

A Study of the Nature of the Physical Environment in Child-friendly Schools in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

The global issue of child labor is closely linked to poverty, which limits access to education and perpetuates inequality. Key international initiatives addressing this issue include the 1989 Charter of the Rights of the Child, Education First, and the Education for All policy, all aimed at ensuring universal access to quality education. The United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) sought universal primary education by 2015, with further progress targeted by 2030. In alignment with these goals, UNICEF introduced the Child Friendly Schools (CFS) initiative in 1990 to promote inclusive, safe, and effective learning environments. Piloted in Sri Lanka in 2002 and expanded to 1,400 schools by 2004, the initiative aimed for nationwide implementation by 2009, though its full adoption

remains uncertain. This study examined how the educational environment in child-friendly schools contributes to equitable educational opportunities. Findings revealed insufficient sanitation facilities—especially affecting girls—overcrowded classrooms, poor lighting and ventilation, and limited teaching resources. In many schools, multiple classes share single halls, disrupting learning effectiveness. While playgrounds exist, student participation in co-curricular activities remains minimal. During this era, the Kandyan people also fought to preserve their independence against three European powers—Portuguese, Dutch, and English—using guerrilla tactics. The region's tropical climate, dense jungles, rivers, and mountainous terrain provided crucial natural defenses that enabled the Kandyan Kingdom to resist these colonial forces effectively.

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Introduction

Child labor remains a pressing global issue, with poverty identified as the primary barrier restricting children's access to education. The lack of education among children significantly exacerbates future socioeconomic challenges, prompting the international community to seek coordinated and innovative solutions. Organizations such as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the Human Rights Commission, and the United Nations have played pivotal roles in safeguarding children's rights to education (<https://www.right-to-education.org/>, 06/01/2025). Notable milestones include the 1989 adoption of the Charter of the Rights of the Child and policies like "Education First" and "Education for All," which aim to provide universal educational access. Key initiatives, including the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), have targeted compulsory education for all children, emphasizing this as a critical step towards equitable development.

In response to these challenges, UNICEF launched the "Child Friendly Schools" (CFS) initiative in 1990 to ensure quality education by addressing barriers beyond mere access. This approach has since been adopted in various countries, offering a child-centered framework grounded in educational and psychological theories such as Vygotsky's social constructivism, Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and inclusive education principles. These frameworks collectively prioritize the holistic development of children, fostering safe, supportive, and engaging

learning environments that accommodate diverse needs (UNICEF, 2019).

Child-friendly schools in Sri Lanka focus on creating an inclusive and supportive learning environment where all students, regardless of their background or abilities, can succeed. Accordingly, CFS program in Sri Lanka was started as a pilot project in 2002 based on 124 schools in the North West Province, and based on its success, the program was implemented in 1400 schools in 2004. Although it is proposed that the child-friendly approach be implemented in all primary schools in Sri Lanka by 2009, it has become questionable. To provide "quality and enjoyable learning for all," the "Child Friendly Schools" method can be recognized as an ideal conceptual program that develops the idea of education for all. Consequently, identifying the conceptual features here is more relevant (United Nations Children's Fund, 2004).

Review of Literature

Many countries around the world view children as child labourers and the primary reason for this restriction on education is poverty. UNICEF (2013) reports that different groups of people miss school due to health and nutritional problems, impairments, and family and social violence. The international community has recognized that a child's lack of education has an impact on future problems getting worse. As a result, countries started seeking coordinated solutions and trying to find unique ways to mitigate these issues. The United Nations Children's Fund,

the Human Rights Commission, and the United Nations Organization are leading international organizations that have grown in this way. These organizations have taken several actions to safeguard children's right to education. In that context, the United Nations' 1989 adoption of the Charter of the Rights of the Child is particularly significant. Furthermore, initiatives like "Education First" and the "Education for All" policy have greatly guaranteed children's access to education. Leading initiatives among them were the MDG (United Nations Millennium Development Goals) program, which aims to educate all children of compulsory school age by 2015, the program to educate all children of compulsory school age by 2030, etc.

In this situation, "Child Friendly Schools" was started in 1990 under the initiative of UNICEF. The aim was to provide quality education by providing solutions for all the threats to children's coming to school, not just access to education. At present, this concept is successfully implemented in many countries around the world.

The "Child Friendly School" (CFS) concept is grounded in various educational and psychological theories that emphasize the holistic development of children. One key approach is child-centered education, which prioritizes the needs, interests, and experiences of students, promoting active participation and encouraging them to take charge of their own learning (Baker-Henningham, & Bóo, (2010). Social constructivism, rooted in the work of theorists like Vygotsky, underscores the importance of social interactions and collaborative

learning, as CFS environments foster group work and peer engagement, recognizing that children learn effectively through social connections. (Baker-Henningham, & Bóo, (2010). Additionally, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs suggests that basic needs such as safety, belonging, and esteem must be met for children to reach their full potential. CFS addresses these needs by creating safe and supportive environments where children feel valued (Alderfer (1969). Inclusive education principles advocate for the inclusion of all children, regardless of background or abilities, and CFS promotes environments that accommodate diverse learning needs. Play-based learning is another essential component, highlighting the significance of play in enhancing creativity, problem-solving skills, and social interactions. Finally, the rights-based approach, grounded in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, focuses on respecting and promoting children's rights within educational settings, emphasizing their right to quality education, participation, and protection. Together, these theories create a comprehensive framework for the Child Friendly School concept.

Some issues are common to many countries and unique to each country in implementing the child-friendly school approach. A key feature of child-friendly schools is the implementation of the Charter of Children's Rights. It is important to examine the dimensions and methods used in implementing the Child-Friendly School approach in Sri Lanka.

The program has been implemented based on six dimensions of the Child-Friendly

School approach in Sri Lanka. Six dimensions are rights-based Interaction, gender responsiveness, development of children's learning outcomes, ensuring children's health security and care, and active participation of students, families, and the community. Supported by child-friendly systems, policies, practices, and regulations Guidelines on Child Friendly Approach, (2009:5-56)

Several studies have found that Sri Lanka has had many educational-related issues for decades. Baker (1988) there were severe disparity in the availability of resources to rural schools in Monaragala district in Sri Lanka, including there were not enough sanitary facilities. After ten years of this research, Baker returned to Sri Lanka and questioned the changes that have taken place in Sri Lankan education during the past ten years. Based on that information, he published a research book named "Sinhalese Village in Sri Lanka: Coping with Uncertainty" (1997). Those discoveries explain that although some progress has been achieved in several areas of the education sector, such a change has not occurred in many schools. It is also said there is a decline in the quality of teachers in some fields. Vitarana (2002) identified that many teachers need the ability and skill to plan activities based on environmental activities to get students' active participation in primary education. Teachers from many schools teaches environmental lessons in the classroom or outside the classroom as usual. However, he points out that student-centered approaches are not used for environmental activities related to primary classrooms. Wimalasiri (2000)

shows the disparity in the distribution of resources related to schools in Sri Lanka. There is a severe shortage of physical and human resources in schools designated as rural schools. A wide disparity is shown in comparison with popular urban schools. In this situation, it has been shown that the positive characteristics of students in rural schools are lower, and participation in school attendance and activities is also lower.

Research Problem

What is the nature of the physical environment in child-friendly schools in Sri Lanka?

Aim of the Research

The primary educational purpose of this research was to explore the nature of the physical environment in child-friendly schools.

Research Methodology

There were 52 teachers and 70 students from grades 4 and 5, 16 principals, and 16 deputy principals from 16 child-friendly schools in Kurunegala and Mahawa educational zones in Kurunagala district, Sri Lanka. Mixed research methods, including interviews, questionnaires, observations, and document checks, were used for data collection. Quantitative data was analyzed statistically, and qualitative data was analyzed thematically.

Importance of the Research

The importance of this research lies in its focus on addressing the significant challenges within the educational environments of child-friendly schools

in Sri Lanka. By examining critical aspects such as infrastructure, resource availability, and the implementation of seven criteria are given under the fourth dimension, "Ensuring health protection and care of children." The

Familia	Sub familia	Genus	Species	Subspecies	English Name & Locality	Other References
Felidae	Pantherinae	Panthera	Panthera leo (extinct)	Panthera leo sinhalleyus (Deraniyagala, 1939) 39,000 yr	Sri Lanka Lion	Kelum et al., 2005
Felidae	Pantherinae	Panthera	Panthera tigris (extinct)	16,500 yr	Tiger	Panthera tigris sudanensis Deraniyagala, 1951 ?
Felidae		Panthera	Panthera pardus	Panthera pardus kotiya	Tiger ?	
Canidae	Caninae	Canis	Canis lupus		?	
Bovidae	Bovinae	Boselaphus	Boselaphus tragocamelus		Four-horned Antelope	

of child-centered practices, this study provides valuable insights into how educational opportunities can be enhanced to promote inclusive learning. The findings contribute to understanding the gaps in achieving universal educational goals, particularly in underserved regions, and offer evidence-based recommendations for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders to improve the quality of education. Moreover, this research underscores the relevance of the "Child Friendly Schools" approach in fostering safe, engaging, and equitable educational environments, aligning with international frameworks like the UN's Convention on the Rights of the Child. By highlighting the practical and systemic barriers faced by schools, the study emphasizes the need for targeted interventions to ensure all children have access to quality and enjoyable learning experiences.

Discussion

Physical resources and services available for students to enjoy learning

1. Water and sanitary facilities

In creating a child-friendly school,

second criterion confirmed the provision of sanitary facilities. Accordingly, the study was directed at whether there are sufficient water facilities for toilets. In that regard, the responses obtained through the teacher's questionnaire, which was directed to the teachers, are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1 shows that 81% of teachers were delighted with water and sanitary facilities in child-friendly schools. According to the response of the deputy principals, 11 deputy principals were very satisfied with their schools' water and sanitary facilities. However, according to observations, many schools have adequate water facilities. It has been observed that many schools need to meet their drinking water requirements with incredible difficulty. It was discovered in this research that schools with more difficulties and fewer facilities were selected for the Child-Friendly School Project. Physical facilities and other infrastructure are expected to be built in a pleasant learning atmosphere by selecting schools with minimal difficulties. Through the Child-Friendly School Program, provisions have been made to meet the needs raised by the most severe problematic

conditions in the schools, but provisions have yet to be made to build schools with complete facilities. Therefore, it was possible to identify schools where the primary requirements still needed to be met within the child-friendly schools. It is a more serious problem in schools that do not have adequate water facilities. Getting and carrying Water, especially from wells, has become a challenging task for students in the primary sector.

Classroom facilities

The classroom should be more enjoyable for a successful and effective learning and teaching process. Space is significant for that. Students cannot be in the classroom like prisoners. Space for an active learning and teaching process is an essential requirement for both the student and the teacher. Table 2 shows teacher responses regarding the classroom

Table 2

Kind of facility	Very satisfied		Somewhat satisfied		Somewhat dissatisfied		Very dissatisfied		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Classroom space	46	88.46	6	11.54	00	00	00	00	52	100
Classroom lighting	52	100	00	00	00	00	00	00	52	100
Classroom ventilation	52	100	00	00	00	00	00	00	52	100
Student desks and chairs	46	88.46	6	11.54	00	00	00	00	52	100
Learning aids	32	61.54	10	19.23	10	19.23	00	00	52	100

A principal's statement at the time of the interview of the principal of a related child-friendly school and an observation note related to a similar school are given below.

“The children in our school clean the toilets. Then the children will not make it dirty? Also, after the religious rites in the morning every ten days, the school is reminded of the things to keep it clean. Students don't even put a sheet of paper in the school now.”

facilities provided by the child-friendly schools.

The Child-Friendly School Program has worked to fulfill most of the building needs in the primary sector of schools where it has been implemented. Therefore, it is clear that the classroom facilities associated with child-friendly schools are adequately built. More than 88% of teachers responded that they had enough classroom space. One hundred percent of child-friendly schools have received responses from teachers saying that the lighting and ventilation in the

classrooms are sufficient. The observed responses also reveal the same situation.

Eighty-two percent of the teachers have responded that the children's friendly schools have sufficient desk and chair requirements. According to the observation data, it is confirmed that there are enough desks and chairs for the number of students in all the schools. The new chairs introduced in the primary sector under the Child-Friendly School program can be seen in the classrooms. Apart from that, among the other materials and equipment required for a primary classroom are a steel cupboard, a small bookshelf for students' creations, exercise books, etc., as well as toys, sports equipment, computers, whiteboards, and digital boards for the learning process from chalk pieces.

One of the principals added through interviews about the resources of his schools below.

"Children of very poor parents come to this school. They lost money, but their humanity and efforts are the best. These people cannot be blamed for the shortcomings of the school. I gathered some teachers and made some small programs. We have space in the garden. The parents got together and built the floor first. Later, the fields were divided among the teachers, and the children were allowed to cultivate. Children now come before the morning starts. Working since evening. All those things were sold. Not only the things needed for the class but also the school development account have now collected a lot of money".
(Principal's Interview)

Playgrounds can be called places that make a unique contribution to increasing the educational opportunities of primary students. Several skills of the students are going to be developed through the playground. It has many things like a ladder, rod, knot rope, sea saw, play house, etc. Accordingly, the size of the playground and its accessories, the geographical location of the playground, and the appropriateness of the equipment and their placement should be at a higher standard. Likewise, positioning should be at a higher level. Likewise, the playground should be more secure. In this way, special attention should be paid to planning the physical resources of the playground, the playground, and their accessories to ensure that they are adequate and safe.

In the principal's statement, it was stated that although more space should be allocated for the primary sector, the maximum space has been given according to the size of the school. Observational data indicate that school space allocated for playgrounds needs to be improved. It was also observed that the playground in one regular school needed to be prepared. A large number of trees were seen in most of the observed schools. Near Child-Friendly School's primary section was a huge banyan tree and some ancient maar trees. In addition, two schools had dead coconut trees struck by lightning and were about to collapse. The other two schools had large trees around for a long time, and students were engaged in activities at each location. In the statements of the principals, it was stated that there were legal obstacles for them to remove the trees, and even though they informed

the relevant institutions, they did not act. In addition to this unsafe condition, the slopes, natural and unevenness of the school grounds, drainage systems around the buildings, various equipment, and temporary construction materials used on different occasions (festivals, programs) were identified as other unsafe conditions in the school grounds. Also, the safety condition of the playgrounds was observed. There, the existing condition and safe location of the equipment were observed. A common feature was that playground maintenance was low. Most schools do not renovate and maintain, especially after the initial stage. Tires in the playground were observed to be covered with soil and grass. Schools where playhouses, ladders, etc., were not repaired. Iron chains dangle after the swing breaks. Slip boats are swinging in a hazardous condition. This was mentioned in the observation notes of several schools.

Waste management

Waste management in schools was observed, and many programs and strategies implemented in schools were identified through observations. Those programs and strategies can be summarized as follows:

1. Polythene has been banned in most child-friendly schools (11 schools). Students should use a box for food.
2. Child-friendly schools (7) burn garbage daily.
3. Child-friendly schools (6) have created living cells to collect leaf litter.

4. Also, 11 child-friendly schools are prohibited from putting leftover food brought by students on the school grounds.

Conclusion

Ministry of Education, there are no toilet facilities in the schools with the standards of 18 toilets, etc., if the students are more than 1500. As there are more girls in schools, more toilets should be reserved for girls. However, such a situation cannot be seen. "Education for All (2015)" report presented by UNESCO, Ministry of Education Performance Report (2015), and Legal Organization for Human Rights and Development (2007) revealed that schools do not have adequate sanitation facilities. Also, the Sri Lankan Drafting Committee for Equal Education (2009) has pointed out that students' learning opportunities are incredibly gained with the minimum facilities, such as adequately designed buildings, toilets, and drinking water. Similar discoveries have been made through this research.

Classrooms should have adequate space for student learning. It is present in the majority of schools. Some schools are relatively overcrowded. Therefore, the space required for learning is sufficient in many schools. However, most classrooms are not adequately light and ventilated. The main reason is covering up with student art or other materials. In addition to this, the construction of the building has also been made to cover the natural light and ventilation. Most schools have enough desks and chairs for students but not enough learning

equipment. Because teachers do not use the existing resources and students are not directed to use them, it is difficult for students to contribute to the learning process actively. In some schools, many classes are held in the same hall without separating the classrooms, which has become a solid obstacle to the students' learning. When the teacher is in the class, or the teacher is absent, the entire learning process, including teaching activities and student activities in other classes, is disrupted.

More efforts have been made in child-friendly schools, where classrooms are segregated through ad-hoc methods. Most school buildings need to be designed for proper ventilation and lighting. Although environmental conditions allow light and ventilation to be obtained naturally, most classrooms need more light and ventilation due to weaknesses in building construction and class planning. Some classrooms use electric light, although they are fully sunlit. Most research findings related to school buildings, classrooms, and other construction projects in Sri Lanka show that they need to be built with formal plans.

Maintaining multiple classes in a single hall without separating the classrooms is a direct obstacle to educational utilization. Not identifying those barriers, not planning alternatives as solutions for them, and not using outdoor classrooms or outdoor environments for learning is not done in many schools.

The Compilation Committee (2009) revealed that most school buildings and classrooms in Sri Lanka must be

designed to implement the curriculum. The findings indicated that improperly constructed 80X20 school buildings, mainly poorly constructed classrooms, need more doors and proper lighting and ventilation. Also, according to Gajaweera (1990), according to the findings, conditions such as lack of space, dilapidated classrooms, overcrowding, non-segregation of classrooms, otherwise temporary segregation and lack of learning environment were revealed. UNESCO (2013) reveals that students in many poor countries are severely affected by the lack of infrastructure, and students are often crammed into the minimal amount of space available in classrooms. It has been shown that this condition is more prevalent in the lower grades. All these facts have been confirmed in this study as well.

Only some schools should be expected to be full of resources. Although it is desirable to prepare learning opportunities using equipment and materials that can be provided from the home, external environment, schools, etc., or created from existing resources, there is a situation where that does not happen. As the number of child-friendly schools with adequate library facilities for the primary sector is at a shallow level of 25 per cent, the learning opportunities available through the library are also significantly reduced. Also, the reading corner introduced in the primary sector as an alternative to the library problem has been successfully implemented in 25 per cent of child-friendly schools, reducing students' focus on learning. In that sense, educational opportunities have fallen. Also, despite sufficient library facilities

and reading corners, the teachers' implementation of activities that direct or motivate students to use them is minimal, so the student's turn to learning through additional reading has also decreased. However, if the child-friendly school program is successfully implemented, these learning opportunities will expand, and they can be modelled in schools that have successfully implemented the program.

Playgrounds are very useful for activity-based learning and co-curricular activities. In most schools, the playground is adequate, but students are often not directed to it. That is to say, as there is a lot of reference to seated activities in the classroom, the learning activities of the students related to the playground have been reduced.

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