

Education in Sri Lanka – Some Comments

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In this paper Dr. S. Hettige of the Department of Sociology Sri Jayawardenapura University emphasizes that educational achievement has become the most widespread source of social mobility in Sri Lanka and one of the basic functions in the education system has been to offer qualifications at various levels. Today education is a dominant value in our society. He suggests that long term educational planning should consider the positive aspects of education and introduce changes to ensure that those who participate in general education move into a harmonious relationship with the productive sectors of the economy. To rectify the present situation the plan may require to set alternative targets for the emerging generation.

We are familiar with the achievements on the educational front in this country. We are also aware of the fact that there are important problems associated with our education system. The purpose of educational reform, both past and present, seems to be to identify and solve these problems. The objective of this short article is to draw attention to the fact that there are diverse factors that lie outside the arena of education but have bearing on the problem and prospects of the system of education.

Let me pose a question at the outset. What is wrong with our present education system? I do not wish to deal with this question at length. For the present purpose, suffice it to say that we are confronted with some serious imbalances between the education and other spheres of our society. These imbalances are manifested in the white-collar orientation of the 'products' of the general education system, sudden shifts in our emphasis in the field of curricular, significant gaps between the products of education and the manpower needs of the local economy, etc. How did the imbalances arise in our context? Fortunately, in order to answer this question, we can not only go back into the recent history of our education system and see what has gone wrong but also compare the contrast the local situation with the experience elsewhere.

Unlike in the developed, Western countries, educational achievement became perhaps the most widespread source of social mobility in Sri Lanka. However, this is quite comprehensible sociological fact because the social distance between white-collar employment and other forms of wage employment continued to grow. The tendency has also been reinforced by the fact that, in contemporary society, the individual is anxious to utilize the means available to him in order to promote his identity; unlike in the past, today, at least in theory, individual identity is not fixed.

There have been two major forces at work in Sri Lanka, particularly during the last few decades of its recent history. On one hand, there has been the growth of bureaucracy and welfarism; the demand for more administrators, clerks, doctors, nurses, teachers, extension, personal in diverse fields was growing. On the other, the expanding local education system was producing more and more 'persons with qualifications' to fill these newly created positions. In the recent past, in fact, it turned out 'qualified' persons at a higher rate than the growth of such positions, thus paving the way to a disequilibrium between 'supply' and 'demand'. However, if the changes in the diverse spheres such as the economy, the social system and cultural values were carefully monitored, one would have predicted the outcome with a high degree of accuracy.

As is clear, in any country of the contemporary world, real growth of white-collar and other service occupations is proportional. In the developed, industrialised countries, these occupations, however grew more rapidly as a result of the enormous growth of industrial and agricultural production facilitated by the technological revolution that was taking place there. This technological advancement allowed the transfer of a large segment of the labour force from productive occupations to service employment without a consequent loss of production. The service sector in some of these countries has become so significant that some Sociologists went so far as to coin terms like post-industrial society to denote such societies.

As is well known, the supply of 'qualified' persons seeking white-collar employment in Sri Lanka was accelerated by the expanding educational opportunities country-wide. The process was also facilitated by a host of other factors.

Despite important and numerous changes in the rural society of this country

in the recent past, it remained relatively less disturbed over the decades compared with the dramatic changes that swept through the countryside in the Western world. In the latter, the population centres shifted from country to city. By contrast, rural-urban balance remained more or less unaltered in Sri Lanka; the overwhelming majority of the villagers continued to live in their traditional habitats exerting more and more pressure on local resources, particularly land. The local cities and towns, due to lack of a rapid industrial growth, not only were unable to accommodate meaningfully a substantial proportion of the rural inhabitants but continued to derive an increasing share of the rural economic surplus. This state of affairs was largely responsible for the slowly changing life-chances of the rural population. Nevertheless, the aspirations for social mobility, particularly among the young and the educated were growing. This is, of course a natural tendency in a free and stratified society. As mentioned earlier, such a society in turn would encourage the individual to utilize the opportunities, real and symbolic, to promote his or her identity. It is against this background that the merits and the limitations of the education system should be examined.

One of the basic functions of our general education system has been to offer qualifications at various levels for those who reach those respective levels successfully.

These qualifications eventually became the main criteria in recruiting persons for various positions. For example, G.C.E. (O.L.) became the basic requirement for lower and middle rung white-collar occupations while a university degree turned out to be a basic qualification for higher staff positions.

A qualification is often a vague indicator of a person's capabilities. One with a G.C.E. certificate can aim at a number of positions because his qualification does not specify a particular task for him. This is true with regard to many such certificate though there are exceptions. Thus, here we identify an important problem, that is the discrepancy between qualifications and skills required for diverse tasks. It constitutes a problem partly because those who obtain such qualifications are not quickly absorbed into the sphere of productive employment.

The general education system offering certificates does not necessarily train pupils for various tasks. The school system, apart from promoting literacy, social conscience, etc, in the community, prepares pupils for public examinations.

Some get through these examinations, others do not. Some find employment with the help of their certificates; others do not. The majority of those who participate in the general system, but fail to obtain 'qualifications' and are forced to take up whatever tasks available in the local milieu. Some refuse to take up such positions for various reasons. As is clearly evident, the overwhelming majority of those who possess certificates, irrespective of the subjects they offer, seek white-collar employment. Why?

As is well known, the rise of 'white-collar' during and after the colonial rule added a new dimension to the pre-existing patterns of status inequality in this country. White-collar employment in general became a life-style broadly defined by specific material and non-material circumstances; rewards, new social values, cultural symbols etc. The formation of this broad stratum or status community has thus been the result of at least three important forces:

- Emergent dominant values in society; values that the members of the society in general are compelled to accept and conform to.
- Values associated with modern education, values reflected in the day-to-day behaviour patterns, i.e. how do we compare two past pupils of a rural school, one who left school early to become an agricultural labourer and, the other who managed to obtain an educational certificate and became an accounts clerk in a city office.
- Distribution of material and non-material rewards in society.

The white-collar is not a homogeneous social entity. Rather it constitutes a sub-system of stratification within the larger social system. But, for a poor, illiterate villager, all those who work in a city office might appear as members of the elite though this is not the case in reality.

Despite its heterogeneous 'the white-collar community' represents a significant 'reference group' for the young aspirants in our society. For the overwhelming majority of them, the only available means of getting there is the education system. It provides the qualifications usually, required for such employment.

It should not be understood that every child who joins an educational institute, i.e. a school, ends up being an aspirant

for a white-collar position. In fact, many of them, particularly in the rural areas, leave school due to diverse circumstances even before they begin to worry about their future destinies. Others who reach various points on the continuum of educational attainment generally prefer non-manual occupations. The social distance between these two segments grows wider as they enter adulthood.

The "mass production" of youngsters with aspirations for non-manual work has become an important issue in recent years. The problem is so significant that one would be tempted to ask whether it is logical to offer 'qualifications' which subsequently do not yield gainful employment for a substantial proportion of those who possess them. It also seems to have compelled educational planners to think that curricular changes might help rectify the situation. Those who advocate change of curricular tend to assume that such changes aimed at providing a non-conventional education would equip the pupil with the skills required for productive employment. I do not wish to deal with the empirical validity of such an assertion or the practical problems involved in its implementation. Rather I would like to emphasize that, if one of the aims of such a plan is to divert a substantial proportion of the school leavers into productive employment, the changes should be structural, i.e. not the reorganization of list of subjects, but by changes in the circumstances that promote white-collar orientation. The circumstantial changes are required not only to ensure the effectiveness and fairness of curricular changes but also to guarantee that the new system operates in keeping with the avowed principle of equality of opportunity.

The significance of the factors that reinforce the tendency among the young to seek white-collar employment is partly evident in the fact that, despite the recent 'devaluation' of many educational certificates, the pressure on education remains as high as ever. As mentioned before, such factors are both material as well as non-material. If broad categories of professions correspond to divergent life-styles characterized by differential material rewards, social prestige, influence and cultural symbols, then those life-styles associated with positive factors and symbols, are essentially more attractive than those associated with negative ones. In society, the individual often attempts to get identified with a positive life-style at least symbolically. It is, therefore logi-

cal to assume that, in order to divert the required proportion of the pupils away from non-productive tasks, it is necessary to make the currently non-attractive or less attractive areas of employment as equally attractive, if not more attractive than, white-collar positions. This would necessitate the integration of educational

Today the universities accommodate only about 12% of those who pass the university entrance examination, let alone all those who sit this examination. Furthermore, a substantial proportion of those who complete university courses also have to waste another few years before they secure gainful employment in keeping with their educational achievements and aspirations, let alone those who possess lower qualifications such as G.C.E.(O.L.) and G.C.E. (A.L.). These youngsters in general prefer white-collar employment.

The fact that all those who seek white-collar jobs are unable to find such employment is indicative of the fact that there is a sharp disparity between opportunities and expectations. What then is the solution? Is it the creation of more and more positions in the services sector? As mentioned before, the services cannot grow independent of the production sector, the former is essentially dependent on the latter. This does not, however mean that the balance cannot be manipulated by deliberate policy and planning. But, then the natural balance is disturbed and the harmonious relationship between the two is threatened. It is, therefore common sense that productive and service employment should grow hand in hand and proportional to one another. The services of those who are capable of participating more effectively in modern life by virtue of their association with modern education should be available not only in the sphere of services such as management, judiciary, politics, education, health, etc. but also in the arena of actual physical production itself for the simple reason that, whether we like to admit or not, the service sector of an economy is heavily dependent on its production sector for its sustenance. Long term educational planning should take into account this state of affairs and introduce changes accordingly in order to ensure that general education and those who participate in it move into a harmonious relationship with the productive sectors of the country based on reciprocity and fairness.

As I indicated earlier, the effectiveness of educational reform is difficult to achieve because of the influence of some pervasive socio-cultural forces. Here we no longer deal with individuals and individual behaviour but with groups of people and institutionalized patterns of behaviour conditioned by not only values and standards but also the nature of the distribution of material and non-material rewards in society,

Unlike in the past, today education has become more or less a common value or at least a dominant value in our society. We are so concerned with the positive aspects of education that the views of those who grow up with little or no contact with the institution receive little or no attention. An integral part of being educated is the fact that the educated person is more likely to abstain from performing menial tasks for his subsistence than the non-educated or the less educated one. Furthermore, today the allocation of manual and non-manual work is not normally based on traditional criteria. The emergent situation is a challenge to the individual.

It is no secret that menial work has long been less rewarding than non-menial work. This is particularly so in modern

society where many groups engaged in certain services are organized in such a way that they are capable of wielding more influence, material rewards and social prestige than those engaged in diverse menial, productive tasks. The 'Modern' bureaucratic elite is one of many cases in point. So we have set the targets for the young members of our society who are constantly searching for their identity, both collective and individual. A representative group of school children, if interviewed, would help us to compile a list of these targets. Let us face the facts; thousands of youthful members of our society who attempt to reach these targets set by us are only behaving in keeping with these forces of our changing society and culture; our own values and standards. The stream has been flowing for quite sometime. Now it is overflowing. Can we afford to be ignorant any longer? On the other hand, to be concerned is to identify the forces which are responsible for the present state of affairs and formulate an integrated plan to rectify the situation. Such a plan may require to set an alternative set of targets for the emerging generations. Further they should also be provided with the means. These new means and end should be incorporated into the national system of education.

INTERNATIONAL FINANCIAL COOPERATION: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

Dragoslav Avramovic

This paper, relevant to our Special Report, has been held over for lack of space and will be carried in our next issue. In this paper Dr. Avramovic discusses the disturbed state of the global financial scene, focusing on the main crisis areas and making proposals that need to be taken up by the Central Banks of the developing countries. Among them are the need for a review and analysis of experiences in domestic monetary, financial and exchange rate policies. Dr. Avramovic, who is now an economic consultant in Geneva, has previously held eminent positions with the Government of Yugoslavia, the World Bank and UNCTAD. In analysing issues; (1) the level of international interest rates; (2) debt reorganization of the affected countries; (3) the problem of instability; (4) allocation of international liquidity; (5) the future of development finance; (6) international financial institutions; and (7) South-West financial cooperation.