

Education takes a new turn in Sri Lanka

J. M. E. Fernando

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The present educational reforms carried out since 1972 are of a more radical nature and "for the first time, the needs of the learner have been given priority. For the first time, educational strategy has been consciously directed towards the achievement of social goals. An attempt has been made to relate education to the most vital national needs of the moment—development". "The output of the education system, must be a dynamic person who can adapt himself to rapidly changing society".

Mr. J. M. E. Fernando has been involved in the implementation of the new reforms as a Social Studies Adviser for the Colombo South Educational Region. He is now attached to the Curriculum Development Centre.

Every society educates its members. In early society education was informal. There were no schools and no classrooms. Nevertheless there was a continual process of education which aimed at forming the character, skills and moral qualities of the individual. When society became more complex, formal education became a necessity, and the aims and methods of education became matters of controversy. At the same time education became a powerful tool, for achieving various goals, depending on the nature of the society in which it took place. In feudal society formal education was the preserve of the ruling class. It prepared the fledglings of the aristocracy for the tasks which were their's by right of birth. For those who were born to obey, formal education was not considered necessary. With the growth of capitalism, education was fashioned to serve the interests of those who dominated society by virtue of their economic superiority. In colonial society education was deliberately designed to facilitate control of the subject people and to increase the affluence of the "mother country". Thus education has served as a means of conservation and preservation—conserving a particular social structure and preserving vested interests.

Our Task

What is the role of education in Sri Lanka which has but recently

emerged from a colonial past and is marching towards a 'democratic-socialist' future? The answer is vital, but there can be many answers. Whatever the answer is, it cannot be the preservation of the present social order or the preservation of vested interests. A new feature of education, in many parts of the world is, that "for the first time in history education is now engaged in preparing men for a society which does not yet exist". We in Sri Lanka are in the process of building a new society, which must be significantly different from that of the past and the present. The present adult generation may not see it's fulfilment but the young ones of today will be it's inheritors. Circumstances of history have entrusted to our generation, the task of building a new society and training it's members. How are we facing up to this historic task? Are the students of today different from those of the past? Are they acquiring the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to adapt themselves, to a rapidly changing society? This is an attempt to answer these questions by taking a look at what is happening in our schools to-day.

The Reforms

Education in Sri Lanka has passed through a feudal phase and a colonial phase. Formal education featured by a schools system, had it's origin in the

colonial period, and hence conformed to the classical colonial pattern. The British created a dualistic schools structure, based on language differentiation, meant to produce a western oriented elite who were to be the auxiliaries of the colonial administration and the interpreters between the white rulers and the "black natives". The "vernacular" schools catered to the rest of the population who required only the arts of obedience and acquiescence. Though the English schools, did produce a few individuals who departed from the norm, by taking a stand against imperialism, on the whole the British succeeded in their objectives. In the process they created a vicious division in society—a favoured minority against a helpless majority.

The first serious attempt to change the colonial system of education began with the report of the Special Committee on Education in 1943. Their major recommendations—free education from Kindergarten to the University and a change of the medium of instruction from English to the national languages, struck at the very foundations on which the elitist system had been built. In the political context of a country which had not yet majored from Crown Colony status these proposals required courage and can be considered radical. However, having been nurtured within the confines of the colonial atmosphere, the reformers lacked a true vision of the future, which lay beyond independence, which was yet to dawn. The national leaders who were serving their apprenticeship during this time and who later took over the reigns, were similarly handicapped. The three decades which followed the Report of the Special Committee saw much activity in the sphere of education. Several reforms were made. Far reaching changes were made in the medium of instruction, financing, control and management of education, as well as the school structure. The core of the education system however, remained comparatively unchanged. Curricular reforms were limited to certain specific areas and were limited in their scope. Education strategy in relation to social needs was not conceived. Qualitative improvement lagged far behind quantitative improvement. Education reforms of this period

lacked a proper sense of direction. The end-products of the vastly expanded education system were still cast in the same mould, and found themselves stranded in a sea of frustration. The "pearl of great price" became a burden and a drag on society. It is in this context, that the educational reforms which are in the process of being implemented, can claim to be significantly different from past reforms. For the first time, a complete reform of the curriculum at all levels has been initiated. For the first time, the needs of the learner has been given priority. For the first time, educational strategy has been consciously directed towards the achievement of social goals. An attempt has been made to relate education, to the most vital national need of the moment—development. While it is premature to pass judgement on the efficacy of the reforms, one can take a look at the learners exposed to them in order to see whether they are different from learners of the past and whether the output of the education system, is going to be significantly different.

The New Student

Let us go down memory lane to a Kindergarten classroom of yesterday. The little children sit in neatly arranged rows, facing the teacher's table perhaps placed on a platform. The bell rings. The teacher enters. Children stand up, greet the teacher. They sit down. The lesson begins. The curriculum revolves round the 3 Rs. Learning is mechanical—rote learning, memorizing and neat writing. It is likely that the teacher who presides over these proceedings, has been selected to teach Kindergarten, because of her ability to keep children quiet. Certainly there were exceptions but this was the general pattern. Contrast this, with a picture of the reformed, primary school classroom, of to-day. There is no time-table and no bell. Children sit in groups around tables. Some are writing. Some are counting. Some are drawing. Some are cutting or pasting. There is a lot of activity and perhaps a lot of noise. The teacher is hovering around, giving a helping hand here, and answering a query there. The difference is clear. At first sight, it may look like chaos, as against discipline, but the actual difference is a natural atmosphere as against the

artificial atmosphere of the past. Children are now being allowed to learn in their normal way. They are learning not by listening and imitating, but by doing. They are doing not what they are forced to do but what they like to do. In so doing they are developing skills and being creative. Above all, they are enjoying learning.

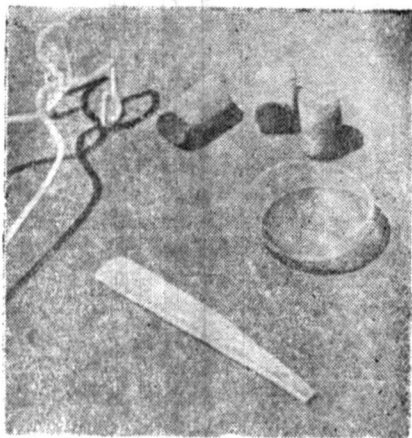
What have the reforms done in the Junior Secondary School? The traditional disciplines, compartmentalized syllabi, the streaming and early specialisation have gone. The curriculum is common and integrated. The distinction between the 'inferior' school with only an arts stream and the superior school, with a science stream is no more. The hierarchical caste system of arts, commerce and science students, has been eliminated from the Junior School. Examinations have been reduced to a minimum. The student relieved of the complexes arising from early specialization, and examinations is breathing in a freer atmosphere. He is not being burdened with irrelevant facts. He is not merely listening and taking down notes. He too is doing something. He does not depend on the teacher for everything but finds out some things by himself. He is learning to solve problems. He is acquiring skills and attitudes in addition to knowledge. Relevancy, activity, independent learning, skills and attitudes are not new things, but with the new reforms they have gained a new and purposeful emphasis.

Activity

The students who have been exposed to the new reforms differ from their predecessors, in at least three important respects. The new student is ACTIVE. Passive learning had become so characteristic of our education system, that the difference is markedly clear. The curriculum as well as teaching strategies, geared as they were to examinations, had reduced the students to passive listeners and note-takers. The reforms both at the Primary and Junior Secondary levels, have been designed to make the student, a more active participant in the task of learning. This is being achieved through curricula which are related to the child's interests and environment and teaching strategies which arouse his curiosity and sense of awareness. Thus the primary school child learns to read and write, not through imitative repetition; laborious tracing on a slate or copy book. He learns the names of things he sees around him, learns to recognise the letters that go to form the name and then gets down to writing the name, or he may do it the other way about. He is not forced to repeat after the teacher "two and two is four". Instead he discovers that two and two make four, by actually adding bottle tops or match sticks or any other objects at hand. So also the Junior Secondary student. He has the opportunity of discovering scientific principles, through experiment and observation. He does not



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... "the science programme can be worked out with improvised equipment, made out of easily available things".

1. A test tube holder from galvanized wire.
2. A watch glass—made out of a fused electric bulb.
3. A Spatule— from an ordinary piece of wood.
4. Rubber stoppers—made out of latex.

require a laboratory with sophisticated equipment, because the science programme can be worked out with improvised equipment, made out of easily available things. The mathematics syllabus too is activity based and the exercises and examples are based on real life situations. In learning social studies, he finds out many things for himself, outside the class room. Thus both in and out of the class room, the student is more active.

Work

The second important difference in the new student is that he is WORKING. A highly academic approach had in the past created a gap between education and manual work. They did not go together. Manual work was for the uneducated and the "educated" shunned manual work. Handicrafts taught in some schools were for "those who had no brains". The vocationally oriented component is one of the most vital strategies in the new system which aims at relating the world of education to the world of work. It underlines the need for acquiring basic manual skills for the development of an integrated human personality. Today every student in grades 6 to 9, learns two pre-vocational subjects. This means that every child is acquiring manual skills, which gives him greater confidence in himself. He learns to value the products

of human labour and to respect the dignity of labour. Pre-vocational work, by enabling the new student to engage in manual work, is adding a new dimension to his personality. In-plant education and project work, are two methods by which it is sought to further extend, the vocationally oriented component.

Learning to Live

The third important characteristic of the new student is that he is LEARNING TO LIVE. In the past both learners and educators, set their sights by the public examinations, which loomed large on the educational horizon. The tragedy of this situation was that the education of millions was determined, by the examinations, which a few thousands sat and only a few hundreds passed. Satisfying the needs of the vast majority of students who do not proceed to higher education is the rationale behind the new reforms. It aims at providing certain specific skills like numeracy, communication skills, techniquacy, sociacy as well as inculcating a scientific attitude and ensuring both physical and aesthetic development. None of these are new. What is new is that they have been consciously built into the new curriculum. They are the specific outcomes expected by the designers. In this way, the students have been given the opportunity to learn to live, rather than merely to pass examinations.

The Output

The new student who is active, who is equipped with both mental and physical skills, whose education is closely related to his physical and social environment and life within it, has the capacity to develop his individual potentialities and make a positive contribution to social advancement. In the specific Sri Lanka situation, the output of the educational system, must be a dynamic person, who can adapt himself to a rapidly changing society, because having emerged from the bonds of colonialism and passed through the toddler's stage of independence, social change is gathering momentum. He also must be a person, who is capable of giving direction to this change. The success or failure of the present

reforms, to produce this type of person, who is in direct contrast to the output of the earlier system of education, can only be assessed, when the new student becomes an adult member of society. We may however attempt a projection into the future and examine his potentialities as a future citizen.

Development

Socio-economic development is the prime concern of a developing nation. The character of the output of the education system upto now, has been one of the factors, inhibiting the development effort in Sri Lanka. "The divorce of education from the world of work has uprooted an entire generation from the type of production, which can be readily developed in the country and has pushed the person, who would normally have gone into some production activity into a fruitless search for white-collar employment, the expansion of which can no longer be supported by the country's productive sectors". (Five Year Plan). To change this situation, the new student is being equipped with relevant knowledge about his own environment, through integrated science studies, study of the country's natural resources, social studies and mathematics. The whole Junior Secondary scheme, seeks to provide skills, attitudes and aspirations, related to the socio-economic environment. The pre-vocational studies, in a special manner brings the student closer to the world of work.

The new alignment between education and development is likely to produce future citizens who can make a positive contribution to socio-economic development, but that alone is not sufficient.

Involvement

The dynamic person whom Sri Lanka needs, must be a person with an awareness. The new curriculum, is rooted in our own environment and provides opportunities for learning about its physical and social aspects. The student therefore, when he emerges into society will be aware of the nature of our society, its needs and the resources available and its problems. Awareness must be accompanied by the ability to analyse and the capacity for logical argument. Activity, problem solving and a

scientific attitude which are prominent features of the new system, will help the new student, to analyse the social situation objectively, reflect on it and argue about it, and then make correct decisions. The person who is aware of the social situation and equipped to make correct social decisions, is one who will be able to identify himself with the society of which he is a member. One of the main defects of the earlier system was, that it created a gulf between the 'educated' and society at large. This was because education did not give them an insight into the real life situation. The new reforms have attempted to bridge this gulf.

The knowledge, skills and attitudes, which the new student is acquiring in school to-day, will enable him, to take his place in society, with confidence about his ability, to help himself and help his fellow-beings.

The successful attainment of the objectives of the reforms is a thing of the future, but the failure to achieve them will be a national disaster. Education by itself, cannot solve all economic and social problems. The present educational reforms are part of a larger socio-economic plan. Failure in other aspects of planning or in their implementation can inhibit the success of the educational reforms. The educational reforms themselves are far from complete. Much more has to be done, especially at the tertiary level, to complete the reform of the whole system. The importance of non-formal education in developing countries is being increasingly recognised. The development of non-formal education is necessary to complement the reformed formal education system. The reforms which have already been implemented or are being implemented at the primary and secondary levels, are not perfect. The new curricula do have certain defects. Revision is necessary to eliminate them. Teaching strategies which are found to be inefficient must be reviewed. There are many obstacles which lie in the path ahead which obstruct the optimum realization of the objectives. What is important is that education in Sri Lanka has taken a decisive turn towards the attainment of objectives which are vital for the nation. Changes there can be, but there can be no turning back.