



## Professional Development of Education Administrative Service officers in Sri Lanka

**Dr. J. Sumedha Jayaweera**

The Principal (SLEAS Class 1), St. Paul's Girls' School, Milagiya, Colombo-05, Sri Lanka

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### ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate the professional development of Sri Lanka Education Administrative Officers. Although several plans and programmes are prepared for optimistic professionalism, still they face difficulties in acquiring effective and well-thought-out professional development opportunities locally and internationally. According to the research problem which was intended to investigate in this study Mixed Method was employed as the main research methodology, and a survey approach and a case study approach were used for studying this research problem. Questionnaires, document surveys, and interviews were employed to gather information from the participants in this study. The participants of this study were the SLEAS officers who represent the open batches and the limited batches of SLEAS for the last thirty years. The researcher selected probability as well as non-probability sampling techniques to select the participants for this study. In order to analyse the qualitative data, thematic analysis was used. It was revealed that currently the newly recruited SLEAS officers are provided in-service training. However, some of the officers have not undertaken pre-service training focusing on the activities of the principal position before their appointment. But such training has been provided to the newly recruited SLEAS officers, not to the principals. According to the responses of most of the participants, currently, there are no such strategies used to identify the training needs of principals. It was revealed that the foreign training opportunities provided to the SLEAS officers and principals are not sufficient, only a few training opportunities are available for officers. There is no transparency mechanism to select officers for foreign training programmes. Some officers are provided opportunities to get foreign training several times. According to the information provided by the participants during the interviewing process and questionnaire survey, the majority of them recommend improving the mechanisms, activities, selection, quality, and other related aspects of training and professional development of principals, and SLEAS officers. As they perceive the existing situation, mechanisms, organization, the quality of the training and professional development of principals and SLEAS officers need to be improved immediately.

### Corresponding Author:

Dr. J. Sumedha Jayaweera

**KEYWORDS:** Professionalism, Sri Lanka Education Administrative Officers, Principals, Training Needs

### 1 INTRODUCTION

This research was carried out in order to investigate the salient features of professionalism which are developed by Sri Lanka Education Administrative Service Officers (SLEAS) in the government school education system. In the meantime, the research is focused what are the causes and effects that can be identified among current education officers attached to Western Province in Sri Lanka towards a commonly accepted professionalism. Furthermore, this research focused on several activities that have been completed to meet the main purpose of this research.

The education sector in any country has a huge responsibility to develop/ produce skillful human resources.

Then, the leaders who lead the education sector have a big responsibility to utilize available human resources for the development of their education and also to meet the aims of the country. As such, it is obvious that the Sri Lankan leaders of education also have the same responsibility on that. Mainly and also basically, the education sector in Sri Lanka is comprised of a few sectors, like, school education, vocational education, and tertiary education. The school education sector is the largest in Sri Lanka. It has more than ten thousand schools, more than 4061653 students, and more than 246592 officers, principals, etc. (Central Bank Sri Lanka, 2019) are employed in this sector. However, the aforesaid school education sector is mainly led by the officers who are bearing

Sri Lanka Education Administrative Service (SLEAS) positions. As realized by the majority of people human resources are the most important and most valuable resources available in any organization. As mentioned above, the SLEAS officers are the top-level managers in the field of school education in Sri Lanka. They are the key players who play roles in the school education management system. Thus, in order to develop and offer a high-quality service, the managers or leaders must create a working environment in which everyone wants to perform to the best of their ability. Comprising of three classes as class I, class II and class III education administrative officers serve at different positions in different levels in the Ministry of Education, Provincial Department of Education, Zonal Education Office, Department of Examinations, Education Publication Department, and as Principals or Deputy Principals in schools, etc. (Gazette extraordinary in Sri Lanka, 2002).

According to Reitzug (2002:3), professional development may take different forms such as training, on-site processes, networks, and professional development schools. Terry (1999:28) also notes that where the necessary skills and knowledge are lacking among educators, principals need to develop a multiple-strategy approach to enable educators to fulfill their roles effectively. Different philosophical orientations have guided the education and professional development of school administrators: traditional/scientific management, craft, and reflective inquiry. (Daresh, 2002; Fenwick and Pierce, 2002). Moreover, in-service and pre-service professional development programmes are conducted for the development of education officers. It seems that according to the requirement and also based on the available resources professional development programmes are organized by education authorities in many countries. Especially, in the Sri Lankan context, professional development programmes are required for the Sri Lanka Education Administrative Service (SLEAS) officers.

Particularly, this study focuses on investigating the professional development of the Sri Lanka Education Administrative Service (SLEAS) officers. This study was carried out to achieve two specific research objectives. The Mixed Method is the main research methodology, and the convergent parallel mixed research model was used in conducting this study. Especially, a multiple case study approach and a survey approach were applied in studying this research problem. The research participants were the SLEAS officers who have joined the service during the last three years and their higher-ranking SLEAS officers who are working as their managers. Probabilistic & non-probabilistic sampling techniques were used in selecting the sample of this study. Interviews, questionnaires, informal discussions, informal observations, and document surveys were administered for gathering data. Thematic analysis and descriptive statistical techniques were considered as appropriate data analytical

strategies in this study. Maximum effort was made to maintain the trustworthiness of the data and to protect participants' personal information. Thus, the researcher paid much attention to ethical considerations in this study.

The SLEAS officers are the officers who actively engage in realizing the national education aims and goals in Sri Lanka. Especially, the SLEAS officers are expected to perform various roles in the education sector in Sri Lanka. The contemporary educational administrator's role is undergoing rapid changes (Gamage, 1990 and 1996c; Cranston, 1996). Therefore, their professional development is imperative since they play key educational administrative roles in the country. It has been mentioned in the service minute of SLEAS that the officers should be provided with professional development and in the constitution of the National Institute of Education that it is one of the duties to provide professional development for the personnel in the education sector. Other than these no policy statement can be found regarding the professional development of the SLEAS officers. According to the personal experiences of the researcher and also the anecdotal evidence, there are many issues and implications in this subject area to be addressed. However, no adequate studies have been carried out in order for the development of this phenomenon. The expected outcome of this study is to identify the real nature of the professional development of SLEAS officers in Sri Lanka.

## 2 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

### *Main Aim*

To investigate the experiences of SLEAS officers on the Sociological background of the professional development of Sri Lanka Educational Administrative Officers.

### *Specific Objectives*

- To identify the strategies used for the identification of the training needs of the SLEAS officers in Sri Lanka.
- To probe the opportunities available for the professional development of the SLEAS officers in Sri Lanka.

## 3 METHODOLOGY

The main research methodology in this study is Mixed methods, and Convergent Parallel Mixed Methods is the main research model/ design which was used to study this research problem. “Mixed methods research is an approach to an inquiry involving collecting both quantitative and qualitative data, integrating the two forms of data, and using distinct designs that may involve philosophical assumptions and theoretical frameworks. The core assumption of this form of inquiry is that the combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches provides a complete understanding of a research problem” (Creswell, & Creswell (2017:32). A survey approach and a case study approach were used for studying this research problem. The case study approach can

be used to investigate actual contemporary life settings and life cycles of people, and it allows researchers to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events of people

(Yin, 2009) and it provides the researcher with a holistic understanding of a problem, issue, or phenomenon with its social context (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). “Survey research provides a quantitative or numeric description of trends, attitudes, or opinions of a population by studying a sample of that population. It includes cross-sectional and longitudinal studies using questionnaires or structured interviews for data collection with the intent of generalizing from a sample to a population” (Fowler, 2008 In Creswell, 2017:41). Questionnaires, document surveys, and interviews were employed to gather information. Questionnaires and interviews were the main data collection methods administered for gathering data from the SLEAS officers. The participants of this study are the SLEAS officers who represent the open batches and the limited batches of SLEAS for the last three years. As a policy of the Ministry of Education, they are usually recruited into the service through differentiated mechanisms, and also their professional development activities are differently organized based on their background, maturity level, experience, etc. Therefore, it is anticipated to make a comparison in order to understand the difference in their professional development in this research. To get a sensible sample and also to gather rich information, the participants of this research were selected purposively as well as randomly. The researcher personally mediated in the data-gathering process. Thematic analysis and descriptive statistical strategies were used in analyzing the data in this study. In order to maintain trustworthiness and for ethical consideration various measures were taken by the researcher during the research process.

The key participants of this study are the SLEAS officers who have joined the service during the last thirty-two (32) years and their higher-ranking SLEAS officers who are working as their managers. The immediate managers of the SLEAS officers were selected from the National Institute of Education (NIE), the Ministry of Education in Sri Lanka (MoESL), the Provincial Ministries of Education (PMoE), and the Zonal Education Offices (ZEO). Participants in this study were selected by using the purposive sampling method and systematic random sampling technique. The sample of this study comprised of the newly recruited 55 SLEAS officers who are from the open examination and also from the limited Examination in the system for the last 10 years. In addition, senior 14 SLEAS officers who are working as their managers were also selected for the sample in this research. They were selected from the schools located in the Western Province of Sri Lanka, MoESL, PMoE, NIE, and ZEO.

### 3.1 Data analysis

In order to analyse the qualitative data, thematic analysis was used. Thematic analysis is a qualitative data analysing strategy that starts with the data and pursues identifiable themes and patterns (Aronson, 1994), and to analyse the quantitative data, descriptive statistical tools were administered in this research.

In preparation for research instruments, the researcher paid attention to addressing the ethical issues by being unbiased. Further careful attention was paid to the preparation of research instruments to avoid any kind of probable discomfort to the participants. In analyzing data researchers strictly stuck to the scientific methods to avoid subjective inferences. Several codes were used to identify schools, cases, and participants, in order to maintain confidentiality and anonymity of the information and sources of information in this research. In order to protect the anonymity of the participants, several codes were used to identify them like, SO1, SO2, SO3, SO4..., JO1, JO2, JO3, JO4, JO5,...

## 4 RESULTS AND FINDINGS

### Identification of training needs: strategies used

The researcher inquired about the perception of the participants about the competencies of the principals. When they were interviewed SO1 indicated that: *“I agreed to some extent. about 30%. Lack of proper training is the reason. At the same time, hardworking principals are punished unjustly, even for the slightest mistake, and they lose what they deserve. Sometimes they may lose their jobs. The principals are leaving their posts and joining alternative positions like in the zonal offices. When the Ministry drops the morale of the principals by investigating the first mistake, they do not work. Become inactive. We need to give them a chance to be corrected. Principals are not afraid to work when that happens” (SO1).*

As mentioned by SO2, the SLEAS officers do not have proper guidance, and training, so, they are not updated well. They do not have opportunities to be updated on new educational trends. As they further stated the principals work according to the political and bureaucratic connections they have, and they are political victims because of lack of skills” (SO2).

However, according to SO3, many officers have practical experience and creativity.

SO4 specified that: *“one cannot say that not everyone is good and some cannot do anything” (SO4).* And SO5 indicated his views in this regard as: *“in the past, the principals behaved as educators. At present principals are playing a management role. That's a big loss. I have not seen principals writing an article for a newspaper presently. Now they are working as craftsmen” (SO5).*

The SO6's point of view is to develop their competencies further.

As stated by SO7 many principals are not at a satisfactory level when concerning their competencies. However, he has seen those successful newcomers as well as weak ones in the system. Further, he seems that there is no big demand for the talents to go up. He proposes to create a system that not only looks at seniority but also looks at skills and abilities and accordingly to be given positions. As SO7 indicated that some people do not leave the positions if they are incompetent to perform their roles. He says that some officers do not like to even get training.

The researcher investigated the way of identifying the training needs of SLEAS officers. According to SO1, SO2, SO4, and SO6, presently, it cannot be seen as a mechanism to identify the training needs of such officers.

SO2 detailed that as: “currently there is no specific policy to identify training needs. Although the criteria are from the Ministry, they do not seem to be working. I was also a principal. There should be a programme to identify training needs and train principals annually” (SO2).

However, SO3 specified that “the training needs are identified at the zonal level.

The SO6 mentioned the identification of training needs as: “Training requirements have not been identified. Need a survey on that, there is no such program. We are given training, not according to the needs of our officers. A training module system is required. The responsible authorities do not pay attention to this. So, the system has crashed. The Secretary of the Ministry of Education wants to be a SLEAS officer. Currently, the secretaries are appointed only for five years. Therefore, they do not have serious accountability in this regard. However, they have not identified the needs of the principal.

It does not seem to have a long-term systematic plan for training programs or anything. We need to train about a thousand principals in the future. But it does not seem to be working with a plan” (SO5).

As SO7 stated the training requirements change from time to time, however, the Ministry of Education does not have a formal programme to identify them and fulfill them effectively. As identified by him it is a serious problem in the system” (SO7).

It was intended to identify the experiences of participants regarding the training needs of principals in this study.

Most of the senior SLEAS officers indicated that the training needs to be covered through professional development programmes of SLEAS officers and principals as information technology, leadership, financial management, language skills development, human resource management, management methods, administrative rules and regulations, school finance, educational research, etc. However, SO4 and SO5 did not mention their views in this regard.

But, SO2 stated: “it depends on the principal. Training requirements vary. One may need training in areas

such as human resource management and human relations. Another may need IT skill development, language development needs. There may be different training requirements such as management skills, administrative rules and regulations” (SO2).

As stated by SO7 the officer training should be formalized, and it would be good if training needs are identified and training is provided. He expects a sudden change in this regard.

Then it was inquired about the usual strategies applied to identify the training needs of SLEAS officers and principals. According to the responses of most of the participants, currently, there are no such strategies to identify the training needs of principals. SO4 stated: “Oh no when getting some money from somewhere, organize training programmes to spend it” (SO4).

### **Professional development: Local and foreign opportunities**

Especially, the senior SLEAS officers were interviewed to gather information on pre-service training. As some of them indicated pre-service training is arranged for the newly recruited SLEAS officers to educate and equip them about their role. However, as they indicated the principals have not undergone pre-service training before placing them in schools.

The SO1 expressed his views and indicated his experiences as: “currently there is no pre-service training for the government school principals, but it is essential. Before recruitment of Sri Lanka Administrative Service Officers, pre-service training is provided. I see a limitation that there is no any pre-service training before appointing principals to national schools” (SO1).

The SO2 mentioned that the principals are not being provided with pre-service training at present. Therefore, they realize the importance of such training. As he indicated even though the National Institute of Education needs to bear the responsibility that is not happening.

However, as SO3 declared, currently the newly recruited SLEAS officers are provided in-service training. It includes the school standardization process, school financial management, role and responsibilities of Zonal and Provincial Departments of Education, school principal and school leadership.

It was comprehended that the newly recruited principals have not undergone preservice training, especially, focused on the role of activities of a principal. SO5 also confirmed the insights and experiences shared by other participants also. He also indicates that at present there is no such program. His view is that there is a real need to have such training. As SO5 nowadays there is on-the-job training for principals. As per his suggestion, the training programmes would be very effective if such training is provided to the principals of major schools. And he believes that the training

of newly recruited officers under a good leader would be very effective.

The JO6 stated that there is a need to have good quality training about the role of a principal, especially for those who come through open competitive exams. As the JO7 indicated that they have undergone a one-year pre-service training before entering into the Education Administrative Service. However, no training has been provided to them before entering schools as principals.

As indicated by SO1 there are no specific in-service continuous professional development programmes available for the SLEAS principals. However, he stated that if there is such a programme its content should be highly improved and standard. It should focus on the creative thinking skills of SLEAS principals. He further specified that five to seven days of training sessions need to be organized at least four times a year.

The SO3 also confirmed that in-service continuous professional development programmes are not running continuously. As he mentioned, in-service continuous professional development programmes must be organized for the development of SLEAS officers. He believes that if it is required to make a good principal foreign training is essential. According to his experience, if the principal does not know the thoughts and needs of the children, the children will be ruined by them.

According to SO3 not only the government but also the top officials of the Ministry of Education should be responsible for not conducting in-service continuous professional development programmes. He said that it is imperative to have policies in this regard. As he mentioned there are authorities to make policies, there is a human resource development division, and additional secretaries and directors are there in the Ministry of Education. He further said that there has been no continuous professional development for many years.

He assumes that it is one of the reasons for to collapse of the school system in Sri Lanka. He revealed that in the past, principals were treated with the utmost respect. As per his experienced, some principals are doing illegal things at schools at present due to a lack of in-service continuous professional development. By way of the indicated, some principals do not have an understanding of social responsibilities. The reason for this is the lack of continuous professional development and the lack of standards. SO3 specifies that there is no one to guide corrupted principals.

The participants were asked about their satisfaction with the pre-service and in-service training programmes. As SO1 indicated he is not satisfied with the training programmes and he says that without identifying training needs the training programmes are organized by the relevant authorities. He believes that there has to be a balance between training and the nature of the work of principals.

When the researcher inquired about the foreign professional development training programmes held for SLEAS principals and officers from the Senior SLEAS officers they showed their experiences. SO1 has perceived the foreign training programmes that he has participated in as not professional development programs, and just trips and visits. The SO2 said that such programmes are not organized systematically.

SO4 cited as: *“there are principals and officials who have never been abroad. There are officers close to retirement who have never received training abroad. Therefore, a formal system needs to be devised to make training programs accessible to all”* (SO4).

According to SO5, some officers have been sent abroad from time to time without maintaining proper order. His view is that every officer should receive training abroad, and it is very important to know the education methods used in good countries. However, he states that this is not happening in an orderly manner in our country, and just send them abroad. SO5 believes that everyone does not get an equal chance. Therefore, he suggests the importance of having a system to give opportunities in a systematic manner. He further indicated as: *The biggest shortcoming is the lack of policies and the non-implementation of the existing policies”* (SO5).

As cited by SO6; foreign Training is not sufficient, only a few training opportunities are available for officers. There is no transparency on how it is received. Some officers are provided opportunities to get foreign training several times. Some don't get at least one chance.

SO7 mentioned as:

*“it is limited. No plans. Just go and come. Sometimes it is a waste of time. We also need to select countries suitable for us to get training and need to inform them of the training needs of our officers. The countries like Vietnam the level of education is now well maintained. We can use their experience. It is necessary to identify the requirements and planned training to suit them and should send them for foreign training”* (SO7).

## 5 CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The majority of participants in this study perceived that it is not been provided with pre-service training for the newly appointed principals in Sri Lanka before they were appointed a principal post in the leading school.

At least one year of pre-service was provided earlier for the officers who joined the SLEAS batch. However, currently, it is not happening with a good standard. Therefore, the participants in this study suggest having their school experience at least for six months before assigning as a director and at least one year of school experience to be a principal of a school. However, sometimes it cannot be seen such mechanism in Sri Lanka.

The lack of pre-service training programmes for newly appointed SLEAS principals is considered one of the shortcomings of the education system in Sri Lanka by the participants in this research.

In Germany, France, China (Shanghai), and South Korea, principal training starts with proper induction training. In France, Scotland, Australia (Victoria), Canada (Ontario), the United States (New York, California), and Russia (Saint Petersburg) a government-funded voluntary preparation course for the recruitment test, and those passing the test gain entry to a career as a principal (Peterson, 2002; Caldwell et al., 2003; Finnish National Board of Education, 2012).

It appears that in Sri Lanka, 12 months of induction/pre-service training is provided to the officers who joined through an open competitive examination of the SLEAS, and three-month pre-service training is offered for the officers who join the SLEAS through a limited competitive examination. Generally, such training is offered by NIE, SLIDA, and MOE.

The newly recruited principals in Sweden are mandatory to participate in the government-funded National School Leadership Training Programme which is organized by the Swedish National Agency for Education as commissioned by the Government authorities. Their induction and orientation programme contains three modules. The programme is running for 3-4 years (Hale & Moorman, 2003; Peterson, 2002).

It was revealed that there are no continuous professional development programmes for the SLEAS officers and principals. It is considered one of the main reasons for the low performance of officers by the participants of this research.

As discovered in this research the foreign and local training programmes are not practical and useful for the majority of participants, since the SLEAS officers and principals are selected for such training programmes without identifying their training needs and professional development needs.

It was revealed that the majority of SLEAS officers and principals are not happy about the in-service professional development programmes and capacity-building programmes conducted by the Ministry of Education in Sri Lanka.

Emine and Mehme (2013) specify that principals' Instructional Leadership skills are improved through professional development activities, including mentorship networking and researching which provide participants with hands-on learning experiences.

It was discovered that there is no appropriate mechanism to measure or identify the training and professional development needs of the SLEAS officers and principals of government schools in Sri Lanka.

When the SLEAS officers and principals are selected for foreign and local training programmes, any proper mechanism is not employed to identify their training and

professional development needs. So, the participants believe that the training programmes are not the best fit for their needs. And, the ultimate result of the training programmes is not successful due to this situation.

Specific modules should be prepared to fulfill various training needs of education administrators/principals in the government schools in Sri Lanka. A survey method is proposed by participants to identify the training needs of SLEAS officers and principals of government schools. However, at the moment there are no strategies used by the Ministry of Education in Sri Lanka to identify training needs.

It seems that in New Zealand, the University of Auckland carries the first-time principals' training programme to induct newly appointed principals in identifying their training needs also. The main objective of this induction training programme is to develop principals' knowledge skills and capabilities to support their successful school leadership. The programmes in covering aspects such as financial management and property control and resource management (Hargreaves et al., 2007; Oeters, 2002; Caldwell et al.; 2003; Finish National Board, 2012)

Blanchard & Thacker (2007) revealed the importance of needs assessment before commencing the training programs. They find that the importance of conducting training programmes through needs assessment before training is designed and delivered helps set appropriate goals for training and ensure that trainees are ready to participate. A similar finding is revealed by Fowlkes et al. (2000), and they state that a needs assessment maximizes the benefits of training.

It was revealed that at present, there is no proper criterion and a better mechanism used by the Ministry of Education to select officers and principals for foreign training programmes.

It was discovered that the majority of SLEAS officers and principals have not been provided with foreign training opportunities. The participants have perceived that the selection mechanism used for choosing officers and principals for foreign training programmes is an unfair system. The selection is made according to the personal agenda/s of the higher-ranking officers of the Ministry of Education.

It was identified in this research there is no systematic or planned local and foreign training mechanism is used by the relevant authorities, central ministry, and provincial ministries in Sri Lanka.

It seems that there are criticisms against the selection mechanism used for selecting SLEAS officers and principals for foreign training programmes. Most of the foreign training programmes are like only visits and they are irrelevant to the Sri Lankan education system.

Currently, the newly recruited SLEAS officers are provided in-service training. However, the officers have not undertaken pre-service training focusing on the activities of the principal position before they were appointed as principals

of schools. Such training has been provided to the newly recruited SLEAS officers, not to the principals. The training obtained as SLEAS officers is not sufficient for performing the principal role in their schools. It does not seem to have an appropriate mechanism to follow up on the influence of training, and at present, there is no formal evaluation system to see the after-effects of training programmes. It seems that there are no such strategies used to identify the training needs and professional development needs of principals and SLEAS officers.

The foreign training opportunities provided to the SLEAS officers and principals are not sufficient, and only a few training opportunities are available for officers. There is no transparency mechanism to select officers for foreign training programmes. Some officers are provided opportunities to get foreign training several times. Some don't even get any chance. A satisfactory performance evaluation system is not implemented to select officers for foreign training programmes. There is no proper mechanism to evaluate the competencies obtained by the participants, and officers through foreign training.

The training programmes of SLEAS officers and principals are not well planned and organized, the training needs of the officers are not identified, the content of the training is not updated, training is not practical oriented, and usually, ad-hock training programmes are organized to the spent balance of money available in the Ministry of Education at the end of the year, resource persons are not suitable, there is no qualified pool of trainers, resource persons, need of the suitable trainees are not well addressed, etc. The majority of senior and junior SLEAS officers are dissatisfied with the training which they have been provided.

Pre-service professional development activities are organized without identifying the training needs and professional development needs of the officers and principals. It has become a real waste of time, and resources since the real needs are not addressed.

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