



Perspectives in Education The Next Decade

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Apart from its idealistic aims education has a fundamental role to play in social and personal development. It will be increasingly felt in the future, as human resource development is the key to growth in a knowledge-based society.

The Future

What are the characteristic features of the future society?

Firstly, one of the distinguishing characteristics of the next century will be the dominance of knowledge where information power surpasses all other factors of production knowledge workers will derive higher incomes than owners of capital. In a world of corporate organisations decision making power will be with the highly educated high level management, not the owners of capital i.e. the shareholders of companies. A person with knowledge will be able to raise capital through various financial instruments only if he knows how to do it and use it effectively. The decision-makers of the boards of management in multinational organisations will wield greater influence in economic decisions even more than the political leaders of a developing nation.

Secondly the development of technology will have a great influence in the life styles of people. Developments in information technology and communication will change the character of the existing organisations. The present offices where we work may turn out to be co-ordinating centres where office-workers may attend office only when and if necessary. Most of the world will be done in their homes. They will communicate with each other through computer-based communication mechanisms. Exchange of ideas may be through new modes such as tele-conferencing.

In education the teacher's role will change and the school as an organisation will change. It may not be necessary for pupils to spend five to six hours in school with their teachers for five days of the week. Probably they may meet with the teacher for two or three hours a day for two or three days a week to get guidance from the teacher. Rest of the time including evenings they may communicate with the teacher via Internet or a more developed communication mechanism. Pupils will learn more and more through other media informally, than by what is dispensed by the teacher at school. Further he will become a learner on his own surfing the websites through the internet or other media channels. In such a situation learning to learn skills are more important than what is learnt.

In a fast changing world education is not going to be a "one shot" operation. Already we have accepted the concept of "life long" education, or the need for continuing education. Opportunities have to be provided for adults to learn as and when necessary. Institutes for further education and opportunities for open learning will be necessary. Even higher education institutes and universities have to be more flexible to meet these demands. The pace of change is so fast that it is difficult to predict what exactly will happen in ten years hence. Thirdly, the world is becoming increasingly and irreversibly inter-linked and inter-dependent. Future organisations whether in business and commerce or professional and voluntary sectors will not only be international but also transnational in such a situation mobility is facilitated and knowledge-workers will move from country to country, changing their jobs. In the process they should learn to adjust to not only new environments, but also to new job requirements, learning new skills. Adaptability is essential for survival.

Globalization will affect not only those who migrate, but also the life styles of people in a country. Information will flow freely into a country whether we like it or not and these will affect our traditional culture and its values. It is here that we have to be aware of what Mahatma Gandhi has said "though I keep my windows open, for the wind to blow from all directions I refuse to be blown off by the wind".

Already the traditional relationships in our society are disintegrating. Transformation of offices and dependence on the computer will exacerbate the feelings of alienation. Coping skills will be necessary for maintaining one's balance.

It is not contended that all these influences will be on our doorstep within a few years. Certainly, the majority of pupils studying in schools during the first decade of the 21st century will experience the developments described above for a major part of their lives.

Sri Lanka Achievements in Education

Where does Sri Lanka stand on the eye of the new millennium, in education? Sri Lanka has many achievements to its credit in the field of education particularly when compared to the position in other countries in South Asia.

It has a network of over 10,000 schools spread throughout the country, which provide fair access to education for all. Enrolment at grade 1 level is over 95%. The

transition of pupils from the junior secondary level to General Certificate of Education (GCE) Ordinary Level (OL) is 70% and the transition from GCE (OL) to GCE (Advanced Level) is over 25%. Regulations for the provision of compulsory education to children between the ages of five years and fourteen years have been enacted. The literacy rate is at 91.8%. There is no discrimination on the basis of gender and women enjoy equal opportunities with men.

In the field of higher education, although there are 12 universities, they can accommodate less than 2% of the age cohort seeking admission to universities. This is lower than the rate of participation in university education in countries, which are in par with the level of development in Sri Lanka. The opportunities in the non-university tertiary-sector are limited and the quality of provision is poor. There is a clear need for expansion in higher education. But even the limited number of graduates passing out from universities do not find employment in the private sector, which is the engine of growth. As a result the output from the university system has to be accommodated as a social welfare benefit scheme in unproductive positions in the government sector.

There is an urgent need to overhaul the entire university education sector to provide an education, which is relevant, need-based and demand oriented while maintaining excellence.

The position in the non-university tertiary sector and technical and vocational sector is even worse.

The current Education Reforms Programme is aimed at the improvement of the quality of general education and ensure access and equity in educational provision. Within the next three to four years some of the quantitative targets such as providing primary education for all, universal literacy, professional training of all teachers and provision of more and better quality inputs may be achieved. However the quality of the product cannot be ensured in a short period of time and success cannot be measured in quantitative terms.

Reforms in the higher education sector and the technical and vocational education sector are also being implemented. However, considering the constraints in the system it may take a long time to see an impact on the system.

Areas for Future Actions

Although Sri Lanka may attain universal primary education in three or four years time, the concept of literacy has to be redefined in the light of changing needs. UNESCO has suggested that compulsory education would comprise a basic education that would equip the child with the required knowledge and skills for living as well as acquiring the process skills of learning, so that a person will be continuously learning in order to keep pace with the changes in the environment. The ability to read and write a sentence and do basic computations in numeracy will be totally inadequate. It would require a general education of ten or eleven years duration with a curricu-





lum leading to the acquisition of competencies in communication including literacy, numeracy and graphics, competencies relating to the environment, the social as well as physical and biological competencies relating to ethics and religion, competencies in play and the use of leisure and competencies relating to learn to learn. Such a broad goal-oriented task cannot be achieved unless we provide adequate facilities for schooling up to about 16 years of age. In about five years time we may have to revise our legislation on compulsory education to raise the upper age limit to 16 years. As the present rate of transition from junior secondary level to senior secondary level is around 70% this is an achievable target by the end of the next decade. The demographic transition will drastically reduce the proportion of young dependents and the present infrastructure facilities may be adequate, if properly maintained.

As we are moving into a learning society, opportunities for open learning or adult and further education have to be strengthened substantially. Opening out the schools to the community in the evenings, establishing centres of further education, more and more opportunities for distance learning and promoting media and other modes for informal learning are some of the cost effective strategies that can be pursued to promote a learning society.

In the developed countries the schools are undergoing a technological revolution. The introduction of the microcomputer has brought about a revolution in the instructional process comparable to what happened in the past with the introduction of printed material. The computer with internet connection has enabled the pupils to engage in self-directed learning with the possibility of getting the teachers guidance at any time, whether during school time or at home. Students could surf various websites and learn about necessary things on their own. Multimedia projectors, CD ROM, videos and other technological aids help to enhance the quality of classroom instruction.

One may say that for developing countries like Sri Lanka where we cannot provide the basic teaching-learning equipment to schools these are far-fetched aspirations. But the increase in the use of TV, telephone and computers within the last 6 or 7 years show how fast changes would take place. Under the educational reforms programme a computer will be provided to all schools with Activity-rooms in the junior secondary curriculum if electricity is available. At the moment nearly 100 schools have computer centers imparting computer literacy to all students in G.C.E. (O/L) and G.C.E. (A/L) classes. The foreign funded projects that are currently being implemented and those in the pipeline will provide computer centres to at least 1000 secondary schools during the next three years. Once these facilities are provided, others will follow up to procure such equipment through different channels. What the government has to provide are the infrastructure facilities such as electricity and telephone connections. Even the government allocation on quality inputs can be increased considerably in the context of the demographic tran-

sition. Unless we make an effort to catch up with the developed countries in this field now, we will continue to remain under-developed.

The changing environment and the intrusion of technology to the classroom will necessarily require a change in the role of the teaching profession. No one should have the notion that the teacher will not be needed and pupils will learn on their own. Computers can never replace the teacher. But the role of the teacher has to change. He is no longer the dispenser of knowledge who is considered to be the sole repository of knowledge. As advocated by modern education practice the teacher will only be a facilitator of learning who will advise and guide his pupils while the children, highly motivated, will learn on their own.

But teachers should know all about the use of technology, where the knowledge is to be found and how to train children to use that knowledge. This requires the teachers to be highly trained professionals. Under the education reforms within the next three to four years all teachers will be professionally trained. Thereafter no untrained teachers will be recruited. However the next step should be to ensure that all teachers ultimately become professionally trained graduates. This would bring teaching profession in this country to a level on par with such profession in the developed western countries.

The need to learn an international language has been recognised widely by the people of this country. While English will be the principal foreign language, the learning of other foreign languages too should be encouraged. The growing international contacts will facilitate the learning of foreign languages. The need to improve the quality of teaching English has been recognised under the education reforms programme. However an accelerated programme to train English teachers is necessary, it is common knowledge that the standard of English among teachers of English is very low. A concerted effort to upgrade the English language skills of teachers is an imperative.

Although globalization on the one hand is bringing the mankind together to form one global family, on the other hand, conflicts among various ethnic, religious and social groups within countries as well as rivalries among nations have brought about untold misery to millions of human beings. It has been estimated that there are as much as 10000 conflicts occurring among various groups at any given time, leading to death, disability and displacement of millions of people. Unless this orgy of violence is contained, if not eliminated, a fair percentage of the world population will not be able to enjoy the fruits of human progress achieved through scientific and technological advances over the centuries.

We in this country at the moment are undergoing a catastrophic conflict resulting in dire consequences. Beside the degree of violence in society is so widespread that life has become very cheap. Sri Lanka is a very good example for a country which is experiencing these contrasting developments.

As germs of conflict arise in the minds of people, education has a major role to play in instilling ideas of peace and non-violence in the minds of young ones.

It is said that the "task of education is to teach at one and the same time, the diversity of the human race and an awareness of the similarities between and the interdependence of all humans". Instead of exacerbating the competitive element in social relationships, the school programmes, the curricular and co-curricular activities should promote co-operation, a sense of sharing and respect for others. Children should be, "able to put themselves in other peoples shoes and understand their reactions. Developing such empathy at school bears fruit in terms of social behaviour throughout life".

Curriculum developers, school administrators and teachers should strive to mould a culture of peace. At the same time one should be aware of one's right as well as one obligations to society. Democratic participation is a right as well as a duty of every citizen. Wherever appropriate, traditional values should be promoted and preserved to achieve these aims.

The break down in the traditional family relationships with the disappearance of the extended family, the adoption of new technology and the increasing competitiveness in modern society has created a feeling of alienation among the citizens in the developed countries. This trend will soon spread to the developing world as well it is the role of education to promote competencies relating to the use of play and leisure, and also provide coping skills to meet more and more stressful situations that one may constantly encounter to life.

The graduation to a knowledge-based society has important implications for management. A more informed person will resist to be driven by others or use of bureaucratic techniques. Providing leadership, setting examples will be better methods of motivating people to work. Participatory approaches will be more successful. Decentralisation of control, providing greater autonomy to schools, school-based management are some of the techniques that may be adopted in effecting this transition. Parents and the community will be encouraged to participate in the management process. The school administrators will have to be accountable to the community that they serve.

In higher education the urgent task is to improve the quality of university education so that the graduates of our universities will be able to contribute to national development. As centres of excellence in scholarship, they have a crucial role in promoting social development. The graduates of universities are expected to give leadership and to create more opportunities for others as a result of his activity.

Under these circumstances priority should be given to enhancing the effectiveness of university education through the revision of course structures, curricula, methodology of instruction and assessment to transform the existing courses to be more relevant, employment oriented, wherever feasible and better matched to the national manpower needs.

The research capabilities of universities have to be strengthened substantially to service the demands of a knowledge-based economy. Research is a key





to advancement of student's scientific-knowledge and technology and a closer relationship has to be established between industry and institutes of higher learning for mutual advantage. As universities are hard-pressed for funding the industry should make their contribution towards promoting research.

The proposed reforms in higher education will bring about major changes in the curricula of universities. The present rigid subject-based courses will be converted to more flexible systems so that the graduates will have better opportunities for interdisciplinary studies. As stated earlier the role of education in the modern context is to develop the competencies of a person rather than getting one to acquire more and more information. The instructional process in the universities too have to change in keeping with these objectives. Universities should also need to be equipped with modern educational technology to improve the methods of learning.

The non-university tertiary education and vocational education sector deserves greater attention in the coming decade. For the number of students in collegiate grades will increase and even at present the high rate of unemployment among this group which is around 23% is one of the highest. While the facilities in this sector has to be increased to meet the growing demand the quality of courses should be upgraded so that the trainees would meet the demands of the employment market.

When one reflects back on what has happened in the past there is nothing special about the onset of a new millennium. It only focuses our attention on the tomorrow's world. But the changes that may occur are so unpredictable, we cannot recommend the specifics that would meet the demands of the future. What we have to do is to shape a person who would be able to meet the unforeseen challenges in an increasingly uncertain environment. ■