



EDUCATION FOR STUDENTS WITH COMPLEX LEARNING PROFILES: POLICY OPTIONS FOR MALDIVES

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This case study is a result of the KIX EAP Learning Cycle "Diagnostic tools for improving education policy planning". Facilitated by the UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP), this professional development course ran from 20 September to 11 November 2022. Across 8 weeks, this Learning Cycle enabled participants to identify system bottlenecks for improving education policy planning, with a special focus on the use of diagnostic tools for system performance analysis. 14 national teams from 13 countries took part in this Learning Cycle: Cambodia, Georgia, Kyrgyz Republic, Lao PDR, Maldives, Moldova, Mongolia, Pakistan (Balochistan), Pakistan (Sindh), Papua New Guinea, Sudan, Tajikistan, Timor Leste and Yemen.



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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

DoIE	Department of Inclusive Education
EAP	Europe, Asia, Pacific Hub
IE	Inclusive education
IIEP	International Institute for Educational Planning
KIX	Knowledge Innovation Exchange
KS	Key stage
MEMIS	Maldives Education Management Information System
MoE	Ministry of Education
NALO	National Assessment of Learning Outcomes
NER	Net enrolment rate
NIE	National Institute of Education
SCLP	Students with complex learning profiles
SEN	Special education needs

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The Maldives Ministry of Education (MoE) is committed to facilitating quality and equitable education for all children to reach their full potential, including those with special education needs (SEN). In the Maldives, the Inclusive Education Policy was first introduced in 2013 and has been revised several times since, most recently in 2021 in response to the Education Act 2020. This new policy addresses the need to create a positive and supportive environment for all children without exception, moving from a segregated to an inclusive system of education. Despite the opportunities created to enhance inclusive education throughout the Maldives, schools still face challenges in providing quality education to all children.

Data availability

In the Maldives, the MoE has the mandate to collect and keep a comprehensive record of education information, including both administrative and academic data. The Maldives Education Management Information System (MEMIS) data include the areas of administration, finance, human resources and student learning outcomes. However, the MEMIS is limited in defining the underlying situation for students with complex learning profiles (SCLP). Therefore, this report also considers UNICEF and UNESCO's (2021) data on students with disabilities and that from the Demographic and Health Survey and the Household Income and Expenditure Survey.

Defining the problem

To investigate the issues pertaining to inclusive education, we identified SCLP at the secondary school level in the Greater Malé region as the target group of the analysis. The team identified and examined indicators related to levels 1 and 2 of the International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) education policy tree pathways, i.e., number of SEN teachers, number of trained/untrained SEN teachers, number of schools, number of SCLP enrolled in inclusive programmes in the Greater Malé region and the percentage of schools with specific elements of school infrastructure. Three issues from the policy tree were chosen for further investigation as underlying root causes affecting school completion: (i) teaching skills, (ii) school location and (iii) school infrastructure.

Potential policy options

Our findings revealed that there is a shortage of trained SEN teachers and schools, as well as limited accessibility to essential elements of school infrastructure in the selected region. We also identified multiple root causes of these overarching issues.

Based on the findings, four main recommendations are necessary for improvement: (i) to scale up human resources training, (ii) to focus on inclusive pedagogy, (iii) to develop infrastructure for inclusive schools and (iv) to develop transport policies and provide necessary facilities.

INTRODUCTION

1.1 The country context

The Republic of Maldives is an archipelago consisting of 1,192 small coral islands, of which 199 are inhabited. The population of the country was approximately 543,620 in 2021 (GlobalEdge, 2022). The capital city, Malé, is home to about half the population, who live on this 2-km² island. The Greater Malé region consists of Malé, Villimalé and Hulhumalé. The student population is about 90,565, of which 46,365 are male and 44,200 are female (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2021/2022). About 63% of students are enrolled in island schools, while the remaining 37% are in the Greater Malé region (MoE, 2019).

1.2 Education system

Until recently the Maldives followed a 5-2-3-2 education system, reflecting the number of primary, middle, lower secondary and higher secondary levels of schooling. A new system was established after the transition to the new national curriculum framework in 2015, whereby kindergarten was recognised as part of formal schooling, and newly introduced key stages (KS) refer to more precise levels of education within the prevailing pre-, primary and secondary school levels, as shown in Table 1 (National Institute of Education [NIE], n.d.).

The Maldives has made impressive achievements in access to K-12 free and public education (Education Act, 2020).

Table 1. Stages of formal schooling in the Maldives

Grade	Key Stage	Phase
12	KS 5	Higher Secondary
11		
10	KS 4	Lower Secondary
9		
8		
7	KS 3	
6		
5	KS 2	Primary
4		
3		
2		
1	KS 1	
UKG	Foundation Stage	Foundation
LKG		

Source: National curriculum framework (NIE, n.d.)

Notes: UKG – Upper Kindergarten, LKG – Lower Kindergarten

In addition, the government provides free textbooks and stationery to all students. The MoE is committed to facilitating quality and equitable education for all children to reach their full potential, including those with special education needs (SEN).

1.3 Special education needs policy

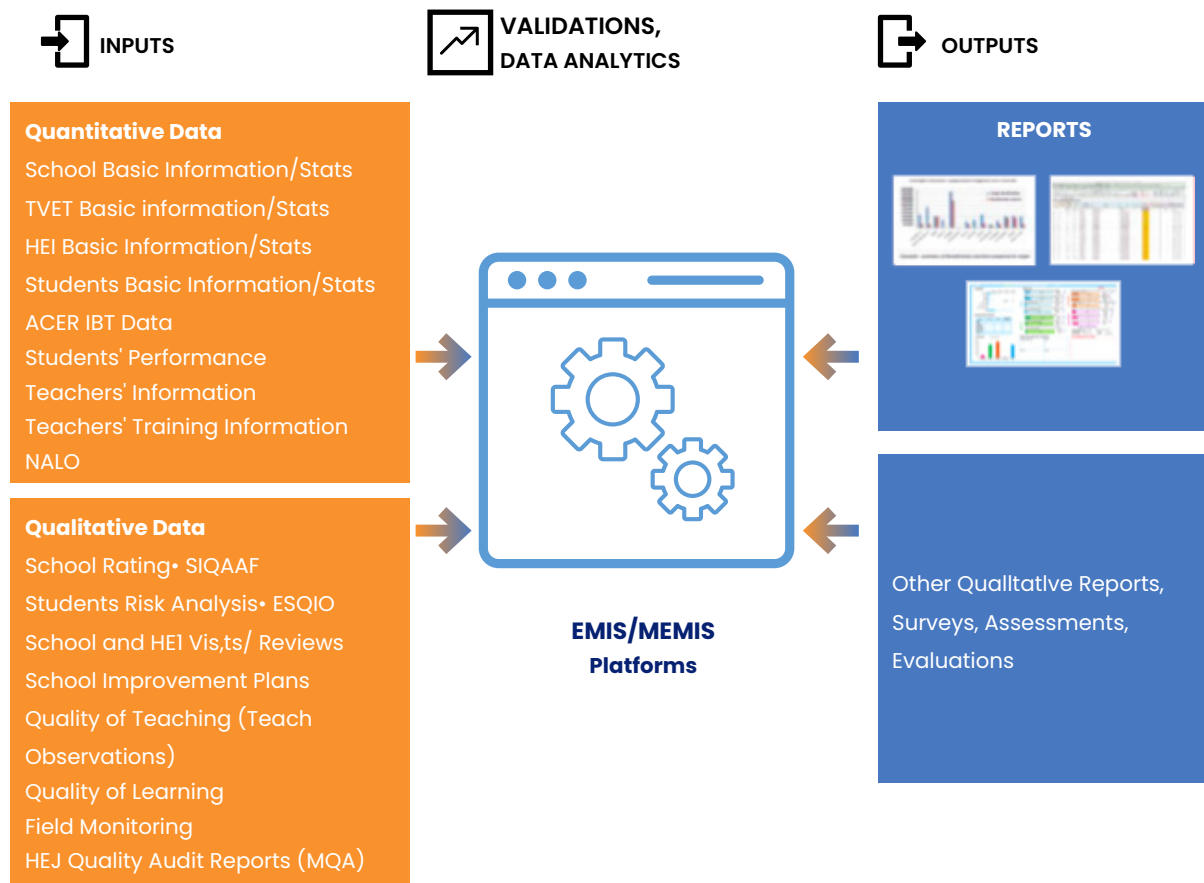
The Maldives' Inclusive Education Policy, first introduced in 2013, was recently revised in 2021 after the enactment of the Education Act of 2020 (MoE, 2013; MoE, 2021). Under the new policy, students with SEN are now referred to as students with complex learning profiles (SCLP). The policy addresses the need to create a positive and supportive environment for all children without exception. This requires moving from a segregated to an inclusive system of education. The policy highlights the need to provide education special needs and disabilities within mainstream classes.

The new policy further addresses the use of teaching strategies, resources and need assessment procedures. Despite these opportunities to enhance inclusive education throughout the country, schools still face challenges in providing quality education to all children. As a result, there is a high demand to enrol SCLP in schools in the Greater Malé region. According to unpublished statistics, there are 4,248 SCLP in the Maldives, of which 1,612 are from the Greater Malé region (Department of Inclusive Education [DoIE], 2020).

1.4 The Maldives Education Management Information System

The MoE established the Maldives Education Management Information System (EMIS) in mid-2017 "to facilitate education data collection, evaluation, and to inform policy-planning and

Figure 1. Maldives Education Management Information System data framework



Source: Maldives Education Sector Plan 2019–2023 (MoE & MoHE, 2019)

education programming initiatives in the country” (MoE and Ministry of Higher Education [MoHE], 2019, p. 43).

Later the system was customised and rebranded as the Maldives Education Management Information System (MEMIS). It is mandatory for the MoE to collect and keep a comprehensive record of education information, including both administrative and academic data (Education Act, 2020; MoE, 2021). Figure 1 shows the data framework within the MEMIS environment, including administrative, financial, human resources and learning outcome data.

1.5 Recent diagnostic attempts

In the Maldives, several attempts have been made in the recent past to diagnose issues in the education sector. One of the most comprehensive of these sector-wide efforts is the Education Sector Analysis and the Education Sector Plan 2019–2023. According to the MoE (2019), the latest Education Sector Analysis was conducted in 2018 and subsequently used to develop the country’s current Education Sector Plan.

Another significant diagnostic effort that was recently conducted is the National Assessment of Learning Outcomes (NALO) 2021. NALO 2021 – which involves cognitive tests in three curriculum subjects (Dhivehi, English and mathematics) – assessed students completing KS 1 and 2 (NIE, n.d.; Quality

Assurance Department [QAD], 2018). NALO’s primary objective is to “to determine the cognitive learning outcomes of Dhivehi, English and Mathematics” (QAD, 2018, p. 14).

There have been other reports generated from recent diagnostic endeavours. These include the effect of and response to COVID-19 in the Maldives by UNICEF and UNESCO (2021), and research on teaching as a career by The Maldives National University, (n.d.).

1.6 The purpose

This country report, an outcome of the KIX Learning Cycle on Diagnostic Tools for Improving Education Policy Planning (DTIE2022), as facilitated by IIEP–UNESCO, is a policy diagnostic attempt focused specifically on issues related to school completion. To this end, this research focuses on a particular marginalised sub-group within the Maldives’ student population, SCLP. Considering the availability of resources for this specific investigation, we only employ data from secondary schools in the Greater Malé region.

2

DEFINING THE PROBLEM

Referring to the available educational statistics for the Maldives, the net enrolment rate (NER) in early childhood education has made remarkable progress, growing from 51.2% in 2001 to 99.6% in 2017 (MoE, 2016). Furthermore, while the NERs of primary and lower secondary students were 95.9% and 90.5% respectively in 2018, the NER reached 100% for both levels in 2019 (MoE, 2019). While these figures depict an overall impression of access, they do not define the underlying situation for SCLP.

According to the MoE's Inclusive Education Policy, SCLP refers to a multitude of students who fall under three broad areas. The first category consists of students with disabilities such as physical, hearing and vision impairments. The second category consists of students requiring special assistance in learning, including students with specific learning disabilities such as dyslexia, learning difficulties and gifted students. The third category includes students who face special circumstances, such as bullying, domestic or sexual violence, and natural disasters (MoE, 2021).

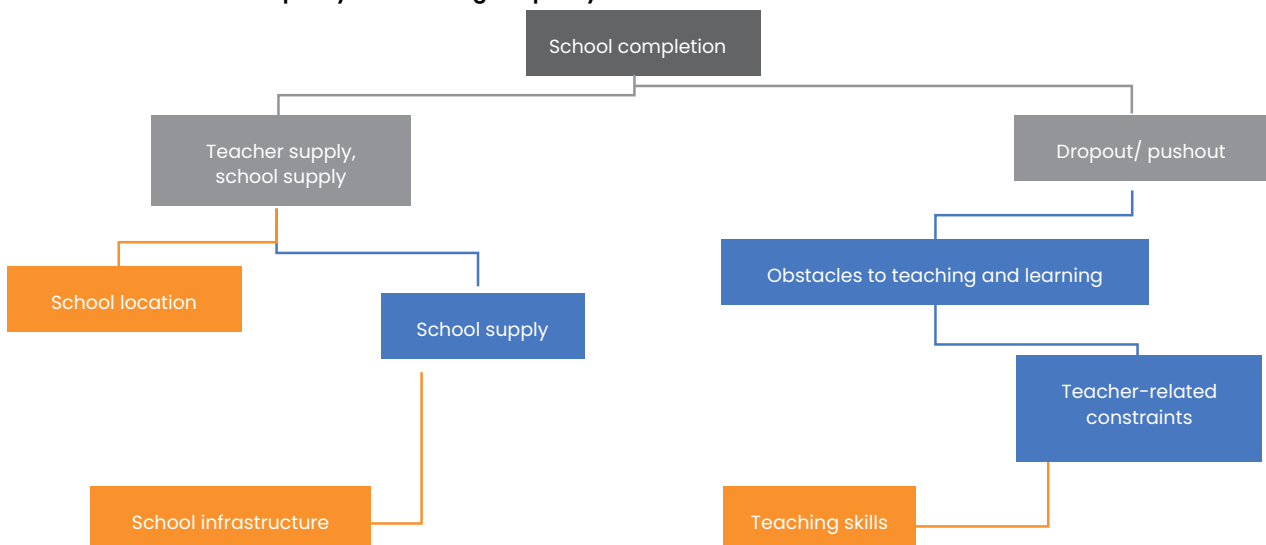
Per UNICEF and UNESCO (2021), data on students with disabilities are available from three sources, namely, the Demographic and Health Survey, the Household Income and Expenditure Survey and the MEMIS. Nonetheless, these first two sources do not provide usable student data, nor is data retrievable from the MEMIS. Despite these setbacks, statistics collected by the DoIE, although not disaggregated into levels of education,

reveal that there are more than 4,000 students across the nation who fall under the definition of SCLP (DoIE, 2020).

IIEP-UNESCO developed a Policy Toolbox (available at <https://policytoolbox.iiep.unesco.org/>) that acts as a collection of policy options that can be adapted by education planners and policymakers around the globe. The Policy Toolbox is associated with policy trees, which are comprehensive tools that allow navigation through the various diagnostic channels in a hassle-free and systematic manner. As such, we used the IIEP Policy Toolbox and policy trees to identify bottlenecks in issues related to the completion of education for SCLP.

Since the overall NER is quite high, an investigation on school completion could focus on issues related to dropout/pushout factors more than issues related to education access. For this reason, we decided to navigate through the dropout/pushout branch of the policy tree, as illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Identified education policy issues using the policy tree



Source: Adapted from the IIEP policy tree

In the original policy tree, there are four sub-branches under the dropout/pushout branch: (i) grade repetition, (ii) obstacles to teaching and learning, (iii) availability of final grades and (iv) teacher and school supply. Of these pathways, grade repetition does not seem appropriate for the local context, as there is no policy for grade repetition in the existing school system. Moreover, although pass percentages in O-Level examinations are available, these are not segregated into the sub-category of students of focus in the current report (i.e. SCLP). Thus, we decided to proceed through the other two paths, that is, obstacles to teaching and learning, and teacher and school supply, as depicted in Figure 2.

From the teacher and school supply side of the original tree, there are three alternative paths, of which we chose to examine school supply and school location. Further down the tree, the school supply path continues to school infrastructure. Simultaneously, from the obstacles to teaching and learning side of the tree, the diagnostics proceeds further down to teacher-related constraints and then to teaching skills. Given our above decisions, we chose three specific issues from these parts of the policy tree for further investigation of the underlying root causes affecting school completion. These are (i) teaching skills, (ii) school location and (iii) school infrastructure. The proceeding findings are presented in order of these overarching issues.

3

FINDINGS

3.1 Teaching skills

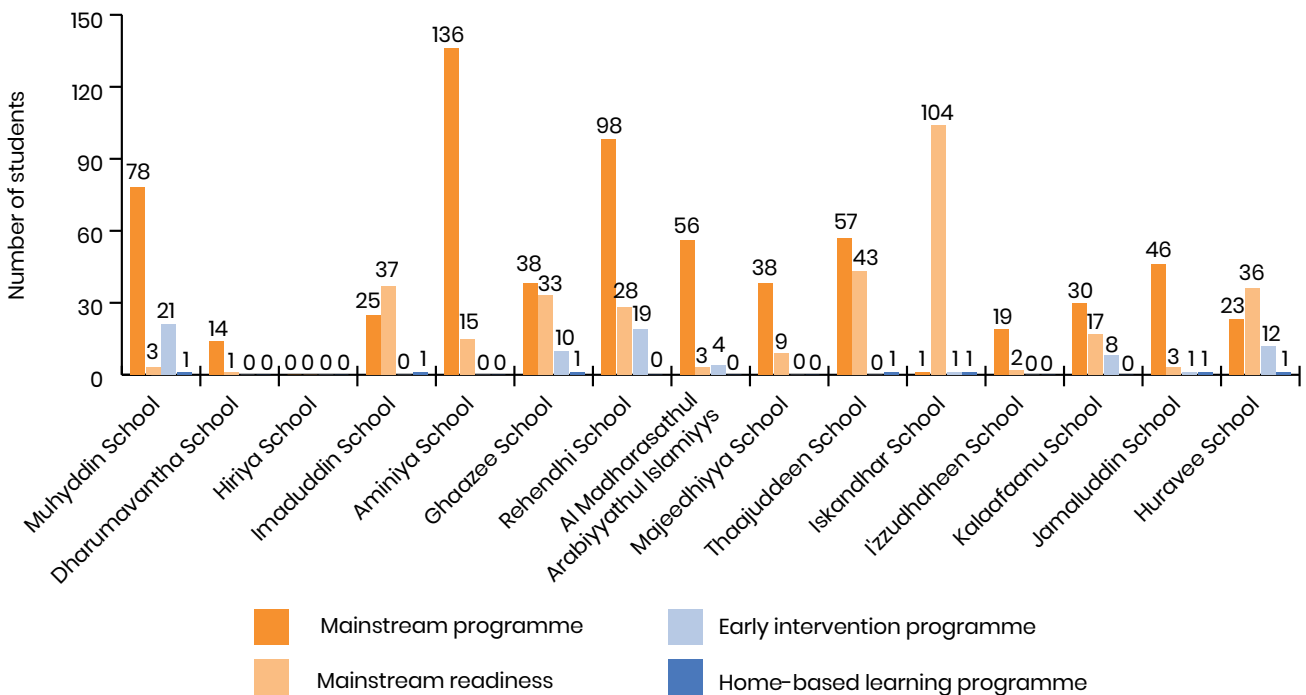
According to the MoE (2021/2022), there are a total of 2,100 teachers employed at schools in the Malé region, with 81 having no formal training. With reference to the Inclusive Education Policy, there should be a minimum of one SEN teacher for every six students who are identified as mild or moderate SCLP cases. This ratio becomes even tighter if the child is diagnosed as a severe or profound case, which requires one teacher for one student. Consequently, it is estimated that 224 SEN teachers across various levels of schooling are required for schools in the Malé region. However, there are only 159 trained SEN teachers and 35 untrained SEN teachers currently employed in these schools (DoIE, n.d.). Specific to this shortage of trained and skilled teachers, we extended our research by using the IIEP Policy Toolbox to explore other possible causes related to teaching skills. In this regard, we assessed training and supervisions, curricula, teacher performance and incentives, and policies connected to SEN students who are studying in mainstream education.

3.1.1 SEN training and supervision

Every school is expected to have, in addition to a SEN teacher, one leading teacher who can oversee the classroom and one teaching assistant who can help students (MoE, 2013). Figure

3 shows the number of SCLP and relevant staff numbers in schools in the Malé region. As can be inferred from the figure, there are still some schools that are unable to meet the demand for SEN teachers, leading teachers and teaching assistants as stipulated in the Inclusive Education Policy.

Figure 3. SEN students and staff in the Malé region



Source: DoIE (n.d.)

3.1.2 Teacher training for inclusive pedagogy

The Inclusive Education Policy promotes three main pedagogical approaches that should be used to provide education for SCLP. These are a universal design for learning, differentiated instructions and co-teaching strategies. There is no evidence that these specific aspects are incorporated in the current teacher training curricula. Hence, there is room to examine the extent to which these topics are adequately covered in pre-service teacher training programmes.

3.1.3 Performance-based scholarship and incentive scheme for aspiring teachers

In the Maldives, the free first university degree programme, launched in 2018, made higher education feasible for many students. According to figures compiled by the Ministry of Higher Education in 2019, 197 students were given scholarships to attend training programs for exceptional education teaching. The government provides free education up to the first degree level, including special education classes. Hence, the salary of SEN instructors is much higher than that of regular teachers. Further, to produce more skilled teachers, Maldives Qualification Authority has declared that some professional training, including teaching, should only be conducted in a face-to-face modality (Maldives Qualification Authority, 2022). There are also plans to introduce teacher licensing, which can help ensure teacher quality and skills (Public Service Media, 2020).

3.1.4 In-service professional development for inclusive teachers

The MoE allocates two days in the annual academic calendar for professional development training sessions for teachers. These sessions usually target the general teacher population in their respective schools. There is little to no proof that such trainings cater to the needs of SEN/inclusive education teachers.

3.2 School location

School location refers to the physical environment (rural or urban) in which a school is situated, including its facilities and resources. Research defends that school location and classroom environment provide students with effective instruction and promote a smooth teaching and learning process, yielding a positive effect on students' academic achievements (Ebinum et al., 2017). Furthermore, studies on rural and urban areas have revealed that the "location of the community in which the school is situated has [an] effect on the performance of pupils" (Owoeye & Yara, 2011, p. 171). Notably, a long distance between school and home hampers teaching and learning, which leads to "absenteeism, delinquency, truancy, lateness and indiscipline" and results in low achievement.

3.2.1 Construction of new schools

Table 2 shows the number of schools and students in the Greater Malé region, disaggregated into islands. Due to limited space, all schools operate on a two-session schedule. Additionally, the newly inhabited town in Hulhumalé (Hulhumalé Phase 2), which is estimated to have a population of at least 35,000, does not have a school at present.

Table 2. Population versus number of schools in the Malé region

Island	Area (km ²)	No. of schools	Population	Students	Male students	Female students
Villingilli	0.32	2	3,172	835	413	423
Malé	2.01	21	200,276	27,095	13,702	13,393
Hulhumalé	4.02	5	15,688	8,410	4,363	4,047
Total		28	219,136	36,340	18,378	17,862

In Hulhumalé Phase 2, two new schools were contracted to complete within the year 2022 by the MoE. Despite being contracted to complete the project within this year, due to delays in receiving materials from abroad it was unfinished. Consequently, a temporary school was built and opened in September 2022 to make it easier for those children living in this area.

The Inclusive Education Policy emphasises the provision of equal learning opportunities without discrimination for SEN children to achieve their maximum potential. Furthermore, it emphasises establishing a safe environment that includes the necessary equipment and materials for these children.

3.2.2 Providing transport

The MoE is currently developing policies for many areas in the education sector, such as decentralisation, teaching training, junior colleges, lifelong learning and residential learning. One such policy concerns school transportation (MoE & MoHE, 2019). Public transport services within the city of Malé are managed by the Maldives Transport and Contracting Company and are free for school children in uniform. Travelling by school bus is the safest transport mode for children to commute to and from school. In addition, this enables students to access their preferred schools, even outside their neighbourhood-zoned school. School buses are economically beneficial for parents as well, who are assured that their children will reach school on time.

The Inclusive Education Policy outlines transportation for children with special needs to receive education while being as close to home as possible. The MoE is working on developing a transportation policy.

3.2.3 Satellite schools

Satellite schools are established on islands with significantly few students. Each satellite school is assigned to a parent school that oversees its functioning and provides assistance, such as teaching materials and provisions for students participating in co-curricular activities and sports. Students must travel to the parent school to participate in extracurricular activities. In the Maldives, satellite education was inaugurated in January 2022. The Satellite Hub Centre is in Huravee School in Malé. Three island schools in the Baa and Vaavu atolls are connected to this Hub Centre.

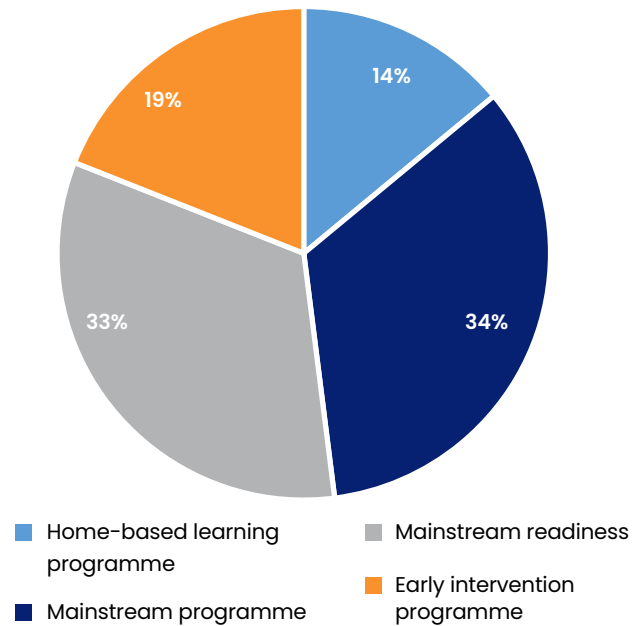
3.2.4 Multi-grade schools

The MoE introduced multi-grade schooling in 2016 to expand and strengthen education. In this scheme, schools with a low number of students will integrate classes from different grades and create modules to accommodate the teaching of all students from a specific KS together. As schools in the Malé region are already overcrowded, there is no scope for multi-grade setting in this area.

3.2.5 Building inclusive mainstream settings

The Education Act (2020) states that “every person living in the Maldives, without any discrimination has an equal right to education”, and that “the state shall provide the opportunity for education in schools providing preschool education, primary education, secondary education and higher secondary education, for children with special needs, without discrimination”. With the enactment of this act, it is mandatory for all schools across the country to provide education for children with special needs in both mainstream and special education classes in mainstream schools.

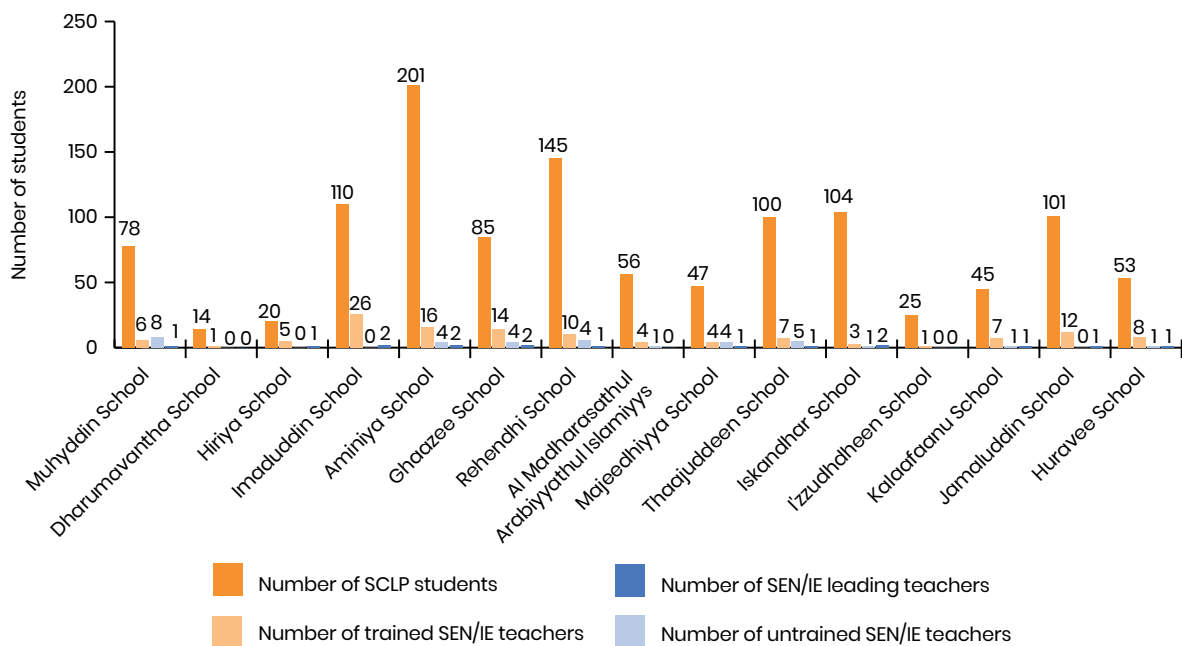
Figure 4. Disintegration of alternative programmes offered under the Inclusive Education Policy



Source: DoIE (n.d.)

According to the DoIE, a total of 1,349 SCLP are studying in 16 schools in Malé. Even though it is mandatory for schools to provide inclusive education, there are only four schools that employ all four alternative programmes stipulated in the Inclusive Education Policy. These programmes are the mainstream programme, mainstream readiness programme, early intervention programme and home-based learning programme. Figure 4 shows the distribution of these programmes offered in schools in the Malé region. For instance, 34% of all the IE programmes offered in schools are mainstream programmes.

Figure 5. Number of SCLP enrolled in inclusive programmes in the Malé region



Source: DoIE (n.d.)

Regarding the percentage of inclusive programmes offered in Greater Malé region schools, Figure 5 depicts the number of students enrolled in each of these programmes from each school in the Malé region.

3.3 School infrastructure

A school's physical infrastructure is the place where teachers and pupils interact, thereby encompassing the entire tangible space where these interactions occur. This space includes classrooms, laboratories, halls, open fields, dormitories and sanitation facilities (Mokaya, 2013), as well as fittings, furniture and equipment. School physical infrastructure is known to affect several aspects of teaching and learning, including enrolment, attendance and completion of education. For instance, Barrett et al. (2019) reported that safe and healthy school places, as well as better space for learning, have a significant impact on students' academic progress and outcomes.

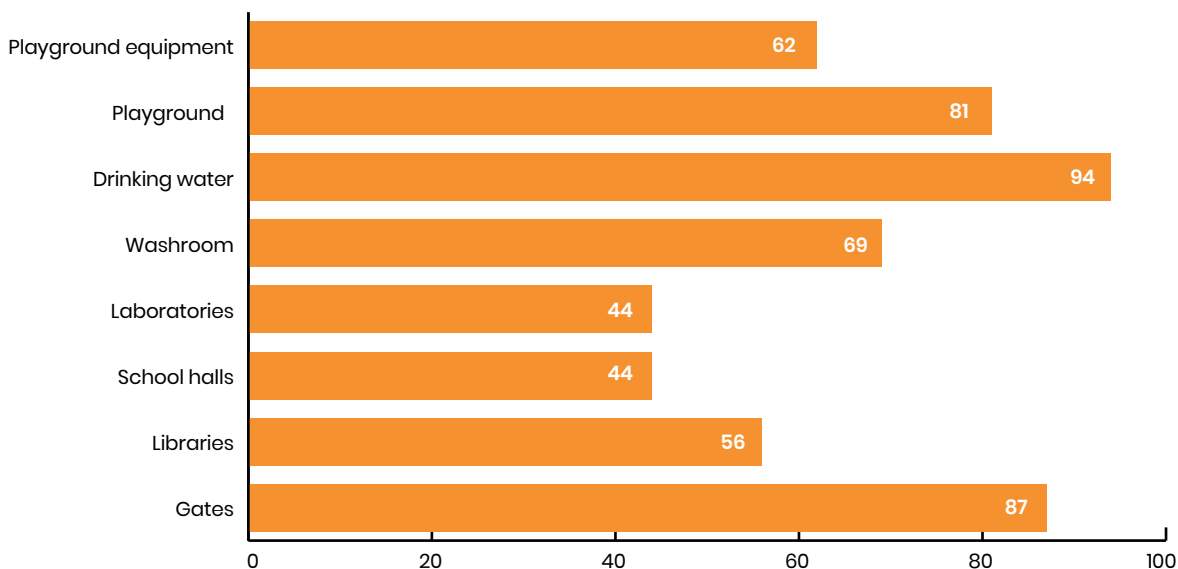
There are several indicators that could inform the suitability of school infrastructure for teaching and learning. The accessibility and inclusivity of the physical infrastructure is a crucial dimension in this regard. Given the limited resources in the current investigation, we proceeded with this dimension only while acknowledging the importance of several others. As mentioned in the IIEP Policy Toolbox, potential root causes

for issues related to school completion include (i) barriers to access in the form of school gates; (ii) non-inclusive hallway, walkway, stair, ramp and playground designs; (iii) hindered accessibility to classrooms, libraries, laboratories, school halls and other such facilities; (iv) blackboards, whiteboards, lighting and cooling facilities; and (v) limited access to water, sanitation and hygiene facilities.

Context-specific data on the above indicators are crucial to diagnosing the root causes of school completion, especially for students with SEN. Unfortunately, these particulars are either not collected or not rendered through the MEMIS at present. Hence, the following findings, as portrayed in Figure 6, are solely based on a recent survey conducted by the DoIE, which covers only the Greater Malé region. Figure 6 shows the percentage of schools with specific school infrastructure elements accessible to SEN students.

As depicted in Figure 6, gates are accessible to SEN students in 87% of schools, while libraries are accessible only in 56% of schools. Further, school halls and laboratories are accessible to SEN students in as few as 44% of schools. Washrooms are accessible in 69% of schools, while drinking water is accessible in 94%. Moreover, while the playground is accessible to SEN students in 81% of schools, playground equipment is accessible in only 62% of them.

Figure 6. Accessibility of school infrastructure elements for SEN students



Source: DoIE (n.d.)

4

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

This policy analysis is an attempt to identify issues related to school completion in the Maldives, and thereby suggest policy options to address these issues. The investigation was focused on SCLP, limited to schools in the Greater Malé region. The findings reveal that there is a shortage of trained SEN teachers and schools, as well as limited accessibility to essential elements of school infrastructure. We further identified multiple root causes of these overarching issues. The findings could have been adversely affected by the limited data available for the investigation, though efforts were made to use data from unpublished documents and reports to account for this. Nonetheless, based on the results, we propose the following prioritised policy recommendations.

4.1 Train human resources

The findings clearly portrayed a shortage of trained SEN teachers. To ensure that education provided to SCLP is in line with the existing policy, specialised SEN teacher training should be the government's priority. A specific need analysis should be conducted to identify the type of SEN specialisations required by each school. A nationwide training programme could then be designed to cover at least the basic skills required to teach SCLP.

Alternatively, a policy could be formulated to include a module on SEN in all pre-service teacher training programmes. Parallel to this, the knowledge and skills of in-service teachers could be enhanced by conducting authentic professional development programmes catering to teacher needs.

In addition to training teachers, consideration should also be given to hiring necessary staff, such as leading teachers and teaching assistants, as per the Inclusive Education Policy.

4.2 Focus on inclusive pedagogy

The Inclusive Education Policy stipulates that pedagogical approaches should be employed to teach SCLP in an inclusive setting. In spite of this specification, our findings revealed that there is no emphasis on training teachers on these specific pedagogical approaches. Hence, a second policy priority that ideally parallels the previous recommendation should include these components in training both pre-service and in-service teachers. Again, regarding in-service teachers, a scaled-up training programme could be designed and conducted for all SEN teachers or for selected teachers from all the schools

across the Maldives.

4.3 Infrastructure for inclusive schools

Our findings highlighted that some essential elements of school infrastructure are not adequately modified to cater to SCLP. Some of these modifications, however, are quite easy to implement during in the planning and construction of school buildings, had it been considered. Accordingly, an important government policy priority should be formulating specific building codes for new schools prepared in line with a universal design. These codes should be published and followed in every new school building.

Additionally, an evaluation of all schools' infrastructure accessibility should be carried out to identify and then implement possible modifications promptly.

4.4 Developing policies and providing transport facilities

Despite the small size of the islands, at times there comes the need to transport students to and from school, especially those with special needs. Our findings highlighted a lack of such transport facilities. At present, there is no specific policy on providing designated transport for school children either. Hence, we recommend formulating relevant policies on this subject.

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