

Crisis in Tamil Medium Education in Sri Lanka – A Review

*Nagalingam Ethirveerasingam, Ph.D.
Independent Researcher and Consultant, Sri Lanka*

Abstract

This paper is based on a comprehensive review of the education system in the Northern Province conducted in 2013/2014, and the author's experience as facilitator of the review and in the production of the report entitled 'Northern Education System Review – 2014'. The paper begins with an overview of the status of school education in Tamil in the North, East and Malaiyakam (hill country) and in context of education in Sri Lanka. It then outlines the education administration in the Northern and Eastern provinces, and highlights several shortcomings of the National Institute of Education (NIE) with which the author was associated since 2013. He was also associated in an invited consultant role of the National Education Commission (NEC), the education policymaking commission, following the 2014 review of the Northern Education System. He was also member of the Standing Committee on General Education of the NEC from 2016 – 2018.

The NIE supports education in the Sinhala, Tamil and English (Bilingual) Medium schools. There are 3,190 schools in Sri Lanka that offer Instruction in Tamil. The NIE carries a cadre of 220 permanent academic staff in the various disciplines related to the school system, of which 20 are Tamil-speaking and 200 are Sinhalese. There is no rationale that it will take 10 times more Sinhalese to develop curricula and textbooks for schools in Sinhala than it would take Tamils to do the same Task in Tamil. There are no Tamils in its cadre of administrative staff. This staff ratio is reflective of NIE's policy of developing curricula, textbooks and teachers' guides for all subjects only in the Sinhala Language, and then translating these to Tamil Language – a practice associated with many errors and inadequate translation in textbooks.

The paper raises the question, "Is the NIE practicing an entrenched and institutionalized form of racism such that the National Ministry of Education and the National Education Commission consider the practice of suppressing Tamil Educators from becoming creators of curricula and textbooks creators as normal?". It concludes by challenging Tamil speaking educators and the Tamil population at large in and outside Sri Lanka to find ways to improve the education in Tamil schools, and by offering some recommendations for follow up action.

Citation

Ethirveerasingam, N. 2018. Crisis in Tamil Medium Education in Sri Lanka – A Review. Proceedings of the Second International Conference on Tamil Nationhood and Genocide. May 5-6, Ottawa, ON. 2:131-138.

Introduction

This paper is based on a comprehensive review of the education system in the Northern Province conducted in 2013/2014, and the author's experience as facilitator of the review and the production of a report titled 'Northern Education System Review – 2014'. (www.edudept.np.gov.lk). The Review was undertaken as a participatory action research exercise. The subsequent implementation was also structured as a participatory exercise. In both, in addition to staff from within the education system, specialists and members of the community were also included. (see pp 97 – 127 in Participatory Action Research and Educational Development – South Asian Perspectives. Palgrave Macmillan, Switzerland, 2017.).

Chapter 2 of the Report titled 'Current Situation – Teachers, Students and Administration' (pp 9-42) outlines through illustrations the status in the North and the country. The percentages have not changed significantly.

It has become a norm among educators in Sri Lanka, especially in the North and may be also the East and Malaiyakam, to look for reasons from other sources than from within when examining causes that led to the present situation. We seldom look to see what are we doing wrong for us to be in the present situation. Having blamed others, we look for faraway mediators such as the international community to fix our problems and effect a solution. The self-reliance the Tamils were famous for over the centuries has dissipated slowly during the last 500 plus years of Colonial rule, and more so since the seventies and since the end of the war of liberation. The rest of Sri Lanka is no better. To confirm, we only have to look at the size of the loans and aid by lenders and donors. This year the World Bank has approved \$100 million to improve the education system. The request was for 2.9 billion dollars. But we do not expect our secondary school children or the University students to work part time during their education years. The donor countries' students work part-time. Such is our dignity.

Once graduating out of such an educational system, even with the District quota system to enter universities, National Colleges of Education and Teachers Certificate holders, the recipients are reluctant to teach in off-the-highway schools in rural areas. Those new teachers posted to rural schools apply all available channels of nepotism to get themselves transferred to urban schools, often to schools where there is already excess cadre. This, in spite of definite guidelines on transfers. Teachers transferred or appointed to rural schools use the influence of provincial councilors, MPs, and find excuses to get themselves transferred by secretaries and its committees to urban schools, in many instances leading to overstaffing at the urban schools. Nepotism is rampant in teacher transfers and need to be curbed. Such practice is anathema to the objectives of teaching and learning.

A school Principal with excess cadre at his/her school appeals annually to have the excess number removed, as there is friction between the excess cadres who do very little teaching and the regular cadres who carry a full load. From which vote they are paid is not a mystery. The authorities ensure they over demand teaching cadres to support such nepotism. Many classes are without teachers. Mathematics and science classes are often vacant in rural schools.

It is important that there is a teacher in every classroom. Most of the provinces do not have a database all in one place, to help make data-based decisions. Schools have the data but it is seldom sent to the zones and up to the provincial departments except the national examination results. The Northern Province and the Eastern Province have such a database since 2013.

There is no participation of the citizens who live and work in the zones. It is an important aspect for those whose children attend schools, especially far away from the Provincial Directorate and the Provincial Ministry. It is also significant that those living permanently in the zones have a voice in decisions made that affect their own children.

An overview

Curricula

Curricula of all the subjects set in terms of Learning Outcome for students from Grade 1 to Grade 11 are presented well in the Teacher's Guide for all Grades. Textbooks prepared by the National Institute of Education (NIE) are available on the NEC website. The curricula in all subjects, except for Dance, Music,

Art and Sculpture, are two-dimensional. That is, they are only content based. Curricula seldom relate the concepts and principles to everyday life of the students and the community. Teaching is rote learning of content to pass the National examinations.

Textbooks

The 2016 textbooks, except for History, are a great improvement on the previous ones. The period allocated to each lesson is just enough to cover facts of the topics in each chapter. There is a disconnect between the time allocated, the topic, the learning outcome and activity as stated in the Teacher's Guide and Textbooks in science and mathematics and in other compulsory subjects. The curricula, textbooks and the Teacher's Guides are written in Sinhala. They are then translated into Tamil for the Tamil medium students and teachers. Education administrators have accepted this as the norm since the inception of the NIE, an arm of the National Ministry of Education, in 1986. Those Tamils who complain of it seldom speak out in public or pursue any of the pathways available for action on the matter.

Science

Science is one subject and is to be taught as integrated science and not separately as Physics, Chemistry, Botany and Zoology. But these were taught as Physics, Chemistry and Biology in each of the three terms of the academic year. Now, in each term, they are taught as separate subjects in serial order, though within the units there is some integration. There are small laboratories in schools and some practical lessons are conducted but performance of students is not given any weight at the National O/L or A/L examinations. There is no field-based teaching or report writing by students in any of the subjects.

Mathematics

Mathematics curriculum, like that of science, is designed as if all students will enter GCE A/L to study Mathematics, along with Physics and Chemistry and would go on to university to study Mathematics or Engineering and Engineering Technology. The fact on the ground is that approximately 60% qualify to enter Grade 12 and about 65% of those qualify for higher education. In effect, like Science and other subjects for A/L, the objective of the teaching seems to be to filter those who can enter tertiary higher education and the others strained out. The education system, while educating those who are university-bound, should still aim to impart skills and knowledge to students who do not reach the universities to enter other professions.

No.	Zone	Primary						Secondary					
		General			English			Secondary Science			Secondary Maths		
		AP	AV	Def	AP	AV	Def	AP	AV	Def	AP	AV	Def
1	JAFFNA	660	658	2	100	33	67	160	174	-14	159	158	1
2	VALIKAMAM	736	623	113	121	31	90	152	138	14	152	125	27
3	VADAMARACHCHI	445	419	26	74	11	63	90	90	0	89	109	-20
4	THENMARACHCHI	316	320	-4	55	6	49	76	58	18	75	58	17
5	ISLANDS	282	192	90	56	5	51	64	47	17	64	42	22
6	KILINOCHCHI	646	674	-28	100	10	90	133	104	29	133	107	26
7	MANNAR	519	492	27	85	16	69	100	77	23	98	68	30
8	MADHU	213	167	46	37	2	35	37	25	12	37	26	11
9	VAVUNIYA NORTH	400	244	156	72	6	66	55	33	22	55	38	17
10	VAVUNIYA SOUTH	608	524	84	95	35	60	105	95	10	104	89	15
11	MULLAITIVU	389	381	8	57	7	50	81	60	21	81	65	16
12	THUNUKKAI	284	196	88	49	3	46	47	40	7	47	29	18
13	PROVINCIAL	5498	4890	608	901	165	736	1100	941	159	1094	914	180

(Source. NP Database: www.edupt.np.gov)

Content of Subjects

The content of the courses, especially of Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Mathematics in Year 13 are best taught at universities. Universities have the laboratories and staff with post-graduate qualifications. At present, after the O/L at the A/L students are required to take 3 subjects for 2 years and then the same subjects for 3 more years at university, implying five years of study spent on just 3 subjects! An Honours degree would be just one year more of the same subject area. The knowledge explosion since the 3-year degree was established in the 15th century is entirely being by passed for our graduates in this 21st century. The need of the 21st Century society is not met by the current 3-year undergraduate program. Only Agriculture requires 4 years of study to get a Bachelor degree. Our university system is trapped in the 19th Century.

The present A/L 13th year curricula can be expanded to widen the courses to offer science and mathematics students a post-O/L content in the arts and for the arts students an environment based science course. They both should also be required to take technical skills, social science and management skills needed in their workplace and community. It is

certain to widen their horizon and enrich them with social skills.

History

At present content in History stops with 1978. Contemporary history should be included. The content is largely Sinhala History and skips over history of the Tamil and Muslim peoples. There is a crying need to obtain consultation from Tamil and Muslim historians for the History curriculum. The history curricula reads as if it was written in Sinhala and translated into Tamil, which it is.

Agriculture, Fisheries, Vocational and Technical

Agriculture is offered at the O/L and A/L in 90% of schools that do not have a land laboratory to grow crops or raising poultry. Where there is no space for growing crops, they should have vertical gardening. Same problem in fisheries and vocational-technical skills being taught, like the others, including physical education, by chalk and talk! It is important to require the school and the teachers to connect with nearby community practicing the professions to give work experience to the students. Teachers who teach such subjects are often not from families who are in such professions.

Teacher-shortage, absenteeism and school hours

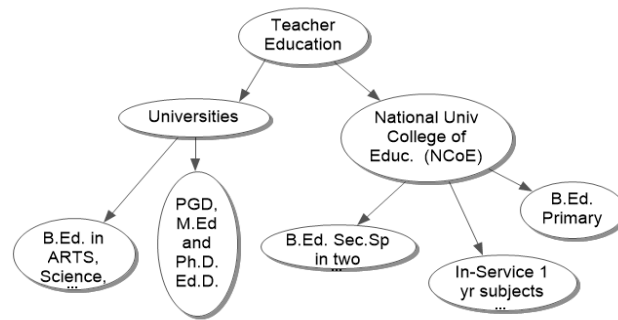
Many schools in the Northern Province rural areas have classes where for long period teachers are not appointed for various reasons including, emergency, short or long term absences from their classes or maternity leave. Such classes without teachers do not give students the skills, knowledge and competencies they are to learn by end of the school year. Long teacher absenteeism results in the syllabus not being completed. This causes problems when they move to the next grade without the prerequisite competences to learn what the next class offers thus increasing failure rate in national examinations.

For many years, the final year A/L students, in most schools in the North, have been attending Tutorials from January till August, which is the date of the examination, with tacit knowledge of their Principal, Deputy Principal and subject teachers and parents. What their teachers do during this time is not known. When the Principals are asked about it they say the students are given study leave! The two-year A/L classes are reduced to 12 months!

Parents have come to depend on and trust tutorials to get their children prepared for passing national examinations at Grade 5, GCE O/L and A/L examinations, and send them to these tutorials from Grade 1 onwards. The O/L and A/L students attend tutorials on average for 20 to 28 hours per week. With 28 hours of school per week, the students have no time for any recreation or to learn anything practical. All schools hold their interschool sports competitions during school hours. The parents do not want sports activities after schools as they want the students to attend their tutorials. Such is the strangle hold of the national examinations on parents, students, teachers and education administrators.

In Sri Lanka, family income is dependent on the level of educational attainment. (See NESR Report Ch 2.) In 1994, University students consisted of approximately 60% coming from professional families that comprise 16% of the population, 24% from middle-income families that comprise 24% of the population, and only 16% come from farm and fisher families that comprise 60% of the population. The vicious cycle of poverty is fueled by the failure in education and thus earnings in employment. Those who break through this cycle are few.

Teacher Education



Universities with Faculties of Education that are not offering science or mathematics B.Ed. general degrees should be encouraged to offer B.Ed. Honours degrees in science and mathematics education who can teach at A/L. University of Colombo, Peradeniya University, University of Jaffna are some that do not offer a B.Ed. Eastern University does.

Rationale to Improve Teacher Education

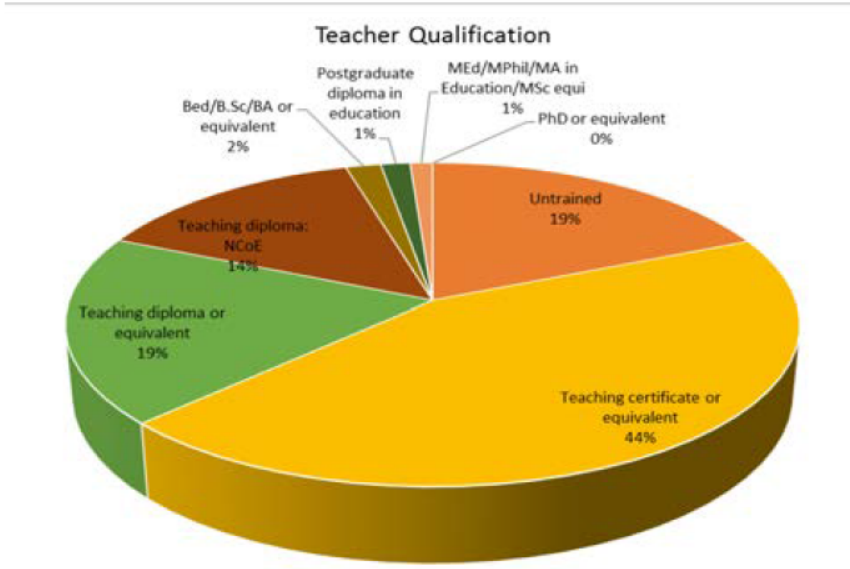
It is important to raise the teacher competence in the Primary and Secondary level than what exists now. The Pie Charts below indicate the status as of 2010 and 2013. Though the numbers may have changed now, the percent data is still a good indicator of the present situation. The problem of learning and teaching starts at the Primary. It continues up through the Grades where approximately half the students proceed without acquiring the pre-requisite knowledge and skills required to follow the content in succeeding stages. 50% of them are pushed out of the system at Grade 11 without any skills required for gainful employment. Remedial classes for such students during the Term break would help the students with lessons during the subsequent Term.

The figures below show that in 2010, nationally, 82 % of the teachers do not carry a degree level qualification meaning that only 18% of all teachers have a College degree or above.

At the school level there exist much discrepancy especially among rural schools. The disparity needs to be eliminated by equitable funding and devolving of key decision making to an elected Zonal Board of voters from the respective Zones.

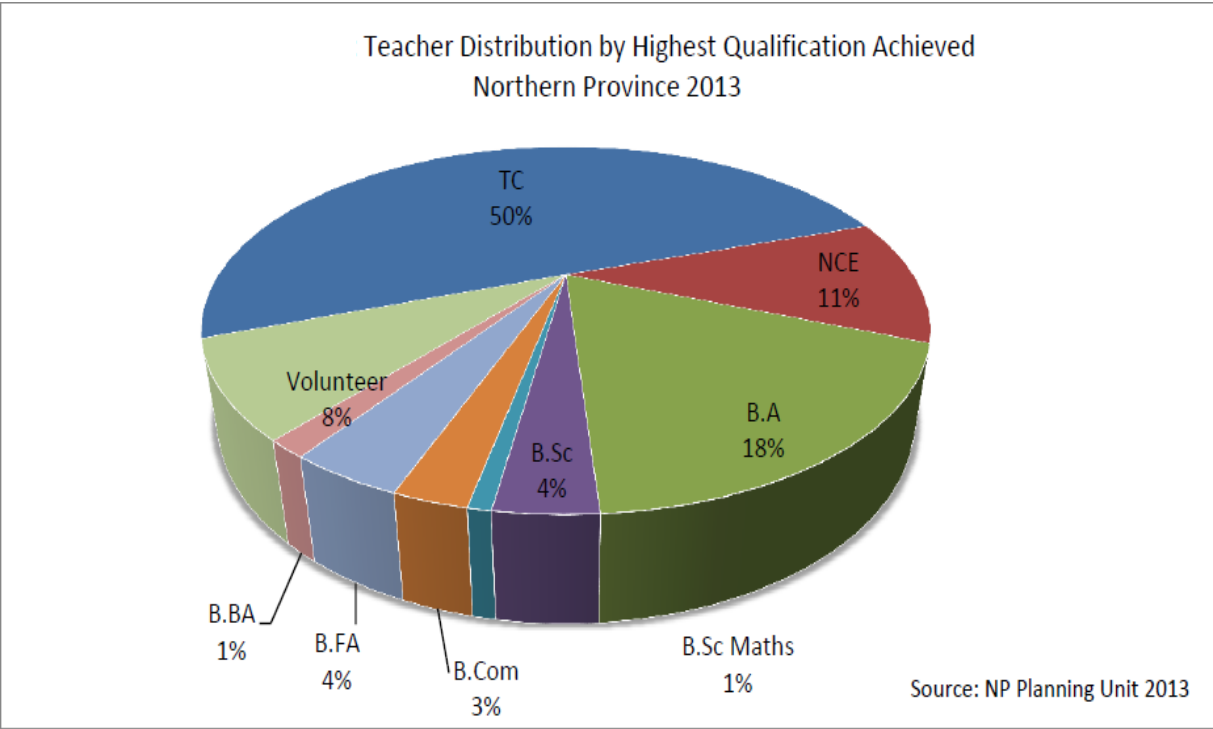
The Percentage of School Candidates qualified for A/L in 2017, by Education Zones in the country, arranged in Descending order of Qualified percentage is given below. Jaffna Zone was 34th with 73.59%. Many Zones in the North and East are in the bottom 25.

The figures below show that in 2010, nationally, 82 % of the teachers do not carry a degree level qualification meaning that only 18% of all teachers have a College degree or above..



Source: Based on MOE 2010 & J. Balasooriya, Teacher recruitment and mobility in Sri Lanka

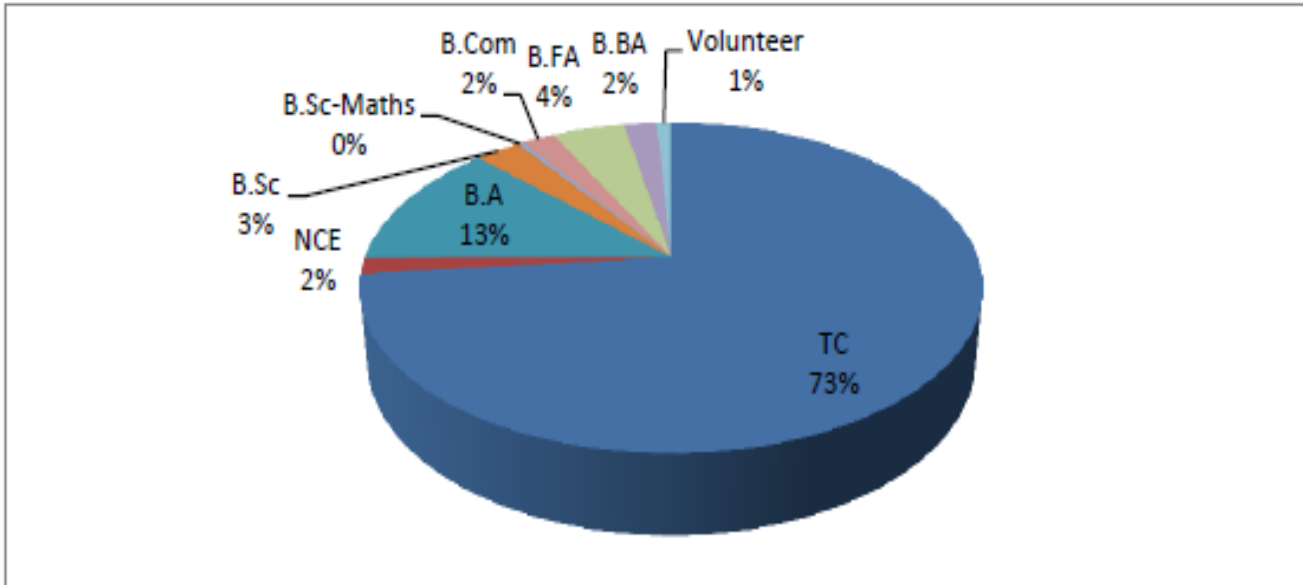
In the Northern Province, in 2013, those with Teaching Certificate and untrained are 58%. In the Kilinochchi Zone in the North the TC and the untrained are 74%. (See figures below.)



Source: NP Planning Unit 2013

In the Kilinochchi Zone, like Madhu, Thunukkai, Vavuniaya South and Mullaitivu Zones similar Teacher distribution by qualifications is inadequate to improve education.

Teacher Distribution by Highest Qualification Achieved Kilinochchi Zone - 2013



Source: NP, Planning Unit 2013

Some areas of Concern

1. Institutionalized Racism Practiced by the National Institute of Education (NIE)

The NIE supports education in the Sinhala, Tamil and English (Bilingual) Medium schools. There are 3,190 schools in Sri Lanka that offer instruction in Tamil. Two thirds of them are in the North, East and Malaiyakam. The NIE carries a cadre of 220 permanent academic staff in the various disciplines related to the school system. Out of 220 only 20 are Tamil-speaking and 200 are Sinhalese. (www.nie.lk).

There are no Tamils in its administrative staff cadre. This staff ratio is reflective of NIE's policy of developing curricula, textbooks and teachers' guides for all subjects only in the Sinhala Language, and then translating these to Tamil Language – a practice associated with many errors and inadequate translation in textbooks. Since 1986, the NIE developed Sinhalese academic and administrative staff recruited from Schools, the Ministry of Education and Universities, without offering the same opportunity to Tamil speaking scholars.

The academic decision making body of the NIE is the Academic Affairs Board, which has 11 members out of whom 10 are Sinhalese and only one Tamil. The Council of the NIE, which is responsible for all matters connected to NIE's responsibilities and objectives, is composed of 17 members who are all Sinhalese (www.nie.lk). Such suppression was institutionalized as the status quo.

The Ministry of Education and the National Institute of Education should implement the relevant articles of Chapter IV of the Constitution on Official Languages. For NIE to implement the Official Language Policy, it needs equal number of Sinhala and Tamil academic staff. Such changes will enhance the cooperation of Sinhala and Tamil educators. It will help promote understanding and cooperation for generations to come. Such recognition of equality will lead to reconciliation. The NIE has not implemented the Official Language Policy by not appointing equal number of Tamil staff as Sinhala Staff.

The Proposal to enhance the NIE is to remedy the omission since its inception in 1986, and will ensure that the curricula, text books and examinations by the Examination department will ensure Parity of the Medium of Instruction. Scholars from both languages can then meet and ensure that all materials have the same content. The MOE and the NIE need to make changes to its structure and staffing. If it fails, the only remedy is for a Tamil citizen to appeal to the Official Language Commission to inquire and recommend a remedy.

2. Official Language Commission

The responsibility of the Official Language Commission is stated as:

“Where the public institution has not given effect to the recommendations of the Commission within a 90-day period from receipt of its report, the Commissioner of the Official Languages Department, or the complainant, after informing the Attorney General in writing, may apply to the High Court of the Province the complainant resides in, within 90 days of the expiry of the period within which the recommendations were to be given effect. (Section 25 of the Act) Where any person has made a complaint to the Commission and has not been informed of the results of the investigation within 120 days of the making of the complaint, or where the Commission has informed the complainant of its decision to refuse to investigate or to cease investigations, the complainant may apply to the Supreme Court within 30 days of the expiry of the 120 day period, or from the date of receipt of the communication regarding the refusal to investigate or cessation of investigations.”

An excerpt of Dr. Gooneratne’s testimony to the LLRC given below gives an indication of the problem that is ingrained in the Sri Lanka Ministries and Departments:

LLRC Tape No.1 – 15-09-2010 – Dr. John Gooneratne

Representations of Dr. John Goonaradne

“...I think that just as much as the use of Sinhala is important to a Sinhalese citizen, so is the use of Tamil to a Tamil citizen.

To cut a long story short, it appears that the implementation of the official languages policy is very spotty and subject to political weather conditions. What is a possible remedy? There is the Official Languages Department to implement the use of the two official languages, and there is an

Official Languages Commission established in 1991 vested with the authority to oversee the implementation of the official languages policy among other functions. It also has I am told the powers to take public servants to court for non-implementation of the official languages. “

Source:<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0Bxbk4wYolpwhNTM0YjYwMTctMmE1Zi00YjcxLWFjOTUtOTg5MmJiOTY5MjY1/view?ddrp=1&authkey=COFA0fkJ&hl=en#>

3. What can the Tamils in Sri Lanka and in the Diaspora do to right the wrong in the education Sector?

The Ninth Schedule Provincial List I. Appendix III Education makes the provision to the North and East Provincial Councils as follows; “23. Production and distribution of school textbooks after approval by the Ministry.” Such a solution may be an alternative. Based on this, an Institute of Tamil Medium Education was proposed in Chapter 12 of the Northern Education System Review Report (www.edudept.np.gov). Based on it, a project proposal with a budget was prepared which the Board of Ministers of the NPC and the Governor had approved in 2015. A Statute was prepared in 2016 and is awaiting approval by the NPC.

The World Bank has approved \$100 million to improve General Education from Grades 1 to 13. In it, funds are allocated for NIE to improve curriculum development, improve textbooks, and teacher education etc. <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2018/04/26/world-bank-approves-100-million-to-help-sri-lanka-modernize-its-education-system>

The NPC can appeal to the Official Language Commission to right the wrong practice by the MOE and the NIE. It can also raise the matter with the World Bank for it not to fund institutions that violate the Ch IV of the Constitution. World Bank funding NIE will only exasperate the conflict between Sinhalese and Tamils and Tamil speaking people.

4. Armed Forces of Sri Lanka Operating Pre-Schools in the North.

The NESR Report recognized the above problem and had made recommendation for the army to handover the pre-schools they operate to the Northern Ministry of Education (See Ch. 9). But the number of preschools operated by the army has increased according to the NP Minister of Education.

At the time of writing, this issue was reported as follows: “The militarization of pre-schools is a form of child soldiering, Northern Provincial Council Minister of Education K. Sarwesvaran told TamilNet in an interview this week. Out of 12 educational zones coming under the NPC, there are SL army run pre-schools in 6 zones. There are 294 schools with 553 teachers and 6,020 children. Sarwesvaran has once again demanded Colombo government to hand over the administration of the SL military-run preschools in Vanni to the civil administration under the NPC.

The NPC Education Minister characterized the military operation of pre-schools as a serious crime on the part of the SL Defence Ministry and the SL Government. They are upbringing the [Tamil] children under their [Sinhala] military culture, discipline, philosophy and thoughts, he said.“ (Source: TamilNet, Sunday 8 April 2018, 23:38GMT)

This drastic policy matter needs to be brought to the attention of the funding agency for this project which in this instance is the World Bank.