

## **The Student Parliament Programme in Sri Lankan Schools: Attitudes, Implementation Challenges, and Practices**

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### **Abstract**

Student participation in school governance is widely recognized as an effective approach to promoting democratic citizenship, leadership development, and active civic engagement among young people. In Sri Lanka, the Student Parliament Programme was formally introduced through Ministry of Education Circular No. 03/2019 to provide students in Grades 6–13 with practical experiences of democratic governance while fostering leadership, responsibility, and peacebuilding. Despite its national implementation, limited empirical evidence exists regarding the effectiveness of the programme and the challenges encountered during its implementation. This study examined students' and teachers' attitudes towards the Student Parliament Programme, identified the challenges affecting its implementation, and explored strategies to improve its effectiveness in Sri Lankan schools. A mixed-methods research design was employed using questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and document analysis. The study involved 10 principals, 10 teachers serving as deputy secretary-generals of student parliaments, and 50 student parliament representatives selected purposively from ten secondary schools in the Matale Education Zone. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were analysed through thematic analysis. The findings revealed that although most students expressed positive attitudes towards the programme, its educational objectives have not been fully achieved because of limited awareness of the governing policy framework, inadequate administrative support, insufficient financial and physical resources, and weak student participation in school decision-making. The study further found that female students, particularly those studying in the Tamil medium, demonstrated comparatively higher levels of participation in leadership activities. The findings highlight the need for strengthened institutional support, systematic teacher training, greater student awareness of democratic governance, and enhanced collaboration between the Ministry of Education and the Election Commission to improve programme implementation. The study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on democratic citizenship education and school governance while providing practical recommendations for strengthening student participation in Sri Lankan schools.

*Keywords:* Student Parliament Programme, democratic citizenship, student participation, school governance, leadership development, democratic education, Sri Lanka

## Introduction

Education plays a fundamental role in preparing young people to become informed, responsible, and active citizens in democratic societies. Beyond developing academic knowledge, schools are expected to cultivate democratic values, leadership skills, social responsibility, respect for diversity, and active participation in decision-making processes. Democratic citizenship education has therefore become an essential component of educational reforms worldwide, enabling students to develop the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values necessary to participate effectively in democratic governance and community development (Biesta, 2011; Council of Europe, 2018).

Student participation in school governance is increasingly recognised as an effective strategy for promoting democratic citizenship and developing future leaders. Student councils, student parliaments, and other representative bodies provide students with opportunities to experience democratic decision-making, express their opinions, represent their peers, and collaborate with school authorities in addressing school-related issues (Fielding, 2001; Mitra, 2004). Such experiences contribute to the development of leadership, communication, critical thinking, teamwork, and problem-solving skills while strengthening students' sense of responsibility and belonging within the school community (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004).

International organisations have consistently emphasised the importance of meaningful student participation in education. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) recognises children's right to express their views freely in matters affecting them, while Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) promotes inclusive and equitable quality education that prepares learners to become responsible global citizens (United Nations, 2015). Similarly, UNESCO (2021) highlights democratic participation and global citizenship education as key priorities for building peaceful, inclusive, and sustainable societies.

Sri Lanka has a long tradition of providing free education and promoting democratic governance within its educational system. Recognising the importance of civic engagement among young people, the Ministry of Education introduced the Student Parliament Programme through Circular No. 03/2019, replacing earlier circulars issued in 2008 and 2016. The programme aims to provide students in Grades 6–13 with practical opportunities to understand democratic principles, participate in school governance, develop leadership competencies, strengthen civic responsibility, and contribute to peacebuilding and national reconciliation (Ministry of Education, 2019). The initiative was also influenced by the recommendations of the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC), which emphasised the

need to strengthen democratic values, social cohesion, and reconciliation through the education system following Sri Lanka's civil conflict.

The Student Parliament Programme mirrors several key features of Sri Lanka's parliamentary system by establishing student representatives, including a Speaker, Prime Minister, Ministers, and Deputy Ministers, who are elected through democratic procedures within schools. Through these structures, students are expected to gain first-hand experience of elections, parliamentary procedures, collective decision-making, leadership, and public accountability. When implemented effectively, student parliaments provide an authentic learning environment that extends citizenship education beyond classroom instruction into practical democratic experiences.

Previous studies have demonstrated that student participation in school governance positively influences democratic attitudes, leadership development, civic engagement, and students' confidence (Cunningham & Ladd, 2018; Murad, 2014). More recently, Abhuhlimeh (2025) reported a strong positive relationship between participation in student parliaments and the development of democratic values among secondary school students. However, other studies have also identified several barriers to successful implementation, including limited administrative support, insufficient teacher commitment, inadequate financial resources, tokenistic participation, and unequal opportunities for student involvement in decision-making (Mitra, 2004; Flutter & Rudduck, 2004).

Within the Sri Lankan context, empirical research examining the implementation of the Student Parliament Programme remains limited. Most existing studies have focused on citizenship education, educational leadership, or civic education more broadly, while relatively little attention has been given to evaluating how student parliaments function in schools, the attitudes of students and teachers towards the programme, and the practical challenges affecting its implementation. Furthermore, limited evidence is available regarding whether the programme achieves its intended objectives of strengthening democratic participation, student leadership, and school governance.

Research conducted by Wedikandage (2021, 2024, 2025) highlights that educational reforms promoting inclusion, multicultural understanding, leadership, and active learning require supportive school environments, effective educational leadership, and meaningful participation by all stakeholders. These studies suggest that democratic initiatives implemented within schools can only achieve their intended outcomes when adequate institutional support, teacher commitment, and student engagement are present. These perspectives provide an important foundation for

understanding the implementation of the Student Parliament Programme within Sri Lankan schools.

Against this background, the present study investigates the attitudes of students and teachers towards the Student Parliament Programme, identifies the major challenges affecting its implementation, and proposes practical strategies for strengthening democratic participation and student leadership in Sri Lankan schools. By examining the programme through the perspectives of students, teachers, and school principals, this study contributes to the growing literature on democratic citizenship education, educational leadership, and school governance while providing evidence-based recommendations for policymakers and educational practitioners.

## **Literature Review**

### *Democratic Citizenship Education*

Democratic citizenship education has become a fundamental component of educational systems worldwide, aiming to prepare learners to become responsible, informed, and active citizens. It extends beyond teaching political knowledge by fostering democratic values, human rights, social justice, critical thinking, and civic participation (Biesta, 2011). According to the Council of Europe (2018), democratic citizenship education enables students to understand democratic institutions, appreciate cultural diversity, respect differing viewpoints, and actively participate in community life. Similarly, UNESCO (2021) emphasises that schools should provide authentic opportunities for learners to engage in democratic practices rather than limiting citizenship education to theoretical classroom instruction.

Within school environments, democratic citizenship education encourages students to participate in collaborative decision-making, solve problems collectively, and develop leadership competencies through practical experiences. Research has consistently demonstrated that students who actively participate in democratic school activities exhibit higher levels of civic responsibility, political efficacy, communication skills, and social engagement (Torney-Purta et al., 2001; Biesta, 2011).

In Sri Lanka, democratic citizenship education has received increasing attention following educational reforms intended to strengthen social cohesion, peacebuilding, and national reconciliation after the civil conflict. Educational initiatives introduced by the Ministry of Education, including the Student Parliament Programme, seek to provide students with practical democratic experiences while developing leadership skills and civic responsibility (Ministry of Education, 2019). Wedikandage (2021)

argues that meaningful citizenship education requires schools to create inclusive learning environments where students actively participate in decision-making rather than remaining passive recipients of knowledge.

### *Student Participation in School Governance*

Student participation is recognised internationally as an essential principle of democratic education. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child affirms children's right to express their views on matters affecting them, including educational decisions (United Nations, 1989). Consequently, many education systems have established student councils, student representative committees, and student parliaments to facilitate student involvement in school governance.

Student participation contributes significantly to students' personal and social development. Fielding (2001) argues that genuine student participation transforms schools into democratic communities where learners become partners rather than passive recipients of education. Similarly, Mitra (2004) found that participation in school governance enhances students' confidence, communication skills, leadership abilities, and commitment to school improvement.

Research also indicates that effective student participation improves school climate and strengthens relationships between students and teachers (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004). However, participation must be meaningful rather than symbolic. Tokenistic participation, where students are consulted without influencing decision-making, often leads to frustration and reduced motivation among student representatives (Hart, 1992). Therefore, successful student governance requires institutional commitment, supportive leadership, and opportunities for students to contribute to school policies and activities.

### *Student Parliament Programmes and Leadership Development*

Student parliaments are widely used as educational mechanisms for developing democratic leadership, citizenship competencies, and collaborative decision-making skills. They provide opportunities for students to experience electoral processes, parliamentary procedures, policy discussions, and community service activities within authentic educational settings.

Murad (2014) found that student parliaments in Macedonia strengthened democratic participation by encouraging free elections, student representation, and collaborative governance. Similarly, Cunningham and Ladd (2018) reported that student parliament activities contributed positively to peacebuilding and democratic

engagement among students in Liberia. Nevertheless, the authors also noted that critical thinking and meaningful debate remained underdeveloped because parliamentary activities often focused on ceremonial functions rather than genuine participation.

Recent evidence from Jordan demonstrated a strong positive relationship between participation in student parliament activities and students' democratic values (Abhuhalmeh, 2025). Students who actively engaged in parliamentary discussions exhibited greater political awareness, leadership confidence, and civic responsibility than their peers.

Leadership development within schools is increasingly recognised as an essential educational outcome. School-based leadership opportunities allow students to develop decision-making, negotiation, conflict resolution, communication, and organisational skills (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000). Wedikandage (2024) similarly emphasises that learner-centred educational practices encourage creativity, innovation, collaboration, and leadership development by providing students with opportunities to engage actively in authentic learning experiences.

### *Challenges in Implementing Student Parliament Programmes*

Although student parliaments have considerable educational potential, their implementation often faces numerous organisational and institutional barriers. Previous studies have identified inadequate administrative support, limited teacher commitment, insufficient funding, lack of student awareness, and weak monitoring mechanisms as common implementation challenges (Mitra, 2004; Cunningham & Ladd, 2018).

Teachers play a decisive role in determining the success of democratic school programmes. Where teachers perceive student participation as an additional administrative burden rather than an educational opportunity, student governance structures tend to become inactive or symbolic (Fielding, 2001). Similarly, ineffective school leadership may discourage meaningful student participation by centralising decision-making within school administrations.

Resource limitations also constrain programme implementation. Financial shortages, inadequate training, and lack of institutional coordination frequently prevent student representatives from organising parliamentary meetings, community projects, and democratic activities (Murad, 2014). Furthermore, unequal access to leadership positions may disadvantage female students, minority groups, or students from lower

socio-economic backgrounds unless schools deliberately promote inclusive participation.

Research conducted in Sri Lanka has similarly highlighted the importance of supportive educational leadership, institutional collaboration, and inclusive school cultures in achieving educational reforms (Wedikandage, 2014; Wettasinghe & Wedikandage, 2023). These findings suggest that the effectiveness of the Student Parliament Programme depends not only on policy directives but also on the commitment of school leaders, teachers, and educational authorities to democratic practices.

### **Research Gap**

Although international literature demonstrates the educational value of student participation in school governance, empirical evidence regarding the implementation of the Student Parliament Programme in Sri Lankan schools remains limited. Existing Sri Lankan studies have largely examined citizenship education, educational leadership, or civic education separately, while few have investigated the effectiveness of student parliaments as institutional mechanisms for democratic participation. In particular, little is known about students' and teachers' attitudes towards the programme, the practical challenges encountered during implementation, and the extent to which the programme achieves its intended objectives under Ministry of Education Circular No. 03/2019.

This study addresses this gap by examining the implementation of the Student Parliament Programme in selected Sri Lankan secondary schools using a mixed-methods approach. It provides empirical evidence on stakeholders' attitudes, identifies implementation challenges, and proposes practical recommendations for strengthening democratic participation and school governance.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is underpinned by three complementary sociological theories: Structural Functional Theory, Conflict Theory, and Symbolic Interaction Theory. Together, these perspectives provide a comprehensive understanding of how student parliaments function within schools, how power relationships influence student participation, and how students construct meanings through democratic experiences.

#### *Structural Functional Theory*

Structural Functional Theory views society as an integrated system in which social institutions perform specific functions that contribute to social stability and cohesion

(Parsons, 1951). Schools are regarded as important social institutions responsible not only for academic instruction but also for transmitting social values, developing responsible citizens, and preparing students for participation in democratic society. According to Merton (1968), every social institution performs both manifest functions, which are intended and recognised, and latent functions, which are unintended but often beneficial consequences.

The Student Parliament Programme represents one such educational institution. Its manifest functions include promoting democratic citizenship, leadership development, civic responsibility, student participation in school governance, and peaceful conflict resolution. The programme also performs latent functions by strengthening students' interpersonal relationships, communication skills, teamwork, self-confidence, and organisational abilities.

However, Merton (1968) further argued that institutions may experience dysfunctions when they fail to achieve their intended purposes. Within the Student Parliament Programme, inadequate teacher support, insufficient administrative commitment, limited financial resources, and poor student awareness may prevent the programme from fulfilling its educational objectives. Consequently, Structural Functional Theory provides an appropriate framework for evaluating whether the programme effectively contributes to democratic education in Sri Lankan schools.

### *Conflict Theory*

Conflict Theory, developed primarily from the work of Karl Marx and later expanded by Max Weber, views society as characterised by unequal power relationships, competition, and struggles over resources (Marx & Engels, 1848/1970; Weber, 1947). Rather than assuming social harmony, the theory suggests that dominant groups seek to maintain authority while less powerful groups attempt to gain greater participation and influence.

Within schools, authority is generally concentrated among principals, teachers, and educational administrators, while students have relatively limited opportunities to influence institutional decision-making. Student parliaments were introduced to reduce this imbalance by providing students with formal mechanisms for participation in school governance. Nevertheless, where school administrators retain complete control over decision-making or fail to consider student proposals, participation becomes symbolic rather than democratic.

Conflict Theory also explains inequalities in leadership opportunities among students. Social class, gender, ethnicity, academic achievement, and popularity may

influence students' access to leadership positions. Previous studies have shown that democratic participation may unintentionally favour socially advantaged students unless schools deliberately create equitable opportunities for all learners (Apple, 2004). In the Sri Lankan context, the theory assists in interpreting challenges such as the limited consideration of student proposals, insufficient administrative support, and restricted student influence identified in this study.

### *Symbolic Interaction Theory*

Symbolic Interaction Theory focuses on the meanings individuals assign to social interactions, symbols, and everyday experiences (Blumer, 1969). According to Mead (1934), individuals develop their identities through interaction with others, while Cooley's (1902) concept of the *looking-glass self* explains how self-perceptions evolve through social feedback.

The Student Parliament Programme provides numerous symbolic experiences through elections, parliamentary debates, leadership positions, ministerial responsibilities, parliamentary procedures, and democratic rituals. Students attach meanings to roles such as Speaker, Prime Minister, Minister, or committee chairperson, and these meanings influence their attitudes, behaviours, and leadership identities.

Participation in elections, debates, committee meetings, and school governance activities allows students to develop democratic identities through continuous interaction with teachers and peers. At the same time, students may also imitate undesirable aspects of political culture, including excessive competition, unrealistic election promises, and factionalism. Symbolic Interaction Theory therefore provides valuable insights into how students interpret democratic participation and how these experiences shape their understanding of leadership and citizenship.

## **Research Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the implementation of the Student Parliament Programme in Sri Lankan schools. The mixed-methods approach was selected because it enables researchers to examine complex educational phenomena by combining the strengths of quantitative data, which provide measurable patterns, with qualitative data, which offer detailed insights into participants' experiences and perceptions (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Specifically, a convergent mixed-methods design was adopted, whereby quantitative and qualitative data were collected during the same phase of the study, analysed separately, and then integrated to provide a comprehensive interpretation of the findings

## **Research Approach**

The study adopted a pragmatic research paradigm, recognising that educational issues require multiple forms of evidence for meaningful interpretation. The quantitative component measured students' attitudes, awareness, and perceptions of the Student Parliament Programme, whereas the qualitative component explored the experiences of principals, teachers, and student representatives regarding programme implementation and associated challenges.

## **Sample**

A purposive sampling technique was employed because the study required participants with direct involvement in the Student Parliament Programme. This non-probability sampling method enabled the selection of information-rich participants who possessed relevant knowledge and practical experience (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Ten schools were purposively selected from four educational divisions within the Matale Education Zone:

Matale Division – 4 schools

Rattota Division – 2 schools

Ukuwela Division – 2 schools

Yatawatta Division – 2 schools

The final sample consisted of 70 participants, including: 10 Principals, 10 Teachers (Deputy Secretary-General/Teacher Coordinators), and 50 Student Parliament Representatives.

Among the student participants:

- 30 were male students
- 20 were female students
- Students represented both Sinhala-medium and Tamil-medium schools.

## **Research Instruments**

Four data collection instruments were employed to enhance the validity of the findings through methodological triangulation.

### *Questionnaire*

A structured questionnaire was administered to the fifty student parliament representatives. It consisted of closed-ended questions measured using categorical response options and several open-ended questions that enabled respondents to explain their views regarding the Student Parliament Programme.

### *Semi-Structured Interviews*

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the ten principals and ten teacher coordinators. These interviews explored participants' experiences, administrative practices, implementation challenges, and recommendations for improving the programme.

### *Participant Observation*

The researcher participated as an election observer during student parliament elections conducted in selected schools. Observation enabled the researcher to examine election procedures, student interactions, leadership behaviours, campaign activities, and democratic practices within their natural school settings.

### *Document Analysis*

Relevant documentary evidence, including Ministry of Education Circular No. 03/2019, school records, meeting minutes, election reports, and programme documents, was analysed to understand the intended implementation procedures and compare them with actual school practices.

## **Data Analysis**

Quantitative data analyzed through statistically and Qualitative data obtained from interviews, observations, and documents were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings enabled a more comprehensive understanding of the implementation of the Student Parliament Programme.

## **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical principles were strictly observed throughout the research process. Approval was obtained from the relevant educational authorities before commencing the study.

Participants were informed of the purpose of the research, and voluntary informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by removing participants' identifying information from all research records. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences. All collected data were used exclusively for academic purposes and stored securely to protect participants' privacy.

## Results

The findings are presented according to the three research objectives: (1) students' attitudes towards the Student Parliament Programme, (2) challenges encountered during programme implementation, and (3) strategies for improving the programme.

### Students' Attitudes towards the Student Parliament Programme

The first objective of the study was to examine students' attitudes towards the Student Parliament Programme. Table 1 presents the overall attitudes of the participating students.

**Table 1**

*Students' Overall Attitudes towards the Student Parliament Programme*

| Opinion/Idea | No. of Students |      |
|--------------|-----------------|------|
|              | No              | %    |
| Positive     | 30              | 60.0 |
| Negative     | 15              | 30.0 |
| No idea      | 05              | 10.0 |
| Total        | 50              | 100  |

The findings indicate that 60% of the respondents expressed positive attitudes towards the Student Parliament Programme, suggesting that most students recognised its value in promoting leadership, democratic participation, and school governance. However, 30% reported negative attitudes, while 10% were uncertain about the programme.

Although the overall perception was favourable, the relatively high proportion of negative responses indicates that students experienced considerable dissatisfaction with certain aspects of programme implementation. Interview data revealed that many students appreciated the opportunity to participate in elections and leadership

activities but expressed frustration because many of their proposals were not implemented by school authorities.

These findings are consistent with Mitra (2004), who argued that student participation enhances leadership and civic engagement only when schools provide meaningful opportunities for students to influence decision-making.

#### Students' Attitudes According to Gender

To determine whether attitudes differed according to gender, students' responses were analysed separately for male and female participants.

**Table 2**

*Students' Attitudes According to Gender*

| Opinion    | Male | %    | Female | %    | Total | %    |
|------------|------|------|--------|------|-------|------|
| Positive   | 20   | 67.0 | 10     | 50.0 | 30    | 60.0 |
| Negative   | 05   | 16.5 | 10     | 50.0 | 15    | 30.0 |
| No opinion | 05   | 16.5 | 00     | 00   | 05    | 10.0 |
| Total      | 30   | 100  | 20     | 100  | 50    | 100  |

Gender differences were evident in students' attitudes. Male students demonstrated comparatively higher positive attitudes (67%) than female students (50%). In contrast, half of the female respondents reported negative perceptions of the programme.

Despite this finding, qualitative interviews suggested that female students actively participated in parliamentary activities and demonstrated considerable enthusiasm for leadership positions. Their dissatisfaction was primarily associated with limited opportunities to influence school decisions rather than a lack of interest in the programme itself.

These findings indicate that increasing female participation alone is insufficient; schools must also provide meaningful leadership opportunities that enable female students to exercise their responsibilities effectively.

#### Students' Attitudes According to Medium of Instruction

Students' attitudes were also examined according to the language medium of instruction.

**Table 3**

*Students' Attitudes According to Medium of Instruction*

| <b>Opinion</b> | <b>Sinhala<br/>(Male)</b> | <b>%</b> | <b>Sinhala<br/>(Female)</b> | <b>%</b> | <b>Tamil<br/>(Male)</b> | <b>%</b> | <b>Tamil<br/>(Female)</b> | <b>%</b> | <b>Total</b> |
|----------------|---------------------------|----------|-----------------------------|----------|-------------------------|----------|---------------------------|----------|--------------|
| Positive       | 15                        | 75.0     | 10                          | 66.6     | 05                      | 50.0     | 05                        | 100      | 35           |
| Negative       | 05                        | 25.0     | 05                          | 33.4     | 05                      | 50.0     | 00                        | 00       | 15           |
| Total          | 20                        | 100      | 15                          | 100      | 10                      | 100      | 05                        | 100      | 50           |

Table 3 presents students' attitudes towards the Student Parliament Programme according to the medium of instruction and gender. Overall, 35 students (70%) expressed positive attitudes, while 15 students (30%) reported negative attitudes.

Among Sinhala-medium male students, 15 out of 20 respondents (75.0%) expressed positive attitudes, whereas five students (25.0%) reported negative attitudes. Similarly, Sinhala-medium female students demonstrated generally favourable perceptions, with 10 out of 15 students (66.6%) expressing positive attitudes and five students (33.4%) indicating negative attitudes.

In contrast, Tamil-medium male students showed an equal distribution of opinions, with five students (50.0%) reporting positive attitudes and five students (50.0%) expressing negative attitudes. Notably, all Tamil-medium female students (100%) reported positive attitudes towards the Student Parliament Programme, and none expressed negative perceptions.

Overall, the findings indicate that students from both language streams generally viewed the Student Parliament Programme positively. However, attitudes varied across groups. Sinhala-medium male students demonstrated the highest level of positive attitudes among the larger student groups, while Tamil-medium female students showed unanimously positive perceptions. Conversely, Tamil-medium male students exhibited comparatively lower levels of positive attitudes, suggesting that their experiences of the programme may differ from those of other student groups.

According to the qualitative data revealed through observations, it was reported that students emulate democratic practices through poster creation, social media campaigns, and stage debates during the election season. However, due to gang pressure (e.g., "Brother, you better vote for me openly, okay") and giving false

promises (e.g., "I will bring a DJ concert"), conflicts and even assaults have been reported among students.

### Students' Awareness of Ministry of Education Circular No. 03/2019

To assess whether students understood the legal framework governing the Student Parliament Programme, respondents were asked about their awareness of Ministry of Education Circular No. 03/2019.

**Table 4**

*Students' Awareness of Circular No. 03/2019*

| Statement        | Male |     | Female |      |
|------------------|------|-----|--------|------|
|                  | No   | %   | No     | %    |
| Very high        | 00   | 00  | 00     | 00   |
| High             | 00   | 00  | 00     | 00   |
| Average          | 00   | 00  | 02     | 10.0 |
| No understanding | 30   | 100 | 18     | 90.0 |
| Total            | 30   | 100 | 20     | 100  |

Table 4 presents students' awareness of Ministry of Education Circular No. 03/2019, which provides the official guidelines for implementing the Student Parliament Programme in Sri Lankan schools. The findings reveal an alarmingly low level of awareness among student representatives. None of the male students reported either a high or very high level of awareness of the circular. All 30 male respondents (100%) indicated that they had no understanding of the circular. Among the female students, only two respondents (10.0%) reported having an average level of awareness, while the remaining 18 students (90.0%) stated that they had no understanding of the circular. Overall, 96% (48 out of 50) of the respondents had no understanding of the Ministry circular, while only 4% (2 out of 50) demonstrated an average level of awareness.

These findings indicate that the majority of student parliament members perform their representative duties without adequate knowledge of the official policy framework governing the programme. This lack of awareness may reduce their ability to understand their responsibilities, participate effectively in democratic decision-making, and implement parliamentary activities according to the Ministry's expectations.

## Administrative Support for Student Parliament Activities

Students were asked whether proposals submitted by the Student Parliament were considered by school administrators.

**Table 5**

### *Administrative Consideration of Student Parliament Proposals*

| Statement     | Sinhala Medium students |      |        |      | Tamil Medium |      |        |     | Total |      |
|---------------|-------------------------|------|--------|------|--------------|------|--------|-----|-------|------|
|               | Male                    |      | Female |      | Male         |      | Female |     |       |      |
|               | No.                     | %    | No     | %    | No           | %    | No     | %   | No    | %    |
| Always        | 00                      | 00   | 00     | 00   | 00           | 00   | 00     | 00  | 00    | 00   |
| Mostly        | 00                      | 00   | 00     | 00   | 00           | 00   | 00     | 00  | 00    | 00   |
| Rarely        | 00                      | 00   | 10     | 66.6 | 00           | 00   | 05     | 100 | 15    | 30.0 |
| Never         | 10                      | 50.0 | 05     | 33.4 | 05           | 50.0 | 00     | 00  | 20    | 40.0 |
| Not Discussed | 10                      | 50.0 | 00     | 00   | 05           | 50.0 | 00     | 10  | 15    | 30.0 |
|               | 20                      | 100  | 15     | 100  | 10           | 100  | 05     | 100 | 50    | 100  |

Table 5 presents students' perceptions regarding the extent to which proposals submitted by the Student Parliament were considered by school administrators. The findings reveal a generally low level of administrative responsiveness towards student proposals.

None of the respondents reported that their proposals were always or mostly considered by school administrators. Instead, 20 students (40.0%) indicated that their proposals were never considered, while 15 students (30.0%) reported that proposals were rarely considered. A further 15 students (30.0%) stated that their proposals were not discussed at all.

Differences were also observed according to gender and medium of instruction. Among Sinhala-medium male students, half of the respondents (50.0%) indicated that their proposals were never considered, while the remaining half reported that their proposals were not discussed. Similarly, Tamil-medium male students were equally divided, with 50.0% reporting that proposals were never considered and 50.0% stating that they were not discussed.

In contrast, Sinhala-medium female students reported comparatively greater administrative engagement, with 66.6% indicating that proposals were rarely considered and 33.4% stating that they were never considered. Likewise, all Tamil-medium female students (100%) indicated that their proposals were rarely considered. Although these responses suggest some level of administrative attention, they nevertheless indicate that proposals were only occasionally addressed rather than systematically incorporated into school decision-making.

One student explained:

*"We discuss many ideas during meetings, but we rarely receive feedback from the school administration."*

Similarly, several teachers acknowledged that heavy workloads limited opportunities to organise regular parliamentary meetings.

These findings suggest that student participation remains largely symbolic rather than substantive.

### Challenges in Implementing the Student Parliament Programme

Students identified several barriers affecting the effective implementation of the programme.

**Table 6**

*Major Challenges Affecting Programme Implementation*

| Statement                      | Sinhala Medium |      | Tamil Medium |      | Total |      |
|--------------------------------|----------------|------|--------------|------|-------|------|
|                                | No             | %    | %            | No   | No    | %    |
| Minimal Member Interest        | 05             | 14.0 | 00           | 00   | 05    | 10.0 |
| Lack of Administrative support | 20             | 57.0 | 07           | 47.0 | 27    | 54.0 |
| Lack of Fonds and Resources    | 10             | 29.0 | 08           | 53.0 | 18    | 36.0 |
| Total                          | 35             | 100  | 15           | 100  | 50    | 100  |

More than half of the respondents (54%) identified lack of administrative support as the principal challenge affecting programme implementation. A further 36%

reported insufficient financial and material resources, while 10% identified limited student interest.

Qualitative findings reinforced these results. Principals highlighted difficulties obtaining election materials and transporting ballot boxes, whereas teachers reported limited time to supervise parliamentary activities alongside their regular teaching responsibilities.

Observations further revealed that election campaigns occasionally involved unrealistic promises, peer pressure, and interpersonal conflicts among students. These practices resembled aspects of national political culture and indicate that democratic values require more structured guidance and supervision.

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the implementation of the Student Parliament Programme in selected secondary schools in Sri Lanka by examining students' attitudes towards the programme, assessing the level of administrative support, and identifying the challenges affecting its implementation. The findings indicate that although the programme provides valuable opportunities for developing leadership skills, democratic values, and civic responsibility among students, its implementation is hindered by inadequate administrative support, limited awareness of the Ministry of Education Circular No. 03/2019, insufficient institutional commitment, and resource constraints. These findings suggest that the programme has not yet fully achieved its intended objective of promoting meaningful student participation in school governance.

### ***Students' Attitudes towards the Student Parliament Programme***

The findings revealed that 70% of students expressed positive attitudes towards the Student Parliament Programme, indicating that students perceive the programme as an important platform for developing leadership skills, participating in democratic processes, and contributing to school governance. Positive attitudes were observed among both Sinhala- and Tamil-medium students, although some variations existed according to gender and medium of instruction. These findings are consistent with previous studies that have demonstrated that participation in student governance enhances civic engagement, leadership competencies, and democratic values (Mitra, 2004; Cunningham & Ladd, 2018; Abuhlimeh, 2025).

The positive attitudes identified in this study support the principles of Structural Functional Theory, which views schools as institutions responsible for preparing young people for responsible citizenship through the transmission of democratic

values and leadership skills (Parsons, 1951; Merton, 1968). However, the comparatively lower level of positive attitudes among some student groups suggests that the educational benefits of the programme depend on the quality of its implementation and the opportunities provided for meaningful participation in school decision-making.

### ***Gender and Medium of Instruction Differences***

The findings revealed differences in students' attitudes according to gender and the medium of instruction. Sinhala-medium male students reported the highest proportion of positive attitudes, while all Tamil-medium female students expressed positive perceptions of the programme. In contrast, Tamil-medium male students showed an equal distribution of positive and negative attitudes, suggesting that their experiences of the programme may differ from those of other student groups.

These findings indicate that the Student Parliament Programme has the potential to promote inclusive leadership opportunities across different student groups. UNESCO (2021) emphasises that democratic participation in schools should encourage equal opportunities for leadership regardless of gender or cultural background. Similarly, Wedikandage (2024) argues that inclusive educational environments contribute significantly to the development of leadership competencies and democratic participation among school students. Nevertheless, the observed differences suggest that schools should ensure equitable opportunities for all students to participate actively and meaningfully in Student Parliament activities.

### ***Awareness of Ministry of Education Circular No. 03/2019***

One of the most significant findings of this study is that 96% of student representatives had no understanding of Ministry of Education Circular No. 03/2019, which provides the official policy framework for implementing the Student Parliament Programme. Only 4% of students demonstrated an average level of awareness, while none reported high or very high levels of understanding.

This finding raises serious concerns regarding programme implementation because meaningful democratic participation requires an understanding of students' rights, responsibilities, and the operational procedures governing the programme. These findings support Mitra (2004), who argued that student participation becomes meaningful only when students are adequately informed and empowered. From the perspective of Conflict Theory, unequal access to institutional knowledge limits students' ability to participate effectively in school governance, allowing decision-making authority to remain concentrated among school administrators (Apple,

2004). Therefore, schools should provide systematic orientation programmes for newly elected student representatives before they assume their parliamentary responsibilities.

### ***Administrative Support and Student Participation***

The study found that administrative support remains one of the greatest challenges affecting the implementation of the Student Parliament Programme. None of the respondents indicated that student proposals were always or mostly considered by school administrators. Instead, 40% reported that their proposals were never considered, 30% indicated that proposals were rarely considered, and another 30% stated that their proposals were not discussed at all. These findings suggest that student participation in school governance remains largely symbolic rather than genuinely participatory.

These findings support previous research suggesting that meaningful student participation depends on supportive school leadership and collaborative decision-making rather than the mere existence of representative structures (Fielding, 2001; Flutter & Rudduck, 2004). Similarly, Wettasinghe and Wedikandage (2023) argue that effective educational leadership requires school administrators to actively engage students as partners in school improvement. Greater administrative responsiveness to student proposals would strengthen students' confidence in democratic processes and enhance the effectiveness of the Student Parliament Programme.

### ***Institutional Challenges Affecting Programme Implementation***

The findings further revealed several institutional challenges affecting programme implementation, including limited administrative commitment, inadequate orientation programmes, insufficient awareness of the Ministry's policy guidelines, and shortages of financial and material resources. These challenges reduce opportunities for meaningful student participation and limit the achievement of the programme's intended educational objectives.

According to Structural Functional Theory, these institutional weaknesses represent dysfunctions that reduce the effectiveness of educational organisations (Merton, 1968). Without adequate institutional support, democratic school governance cannot be fully realised. Therefore, strengthening administrative commitment, improving teacher training, allocating sufficient resources, and increasing students' awareness of the policy framework are essential for improving the implementation and sustainability of the Student Parliament Programme.

## **Conclusion**

This study examined the implementation of the Student Parliament Programme in selected secondary schools in the Matale Education Zone of Sri Lanka. Specifically, it investigated students' and teachers' attitudes towards the programme, identified the challenges affecting its implementation, and explored strategies for strengthening democratic participation within schools.

The findings indicate that although students generally hold positive attitudes towards the Student Parliament Programme, the programme has not yet achieved its full educational potential. The study revealed that students value opportunities to participate in elections, leadership activities, and school governance. However, these opportunities are frequently constrained by limited administrative support, inadequate awareness of Ministry of Education Circular No. 03/2019, insufficient financial and physical resources, and limited opportunities for students to influence school-level decision-making.

The findings further demonstrate that democratic participation within schools extends beyond organising student elections. Meaningful student participation requires supportive school leadership, well-informed teachers, systematic orientation programmes, institutional commitment, and opportunities for students to contribute to decisions that affect their school communities. Without these conditions, student parliament activities risk becoming symbolic rather than serving as authentic experiences of democratic governance.

This study contributes to the literature on democratic citizenship education and educational leadership by providing empirical evidence on the implementation of the Student Parliament Programme in Sri Lanka. The findings also demonstrate the relevance of Structural Functional Theory, Conflict Theory, and Symbolic Interaction Theory in explaining the strengths and challenges of democratic participation within school settings.

## ***Practical Implications***

The findings have several important implications for educational policy and practice.

For the Ministry of Education, the results suggest the need to strengthen the implementation and monitoring of the Student Parliament Programme across schools. National guidelines should be supported through systematic monitoring, teacher training programmes, and regular evaluations to ensure consistent implementation. For school principals, the study highlights the importance of creating participatory school cultures where student representatives are actively

involved in discussions concerning school development, extracurricular activities, and student welfare. Principals should view student parliaments as mechanisms for collaborative governance rather than ceremonial organisations. For teachers, structured orientation programmes should be organised before student elections to improve students' understanding of democratic principles, parliamentary procedures, leadership responsibilities, and ethical political behaviour. Teachers should also mentor student leaders continuously throughout their term of office. For students, the programme provides valuable opportunities to develop leadership, communication, teamwork, critical thinking, and civic responsibility. Greater awareness of democratic values will enable students to participate more effectively in school governance and community development.

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