and JICA, although the surveys were implemented independently at the grassroots level. The persons who participated and were interviewed gave informed verbal consent in their native Sinhalese language. The interviewers briefed the interviewees on ground rules to ensure confidentiality and the aims of the research. Interviewees were assured that refusal to participate would have no impact on the services provided.

RESULTS

Educational Opportunities of Children with Disability (2 - 18 years of age)

With regard to the first research question, Table 4 shows the current position of education-related resources that are utilised by children with disability who are 2 - 18 years of age. A total of around 31.1% utilised educational resources such as schools, special needs classes and Montessori, and 8.7% used other resources such as community workshops and training centres. In contrast, approximately 38.8% of children with disability were at home, with no special social activities except for some who did household chores.

Table 4: Lifestyle and Utilisation of Educational Resources among Children with Disability (2-18 years of age)

Category	Female			Male			n (total)	%
	2-5 (yrs.)	6-14 (yrs.)	15-18 (yrs.)	2-5 (yrs.)	6-14 (yrs.)	15-18 (yrs.)		
Home	5	10	6	2	8	9	40	38.8
Special needs class	0	6	0	0	12	1	19	18.4
Montessori/ School	1	4	1	0	7	0	13	12.6
Community workshop	1	2	1	0	2	1	7	6.8
Training centre	0	0	1	0	0	1	2	1.9
Changing residence	0	1	1	1	1	0	4	3.9
Death	1	0	0	0	2	0	3	2.9
Unclear	2	2	2	2	5	2	15	14.6

Case Studies of Non-Attending Children

For the second research question, the authors focussed on non-attending children with disability, 6 -18 years of age, who do not utilise any local resources such as community workshops. Case studies of 3 of these children are presented here: Hanako, Taro and Hayato (pseudonyms).

Firstly, household priorities and conditions that hinder children with disability from going to school were apparent in the case of Hanako, a 12-year-old girl with intellectual disabilities. Although she was able to go to school, she spent most of her time with her cousin's daughter. Her mother said,

"She is very helpful for us to do household chores and babysitter. All members of the family are very busy every day. So her work is convenient for us. Of course, we have thought about her opportunities to go to school. However, we have nothing to do in the current condition."

Her mother also mentioned the household income,

"We [the household members] are the poor. So, it's necessary for us to go outside to work, leaving them [Hanako and the cousin's daughter]."

Hanako's case shows the impact of household conditions and family attitudes

on her educational opportunities, as well as the difficulties in the family's living conditions.

More complex and vulnerable family conditions were found in the case of another child. After gaining information about a non-attending girl, the researchers visited her house with a Grama Niladhari and the CBR core group officer. There they came across another non-attending child, Taro, a 6-year-old boy with hydrocephalus who was carried in his mother's arms. Taro's mother related her life story, including her relationship with her ex-husband and domestic violence which was evident from scars on her face. She said that they were evacuated from a neighbouring village where the ex-husband lived, and they had not registered with the divisional secretariat. Taro's case illustrates the impact of vulnerable household conditions, including domestic violence, on his life.

Accessibility to school and physical disabilities were mentioned by the families of children with disability. The third case was that of Hayato, a 10-year-old boy with cerebral palsy, who spent most of his time in a baby carriage. His father mentioned the physical limitations, stating "there was no access to school by their baby carriage." The parents also stated that their schedule did not leave enough time to take him to school because the mother had to take care of a daughter who did not have disabilities, and the father had to work outside on most days. The researchers offered feasible options for support; however the father did not want to utilise support because he considered it to be shameful conduct in the community. Hayato's case represents the physical and psychosocial barriers to promoting education for children with disability. These barriers are not necessarily limited to the individual or to the household, but might also be associated with socially negative images or representation, such as prejudice towards people with disability and the use of social services in the community.

Post-school Life of Ex-Students with Disability who have attended Special Needs Classes

To examine the third research question, a follow-up survey was conducted on the post-school life of people with disability who had attended special needs classes (Table 2). The 13 interviewees were divided into two groups based on their use of local resources after completing education: ex-students with disability who utilise local resources such as CBR village steering committees or community workshops in the CBR programme ('users', nos. 1–5) and those who do not

participate ('non-users', nos. 6–13). This study mainly focusses on 'non-users' in comparison with 'users'.

Figure 1 shows the analysis diagram of the past-school and post-school life of 'non-users', as compared to 'users' data. Seven categories and nineteen sub-categories were created through the KJ method. In addition, seven categories related to barriers were created through interpretation of interview data and field notes. Compared with the 'users', 3 types of 'lifestyle' are distinctive: 'time mostly spent at home' without social activities, 'household chores' and 'temporary agricultural work.'

There are 3 focal points related to participation in social activities. First, four 'non-users' (nos. 7, 9, 11 and 13) mentioned the lack of a network and of information. After their schooling period, the interviewees and their families had almost no connection with CBR-related officers, key persons ('given no information on post-school opportunities' and 'lack of social services'), or people with disability ('no connection to other people with disability'). In four cases, not only people with disability but also their family members did not recognise the CBR activities and stakeholders.

Second, four 'non-users' (nos. 8, 9, 11 and 13) stated indifference or rejection of resource usages ('unwilling to go' and 'reasons for not wanting to participate'). For instance, interviewee no. 13 simply said, "I don't want to go to there." Although the reason that he stated was uncertain, his mother explained that he was not used to interacting with others because he stopped going to school within 6 months owing to learning difficulties in the regular class. In the case of this interviewee, 'unwilling to go' to school is possibly due to the short period of education ('inadequate time in school') and negative experiences during education ('shortage of group interaction experiences' and 'problem'). It is also worth noting that only the four families of 'non-users' (nos. 6, 7, 9 and 11) mentioned negative experiences during the schooling period ('problem'), as compared with 'users' (nos. 1–5). These experiences in school may relate to 'reasons for not wanting to participate' in social activities after completing school.

Family priorities ('household chores' and 'temporary agricultural work') might also be related to 'reasons for not wanting to participate'. For example, interviewee no. 7 said, "I do daily chores every day and play with my cousin" ('household chores'). The parent said that it was helpful and keeping them at home required little effort, meaning that they did not want to change their household lifestyle ('family reasons; the order of family's priority').

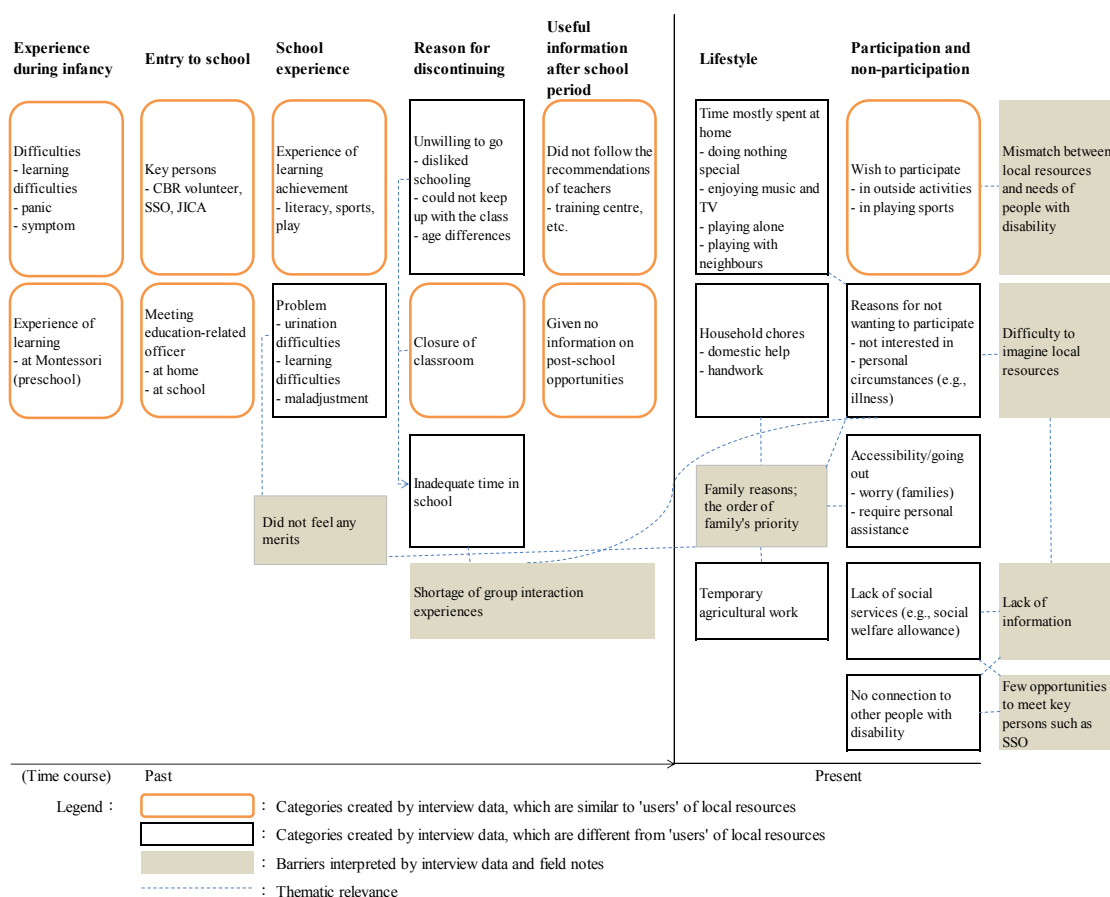
The CBR core group officer stated in an informal interview,

“Many families of disabled people make them do household chores, because they are useful for the families. Although it may relate to poverty, participants of community workshops are also poor. I think that it depends on parents’ attitudes and opinions.”

This narrative indicates that household conditions, including attitudes, may account for their limited participation in social activities.

Third, three ‘non-users’ (nos. 6, 7 and 12) expressed their desire to participate in social activities (‘wish to participate’). Whereas the parent of interviewee no. 7 was not in favour of her participation, two interviewees (nos. 6 and 12) started to participate in community workshops after the interviews. They have continued to avail of their opportunities, making friends and/or meeting ex-pupils in a school.

Figure 1: Analysis Diagram of the Past-and Post-School Life of ‘Non-users’



DISCUSSION

This research study attempted to explore the comprehensive situation in regards to educational opportunities and post-school life of people with disability. The findings make several important observations concerning the educational opportunities for children with disability in rural areas in the national CBR programme in Sri Lanka. These are discussed in the sequence of the three research questions while shedding light on a multisectoral approach.

Current Educational Opportunities in R-division

The findings raise the issues of non-education for children with disability. Around 38.8% of the children in this study sample spent time at home without any participation in social and educational opportunities, although there is the possibility that unrecognised cases remain in each section. The same issue of non-education is mentioned by a local NGO (AKASA, 2011). Inclusive education in regular schools should be promoted for all children, including pupils with disability. Yet, as previous studies show (Furuta, 2006; Higashida, 2014a), there are several options for children with disability and their families to utilise in Sri Lanka. In R-division, the community workshop has functioned as a bonding resource for other opportunities, such as vocational training centres which can be used by youths, 16 years or older. More varied resources and programmes should be provided by government and non-government organisations to ensure education for all people with disability.

Reasons for Non-Attendance

Each family had varied and complicated issues which might have resulted in limited educational opportunities for children with disability. The striking reasons are not only the lack of reasonable accommodation in schools, but also the influence of family opinions and attitudes, which has also been mentioned in other research (Abosi and Koay, 2008). Socioeconomic factors could have an impact on attitudes regarding the participation of children with disability, as the case studies revealed household conditions which included poverty and domestic violence, and the third survey indicated the families' priorities. This study therefore supports the importance of a multi-sectoral strategy, including cooperation with developmental, livelihood and health-related sectors, in order to overcome the exclusion of children with disability from educational, economic, social and cultural opportunities (Groce, 2004).

Post-School Lifestyle and CBR

The findings suggest the importance of utilising local resources continually, from the time the individuals attend school. It was seen that current 'users' of local resources maintained their connection with key stakeholders even after they outgrew the school-going stage, whereas the lack of information, negative experiences and short-term schooling period were expressed only by 'non-users'. This research notes the significance of attending school while in the prime of life, which leads to connecting children with disability and their family members to other resources and local supporters. Hence, the role of coordinators such as CBR core group officers is probably essential to facilitate such connections.

Implications for Action and Research Strategy

A multisectoral approach seems to be required to identify children with disability and refer them to suitable resources. During surveys with the education, health and social welfare sectors, the researchers encountered the challenges of the multisectoral approach. For example, when local government officers were interviewed to identify non-attending children in R-division, some of them did not list the names of non-attending children with disability, even though they were acquainted with them. They were then asked to list all the children, whether they had disabilities or not. This experience indicates the importance of sharing the concept of marginalisation from educational opportunities with officers of various sectors through actions such as awareness-raising programmes. It also includes the need for record-keeping in each sector, and data sharing among sectors.

Limitations

There is the possibility of selection bias due to the limitations of information collection. The study sample may not be representative of the surrounding areas, because the surveys were implemented in only one area. For instance, Tables 1 and 2 may not show the total situation of children with disability in the rural area. Moreover, the discussion about the system and method of education is also limited. Specifically, it is important to promote inclusive education at the grassroots level, as the Ministry of Social Services (2012) suggests in its action plan.

CONCLUSION

The findings provide important evidence of conditions and socioeconomic factors related to the educational opportunities as well as the post-school lifestyle of people with disability in rural Sri Lanka. Notwithstanding the limitations, the findings and perspective can contribute to a better understanding of the importance of a multisectoral approach due to the issues that cut across societal lines. To enhance the understanding of educational and post-school issues, it is recommended that future research on CBR focus on a larger and more representative sample of people with disability in Sri Lanka.

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