ABCDE: An Enduring Education Reform for a Sustainable Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

Sri Lanka's forthcoming education reform of 2026 proposes sweeping changes—competency-based curricula, modular learning, digital integration, and vocational pathways—to address inequities and prepare youth for a globalized world. A careful look at the education reforms of the past, however, reveals that structural and curricular adjustments alone cannot effect the desired transformation. Rather, the reforms should be realized within a moral and attitudinal framework if they are to produce changes that endure. Using an interpretive reflection of the author's lived experiences within Sri Lanka's school reality, and validating it against the existing literature, this paper thus attempts to address that gap by introducing a value-based spiral framework of—Attendance, Belongingness, Cleanliness, Discipline, and English (ABCDE), within which the proposed reform agenda should be realized. In so doing, the paper draws on existing research and national data, and aligns the model with wisdom philosophies and education reforms in the East as well as the West, such as Buddhist Noble Eightfold Path (*Arya Ashtanga Marga*), UNESCO's 5P project for 2030 (People, Peace, Planet, Prosperity, Participation), and the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm (IPP) of context, experience, reflection, action, and evaluation. While the ABCDE framework—taken literally as the five components and figuratively as the foundational value-orienting principles—is primarily proposed as a mindful compass for reformers, school administrators, teachers, and learners toward an effective implementation of the proposed education reforms, the paper advances several propositions for translating these principles into everyday school practice. In addition, it identifies and recommends sustained stakeholder involvement and future research for the professional development and ongoing refinement of the framework. It is hoped that ABCDE, when inculcated as an everyday slogan of every educator, learner, and citizen in the country, will serve as a prerequisite in the proposed education reforms, transforming policy rhetoric to everyday transcendence, cultivating future generations who are not only employable but also enlightened, not merely competitive but citizenly.

Keywords: Sri Lanka, education, reform, sustainable change, ABCDE framework

INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka's education system, despite its proud and long-standing commitment to free and universal schooling introduced by C. W. W. Kannangara in 1943, faces mounting challenges: early school dropouts, uneven access to resources, declining discipline, limited English proficiency, and inadequate preparation for human capital and global citizenship (Ahmed, 2020; Arachchi, 2022; Bishri, 2024). As the government takes responsibility for providing optimal school education for every child, the Ministry of Education (MOE) intends to address these challenges through its new 2026 National Education Reform Agenda with competency-based curricula, modular learning, vocational pathways, and digital integration (MOE, 2025; President's Media Division [PMD], 2025a).

Despite multiple reform attempts in Sri Lanka since independence, the education system has not been able to effect the transformative changes the reforms intended to bring about. Scholars consistently highlight that the primary challenge is not the absence of reform proposals, but the repeated failure to translate policy into sustained implementation (Jayasooriya, 2025; Little, 2011). Political cycles continuously interrupt continuity, resulting in short-lived and fragmented reform trajectories. According to the National Education Commission (NEC) reports, reforms have focused disproportionately on curricular restructuring while neglecting fundamental structural and cultural determinants such as teacher capacity, equitable school conditions, student

well-being, and values formation (NEC, 2003). The persistent examination-driven orientation further reinforces a narrow academic rationality that undermines creativity, holistic development, and meaningful learning (Gunawardena & Jayaweera, 2006; NEC, 2003). As a result, inequities between rural and urban schools remain deeply entrenched, and outcomes have remained stagnant despite policy innovation (Gunawardena & Lekamge, 2004).

The identified gap is therefore not a lack of reform ideas but the absence of a grounded, values-centered, culturally-embedded framework that can operationalize reform sustainably at the level of practice. According to the NEC proposal of 2003, the school is increasingly required to assume functions that were traditionally fulfilled by the close-knit family, such as instilling discipline, nurturing wholesome attitudes and values, safeguarding children from harmful social and commercial influences, and providing guidance and counselling to both learners and parents, thereby expanding the mission of the education system beyond mere academic instruction.

While education reforms aim to create a system that enables individuals to live satisfying and peaceful lives—by being productive, knowledgeable, practically skilled, disciplined, refined, and able to communicate effectively for the well-being of society—this widening of school responsibilities simultaneously reveals a tension: structural innovation, professional training, and curricula reform alone, without moral grounding, risk becoming mechanical, and moral aspiration without structural, personnel, and curricula support risks becoming mere rhetoric.

This gap justifies the need to explore an alternative that helps address the existing vacuum of ethical coherence and policy continuity. In this context, this paper proposes a framework grounded in Attendance, Belongingness, Cleanliness, Discipline, and English, with the acronym ABCDE functioning both literally as a reference to its five components and figuratively as an articulation of the framework's foundational character. Drawing on an interpretive reflection of the author's lived experiences within Sri Lanka's school context, and situating these insights alongside existing scholarship, the paper advances the framework as a prerequisite for the proposed education reforms of 2026, thereby reconciling educational modernization with moral formation. In so doing, it aims to provide an everyday slogan—both a moral compass and a practical guide—for school leadership (policy-decision makers, administrators, teachers, and researchers) as well as students, in support of building an enduring reform that contributes to sustainable national transformation.

Attendance: Voluntary Participation, Equitable Access, and Continuity

Statistics show that in 2011, 358,596 children were enrolled in school. After 11 years of initial education, approximately the same number of children would have sat the GCE Ordinary Level examination in 2021 (PMD, 2025a). However, PMD reports that only around 311,000 children appeared for the exam in 2021, indicating that nearly 47,000 children below 15 years of age had left school between 2011 and 2021, the year schools reopened after a long period of closure and remote learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

On the other hand, according to the national prison administration data, the juvenile imprisonment rate in Sri Lanka was reported to be 0.1% of the total prison population (a figure from a 2013 assessment) (World Prison Brief [WPB], 2025). While the total prison population as of October 3, 2025, was 34,727, this is 2.6 times higher than the official capacity of the prison system in Sri Lanka (which is 13,241). Among the prisoners, approximately 80% had not passed the G.C.E. Ordinary Level examination. 64% of those imprisoned were arrested for drug-related offenses, and 70% of those so arrested for drugs have not progressed beyond Year 8 (PMD, 2025a,b).

Over the years, researchers found several significant factors contributing to absenteeism and school dropout, such as economic backgrounds, parental conflicts, emigration, lack of interest in the existing school systems due to inadequate infrastructure, teacher shortage, lack of learning opportunities, burnout, workload, and unsafe conditions (Bishri, 2024; Gunawardena & Jayaweera, 2006; Perera, 2012). They further agree that school absenteeism and early dropout feed into a vicious cycle that ultimately erodes the social fabric, weakens family and community ties, and ruptures the moral foundation of society (See Figure 1).

Figure 1: A Vicious Cycle of Social Decay
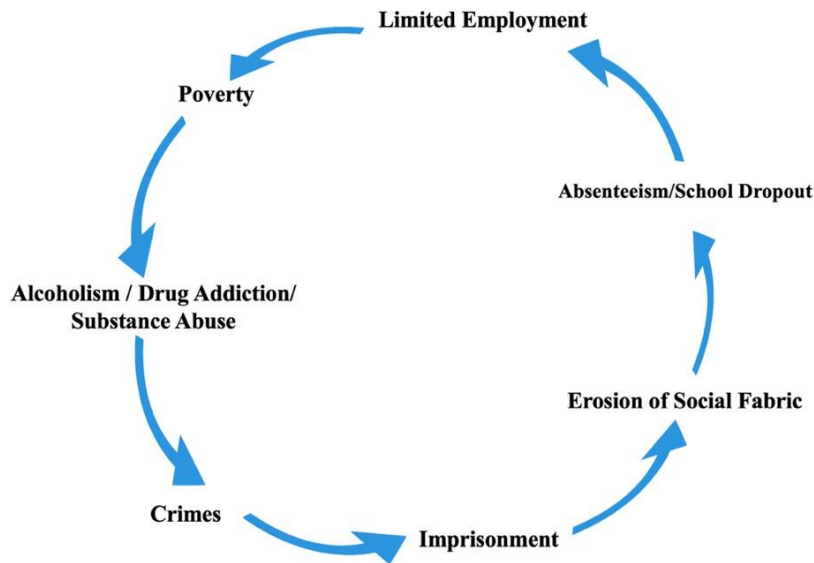
Note: A cycle illustrating how school absenteeism and dropout trigger a cascading chain of socioeconomic consequences leading to the erosion of the social fabric.

To break this vicious cycle, the proposed education reform of 2026 is convinced that no child should leave school without completing 13 years of compulsory education. If a child is absent from school for three consecutive days, for example, the reform demands that a state official conduct a personal investigation into that child's circumstances (PMD, 2025a). To that end, the reform expects to move beyond mere curricular changes to transformations in fundamentals such that the desired socioeconomic transformation is sought through children's increased attendance in school, regular participation in learning, and equitable access to education facilities and opportunities across the island. For this reason, the proposed ABCDE framework honors attendance beyond mere physical registration. It signifies a voluntary presence, equitable participation in the national resources and knowledge acquisition, and commitment to a continuing and conscious nation-building and citizenship development process.

Belonging: Social Inclusion, Emotional Safety, and Reconciliation

Adapting a participatory approach, not only in the systemic reform at large but also in classroom pedagogies, helps reduce the rates of school absenteeism and dropouts (Pressoire, 2008). The more children are present in an ideal learning environment that fosters emotional safety, empathy, identity, and peace, the more opportunities they have to lay a sound emotional, psychological, social, and intellectual foundation. Studies have shown that while racial stereotypes and cultural messages about wealth and inequality are learnt in early stages of education, a more participatory learning environment can help develop inclusive attitudes, skills, and values—such as wise use of resources, cultural diversity, gender equality, and democracy—that support sustainable development (Samuelsson & Kaga, 2008; Sarathchandra, 2008).

It is in this light that the ABCDE framework sees the sense of belonging to be dependent on attendance. While Maslow's hierarchy, proposed in 1943, categorizes love and belonging as human motivational factors second only to physiological and safety needs, the universality of this value was emphasized in the author's own doctoral study on global citizenship, an interpretative phenomenological research conducted in the context of Jesuit higher education in the United States. The findings suggest that the participants considered belongingness to be an experience of welcome, care, relational warmth, and relationship-building that allows them to feel included, supported, and connected within new communities. Participants further found belongingness to contribute to their emotional and social integration, such that they spoke of how being included and received within a collective environment helped foster bonds, emotional security, and a sense of "feeling at home" in unfamiliar contexts, such as their own study abroad experiences, be they cultural, linguistic, or religious (Fernando, 2025).

In a multi-ethnic island-nation like Sri Lanka—where ethnic and linguistic tensions have shaped national history—belongingness is crucial for national growth and peacebuilding. Schools, after families, should ideally be the first places of reconciliation, where Sinhalese, Tamil, and Muslim children learn together, feel included, and celebrate diversity, a student formation essential to any lasting reconciliation in the country (Jayasooriya & Vickers, 2025). Schools can cultivate this through thoughtful intercultural activities, interreligious dialogue, student mentoring, and community-based projects. School administration, educators, and teachers alike should emphasize socio-emotional learning and inclusive pedagogies to nurture belonging in diverse classrooms, transforming schools into microcosms of social harmony and global citizenship in a pluralistic world (Hummel et al., 2024).

While the proposed 2026 education reform calls for a reevaluation of the schools that have no literary festivals, sports days, excursions, and cultural festivities such as Vesak, Tai Pongal, Holy Week, Eid, etc. (MOE, 2025; PMD, 2025a), it should be kept in mind that belongingness goes beyond providing mere opportunities for students to come together to embrace and enjoy diversity. It is an attitude, a feeling, an everyday habit that should be inculcated within oneself and within one's everyday life, both inside and outside the school, because, as the former Superior General of the Society of Jesus puts it,

Tomorrow's "whole person" cannot be whole without an educated awareness of society and culture with which to contribute socially, generously, in the real world. Tomorrow's whole person must have, in brief, a well-educated solidarity… Solidarity is learned through "contact" rather than through "concepts." When the heart is touched by direct experience, the mind may be challenged to change. Personal involvement with innocent suffering, with the injustice others suffer, is the catalyst for solidarity, which then gives rise to intellectual inquiry and moral reflection. (Kolvenbach, 2000, p. 10)

Cleanliness: Moral Clarity and Stewardship

Today, the world is plagued by crises of care, evident in issues such as poverty, migration, refugees, gender inequality, climate change, and sustainable development challenges. Care crises refer to "the complex process of destabilization of a previous model of sharing responsibilities on the care and sustainability of life, which entails a reorganization of the care work" (Leivas, 2019, p. 41). On the other hand, the care-education dichotomy, a concern raised by those who believe that care is often absent in formal education, and the public-private divide are not foreign to education literature (Ostrove, 2016; Sims, 2014).

Because these crises are persistent and because these divides are fundamental, irrespective of how developed the countries are, there exists an array of global efforts that aim to address them. For example, Japan's *O-Soji* school cleaning tradition teaches cooperation and respect for community spaces (Michael, 2025). With its "SG Clean" campaign started in 2020, Singapore's National Environmental Agency (NEA) collaborates with schools to instill cleanliness as a civic virtue, contributing to the country's global reputation for environmental order (NEA, 2020). Similarly, Sweden's "Green Flag Schools" program and "Green Schools" in China, Hong Kong, Israel, Mexico, Taiwan, and the USA, connect cleanliness with environmental sustainability (Gough, 2019).

In Sri Lanka, however, these care crises, public-private divide, and care-education dichotomy tend to become everyday phenomena. For instance, at home, we often find our living halls more presentable and arranged than our kitchen and bedroom spaces. At school, while its assembly ground (a public space) is always found clean, its backyard (private space) is often filled with garbage, fallen structures, broken tables and chairs, decayed materials, scribbled walls, outgrown vegetation, stinks, and filth; children clean their proper classrooms (public space), while leaving the toilets aside (the private space); they are trained to wash their hands before eating (ownership), while they carry their tiffin boxes home often unwashed and sometimes with food wasted inside (non-stewardship); and they are seldom trained to care for public places (library, home science room, laboratory, music or dance room) and things they use, and to leave them in at least the same or even better condition than they initially found them (stewardship).

Fruits of such a duality of values and standards, a dichotomized seed planted in early stages of formal education, cannot be avoided from being inculcated into students' personal codes and being transferred into

every aspect of life as they grow. Today, Sri Lanka's public transportation, government offices, hospitals, cinemas, sports complexes, and parks, needless to mention its public sanitary system, require a thorough cleansing or *shramadane* (Sinhalese word meaning voluntary sacrifice of labor for a common task such as cleaning) as much as its education system does. Recognizing this imperative, the current government, which has placed notable emphasis on its national "Clean Sri Lanka" project, including the island-wide "Quit Drugs" campaign, has launched its education sector initiative with the slogan "Our Toilets, Our Responsibility" (Education Times, 2025; PMD, 2025b). It focuses on improving hygienic sanitary facilities and practices in schools, promoting a shared use of sanitary facilities by teachers and students to ensure collaboration and equal responsibility, and fostering a culture of cleanliness, equity, and self-motivation that aligns with the national project.

To this end, the proposed Education Reform of 2026 seeks a cleansing that extends beyond one's personal hygiene to moral integrity and ecological consciousness by learning to respect the environment, public health, and shared resources. While formal education is essential to ensure that the change it solicits is holistic and sustainable, it should start from within. Cleanliness training in school should therefore focus on the formation of integrity of selfhood, clean learning, academic honesty (especially as digital assignments become more common under the proposed credit-based educational reforms), respect for others, and collective responsibility toward a sustainable common home. Through project-based learning, students can be trained to link personal cleanliness with planetary responsibility, aligning local practice with global citizenship and sustainability goals (Mc-Evoy, 2017; MOE, 2025; UNESCO, 2014). By introducing STEM and environmental streams, the proposed education reforms can integrate cross-curricular themes and sustainability modules, such as renewable energy, waste management, plastic avoidance and recycling, climate education, and clean data ethics in digital learning.

Embedding cleanliness as an everyday attitude, personal responsibility, or stewardship is fundamental for both educators and learners to create cleaner surroundings, cleaner data, cleaner governance, and a cleaner planet. It is for this reason that the ABCDE framework regards cleanliness, which is considered next to godliness, in progression with participation and belonging, and it signifies moral clarity, stewardship, and ethical responsibility.

Discipline: Self-Regulation, Academic Integrity, and Sustainable Future

The words "discipline" and "disciple" share the same Latin root, *discere*, meaning "to learn," and their connection reveals a deeper truth often overlooked in contemporary usage, where "discipline" gets associated with control, punishment, and imposed order. At its core, however, discipline means the method or training that enables learning, a structured and focused way of forming the mind, body, and spirit toward mastery or virtue. Accordingly, a disciple is someone who follows a path of formation, not out of blind obedience but through devoted practice and growth. In religious and philosophical traditions such as Buddhism and Christianity, being a disciple implies dedication to discipline, a teacher, or way of life, such as the *Dhamma* (Teaching) in Buddhism or The Way in Christianity.

For instance, the Buddhist understanding of discipline—often referred to as *sīla* (Pali) or *śīla* (Sanskrit)—is much deeper than the Western notion of mere obedience or external control. Translated as virtue, morality, or ethical conduct, discipline means engaging in character formation through voluntary practice and conscious effort (Rahula, 1996). It involves moral, mental, and spiritual training aimed at higher learning and insight, the cultivation of wisdom and compassion, the liberation of the mind (or inner transformation), and harmonious living. For this reason, Buddhism regards *sīla* as the foundation for the three pillars of spiritual training— *sīla* (ethical conduct), *samādhi* (concentration), and *paññā* (wisdom), because a mind disturbed by unethical action cannot perceive truth clearly.

Just as *sīla* is foundational for promoting mutual respect and harmony, discipline in education is not about punishment but about self-regulation, accountability, and moral reasoning (Rahula, 1996). It is the capacity to act rightly even without supervision, and therewith promote (a) respect for life and the dignity of all persons, (b) honesty and integrity in personal conduct, academic work, and social relationships, (c) mindful communication through dialogue and avoidance of harmful speech, and (d) moderation and balance in the use

of technology, time, and resources. Such practices nurture a culture of peaceful coexistence and shared responsibility, mirroring the ethical spirit of the Vinaya — the monastic code that sustains harmony in Buddhist communities.

Because discipline is fundamentally liberative and not restrictive, by cultivating it through self-mortification and mindfulness, learners are expected to gain freedom from impulsivity, distraction, and self-centeredness. Such a discipline is critical for a lasting reform of education in Sri Lanka, as children and youth of this age are becoming increasingly impulsive, distracted, and self-centered—thanks to fast internet, artificial intelligence (AI), social media, and microcultures and "digital divide" they create between genders and communities, exacerbating social inequality (Bozzola et al., 2022; UNICEF Sri Lanka, 2018). While it is primitive today to envision a school system detached from modern scientific and technological innovations, conceiving education solely as a technological reform devoid of moral and disciplinary foundations would constitute a profound pedagogical and moral crisis. It is because children growing up with technology but without decorum would be like edifices without foundations or temples without sanctuaries. Children without discipline are more susceptible to succumbing to pressure, losing themselves in every sense of the word, or giving up easily amidst the temptations and challenges of time, such as exam pressures, social-media addiction, anxiety, emptiness, and rote compliance. The effect of such a lack of discipline in the initial stages of formal formation is reflected in the rate of suicide in the country. Research shows, for example, that the suicide rate for young females (17–25 years) in Sri Lanka was 10 per 100,000. While this is the highest rate among all female age groups, for young males in the same age bracket, the rate is 28 per 100,000 (Bandara et al., 2024).

Against this backdrop, the proposed education reform of 2026 should prioritize discipline beyond exam readiness to include internal motivation, moral formation, and academic integrity. As credit-based, continuous-assessment systems replace rote exams, schools must nurture table discipline, time management, and ethical reasoning through mentorship and reflective dialogue. Discipline here means integrity training in AI use, collaborative work, and lifelong responsibility for learning, thus empowering children to work for the greater good, greater freedom, and greater maturity that integrates moral grounding with creative expression. To this end, while the proposed education reform foresees teacher training in AI and digital assessments, professional development in disciplines must also focus on AI ethics, plagiarism detection, and differentiated evaluation that adjust assessment methods to suit students' diverse needs, abilities, and learning styles (MOE, 2025; Rajapakse et al., 2024). In this way, discipline in the modern era entails learning to use technology responsibly, respecting intellectual property, and balancing automation with authentic learning. Put differently, under the new reform, school administration and teachers should be trained to evaluate not just the product of learning but also its process, and that is where discipline becomes an absolute requirement.

English: Global Competence, Communication, and Citizenship

In a globalized economy, English remains the global lingua franca that opens pathways to a world of opportunities—education, employment, cross-border collaborations, and global trades. In the context of Asia, English-medium initiatives in public schools, though unevenly distributed, have improved employability and global competitiveness, especially in the IT field and the global labor market (Bui et al., 2017; Coleman, 2011).

Despite achieving over 95% literacy, Sri Lanka faces persistent issues with English proficiency (MOE, 2025). Kannagara's education reforms during British rule had made English the compulsory second language and positioned it as the medium of instruction in schools, though following independence in 1948, the Sinhala-only Act, a strong political move passed in the parliament in 1956, is argued to have impaired the quality of English education in Sri Lanka as early as the 1960s (Jayasuriya, 1969). Today, six decades later, while the persistent urban–rural disparities, politicization, and exam-oriented nature of Sri Lanka's education continue to cry out for comprehensive innovations and sustainable reforms, shortages of English-proficient teachers and significant gaps in English-learning resources, particularly in rural schools, underscore not only the inequitable access to quality education but also the widening socio-economic divide between the rich and the poor.

Against these odds, the 2026 Reform Project expands English instruction alongside bilingual (Sinhalese and Tamil languages) and IT programs, aiming to equip students for regional and global mobility (MOE, 2025).

Multilingual education as such is indeed needed to anchor students' local cultural identity while helping them sail through global doors. It is important, therefore, to position English as a tool of empowerment for global participation, but not for elitism and privilege, a bridge language that needs to be democratized, ensuring that every child, rural or urban, learns to use it with confidence and dignity. Digital English labs, AI translation tools, teacher exchange programs, and multilingual pedagogies can help democratize English language learning and promote cross-border competencies and collaborations. In the reform process, however, care must be taken not to eclipse local languages with English; instead, they should be strengthened as core foundations for fostering well-educated solidarity, national reconciliation, and global identity.

Table 1: ABCDE of Educational Reforms

Letter	Value	Educational Meaning	Global Relevance
A	Attendance	Regular participation & access to learning	Right to education & lifelong learning
B	Belongingness	Emotional inclusion & community cohesion	Social harmony & global citizenship
C	Cleanliness	Physical, moral, & environmental hygiene	Sustainability & ecological ethics
D	Discipline	Self-control, accountability, & integrity	Ethical behavior & civic responsibility
E	English	Communication & global connectivity	Global competence & employability

Note: The table highlights the educational meaning and global relevance of the proposed ABCDE framework.

ABCDE: Prerequisites

With its local urgency and global relevance (see Table 1), the proposed ABCDE framework is more than a pedagogical checklist for educators in Sri Lanka. First, it is a moral compass because each of its five dimensions embodies principles that deeply resonate with the Buddhist Noble Eightfold Path (*Arya ashtanga marga*) of self-liberation (Rahula, 1996). For example, Attendance in the ABCDE corresponds to right effort or energy (*Samma-Vayama*) or the mindful perseverance to stay on the path; Belongingness aligns with right intentions, thoughts, or attitude (*Samma-Sankappa*) and right speech (*Samma-Vacca*) that foster empathy and harmony; Cleanliness evokes right vision (*Samma-Ditti*) and right or integral action (*Samma-Kammanta*), rooted in moral purity and stewardship; Discipline reflects right mind or thoughts (*Samma-Sati*), right concentration (*Samma-Samadhi*), right speech (*Samma Vacca*), right action (*Samma-Kammanta*), and right livelihood (*Samma-Ajiva*), cultivating inner regulation and moral wisdom; and English parallels right effort or energy (*Samma-Vayama*), directed toward understanding, dialogue, global literacy, and shared human insight. Together, ABCDE reinterprets the Buddhist path of liberation as a contemporary educational paradigm for liberating not only the self but the whole nation from ignorance, inequity, and inertia.

Secondly, ABCDE also parallels UNESCO's 5Ps framework—People, Peace, Planet, Prosperity, and Participation—which undergirds the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Mc-Evoy, 2017; UNESCO, 2014). The ABCDE model aspires to concretize these global aspirations in the local classroom: Attendance affirms *People*, the dignity and respect for human personhood and rights as well as inclusive and equitable access to resources; Belongingness advances *Peace* and social cohesion through empathy and dialogue; Cleanliness safeguards *Planet* by taking ethical conduct and moral duty beyond personal hygiene to environmental stewardship to respond to the care crises in the world; Discipline ensures *Prosperity* through ethical leadership and responsible productivity; and English nurtures *Participation*, bridging nations through a common language of communication and collaboration.

The conceptual validity of ABCDE can be further validated by considering it through the lens of some of the world's most recognized educational pedagogies. For example, the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm (IPP)—the hallmark of Jesuit education since 1548—also known as the Integrated Pedagogical Paradigm, operationalizes holistic formation through a circular process of context, experience, reflection, action, and evaluation (Dickel, 2017; Duminuco, 1993; Pousson & Myers, 2018; Xavier, 2020). In attempting to align ABCDE with the IPP, one could say that attendance provides the *context* for inclusion; Belongingness deepens *experience* through relational learning; Cleanliness calls for *reflection* on one's moral and ecological responsibility; Discipline moves toward *action* through self-mastery and integrity; and English (as a global language) enables *evaluation* through common language, dialogue, and collaboration. Similarly, the ABCDE framework could also be interpreted through the 3H model of education ('Head' or cognitive domain; 'Heart' or socio-emotional domain; and 'Hands' or behavioral domain), the education for stewardship and love, and the pedagogical reforms introduced by thinkers such as John Dewey and Paulo Freire, who saw education as a conscious, moral, and reflective process. In this way, the type of education that the ABCDE envisions to impart could be said as the *education of the whole person*.

The ABCDE framework's alignment with various philosophical, religious, and secular foundations, as well as with some of the best global educational practices, renders it not only intercultural but also international. It embodies the harmony between ancient wisdom traditions and contemporary educational sciences, making them prerequisites for a total reform that aspires to see education, in Gaudelli's (2016) words, as *everyday transcendence*. As Figure 2 suggests, the elements of the framework operate not in isolation but in a causal-relational sequence, such that changes in one is expected to produce a downstream changes in the next: Attendance invites Belongingness as being present allows connection; Belongingness nurtures Cleanliness as those who feel valued respect their surroundings; Cleanliness strengthens Discipline as those who care for the self and environment demands moral order; Discipline supports mastery of English because consistency and confidence in communication grow from inner order; Competency in global communication in turn reinforces further participation (Attendance). In this way, ABCDE is expected to form a spiral rather than a circular framework because, in its progression from one element to the other, it constantly revisits its own fundamentals and refines itself, thus affecting continuous learning, reflective reform, and sustainable growth.

Figure 2: The ABCDE Spiral
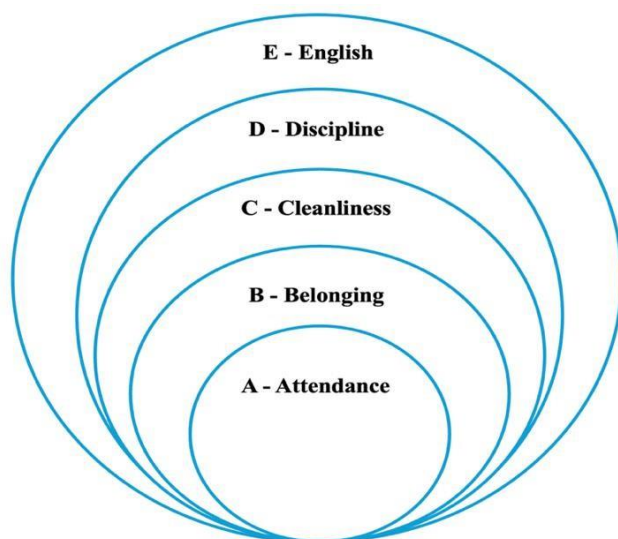
Note: A spiral relationship of Attendance, Belongingness, Cleanliness, Discipline, and English leading to continuous learning, reflective reform, and sustainable growth.

From Framework to Practice: A Roadmap for An Enduring Education Reform

To strengthen the practical orientation of the ABCDE framework, it is essential to demonstrate how its five dimensions can be enacted across diverse school contexts in Sri Lanka. While the framework should first be inculcated as a moral compass and a pedagogical guide for the school, it should also be envisioned to permeate

every aspect of everyday life in and out of the school. To begin with, having the framework displayed on billboards, classrooms, and in common venues, and integrating it into every conference, assembly, community event, and sports gathering at school is essential. In this way, the framework can remind all stakeholders of its potential to nurture holistic human development. Additionally, the following applications, which warrant further validation through empirical research in the context of Sri Lanka, could be grounded within rural, urban, and semi-urban educational environments in the country.

Attendance (A): As the proposed Education Reform of 2026 has it, making school attendance a national educational priority is fundamental. Provincial councils could establish specialized liaison units to collaborate with school administrations, village officers (*gramasevaka*), and social workers to identify students at risk of absenteeism and school dropout. Through contextual analysis of school-related, family-related, and community-related factors, these offices could implement targeted interventions to direct and accompany vulnerable students back into the learning environment. Within schools, a culture of presence should be cultivated by creating welcoming, safe, and engaging learning spaces free from bullying, violence, and substance abuse. While systematizing and strengthening regular parent-teacher meetings and paper trails between them is needed, *Attendance improvement circles* aimed to identify the root causes of absenteeism and dropouts can be formed among faculty, staff, parents, and students to encourage mutual accountability among students. Positive policy-level strategies, such as setting a maximum number of excused absences, instituting recognition awards for perfect attendance, and requiring mandatory meetings for the student and parent(s) with school authorities for repeated or unexplained absences, could be systematized (Positive Action Staff, 2023). The US Department of Education (2007) has found that these measures have positive effects on students' behavior and academic achievement. Also, establishing a proactive system of parental engagement through direct calls and follow-up visits can further strengthen this culture of commitment to school attendance and participation.

Belongingness (B): In a multi-ethnic, multi-religious educational environment such as Sri Lanka's, belongingness must extend beyond symbolic morning assemblies to deliberate pedagogical engagement. Weekly classroom sessions incorporating discussions, debates, presentations, role-play, and collaborative projects can address themes such as unity in diversity, cultural celebrations, environmental responsibility, drug awareness, and civic participation. A time-limited and teacher-supervised *student buddy* system—a practice commonly employed in schools, universities, and workplace settings in the West—can be introduced across each school year to foster mentoring relationships that provide mutual support, guidance, and accountability (Hartenstein, G., 2024; Lentini et al., 2005; NOSH, 2014). Such a system helps ensure that each child feels seen, safe, and included. The IPP can serve as a reflective tool to evaluate the effectiveness of these initiatives, fostering continuous improvement through contextual reflection, experience, and action. Such an approach is expected to foster not only school harmony but also interreligious dialogue, intercultural understanding, and national reconciliation.

Cleanliness (C): Beginning with personal and classroom spaces, cleanliness should be extended to the upkeep of common school spaces. Going along with the "Clean Sri Lanka" education sector initiative, which has its slogan as "Our Toilets, Our Responsibility" (Education Times, 2025; PMD, 2025b), it should be extended to care for school grounds, halls, libraries, labs, corridors, and surrounding roads, which may be systematically distributed among classes under teacher supervision. Rotating these assignments between classes and throughout the academic year helps ensure equitable participation of students with greater willingness and shared responsibility. Integrating such routines into morning schedules can reinforce discipline and service-mindedness as the first things that one needs to grow with, before achieving academic excellence. Parent and community involvement can be encouraged, particularly for more labor-intensive activities such as campus maintenance and neighborhood cleanup efforts.

A more participatory approach, as such, is thought to be key to developing collective responsibility and community belonging. Under the proposed Education Reform 2026 (MOE, 2025), these activities could be linked to credit and modular-based learning as well as higher ecological stewardship opportunities: green projects, student-led beach cleanups, well restoration, or health-awareness campaigns addressing issues, such as dengue prevention measures, waste management, and clean water initiatives. Using the IPP, reflection sessions can connect the action of environmental responsibility with moral discipline and spiritual renewal,

making it an integral part of holistic development. Having sessions with no more than 7 or 8 individuals (comprising administrators, teachers, parents, alumni, and students) every six weeks or so to evaluate the progress of these projects and the school life in general would allow for a holistic response. In forming these groups, it is important to pay attention to gender balance, ethnic/religious balance, and to include kids from different (but proximate) grade levels. These committees could also discern and introduce any topics that need timely attention and additional interventions.

Discipline (D): There exists a variety of complementary strategies that help promote responsibility, respect, and reflection inside the classroom. For example, *restorative justice* and *social-emotional learning* (SEL) can cultivate empathy, emotional awareness, and conflict resolution among students, while *positive reinforcement* and *consistent routines* help establish clear behavioral expectations (Hanover, 2017; Strobel Education, 2023). Additionally, structured models such as the *LEAST Approach*—ranging from non-intervention to direct action—enable teachers to respond proportionally to misbehavior, ensuring that classroom management remains calm, constructive, and conducive to learning (WEAC, 2025). With proper training in these strategies, educators can be empowered to apply them on an everyday basis. Instead of punitive measures, *restorative dialogues* can help students acknowledge mistakes, understand their impact, and take constructive steps toward reconciliation. Schools can also establish *peer discipline committees*, guided by teachers, to mediate conflicts and promote restorative justice practices. Involving parents in this process could help strengthen the partnership and transparency between home and school over the problems that students encounter. Regular communication and shared responsibility, as such, help transform discipline from an external imposition into an internalized virtue that approaches issues with a collective responsibility and ethical citizenship.

English (E): Just as the Education Reform 2026 prioritizes English proficiency (MOE, 2025), the ABCDE framework emphasizes regular and continuous English usage within schools. While teacher capacity building is critical to address the existing shortage and uneven distribution of qualified English educators, exchange programs between national and provincial schools, for example, can be introduced to promote cross-learning and collaborative mentoring. *Student Buddy* partnerships both within and between schools can also be arranged to create equal learning opportunities, especially for those schools that lack language learning resources. Joint projects, such as classroom presentations, English Day programs, language exhibitions, and drama performances, could also be regularized and strengthened both within and among neighboring schools, fostering confidence, cross-cultural understanding, and expressive skills while positioning English as a medium of collaboration rather than hierarchy. As Sri Lanka moves toward integrating technological innovations within the proposed education reform, the use of multimedia and interactive digital learning platforms can offer significant opportunities and effective pedagogical tools for strengthening English-language exposure and cognitive development of different age groups.

Proposed Stakeholder Involvement

The Proposed Education Reform 2026 in Sri Lanka must be understood not as an intervention in an insulated or idealized educational setting, but as a reform emerging within an already complex and evolving system. For this reason, the integration of the ABCDE framework—encompassing Attendance, Belongingness, Cleanliness, Discipline, and English—should ideally occur in tandem with the proposed reform measures, allowing for a comprehensive pilot implementation whose effectiveness can be assessed over time. However, two significant considerations arise. First, from an ethical standpoint, it would be problematic to focus exclusively on a single school or a small cluster for an extended period, such as thirteen years, while neglecting the systemic needs and equity concerns of other schools. Second, introducing such a transformative model in the current context means engaging parents and communities who themselves were not educated under a similar value-centered system and who may resist new practices due to entrenched habits, socio-cultural norms, or limited awareness.

For this reason, the integration of the ABCDE framework should not be confined to schools alone, but adopted as a national policy ethos guiding all public institutions, ministries, and developmental programs.

In this regard, it is recommended that the government institutionalize the ABCDE framework as a cross-sectoral national policy, a moral and developmental compass informing every state ministry, department, project, and strategy. Similar to "Clean Sri Lanka Project" which extends to include "Quit Drugs" campaign carried out by the Ministry of Defense, for example, the Ministry of Education could embed the framework in curricula, teacher formation, and school governance; among those who can operationalize "Cleanliness" component through public hygiene, nutrition, and sustainable well-being campaigns are the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Water Supply, the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Wildlife and Water Resources Conservation, the Ministry of Irrigation, the Ministry of Tourism and Lands, the Ministry of Environment, the Ministry of Fisheries, the Ministry of Transportation and Highways, the Ministry of Shipping, Ports, and Aviation, and the Ministry of Trade, Commerce and Food Security; the Ministries of Buddha Sasana, Religious, and Cultural Affairs and Youth and Sports, together with religious leadership in the country, can embody "Discipline" and "Belongingness" through national reconciliatory programs and sportsmanship initiatives. The Ministry of Women, Child Affairs, and Social Empowerment could promote family engagement, inclusion, and care for vulnerable children as extensions of "Attendance" and "Belongingness," while the Ministry of Labour and Foreign Employment can align "English" and "Discipline" with workforce readiness and ethical professionalism.

When ABCDE principles are integrated into every aspect of the government's operational culture, both within and between—whether in infrastructure development, social welfare, or economic planning—the framework becomes more than a mere prerequisite for educational reform; it evolves into a national moral blueprint. Through such coordinated governance, Sri Lanka's development agenda can transcend fragmented policymaking and move toward a coherent vision of human-centered progress. Embedding the ABCDE framework as a guiding philosophy of all national projects ensures that education reform is not confined to classrooms but extends to the formation of citizens, institutions, and communities. In doing so, the framework positions itself as both the ethical foundation and the practical methodology for achieving the holistic transformation envisioned in the 2026 reform agenda.

CONCLUSION

As Sri Lanka's Education Reform of 2026 advances toward digital integration, vocational pathways, and continuous assessment, the ABCDE framework provides a complementary values-based architecture that roots reform in moral purpose and human dignity. If the nation is to cultivate a sustainable economy and a resilient society, its education system must transcend policy documents and penetrate the hearts, habits, and horizons of its people. The ABCDE framework embodies this vision to educate not only for employment but for enlightenment, not only for competition but for compassion. As a result, the framework thus proposed becomes more than a reform strategy; a mindful mantra of all school administrators, policy decision makers, researchers, educators, teachers, and learners in the country.

For the framework's long-term success, active engagement of all stakeholders is imperative. Policymakers must ensure national and structural support, curriculum changes, and accountability. Administrators must create enabling institutional cultures that prioritize continuous professional development of the proposed framework alongside curriculum reform. Teachers must interpret and apply the framework pedagogically, making it a classroom practice. Students must embody the spirit of the framework through lived practice. Continuous professional development—emphasizing reflective pedagogy, emotional intelligence, and mentoring—should accompany implementation. Peer-learning clusters and collaborative forums can help bridge disparities between schools of differing resources. Government and non-government agencies can also facilitate resource pooling mechanisms to reduce disparities between rural and urban schools. Finally, participatory research documenting the lived experiences of administrators, teachers, students, and communities will be vital for ongoing refinement of the framework. In doing so, the ABCDE framework can become more than a reform strategy—it can evolve into the moral grammar of Sri Lanka's educational renaissance, shaping generations of learners rooted in equity, empathy, and excellence.

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