

Title of the study : Sri Lankan Education System as a Reflection of Society's Ruptures: A Conceptual and Theoretical Exploration
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Introduction:

Numerous descriptive analyses of Sri Lankan education including the history of modern education, the advent of free education, education reforms at different points in time and so on have been published in Sri Lanka since the 1940s. In addition, there is a large corpus of consultancy reports written for various government departments or development organizations that also deal with aspects of education that might or might not be published, but are nevertheless relatively accessible to researchers. Many of these deal with technical lapses in the systems of education and means of addressing these. The attempt that would be made in this paper is not to summarize these papers or to venture down the same roads as these previous reports simply because such information is widely and easily accessible. The attempt here would be more modest and limited and in that context, it would attempt to assess the present position of Sri Lankan education by tracing its correlations and linkages with society in general and specific societal process in particular.

The specific societal processes that I have in mind are violence, increase in competitiveness, and the dismantling of imagination. While many more issues can be added to this list, my attempt would be limited to a focus on these key issues in so far as they are reflected in the education system as well as in the wider society. In that sense, it would be a more clinical analysis in ethnographic terms specifically located within a number of theoretical perspectives and conceptual clarifications.

Concluding Thoughts:

What has been attempted in this paper are primarily twofold. One was to place in context some of the dominant sociological theoretical explanations of the role and dynamics of education in general. This was done in the hope that these or similar theoretical processes might play role in critically assessing the overall conditions and lapses of the Sri Lankan educational system rather than merely probing into its technical inefficiencies. In making such attempts however, the limitations and lapses of these perspectives need to be taken into account, and adequately modified to suite local conditions.

Second, three recent trends in education, namely violence, competitiveness and lack of imagination were identified as dominant manifestations and their correlation with outer society was placed in context. It is now time to pose a fundamental question. What does all this mean?

By no means what has been presented here is conclusive. It was not meant to be. The idea was to look at three key societal processes that has also negatively impacted on the school system in particular and the extended formal education system in general and to understand the dynamics and correlations involved.

What is clear is that when we take these three processes as a whole, what we see is the reality of un-addressed societal processes from the outer society making their collective impact on the education system. In that scenario, the victims are children, and the

extension of that reality means that our future has been victimized today. These negative processes in schools are too complex and too entrenched in the wider society for schools to combat on their own in their institutions. Both at political and policy making levels in the outer society, there needs to be recognition that these are problems that needs to be addressed simultaneously at the level of society as well as at the level of education. Any models of intervention not taking into account this two-pronged approach is unlikely to succeed. The problem however, is that despite the emergence of these problems, and the recognition of them at the popular level, there have been no consistent public pressure on regimes in power to take appropriate action. On the other hand, the relative lack of sensitivity on the part of regimes is also indicative of the dismantling of democratic practices in the country over the last twenty years. In such a context, there is no urgency in responding to public needs.

On the other hand, compared to the extensive corpus of knowledge that documents various technical aspects and limitations of Sri Lankan education as well as its historical evolution through many reforms, there is a serious lack of knowledge on the impact of negative societal processes on education. Viewed in that light, there are no serious studies that trace the impact of the three processes outlined above on education or the kinds of conclusions and recommendations that can be drawn from them. More clearly, even the few sociological analyses that deal with some of these issues have not been adequately used in Sri Lankan education research to assess their collective impact on education and students.

Clearly, policy and reforms on key issues that afflict the country as well as its education system cannot be merely undertaken on the basis of felt need and public perception. They have to be based on formal knowledge. It is that gap that needs to be filled at the moment. Before conclusions can be drawn and recommendations made, the nature and the dynamics of the problems involved must be understood. It is in such a context, that education research in Sri Lanka needs to move away from conventional research models and embrace both models and methods of analysis as well as the existing corpus of limited local knowledge on these issues already available in sociology, social anthropology and political science. The filling of that gap is one of the most important priorities in understanding the present dynamics of Sri Lankan education in the first quarter of the 21st century. That intellectual enterprise needs to precede any serious and overarching attempts in addressing the issues identified above.