

The obstacles in the way

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"Traditional respect for teachers which prevents free participation by the learners in the learning process, badly trained or untrained teachers, rote learning, bookish learning, scrupulous adherence to time tables and discipline which amounts to regimentation are some of the inhibiting factors still present in our school system. In addition, in many countries the citadels of higher learning are the most conservative and most resistant to change". Changes required here demand a change in educational structure and equally important, a change in attitudes.

Some of these changes are being suggested by local educationists as well as by foreigners but we must also "guard against foreigners' advice and expertise which is calculated to preserve their vested interests and possibly divert us from our own objectives. It also means that while deriving nourishment from foreign research, we must develop our own structures for educational research. Since the problems facing the Third World countries are similar, an interchange of ideas and co-operation and joint work in educational research amongst them may be more fruitful than depending on foreign expertise which is suspect".

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Education is beginning to play a major role in the overall strategy for development, in the countries of the Third World. Many people in these countries even believe that education is a panacea for all the ills affecting their societies. Their leaders as well as the people themselves expect much from educational reforms which in some cases are radical and innovative. The success of educational reforms in the Third World are bedevilled by many obstacles, largely inherited from a colonial past or inherent in underdeveloped societies.

Sri Lanka too has launched on far reaching educational reforms. Her educational reforms are part of an integrated socio-economic development programme which aims at the creation of a 'democratic socialist society'. Integrated curricular reforms at all levels—Primary, Junior Secondary and Senior Secondary have already been launched. Education in Sri Lanka is apparently on the right road but the road is strewn with many obstacles. The education system itself as well as the social system and the economic system present many formidable obstacles, which must be overcome before the reforms can result in the expected outcomes.

Within the education system, the obstacles may be identified as the school structure, the examination system, the administrative structure and the higher education system.

The School Structure

The School structure in Sri Lanka has certain characteristics inherited from two traditions,—the indigenous and the British, which inhibit the success of the educational reforms. Traditional respect for teachers which prevents free participation by the learners in the learning process, badly trained or untrained teachers, rote learning, bookish learning, scrupulous adherence to time tables, discipline which amounts to regimentation are some of the inhibiting factors still present in our school system. The new curricula have to be implemented through this school system which will inevitably retard their success. The school among other changes must become less rigid and more flexible, even to the extent of allowing students to leave for employment, and re-enter at a suitable trade. Working hours, time tables have to be more elastic, in keeping with regional needs. Grades may eventually have to be abolished and replaced with levels of knowledge.

Another direction in which the school must develop is in its relationship with the community. Today the school has very little inter-action with

the community. In a developing country the school can and must play a significant role in community development. There must be an interchange of knowledge and skills between the school and the community and even an inter-change of teacher resources. The school must reach out to the community and the community must reach into the school. A rigid school structure strictly adhering to fiat issued by bureaucrats from a central directorate and hemmed in by red tape cannot adapt itself to this role.

The Examination

Examinations are perhaps one of the most formidable obstacles which frustrate the objectives of education reforms in Sri Lanka. Our education system had become so highly examination-oriented that even the present radical reforms have failed to devalue the examination. One cannot forget the alarm—which even seemed to be bordering on panic—that appeared last year with the approach of the first NCGE examination. Newspapers had to open forums for answering numerous queries and providing clarification on different aspects of the examination. Although upto that time, the new Junior Secondary programme had aroused comparatively little debate or controversy. The approaching examination had a stifling influence in the classroom too. The innovative spirit and enthusiasm with which both students and teachers began in 1972 seemed to gradually ebb away in many a school, and regression into the old cramming methods was much in evidence. One cannot blame the parents, teachers or students for this. The NCGE is a selective examination. It is the door which leads to the narrow corridors of higher education which in turn lead to the highly competitive employment market. With the question "What happens to the NCGE failures"? not finding an adequate answer, with no visible signs of an organisational set-up to train them in employable skills, it is no surprise that the new reforms have failed to get rid of this "examination syndrome". It is true that the NCGE examination is a new type, with greater objectivity and more emphasis on concepts rather than factual knowledge and that the actual examination and the nature of the results have allayed the fears of the parents pupils and teachers to some extent.

Much more remains to be done however, in reforming the processes of evaluation and certification, providing for diversified employable skills, and revising the methods of selection for employment before the stifling influence of examinations is eliminated. It requires also a whole change of attitudes because today we have a vicious circle in which the leaders of society are academic achievers, who owe their positions to examination success, and promote a selective society which in turn favours academic achievers who can prove themselves through examinations. A developing society must be adaptive. It must not emphasise any particular method of measuring success.

Higher Education

Changes at primary and secondary levels of education must necessarily be accompanied by changes at the tertiary level. In most countries the citadels of higher learning are the most conservative and most resistant to change. Judging by past experiences one can be pardoned for being pessimistic as to the response of the seats of higher learning in Sri Lanka to the winds of change presently blowing across the field of education. If the changes at the school level are to dove-tail into post-secondary education without violating the spirit or the objectives of the reforms, higher education in Sri Lanka must undergo a radical change at two levels—a change in structure and a change in attitude.

University education in our country beginning with a dream of an autonomous and fully residential university outrivalling the hallowed institutions at Oxford and Cambridge—passing through a multi-university system has arrived at a monolithic university with several campuses having minimal residential facilities. Whether a monolithic university, devoid of autonomy can make an effective contribution to the needs of a developing nation is questionable. The present set up is however transitional and a new university structure meaningful in the context of development is an urgent need.

A new structure of higher education must also take into account the frustration caused by limited "room at the top". Sri Lanka is perhaps unique in denying university placements every year to the majority of those

who satisfy the necessary admission requirements. This system of compulsory drop-outs is no doubt a result of "the unplanned expansion of educational facilities" in the past. The impact of the educational reforms at the secondary level is expected to reduce this wastage. This expectation will however not be realised unless structural changes provide for the absorption of the output of the secondary schools. This need not be necessarily at degree level. The degree is so much sought after, not due to any intrinsic value but because of its value in the labour market. If there are non-degree courses which provide employable skills and employment opportunities, the thousands who fail to squeeze through the narrow portals of the University of Sri Lanka will not undertake that fruitless pilgrimage. They will gladly traverse the fruitful by-ways, if and when provided.

The structural changes must be accompanied by a change of attitude on the part of University personnel. They must be ready to change the University courses and re-cast them to fit in with the development task and bring them into alignment with the new school curricula. The first batch of students following the new Junior Secondary programme are but two years away from entrance to the University but signs of reforming activity at the University level are conspicuously absent.

One can discern a certain hostility to the new educational reforms, in University circles. Although some University personnel have co-operated in and made valuable contributions to the curricular changes now being implemented in the schools, there are many Dons who ridicule and condemn these reforms without making a real effort to understand them. Many a teacher going into the University for post-graduate study has been unpleasantly surprised by the spirit of hostility within the precincts of the Faculty of Education itself. Criticism from the Faculty of Education would be most welcome and beneficial, if they are based on evaluation and research which is its legitimate task. There is however no evidence of such activity to establish liaison with those involved in planning and implementing the reforms at school level.

The paucity of research at our campuses has been often commented on. The pivotal role of research in developing countries cannot be over-emphasised—not research in exotic fields but in those areas which directly affect the life of the people, such as agriculture and animal husbandry, health and nutrition, physical and manpower resources, appropriate technology and rural transformation. The University can provide valuable guidance to educational as well as social and economic development by engaging in appropriate research. That will be a positive contribution to the attainment of the objectives of educational reforms as well as the larger socio-economic objectives.

The Administrative Structure

The administrative structure of education must also undergo a significant change if the objectives of the reforms are to be realised. A centralised structure facilitates planning of education, especially when it is integrated with socio-economic reforms. In the implementation of meaningful reforms however it can be a disadvantage. Though Sri Lanka is a small country it has a wide variety of resources and occupations, as well as cultural patterns. It is desirable that regional differences be taken into consideration in implementing curricular reforms. Pre-vocational studies is one area in which local differences should be strongly reflected. At the outset pre-vocational curricula were designed by the schools themselves but due to the inability of many schools to draw up suitable programmes and the needs of the centralized NCGE examination, attempts at grass-root planning of curricula had to be modified to some extent.

The administration of education has been decentralized during the course of the last few years by the establishment of Regional Directorates. The regional departments however do not yet have the power or authority to innovate or modify the curriculum to suit conditions particular to their regions. Decentralization of routine administrative matters alone is not sufficient to give full effect to the new reforms. The regional administration must be positively involved in the planning and implementation of reforms.

The nature of the present decentralization is reflected in the role of the Circuit Education Officer who is

the administrative officer in direct touch with the school. He is so overburdened with routine administrative matters and so encumbered by regulations that he has hardly the time nor the ability to be involved in purely educational matters. Instead of serving as a guide and counsellor he is almost wholly occupied in holding inquiries, distributing circulars and routine instructions, collecting statistics—quite often the same data over and over again—and such other routine matters.

The process of curriculum development also requires certain adjustments if it is to be more effective. The method now adopted is a joint effort by curriculum specialists and practising teachers. Though this method is excellent, lack of incentives prevents the Curriculum Development Centre obtaining the services of teachers who are best qualified to engage in this work and also drawing from a variety of sources. The present system of centralised curriculum development requires facilities for obtaining feed-back, processing of feed-back data, and effective and constant communication between the curriculum developers and the teachers implementing the curriculum under widely varying conditions. The facilities available for such a continuous dialogue are totally inadequate.

Economic Factors

Education for development envisages a mutual interaction between educational and economic development. Most developing countries find it difficult to breakthrough the vicious circle of snail paced economic development inhibiting educational development which in turn contributes to failure in hastening economic development. Sri Lanka's situation is not different.

An export-import economy, highly susceptible to external forces over which we have no control, can put out of gear the most carefully prepared development plans. This has been our experience in the recent past. The basis of a colonial economy depending on a few primary products cannot be changed in a short time. Its infrastructure similarly defies quick change. Old attitudes die hard. While the educational reforms are aimed at helping to change this situation, these very factors them-

selves inhibit the effectiveness of the educational reforms in various forms.

One of the main objectives of the new educational reforms is the equalising of educational opportunity. Looking at the Junior Secondary School, one sees all the students rich and poor studying Science and engaging in pre-vocational studies. They follow a uniform curriculum and sit the same examination. Important steps have thus been taken towards equalisation but it is futile to imagine that we have achieved equality of educational opportunity. The buildings, furniture, teaching aids, libraries, and playing fields available in the better schools defy comparison with those available in some of the poorer schools, which lack even the basic amenities. Even a single class room finds within its four walls children from homes with a wide range of income levels. Malnutrition, inadequate food, lack of text books or even exercise books, lack of facilities to study at home—these are some of the disabilities which many children in our schools have to contend with in educating themselves. These disabilities, not only are a hindrance to the achievement of the objectives of educational reform but also limit the returns from the large investment made in education.

It is an ironical fact that the haves of society are making maximum use of the educational facilities provided free by the state for the sake of the have-nots while the have-nots themselves are unable to. The children of poor parents who cannot afford to provide them with even basic needs like exercise books and pencils, apart from making optimum use, often fail to benefit at all from the facilities provided by the state.

A further example of economic difficulties of individual families stultifying the efforts of educational planners is provided by the situation with regard to the use of class books in the Junior Secondary School. With the new curriculum and methodology, expected to awaken the spirit of discovery in the junior school child, it was foreseen that the inadequacy of reading material for children of this age group would be a frustration to them. As a first palliative a series of source books relating to the different subjects were produced in double quick-time. A recent survey carried

has revealed that in respect of each subject the number of children who do not use these books far outnumber those who use them. Surveys at circuit level have shown that this situation exists in urban, suburban and rural areas. The only reason for this situation is that the children cannot afford to buy them.

It is envisaged that the products of the new education geared to development and which provides relevant knowledge, skills and attitudes will be different from the products of the past, and that they will be able to make a positive contribution to development. But is the economy adapting itself to accommodate them? To take one example, the new education programme seeks to produce people with the capacity and the desire to engage in self-employment. Already some of the student population exposed to the new programme are on the threshold of employment. It is likely that some of them will want to set themselves up in self-employment but what are the chances of post-NCGE youngsters, without property or family background and without political patronage finding the necessary facilities?

A change in the attitude to white-collar employment is another important objective of the reforms but it is doomed to failure unless there is a radical change in the wage structure. The steps already taken to change the wage structure have hardly dented the economic and social superiority that goes with white-collar employment. Unless there is a more meaningful change the race for white-collar jobs will continue.

Social Factors

The social factors which impede educational reforms and the achievement of their objectives are mostly social values and attitudes, which stand in the way of the whole development process. Some of them are traditional and coming down from ancient times. Some are class based and of recent origin. Among the traditional, two of the most conspicuous are superstition and social prejudices based on caste or racial differences. The education reforms have the development of a scientific attitude and providing the ability to use the scientific method in solving problems among its objectives. Super-

stition provides a formidable obstacle in achieving them. The large amount of advertising space in newspapers bought by purveyors of charms and potions guaranteed to ensure success at examinations is only an index to the extent to which superstition has a hold on our people.

Caste and race prejudices are still widely prevalent in our society. Besides their disruptive effect on the whole development effort they obstruct the achievement of the objectives of educational reforms in several ways. Equalisation of educational opportunity is one of the objectives hampered by these prejudices. There are certain social groups who are still not able to make use of the educational facilities provided by the state because of caste prejudice. Some of the pre-vocational subjects are repugnant to certain sections because of caste association. These prejudices will not be eliminated as long as quite a number of our political and social leaders continue to hold them privately, in spite of public statements to the contrary.

Class values and attitudes are equally formidable obstacles. Vocalised opposition to the new reforms has been almost exclusively voiced by the upper middle class. This is understandable because the new reforms are aimed at breaking down the monopoly in higher education and better employment so far enjoyed by them. A bigger problem is the attitude of those who aspire to "middle-class respectability". Throughout the colonial period and the first decades of independence the privileged position of the middle-class provided a mirage for those who were denied those privileges. The education system too was a major contributory factor to the growth of this attitude because its aims, objectives and methods all favoured the middle-class.

Even today the school in the village attended by the children of the peasants is structured to the needs of the middle-class. Its working hours and vacations ignore the village situation where children actively engage in work alongside their parents especially during the planting and harvesting seasons. The village school still tries to duplicate the town school and the villager if he can afford it will send his child to a town school.

One of the charges levelled against pre-vocational education is that it is a device to keep the children of the working classes tied down to their traditional occupations and deny them the social mobility which they imagine was available to them under the old system of education. These are all symptoms of the attitude still prevalent among peasant and working class groups, towards "middle-class respectability".

Foreign Influence

Although we are now a sovereign and independent republic the foreign presence is still with us. The methods of neo-colonialism to continue their hold on the economies of erstwhile colonies are well known. Their efforts to stall rapid economic development in the Third World is calculated to preserve their own economic interests. A radical and complete change in the educational systems of these countries is also not in the interests of the former imperial powers. Foreign aid in the form of experts and scholarships is one of the subtle means by which they attempt to preserve a foothold in our educational development. As long as they can continue to export their educational theories and practices to us by this means we provide a market for their books and other educational equipment. We cannot certainly reject all educational research and thinking which is foreign, but we must guard against foreign advice and expertise which is calculated to preserve their vested interests and divert us from our own objectives. It also means that while deriving nourishment from foreign research, we must develop our own structures for educational research. Since the problems facing Third World Countries are similar, an interchange of ideas and co-operation and joint work in educational research amongst them may be more fruitful than depending on foreign expertise which is "suspect".

The educational reforms launched in Sri Lanka face many obstacles, both within and without the system. They are only a beginning. In order to overcome these obstacles these reforms will have to be revised and further reforms initiated. This is not a task for the educationists alone. It is a task for the whole nation.