

# Teachers' Perceptions of the Implementation of the Five Essential Learning Concepts Proposed in the Catholic Curriculum Reform: A Mixed-Method Study in the Colombo District, Sri Lanka

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigated teachers' perceptions of the implementation of the Five Essential Learning Concepts (5 ELCs) proposed in the Catholic Curriculum Reform (CCR) in Sri Lanka. The 5 ELCs are Character Development (CD), Environmental Sensitivity (ES), Social and Socio-Cultural Sensitivity (SSCS), Health and Wellbeing (HW), and Values, Norms and Mindfulness (VNM). The study adopted a mixed-method approach. The objectives were: (i) to examine teachers' understanding of the 5 ELCs in the CCR; (ii) to identify teachers' attitudes toward the 5 ELCs; (iii) to identify the challenges in implementing the 5 ELCs; and (iv) to propose strategies to overcome those challenges. An explanatory sequential design was employed. A total of 232 teachers from the Colombo district were surveyed online using a Likert-scale questionnaire, and focus group interviews were conducted with 23 stakeholders. The findings suggested that teachers' awareness, knowledge, understanding of purpose, and confidence regarding the 5 ELCs were generally positive. However, teachers showed more favorable attitudes toward Character Development and Environmental Sensitivity, while attitudes toward Mindfulness, Social and Socio-Cultural Sensitivity, and Health and Wellbeing were less favorable due to the abstract nature of these concepts. The results indicate gaps in teacher preparedness and advocate for targeted capacity-building and professional training programmes. The recommendations emphasize flexible modular delivery and continuous curriculum evaluation for development and improvement.

**Keywords:** Teachers' perceptions, Catholic Curriculum Reform, Five Essential Learning Concepts, curriculum implementation, teacher preparedness, mixed-method study

## INTRODUCTION

### Background of the Study

This study examined the relationship between the Five Essential Learning Concepts (5 ELCs) proposed in the Catholic Curriculum Reform (CCR) and teachers' perceptions of their preparedness, awareness, and understanding ahead of the proposed implementation in 2026. Records from the Research and Planning Department of the National Institute of Education (NIE), Sri Lanka, indicate that no prior empirical research has been conducted on the 5 ELCs for two reasons: first, this is the maiden conceptual, curricular, and policy introduction of the 5 ELCs into the curriculum framework of Religious and Value Education, proposed by the NIE under the directives of the National Education Commission (NEC) and the Ministry of Education (MOE), which acts as the administrative agent for implementation; second, there was barely any quality time frame available to research the topic through a national survey among Catholic teachers.

### Rationale for the Study

The imperative national urgency to promote inter-religious understanding, coherence, and coexistence was a benchmark consideration discussed in the National Education Policy Framework (NEPF) 2023–2033. In addition, the leading elements of the module-based structure, the new credit-based assessment criteria, and hands-on experience in an authentic learning culture (Gamage, 2008) were analytically addressed through a balanced spectrum of "Learning about" and "Learning from" religions (Curriculum Framework for Religious

Education report presentation, MOE). The prevailing education system has been under heavy criticism for the following widely expressed and scholarly discussed issues: heavy content orientation, pure examination orientation, stereotyped lecture methods oriented toward teacher-centeredness, and a long-felt mismatch with modern job-market requirements, all of which have raised serious yet unanswered doubts about the progression of general education in Sri Lanka (Gamage, 2008; Ministry of Education, 2023).

Accordingly, the study addresses the unprecedented and pressing requirement of recognizing teachers' perceptions (Kevin, 2009) of the 5 ELCs proposed in the CCR prior to implementation (Penuel, Fishman, Yamaguchi, & Gallagher, 2007).

### Significance of the Study

The research outcome is expected to facilitate the successful implementation of the CCR across three levels:

- **Macro level:** Opens the doorway for continuous assessment and evaluation for key education policy agencies such as the NEC and MOE.
- **Meso level:** Provides curriculum developers at the NIE with a platform for further development and content evaluation.
- **Micro level:** Meaningfully guides provincial educational officers, teacher trainers, zonal educational officers, and other stakeholders, while providing researchers with a conceptual yet fortified background for continuous research (Luisa, Morales, Liso, & Perales, 2021).

The most significant consideration of the research is that teachers are the most critical catalysts and stakeholders in any given implementation (Jita & Vandeyar, 2006); what they visualize (Mingdam et al., 2022), learn, and internalize are the deciding factors that transform expected outcomes into workable eventualities (National Educational Reformist Guild, 2020). Hence, research on perception serves as the vanguard of the implementation in 2026.

### Definition of Key Terms

**Teachers' perceptions:** In this study, teachers' perceptions refer to the psychological, social, and pedagogical variables reflected in teachers' preparedness, awareness, understanding, attitudes, and perceived challenges regarding the 5 ELCs. These constructs are treated as distinct but related dimensions of perception.

**The Five Essential Learning Concepts (5 ELCs):** The 5 ELCs are formally identified components of the Catholic Curriculum Reform: Character Development (CD), Environmental Sensitivity (ES), Social and Socio-Cultural Sensitivity (SSCS), Health and Wellbeing (HW), and Values, Norms and Mindfulness (VNM).

**Implementation:** In this study, "implementation" refers to teachers' perceptions of the proposed implementation of the 5 ELCs, not to the assessment of actual classroom practice. This distinction is maintained throughout the study.

### Objectives of the Research

There are four major objectives to be achieved at the end of the research.

- To examine teachers' prior understanding of the 5 ELCs in the CCR.
- To identify teachers' attitudes toward the 5 ELCs in the CCR.
- To identify the challenges in implementing the 5 ELCs.
- To propose strategies to overcome challenges connected with the 5 ELCs in the CCR.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Teachers' Perceptions of Curriculum Implementation

Teachers' perceptions are described within the ambit of preparedness, awareness, understanding, and

confidence toward new initiatives (Kevin, 2009). Fullan's change theory postulates that successful implementation requires capacity building and feedback across three dimensions: new materials, new practices, and new beliefs (Fullan, 2007). In the implementation process, teachers who possess creativity and problem-solving skills are sure to be positive in the process (Mingdam et al., 2022). Uninformed and malcommunicated reform structures suffer grievously in the implementation process (Tyack, 1995).

### **The Five Essential Learning Concepts in the Catholic Curriculum Reform**

The 5 ELCs in the CCR are formally identified as (CD), (ES), (SSCS), (HW), and (VNM). Although no research evidence specifically addresses the 5 ELCs—since this is a fresh effort from the educational authorities at the NIE—cognitive development theory (Kohler, 2008) and social constructivist theory (Vygotsky, 1978) shed light on the student-centered and knowledge-construction components embedded in the constructs of the 5 ELCs. Nevertheless, Freire's critical pedagogy enlightens SSCS and ES through the perspective of culturally responsive teaching.

### **Implementation Barriers and Teacher Preparedness Toward Reforms**

Properly guided training, availability of resources, and well-rounded curriculum-aided administrative support lead any curriculum framework to desired success (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, & Gardner, 2017). Well-trained teachers are the source of human agency for the successful implementation of any given curriculum (Fullan & Pomfret, 1977). Mezirow's transformative learning theory invariably addresses the engagement of teachers in the delivery aspect of the curriculum (Jita & Vandeyar, 2006). Teachers' psychological, emotional, and cognitive responsiveness is a decisive motivator toward the successful accomplishment of any reform (Luisa, Morales, Liso, & Perales, 2021).

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework of this study links the 5 ELCs (CD, ES, SSCS, HW, VNM) to teachers' perceptions through five dimensions: awareness, understanding, attitudes, preparedness, and perceived challenges. These dimensions are treated as distinct constructs that collectively shape teachers' readiness for the proposed implementation. The framework draws on Fullan's (2007) change theory, which emphasizes capacity building across materials, practices, and beliefs, and on Bandura's self-efficacy theory, which highlights the role of confidence in curriculum implementation.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Philosophy and Approach**

The theory of constructivism was adopted as the philosophical setting. The study examined teachers' perceptions (dependent variable) in relation to the implementation of the 5 ELCs (independent variable). Accordingly, the relationship created new knowledge through the data collection and analysis process. Consequently, the "new knowledge" essentially becomes the mainstream findings of the research (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). An interpretative theoretical approach was utilized since the study centered on the interpretation of the subjective findings of teachers in reference to their perceptions (Crotty, 1998). The use of symbolic interactionism justified the examination of how teachers draw conclusions based on the 5 ELCs: (CD), (SSCS), (ES), (VNM), and (HW). An inductive research approach was utilized as the working scientific approach.

### **Research Design**

The research design was aligned with a mixed-method explanatory sequential design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) to integrate quantitative and qualitative data for objective outcomes. The sequential logic was utilized over a convergent design for more in-depth exploration (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). The following reasons justify the selection of a mixed-method approach.

- This study of reforms was understood as a **"yet-to-be-implemented"** process rather than an end product; thus, it was essential to establish a baseline first.
- The study objectives essentially required description prior to explanation. The four objectives better explain the scope: objective one (examine understanding) was descriptive; objective two (identify attitudes) was also descriptive; and objectives three and four (identifying challenges and proposing strategies) were explanatory.
- The quantitative results inevitably revealed which gap needed qualitative exploration. For instance, the pre-piloted study statistically proved the reading of the strongest predictor ( $R^2 = 0.820$ ), but numbers alone cannot provide robust explanation; this must be grounded through a qualitative approach that examines why teachers lack purpose-understanding or how they experience that gap.
- The selected constructivism (epistemological approach) and interpretivism (ontological approach) aligned themselves as a well-matched mechanism. The mixed-method approach achieves this end; quantitative data alone may not suffice without the backing of qualitative abstraction.

## Population and Sampling

The sample was drawn from Catholic teachers in the Western Province. The rationale for this selection was demographic concentration, the fact that piloting and pre-piloting processes were largely carried out in this province in 2022 and 2023, and the fact that teacher training programs were largely held in the province during the data collection process, as recorded by the Planning and Research Department of the NIE.

The sample frame was selected from six types of schools (1AB, 1C, Type 2, Type 3, semi-government, and fully private schools) in the Colombo district. A purposive sampling technique was employed for the online survey, while purposive criterion sampling was used for the twenty-three participants (teachers, resource persons, curriculum developers, and curriculum administrative officers) in the interview process (Malterud et al., 2016). The teacher characteristics considered relevant to the study included teaching experience, educational level, subject taught, and prior exposure to curriculum training.

## Data Collection Instruments

**Quantitative instrument:** A structured online survey using Likert-scale items (strongly disagree to strongly agree) was used to measure teachers' perceptions of the 5 ELCs. This flexible format, aligned with the constructivist–interpretivist stance, allowed for exploratory and descriptive dialogue, enabling deep engagement with participants' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Initially,  $n = 100$  was used for a pilot study through the instrumentality of SmartPLS software, where validity and reliability were duly tested. Subsequently, the major survey was conducted ( $n = 231$ ) and analyzed in SPSS software.

**Qualitative instrument:** Focus group interviews were conducted with twenty-three stakeholders (teachers, resource persons, curriculum developers, and curriculum administrative officers) to explore the challenges and strategies related to the implementation of the 5 ELCs.

## Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics, correlation analysis to guide qualitative exploration, and regression analysis to examine relationships between variables were among the statistical analysis tools used. Manual thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used across the twenty-three stakeholders to identify patterns, perspectives, and inductive eventualities.

## Ethical Considerations

Proper ethical clearance and permission were obtained from the following authorities to ensure the ethical binding of the research: the General Manager of Catholic Private Schools, Western Province educational authorities, and the National Institute of Education. All participants were assured of the basic ethical demands of the research.

## Data Analysis and Interpretation

The analysis and interpretation of data are constructed in alignment with the order of the objectives.

### Objective One: To Examine Teachers' Prior Understanding of the 5 ELCs in the CCR

#### Quantitative Findings

Teachers demonstrated a moderate to high range of understanding of the five ELCs. The construct "Understanding of purpose" recorded the highest reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .885$ ) and the strongest correlation with the perception of implementation ( $r^2 = .906$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

**Table 1: Reliability and Validity Analysis of Understanding of Purpose of 5 ELCs**

| Cronbach's Alpha | No of Items |
|------------------|-------------|
| .885             | 4           |

Source: SPSS Outputs

**Table 2: Regression Model Summary**

| Model | R                 | R Square | Adjusted R Square | Std. Error of the Estimate | R Square Change | F Change | df1 | df2 | Sig. F Change |
|-------|-------------------|----------|-------------------|----------------------------|-----------------|----------|-----|-----|---------------|
| 1     | .906 <sup>a</sup> | .820     | .816              | .11491                     | .820            | 191.516  | 1   | 42  | .000          |

Predictors: (Constant), understanding purpose. Source: SPSS Outputs

#### Qualitative Findings

The results demonstrated uneven yet strong predictions before implementation. Teachers had an explanatory understanding of (CD) and (ES) most obviously, while a notably weaker stance was revealed in (VNM) and (SSCS). (HW) demonstrated a moderate value. For instance, "Yes, I am aware about these five essential learning concepts... Character development and environmental sensitivity would be better to teach" (1AB school teacher), and "I am not aware of these five essential learning concepts; I can't say anything" (1C school teacher).

#### Interpretation

Statistically, the above results reflected a hierarchy of concreteness in the constructs. Arguably, observational behaviors (CD and ES) showed easy grasp, while internally constructed dispositions of values and norms resulted in a weaker grip. The standing result was oriented toward Piaget's theory of concrete operational thinking working in the minds of teachers (Kohler, 2008). Depending on the expressed results, Sri Lankan teachers are more concerned with the pragmatic teachability of a given religion rather than doctrinal precision in their approach to pedagogy. This also provides a possible signal to curriculum developers to prioritize and operationalize abstract concepts in classroom settings for more viable results.

### Objective Two: To Identify Teachers' Attitudes Toward the 5 ELCs in the CCR

#### Quantitative Findings

Attitudes demonstrated a largely very positive stance. Statistically, perception scores were high, with greater positive correlations between attitudes and predictor variables, namely awareness, knowledge, purpose-understanding, and confidence.

**Table 3: Pearson Correlation**

| Criterion              | Awareness of 5 ELCs | Knowledge of 5 ELCs | Understanding of purpose of 5 ELCs | Confidence in teaching of 5 ELCs |
|------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Pearson Correlation    | 0.874               | 0.867               | 0.906                              | 0.885                            |
| Sig (2-tailed) P value | 0.000               | 0.000               | 0.000                              | 0.000                            |

Source: Author's Compilation

### Qualitative Findings

The qualitative findings largely varied depending on the concept and the school type. Predominantly, 1AB and 1C schools showed greater confidence and positivism, while Type 2 and semi-government schools expressed the most skepticism.

### Interpretation

The quantitative findings suggested that understanding perception is more powerful than knowledge. This is aligned with Bandura's self-efficacy theory in scientific curricular implementation.

### Objective Three: To Identify the Challenges in Implementing the 5 ELCs

The following barriers were expressed collectively in the interviews:

**Limited practical training sessions** organized by the authorities: "Only two piloting sessions; more hands-on experience sessions are needed" (1AB teacher).

**Overload of curriculum** that pushes back creativity in teaching strategies: "The subject itself cannot bring about transformation... Difficulty to portray health and well-being" (1AB teacher).

**Difficulty grasping abstract concepts** like VNM and SSCS: "Difficult to teach values, norms and mindfulness due to AI distractions and lack of practical inputs" (Type 2 teacher).

**Resource constraints and scarcity:** "Lack of materials, time, and administrative support" (Type 2 teacher).

**Distraction of students and large class sizes:** "Difficult to maintain engagement for reflective concepts like mindfulness due to the number of students in the class" (teacher from a semi-government school).

**Quantitative findings:** ( $R^2 = .820$ ) affirmatively suggested the weightage of purpose of understanding. This went on to posit interventions targeting purpose clarification.

**Table 4: Summary of Research Objectives, Key Findings, and Recommendations**

| Research Objective                           | Key Findings from Interviews                                                   | Most Discussed ELCs | Challenges/Barriers                            | Suggested Improvements                       |
|----------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| 1. Examine teachers' understanding of 5 ELCs | Most teachers have partial awareness of 5 ELCs; some knew about CD and ES, but | CD, ES              | Lack of training, limited prior exposure, some | More training programs, awareness workshops, |

|                                                                 |                                                                                                                   |            |                                                               |                                                                                |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                                                 | awareness of SSCS and VNM was low                                                                                 |            | skepticism about reforms                                      | mentoring by experienced teachers                                              |
| 2. Identify teachers' attitudes and perceptions toward 5 ELCs   | Teachers generally have positive attitudes toward implementing 5 ELCs; prioritize CD and ES over other ELCs       | CD, ES, HW | Overcrowded curriculum, difficulty integrating multiple ELCs  | Practical workshops, project-based learning, integration guidance              |
| 3. Evaluate teachers' ability to implement 5 ELCs in classrooms | Implementation varies; urban schools implement CD and ES more effectively; rural/semi-government schools struggle | CD, ES     | Time constraints, lack of resources, heavy syllabus           | Hands-on learning, experiential activities, administrative support             |
| 4. Explore recommendations for improving ELC adoption           | Teachers recommend practical support, training, and administrative alignment                                      | All 5 ELCs | Limited awareness, rural reach challenges, initial resistance | Nationwide teacher training, monitoring, collaboration with school authorities |

#### Objective Four: To Propose Strategies to Overcome Challenges

The results suggested the following strategies: hands-on experiences with properly guided experiential training sessions, discovery-based and project-based learning strategies, modular lesson designs, administrative support and stakeholder involvement, and continuous curricular revisions.

**Table 5: Regression Analysis — Awareness of 5 ELCs and Teachers' Perception of Implementing 5 ELCs**

| Model           | Unstandardized Coefficients B | Std. Error | Standardized Coefficients Beta | t      | Sig. |
|-----------------|-------------------------------|------------|--------------------------------|--------|------|
| 1<br>(Constant) | 2.170                         | .151       |                                | 14.334 |      |
| Awareness       | .463                          | .040       | .874                           | 11.643 |      |

Source: SPSS Outputs

#### Limitations of the Study

The limitations include the cross-sectional design, geographical delimitation, self-reported perceptions, researcher positionality, gender imbalance, and the absence of student voice. Because the study is cross-sectional and perception-based, the findings should not be interpreted as establishing the effectiveness of the curriculum reform; rather, they capture teachers' views about the proposed implementation at a specific point in time.

## CONCLUSIONS

#### Summary of Findings

- The understanding of purpose is more rooted and is the predictive construct ( $\alpha = .885$  and  $R^2 = .820$ ).
- Positive attitudes may not automatically bear fruit toward implementation confidence; rather, a systematically well-supported scheme is needed.

- Teachers in under-resourced schools reported significantly more barriers than those in 1AB schools.
- There is an uncompromising demand for hands-on experiences, properly guided training sessions, discovery-based pedagogy, modular lesson designs, and continuous administrative support.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

- **Targeted professional development:** Design and implement hands-on, experiential training sessions focused on the abstract concepts of VNM and SSCS.
- **Modular lesson designs:** Provide teachers with flexible modular lesson designs that integrate the 5 ELCs into existing subjects.
- **Administrative support:** Ensure continuous administrative support and resource allocation, particularly for under-resourced schools.
- **Continuous curriculum evaluation:** Establish mechanisms for ongoing curriculum evaluation and revision based on teacher feedback.
- **Stakeholder involvement:** Involve teachers, curriculum developers, and administrators in collaborative decision-making processes.

## Further Research Directions

In highlighting future research directions, the following research can be anticipated:

- **Longitudinal study:** Launch a longitudinal study to uncover how teachers' understanding of abstract concepts like VNM and SSCS evolves with the introduction of the new reforms into the school curriculum.
- **Disaggregated analysis:** Conduct disaggregated analysis to study attitudes comparatively by gender, school type, and years of experience of teachers.
- **Application-oriented training:** Prioritize application-oriented hands-on experience training sessions over content-focused workshops. These continuous sessions should monitor and evaluate the status quo of teachers periodically.
- **Classroom observations:** Future research could complement teacher-reported perceptions with classroom observations, lesson plans, or other documentary evidence to assess actual implementation.

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