

EDUCATION IN THE 1990's - POLICIES

by
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In Sri Lanka education has been blamed widely for much of the present crisis - for unemployment, youth unrest, the ethnic conflict and the erosion of values. But since education does not function in a vacuum and is strongly affected by the political, economic and social environment, such views appear to be based on unrealistic perceptions of the role of education.

Nevertheless, the relatively slow pace in quantitative development, and qualitative change in the eighties has perhaps exacerbated a situation created by forces generated in the external environment. Reduction in educational expenditure to 2.3% of the GNP by the mid eighties on account of structural adjustment policies, has impoverished the infrastructural facilities of schools that have no access to non-state resources, and has been a constraint on the implementation of quality improvement programmes. A proportion of the school age population remains out side of primary and secondary schools largely as a consequence of the hardships caused among poorer groups due to spiralling living costs, and indifference at official level to their education needs. The education system therefore, appears to assist in reinforcing the effects of poverty. The content of education continues to be determined by a narrow examination-oriented focus that neglects broader social needs and fuels aspirations that are frustrated by an unstable economy.

It is possible to identify some priorities for concrete action in the next decade besides the need for 'rehabilitation' after the disruption of educational activity stemming from the political environment. These priorities have been identified on the premise that the objectives of an education system are to promote knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for individual and national development, and to distribute educational opportunity equitably without socio-economic or gender differentiation.

Educational Opportunity

While educational participation and literacy rates in Sri Lanka are much higher than in most other countries of the SAARC region, these rates have tended to stagnate in the eighties (Central Bank 1981/82, Department of Census 'Labour Force and Socio-economic Survey

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HALF THE SECONDARY SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN ARE NOT IN CLASSROOMS AND ONLY TWO PER CENT OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION POPULATION ARE IN UNIVERSITIES. MRS SWARNA JAYAWEERA, EMERITUS PROFESSOR OF EDUCATION, UNIVERSITY OF COLOMBO LOOKS AT SOME OF THE CRITICAL AREAS IN EDUCATION THAT NEED TO BE CHANGED IN THE COMING DECADE.

1985/86), and Sri Lanka is yet far from achieving even universal primary education'. Attention has been focused in recent years at international level (UNESCO, UNICEF) on universalizing primary education, and currently on 'education for all'. In contrast there has been little concern in Sri Lanka that a substantial number of children between 5 and 14 years of age in pockets of economic disadvantage, and around half the secondary school age population are not in attendance in schools; that regional imbalances in access to science and technological education are wide; and that only 2% of the higher education age population are in Universities.

It is necessary at least in the nineties to facilitate the utilization of existing facilities by children in poorer groups and to provide complementary, part-time, non-formal educational opportunities for those boys and girls whose family circumstances or economic activities prevent participation in formal educational institutions. Incentives have been provided already in the form of free tuition, school books and meals, but other constraints have been identified by studies in the eighties (Ministry of Edu-

- SOME PERSPECTIVES AND

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Centres for out-of-school children introduced on a low key need to be extended and to be concentrated in locations where the need has been identified.

The yearning of many non-schooling children for an 'education' is a challenge to the social conscience of those in the power structure. Contrary to popular belief, compulsory education legislation does not exist in this country even at primary level and there has been reluctance over the years to introduce legislation that may not be enforced. It will be useful to examine the issues involved and to investigate possibilities of introducing legislation that may offer the alternative of part-time education in special circumstances and flexibility in adjusting to agricultural cycles. At the least such legislation may activate the implementation of programmes to meet the needs of educationally disadvantaged children.

The current situation with regard to secondary education has two facets -- disparities in facilities and in curriculum provision. Only 40% of the secondary schools, for instance, had facilities for science education in the eighties. It will be a fruitful exercise to re-introduce the strategy adopted some decades ago, of promoting edu-

cational opportunity through the establishment of well-equipped Central Schools with provision for 'scholars' from primary schools in the neighbourhood. Such a policy will also ensure more equity in access to university education and will make it possible to dispense with the quota system for university entrance that has helped to create individual frustration and ethnic conflict.

Sri Lanka has one of the lowest percentages of the relevant age group in higher education institutions -- even among developing countries. The number of students at the third levels of education per 100,000 persons is reported to be 295. The comparable statistics for some other countries in the Asian region are Bangladesh 269, Nepal 269, Indonesia 403, Malaysia 467, India 664, Singapore 1253, Thailand 2181 and the Philippines 2642. (UNESCO, Bangkok, 1985).

While the expansion of university places will help to reduce frustration and wastage of talent, it is apparent that the universities, including the Open University, will not be able to meet the demand from the secondary school population in the foreseeable future. A major barrier to educational opportunity has been the absence of a pluralistic structure in tertiary education. The few institutions that provide opportunities do not appear to be perceived as alternatives to university education with the exception of the Law College and accountancy related institutes in Colombo.

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It is necessary therefore to strengthen selected institutions and to develop new tertiary level institutions at provincial or district level. These institutions should meet national and local human resources needs and reach standards that ensure alternative paths to professional and technical employment and transfer to universities where necessary. A parallel programme of provincial or district institutions appears to have more potential for positive change than a policy of diluting university education by establishing sub-standard university 'colleges' and thus creating sources of social cleavages and further frustration and unrest.

General Education

Imbalances in the provision of educational facilities and the congruence of the socio-economic background of students, school facilities and performance have been perennial problems in Sri Lanka as a cumulative result of inequality in resource allocation by the State and income disparities. Many disadvantaged schools have been dependent on the infrastructural support given by international and bilateral agencies such as UNICEF and SIDA (Sweden), but around 40% of all schools lack minimum

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facilities in buildings, equipment and basic amenities. Radical change in resource allocation patterns with 'positive discrimination' in favour of the disadvantaged is therefore required to redress the imbalance and to improve the quality of education of this segment of the population. The management of education needs to be decentralized and to reflect more community participation and interests.

Teacher supply and distribution has been a major victim of the political process in the last half century unlike in many industrialized countries where educational institutions have been left unhampered to perform their functions. Teacher education programmes have been vulnerable to the predilections of policy-makers and administrators. Ad hoc policies and programmes introduced in recent years have devalued existing institutions and have resulted in under-utilization of resources, duplication of efforts and maldistribution of facilities. If this amorphous situation is not to prevail in the nineties too, it is necessary to formulate an overall strategy for teacher supply and professional training and retraining to meet the needs for the school system.

Curriculum development was the forte of the educational administration in the late sixties and the seventies. The curriculum was used purposefully to effect changes in primary and junior secondary education, although there was also excessive haste, centralization and uniformity in some programmes. It is necessary to recapture that momentum and direct it to curriculum renewal and adaptation to local needs with local participation.

Technological Society

There appear to be significant lacunae too in curriculum development with respect to basic skills and interaction with the macro-environment. GCE (Ordinary Level) results over the years have underscored the low level of attainment of the majority of students in mathematics, a basic skill in an increasingly technological society. Wide disparities exist in access to knowledge and skills in science and technology and to proficiency in English as a language of entry to knowledge and upward mobility in the socio-economic environment. The "Life Skills" programme, which has the potential for developing into a programme that will provide students the orientation and some of the competencies required to live and work in a world dominated by rapid technological changes, is found only in a limited number of schools. The curriculum has yet to promote an understanding of one's heritage together with the acceptance of the concept of living in harmony and mutual respect in a plural society. The promotion of human values has been overshadowed by the examination-orientation of all curricula offerings including religion.

There is need therefore for curriculum renewal in basic skills, in moving towards the goal of science and technology for all, and in promoting national harmony, awareness of social and cultural issues and human development. A re-appraisal of the examination system may assist in restoring creativity and values to their due place in the curriculum. The year 5 scholarship examination has lost its objective of reducing inequalities and has tended to stifle creativity in young children. Delinking university entrance from the GCE (Advanced Level) examination and restructuring selection procedures may reduce the stresses that overwhelm the secondary school student.

It has been the experience in

many countries that the general education system may develop attitudes and aspirations but cannot provide vocational training to meet the needs of the economy. The Sri Lanka experience in the seventies has also shown that the employment of secondary school leavers and university graduates depends on the labour absorptive capacity of the economy rather than on adjusting the curriculum to meet specific employment needs. But the vocational education sector in all countries functions as the intermediate agency between general education and the labour market.

Education and Employment

In Sri Lanka vocational education facilities are hardly adequate to meet the needs of school leavers and 'drop outs' in the context of a projected increase in the working age population, while at the same time shortage of skills is likely to impede utilization of the benefits of technology. Enrolment in vocational education institutions reflect the gender division in the labour market and reinforces it by confining women to training for what are perceived to be gender-appropriate jobs. At both secondary and tertiary levels, uniform standards at different skill levels have yet to be enforced.

The establishment of the Tertiary and Vocational Education Commission may provide the structure necessary for facilitating planning, co-ordination and monitoring. It is necessary to conduct tracer studies to assess the relevance and efficacy of the island-wide network of training programmes operated by national training agencies, as

The need in Sri Lanka is not for grandiose schemes but for specific plans of action to meet the needs and constraints that have been identified

well as needs surveys to ascertain not merely market demand but also development needs in the agriculture, industry and service sectors. For a country that is said to be industrializing there has been minimal transfer of technology in export-oriented industry and correspondingly little sophistication in non-formal vocational training programmes. The most vulnerable group has been young women with 10 to 12 years of secondary schooling who are being utilized as low cost labour in semi-skilled occupations in factories within and outside the Export Processing Zones, without prospects of upgrading their skills or achieving career mobility. The quality of many training centres in the periphery offers little hope of achieving greater sophistication in technological development through training and extension, upgrading skills in the informal sector in which men and women from low income families are concentrated or generating employment and increasing production.

The paucity of tertiary education institutions increases pressure on universities to meet labour market needs. Universities, however, provide not only high level professional training. They are also 'centres of excellence' for potential researchers in all branches of sciences and technology, scholars in arts and humanities and creative artists. The devaluation of arts courses in universities and senior secon-