

Internationalization (privatization) of school education in Sri Lanka : An analysis of the differing discourses and the impact on society

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ABSTRACT. Understanding the nature, dynamics and impact of international education, in particular international school education, in a given country requires comparative understanding of the public education system and associated ideologies such as the free education. It also requires an understanding of how education system in the country has been changed due to colonisation and after gaining independence. Furthermore, the socio economic and political changes taking place in a country also influence the expansion of international education. The post 1977 changes in Sri Lanka and the expansion of international schools is a good example. By examining the public discourses around international schools and public schools as well as the impact on quality of education, equity, national identity, etc. this paper provides a brief account of the nature of prevailing discourses and emerging themes on this issue.

KEY WORDS. Educational inequality, International schools, Internationalization of education, Education and National Identity in Sri Lanka, Colonialism and education.

Introduction

This paper critically examines the internationalization of education in Sri Lanka during post 1977 period, teacher-public discourses pertaining to the international and public school spheres, and their implications on society and culture. The public discourses on educational inequality in Sri Lanka are rooted in the British colonial history of Ceylon, the course that free education project went through since independence, the post-1977 market-led economic rationalist, anti-welfare policies, and the nationalist way of thinking advocated by those who can only access the public education system to advance their children's status in society.

Public perceptions about the new phase of internationalization, especially after 1977, cannot be properly understood without locating the process in the broad socio-economic, political, historical and cultural contexts as well as the overall evolution of the education system with its many complexities. This is because the perceptions about the privately provided international education are often clouded by the experiences of parents and children from a variety of social strata. However, it is not the purpose of this paper to engage in an in depth examination of such public perceptions. Rather its aim is to extract several continuing

themes from the relevant education discourses and present them for the wider readership in the hope that it will assist those contemplating future research in this field.

In the Sri Lankan society there has been a continuing critical discourse on the role of schools that privilege some and disempower and exclude others with similar educational and social aspirations. Because of these criticisms and concerns, and government reactions, there has been a degree of localisation/indigenisation of urban-based elite schools in the 1960s and afterwards making them available to a broader cross-section of the population. The medium of instruction changed from English to Sinhala and Tamil, yet instruction in English also continued in these urban schools. Many students brought knowledge of English from their family backgrounds also as their parents were middle class professionals in the state or private sector.

In this context, a larger section of the population see the genesis and expansion of international schools as a repeat of what existed during the colonial period serving a similar function to these urban elite schools, i.e. contribution to the creation and maintenance of a privileged strata in society whose values, interests and aspirations as well as ideologies are pro-Western, not Sri Lankan. In this sense, those who are excluded from participating in the international schools do not see the education made available through international schools as a liberating one. Instead, they see it as an alienating and antagonistic one. However, those who have the necessary resources to access such education see it as a liberating, multi skilling, elevating and broad based one allowing the children access better trans-cultural capital. The excluded segments do not believe that the education from the international schools as providing the cultural capital required for culturally compatible national development and social progress. Thus, there are two significant frameworks by which people located in different strata view international education and national/ public education.

Those who criticise international schools do so from a variety of perspectives and for a variety of reasons. Some of these are related to the nature of education provided by the international schools, but other criticisms arise as a result of the poor standards prevailing in the public education system, the disadvantages that students face in the competitive employment market place and the anger generated in the public mind as a result, impact on national identity and values, widening class disparities, and equity implications.

How do we make a link between the internationalization of education e.g. international schools, and educational and socio-economic inequalities existing in a society such as Sri Lanka? Is there such a link, and if so what is the nature of it? Alternatively, are the criticisms of international schools misguided? Do these criticisms arise because of a certain ideology such as 'free education syndrome', or due to the supposedly sub-standard nature and quality of education provided by the public education system? How far are they responsible for generating anti-internationalization attitudes and rhetoric? What is the basis of such attitudes and rhetoric, and where do they come from? These are some questions that one can raise around the issue of internationalization of school education in the Sri Lankan context. I examine these questions based on the critical public discourses prevailing in Sri Lanka. Thus, the paper contributes to a critical understanding of the internationalization of education in

comparison with the needs and wishes of the local population for a fair and equitable access and distribution of teaching and learning opportunities and resources.

Internationalization of Education: Different Forms

In Sri Lanka, the internationalization of education occurs in several ways. They are:

1. International schools preparing local students for the Advanced Level examinations in the UK, and other Western countries (e.g. Cambridge Senior, London Matriculation examinations. Fees are charged for these examinations).
2. Sri Lankan students going to other countries to follow secondary education e.g. either with parents who are emigrating or as fee paying students.
3. Sri Lankan students who are unable to get entry to local universities proceeding to other countries to follow tertiary education courses. E.g. UK, USA, Australia, Russia, India, Malaysia, Thailand. Agents of overseas institutions assist these students, as are friends and family members who live in these countries and/or who have some knowledge about the countries and their education institutions.
4. Foreign universities offering their degree and diploma courses to fee-paying students in Sri Lanka. Several foreign universities have established their presence through partnerships with local private agencies for this purpose, in some cases establishing their own campuses (e.g. American University, Monash University College).
5. Academic and administrative staff of the publicly funded tertiary institutions, and staff of the education ministry etc, either obtaining their qualifications from foreign universities and/or making short term professional visits to foreign education institutions usually with funds provided by international bodies (e.g. Commonwealth, World Bank. Countries include UK, USA, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, India, and Pakistan).
6. Educational experts from other countries who are engaged by donor agencies through the ministry of education actively advising the Sri Lankan government, and also being active in formulating education policies and programs and special projects for reform and development (e.g. The World Bank Report, 1996).
7. Teaching materials such as textbooks, journals published in mostly western countries in the English speaking world being available in the libraries at educational institutions, and in many situations being recommended for various courses.

8. Foreign researchers exclusively or in collaboration with local academics conducting research on Sri Lanka's educational issues and publicising their results. Through this process introducing various conceptual and methodological approaches from outside that are then picked up by local researchers.

Many of these avenues of internationalization have a considerable history going back to the British colonial days (1796-1948). With the changes occurring in the world, and the local context over the last three decades in particular, some of these avenues have assumed renewed or added significance as they were opened up to a larger proportion of the population compared with the restricted availability or limited accessibility of the same in the earlier periods (e.g. international schools, obtaining an academic or professional qualification from a foreign institution).

International Schools in Sri Lanka

It is important to note the rapid expansion of private education in Sri Lanka after 1977. The number of private schools increased from 37 in 1983 to 63 in 1992 (Central Bank, 1992:95). Most of these were so-called international schools offering primary and secondary level instruction in the English medium to children from well-to-do urban families, in particular those belonging to the NUMC (New Urban Middle Class). While most expatriate families living in Colombo also send their children to these schools, their main attraction to local parents is the medium of instruction. The period after 1977 also witnessed the establishment of several private colleges in and around Colombo preparing secondary and post-secondary school children for examinations conducted by overseas agencies and universities. Many parents consider the instruction offered by these colleges as a prelude to further training abroad (Hettige, 1998: 85).

By 2002 there were 20 international schools registered with the Association of International Schools in Sri Lanka. In the last decade, the number of international schools operating in Sri Lanka has increased with very little government regulation. Some have expanded their operations to places such as Kandy. Others have extended their offerings to cover early childhood, primary, and secondary education. By 2009, the number of international schools has increased to 62 island wide (Education Guide, Sri Lanka 2009).

In the international schools, the fees charged vary depending on the school. Teaching medium is English. They are mainly Colombo based, even though some are now beginning to open up provincial branches that charge relatively less fees compared to those charged in Colombo. The main criterion applicable is affordability. The schools have better teaching and sports facilities. Some teachers are expatriates. They teach a foreign curriculum. International school students cannot sit for local examinations set by the ministry of education

such as Ordinary Level and Advanced Level. They cannot enter the government-funded universities with their qualifications.

In some schools, there are expatriate children also. There was no regulation or monitoring by the government in the past even though currently some measures are being contemplated for better monitoring and maintenance of standards. The government does not provide funds either. Buddhism, the main religion in Sri Lanka is not taught as in public schools. However, Sinhala and Tamil - the local languages are taught.

Educational Inequality: Concerns of Teachers in the Public System about International Schools

During a visit to Sri Lanka in July 2002, the author asked the teachers who were attending classes for their Graduate Diploma in Education at a public university in Sri Lanka about their views on international schools and their impact on society. The main concerns and opinions expressed by these teachers were as follows:

According to one teacher, the impact is apparent in the following:

- Widening gap with children from difficult areas (e.g. Rural)
- Inequities created for the skilled children of poor parents
- Educational opportunity limited to a certain class
- Injustice to the children from rural areas in the employment market
- Competition created between the rural and urban children
- Learning in the English medium leads to a decline in 'national thinking'.

Another teacher said, "In a society where there are significant economic disparities and inequalities, this further contributes to increased class conflict. When international schools are introduced without significant economic development, serious problems can arise. However, in the short term, an educated class is created". A Buddhist monk, who is also a teacher listed following consequences of international/privatised schools:

- Due to privatization/internationalization majority of the children are subject to disadvantage,
- Those in the higher social classes secure good employment, and a possibility for class struggle exists as a result,
- Children with natural abilities are not the ones taught,
- International schools are unsuitable for the national needs even though they provide opportunities to enter a new world globally,
- Professional education given is not necessarily suitable for the national economy,
- They produce citizens who are not suitable for Sri Lankan society.

Others pointed out that the international schools destroy equal opportunity in education, and employment. "When there is a tendency for private sector employment to go to those from international schools, it is not fair by those who attend public schools" one said. Another said that "in time to come even the government will require job applicants to have international qualifications". Another person who considers education as a symbol of class privilege said, "the education in Sri Lanka is one that generates a class difference, and even protect class privileges. Those who succeed, come to occupy a superior mentality. There is no independent and critical study. Those from rural areas are unable to reap the benefits."

Some teachers recognise the merits of international schools such as the regular revision of the curriculum, provision of better English language knowledge, better resources and facilities, and advocate that the public schools should also follow similar practices, and improve the quality of education. They say that the international schools provide a contrast to the public schools, hence it is good. One teacher emphasised the need for a common curriculum in public schools as an equal opportunity measure. Others expressed concern on the impact of internationalization on free-education. One said, "Those who obtain education in international schools do their service to other countries and not Sri Lanka". Another pointed out that "the international education is open only to economically better off children. Hence, it is unjust for those in the lower/poor middle class (*dilindu madyama pantiya*)".

Thus there is a range of views about international schools, what they do, their impact etc. among the teachers in the public school system. Two main perspectives emerge from their responses:

1. Those who look at this issue from a nationalist, class and regional (rural-urban) points of view,
2. Those who look at from an internationalist/global point of view.

These two correspond to the universalistic and particularistic orientations of youths in the new and traditional middle class fractions described by Hettige. Former corresponds to the particularistic and the latter to the universalistic (Hettige, 1998: 91). It is apparent from the foregoing that the teacher discourses on international schools in Sri Lanka include several essential themes. They are:

1. Better employment opportunities available for those who attend international schools,
2. Decline in the quality and standards in government schools,
3. Impact of internationalization on national identity and values,
4. Impact on free and universal education, equity vs. affordability debate,
5. Amelioration of class divisions and conflicts due to the dualities in education.

Better Employment for those who attend international schools, and those who gain tertiary qualifications from overseas universities

With the government's economic liberalisation policies in the late 1970s, privatization of state enterprises accelerated. On the other hand, the private sector also started to grow with the new incentives that the government provided. The state started to lose its pre-eminent position that it once held as the main employer. However, those who went through the public education system—from school to university levels—continued to look to the state for employment. Those who had access to political patronage and nepotistic links succeeded but the large majority did not have such access. Thus, there is a backlog of youths that complete education through the public system waiting to secure employment. Others resort to jobs that are not commensurate with the educational qualifications and their aspirations. This is confirmed by various reports published in the last few decades also (e.g. The World Bank Report). On the other hand, the private sector requires specific skills for those seeking employment such as English knowledge. Those who go through international schools, and some of the privileged schools in Colombo, stand a better chance in this context. Many of those from the public schools and universities find it difficult to meet the expectations of the private sector employers. High competition exists to obtain a kind of quality education from the public as well as the private, international system. This situation has attracted criticism from those who see this as creating significant inequality in society.

Those who attend rural schools and get a university degree have to join the unemployment queue or at the end become a school teacher. Those who attend urban colleges and follow whatever the course pick jobs that put them in the upper echelons of society. For this *Sudda* (whites = British) have given them *kaduwa* (sword=English) (Hewage, 1999:7-8)

Some local academics interpret this difference between the attributes of the children who qualify from the public and international system as a disparity brought about by the expanding globalisation and transnational relations while others interpret these as the outcome of short-sighted national educational policies. Speaking about the western dominated flow of information and cultural goods in the developing world, Hettige comments that many *swabhasa* educated youth (part of the nationally-oriented Third World intelligentsia), particularly those from rural backgrounds whose parents are not in high positions in the state bureaucracy - are unable to participate in the transnational project which is managed and controlled by a growing, transnational middle class. The transnationally oriented private sector has also led to wide income inequalities. The transnationally oriented middle class comprises diverse elements of society such as business executives, upper layer of the NGO sector, executives and other higher-level employees in locally based, international agencies (Hettige 1998:6-7).

Inability of those who go through the public school system (and even the public university system) to compete for employment successfully in the open market place, including in the private sector, is an issue that commentators started to focus from the 1970s. This has been a key issue around which the discourse on education was conducted often by those in the private sector, not necessarily those involved with educational policy or decision-making. There was a considerable degree of frustration in the 1970s and 1980s about the lack of action by the government and educational authorities to rectify the situation. Often those from the banking and industry sector have commented in the public media about the need for local graduates to have skills and attitudes that are appropriate and sufficient to operate in various professions and roles effectively. One accusation was that those who pass out from Sri Lankan universities possessed a book knowledge but rarely the practical skills required by the wider society. The attributes that were lacking in those who pass out from (and for that matter drop outs from also) the public education system included the lack of English language proficiency, problem solving skills, independent thinking skills, team work skills, global and current affairs literacy, computer skills, personality, interpersonal communication skills, and adaptability to new work situations.

Those who attended so-called prestigious public schools in urban centres were supposed to possess some of these skills even when they did not pass the Advanced Level examination and enter the universities. Thus, they were seen as suitable to hold various middle ranking roles in the private and even the public sector. To add to this perception, many children who went through these prestigious schools were also able to access family and old boys and old girls networks to secure positions in both the government and private sector. Such patronage is not available to a mass of children who attended rural and semi-urban schools, entered the local universities and passed out with degrees in Humanities and Social Sciences.

Commenting on the inventory of attributes that the private sector employers expected from its managers, the chairperson of a private company stated that these included 'well-trained and disciplined minds, mental endurance and physical fitness, charismatic leadership, team spirit, the capacity to arrive at decisions, moral and intellectual honesty, the ability to communicate fluently in spoken and written English'. He further said, 'these are qualities that university graduates today, do not possess. School-leavers with Advanced Level qualifications, a general education, good English, and sports, do better than degree-holders. A university education does not have any relevance for the private sector today, which needs performance and achievement from its employees more than academic distinction...They (the university graduates) cannot communicate in English. They are 'loners', whose main preoccupation is with security of tenure; they are talkers, not doers; they have an inflated opinion of their academic paper-qualifications' (Samarajiwa 1997: 13). The head of department of industrial management of a public university stated that 'The private sector dislikes graduates because they do not contribute much to corporate success. They are not result-oriented, but are quick to find excuses, and lack adaptability and flexibility' (Samarajiwa 1997: 13).

These characterisations of graduates from public universities are over-generalisations. Specific sections or programs of the universities produce better graduates than others. Nonetheless, these comments signal the thinking and dominant perceptions prevailing in the private sector as well as the thinking of the intellectuals from the public education sector. Thus, the gulf between the public education system and the employment sector is quite serious. The interesting factor emerging from the Sri Lankan experience is that the private sector in their search for a pool of talent to source its many roles do not seem to rely on the public education system that the government has invested heavily. Instead largely it seems to by-pass the public system of university education, and relies on school-leavers with specific characteristics. This is where the niche status of the so-called privileged public schools located in urban centres, and international schools have been derived.

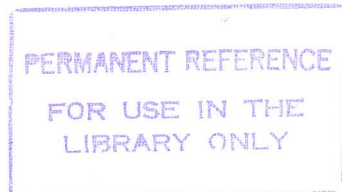
Uyangoda deals with the fact that a majority of youth are left out from gaining a quality education acceptable by the employers. They are victims of the transitional period from welfarism policies to economic rationalist policies. Many of them can be angry and hostile toward those who get a quality and acceptable education through both systems because of this denial of opportunities to them- educational and employment (Uyangoda 1995:13). This is a fundamental social structural, attitudinal and behavioural problem in Sri Lankan society leading to a range of outcomes such as youth insurrections, emigration, attendance at international schools, enrolment in foreign courses of study, and brain drain. Perceived strengths and weaknesses of each system i.e. public and private, matter because these perceptions then lead to rational or irrational decisions in terms of participating or not participating in one or both systems. In reality, both systems have their own pluses and minuses. However, the tendency is to see one system as poor in quality and recognition and the other as high in quality and recognition.

Previously, a postgraduate qualification was required to join the higher ranks in the government bureaucracy. A first degree alone was not considered as sufficient. This disqualified many of those who had obtained a first degree from a foreign university. However, now this practice is changing. Those who obtained foreign first degrees are also entering the public sector.

While Sri Lanka's economy has now been almost completely adjusted in structural terms to promote a market-led growth process, the public education and employment policies largely remain as they were perceived and formulated to suit the parameters of the welfare state and nationalistic aspirations of the masses after the independence. In this context, one has to even wonder whether the colonial education project is being still perpetuated under a neo colonial-globalisation guise creating two different class segments and widening gaps between these.

Decline in the Educational Standards and Outcomes in Public Schools

Whether or not the reported decline in standards in public schools is directly related to the expansion of international schools, and the privately run tuition classes/schools, it is



necessary to examine the trends in declining standards in order to comprehend the totality of the situation and to achieve a holistic understanding of the issues surrounding internationalization of education. By the time of independence and its immediate aftermath, Sri Lanka's education system was praised as an example to other developing countries. With a literacy rate of over 90 percent, the highest basic and secondary education participation in South Asia, and social indicators typical of countries with much higher incomes, it was described as a 'heartening success story'. However, Sri Lanka was also described in the last half of the last century as facing 'second generation problems, effecting quality, equity and efficiency of education' (The World Bank Report 1996: 1). The same report stated that the quality and efficiency is declining particularly in urban slums and rural areas. Among the factors leading to this situation were teacher training with inadequate quality, content and capacity, falling student- teacher ratios from 28 in 1989 to 24 in 1995, weak and disorganised educational administration, less responsive general education curriculum, text books with poor physical quality and contents, inequitable distribution of resources, low and declining expenditures on quality inputs, high teacher absenteeism, deployment of teachers that does not respond to demand, high allocations for welfare programs (The World Bank Report 1995:3-4). According to Uyangoda,

The public sector educational institutions, including schools and universities, have ceased to be centres of quality education. As a result, public sector education fails to produce generations of the youth with a competitive spirit for excellence. The expansion of the private sector of education in the English medium, catering to new classes of capital and surplus accumulation, is a mere illustration of this discomfoting trend (1995:14).

Here he is referring to the fact that the expanding international schools in Sri Lanka partly reflect the declining trends in public education. In other words, if the public education was good in quality, parents do not have to spend as much money as they do now by having to send their children to international schools. The fact they do so is an indication of the state of affairs in the public schools. Writing on the subject later, Uyangoda further states that 'One real problem now with Sri Lanka's 'free education' is not whether education is free or not, but whether Sri Lanka's younger generation receives a quality education' (Abeysekera & Uyangoda 1997: 2). If the public education system was operating well to provide quality education to all, it is doubtful whether the criticisms of international schools would be stronger as they are now.

As we observed already, those who criticise the operations of international schools do so by comparing them with the standards in the state funded public schools. They argue that it is unreasonable to allow the well-to-do segments of the society to access higher standards of education leading to better employment opportunities, while the state education sector is in a state of decline. The latter is supposed to provide universal education, especially meeting the needs of disadvantaged segments of society such as those from rural, lower socio-economic classes, and caste groups.

When those who attend the public schools don't get a quality education recognised by the rest of the society, in particular with the attributes demanded by the private sector, the frustrations generated as a consequence are directed toward those who attend international schools more so than the case would be otherwise.

These details show us the flow on effects on international schools and other higher education institutions have due to the problems existing in the public education system. As explained earlier, these are the quality, capacity, and recognition by the employers. In short, the relevance of education both to student aspirations, employer needs, and the social context - whether it be national or international.

Impact of Internationalization on National Identity and Values

The impact of international schools and internationalization of education on national identity and values have to be discussed in relation to the role that public education system plays in this regard. What role does each play or not play in creating a national identity and the values that underpin it?

Education is a key social institution, which contributes to the inculcation of values and national identity as perceived by the national leaders and policy makers. Those associated with or sympathising with the public education system interpret changes occurring in Sri Lanka's education sector to be not in the best interest of national identity and values which should underpin the education process. Here, they mean the Sinhala-Buddhist values, and national identity based on these.

Some see the public education system as not helping to create a common national identity and basic human values. Quoting from Balasuriya (1989), Udagama states that 'Our education system is a disaster as far as the creation of a common Sri Lankan identity. The educational system is examination oriented, individualistic, competitive and largely theoretical; our academic curriculum neglects value promotion, personality development, social concern and service' (Udagama, 1990: 12). Quoting another educationist in Sri Lanka, (i.e. Hewage), he further says, 'The schools did not develop the basic value of respect and concern for the human person, in spite of the stress on religious education. Our school model, too, could not accommodate our various cultures, ethnic groups and languages in a meaningful way and as a result the system alienated and marginalised rural youth and youth especially from minority groups' (Udagama, 1990:12). According to Hettige:

Following post-1977 economic reforms which led to the intensification and diversification of Sri Lanka's external links, nation-state ceased to be the dominant framework for identity formation and ideological orientation for many people. This was true for both youths and adults alike... Almost unrestricted flow of information, media images and cultural goods into the country has facilitated the spread of new life styles and consumption patterns.

As a result, consumption based life styles and social identities today openly compete with conventional life styles and identities based on social positions occupied by individuals. (1998: 8-9)

In this broader context of cultural globalisation, and the erosion of traditional value basis underpinning public education, what role do international schools play in terms of national identity and value formations? Here we have to go back to the characteristics of international schools that were mentioned earlier. For example, unlike in the public system, international schools do not teach local religions as a subject. The medium of instruction is English. The school culture, the exposure to electronic media, teachers from other countries, curriculum based on foreign institutions and requirements contribute to the generation of different ethos and priorities among children. In a society where status consciousness is high, and cultural imitation is even higher, values acquired by the children through these schools have the potential to set them apart from the average Sri Lankan youths who attend the public school system.

It is clear that the international schools do not operate within a national framework of values and identity. Their foci and emphases are international. The role they play in developing the national identity in a traditional sense where Sinhala Buddhist identity is the core element is minimal. Instead they develop a sense of individual identity, which is international in character and appreciative of the achievements of developed western societies in a historical and contemporary sense. They are being trained for future employment in the industrialised world, including the private sector of Sri Lanka, which is internationalised.

In short, those who criticise international schools and internationalization of education on cultural and identity grounds argue that we should be participating in global processes while preserving their own national identity, values, norms, etc., rather than without these. The current trends in international education are seen as going against this stance. They also argue that education should serve the needs of the country rather than other countries. An education suitable to national needs is necessary rather than blindly follow education provided by international institutions. Need for adapting knowledge obtained from international institutions to local needs and conditions is also emphasised.

However, compared with more powerful nations in Asia such as China and India it is doubtful whether a small country like Sri Lanka is able to sustain a more nationalistic and traditionalistic view of education for too long. In fact when examining the history of Sri Lanka it appears that the ability of various segments of society to access different kinds of international education played a crucial role in the development of a professional class during and after the colonial period. Some elements of this class imitated and adopted western life styles, values and identities. Other elements maintained the national attributes and identities. This is a factor that becomes very clear when we examine Sri Lankan immigrants in Australia and similar countries. The two social strata, one oriented to Western values, identities and life styles and the other to Sri Lankan ethno-religious-linguistic values, identities, and life styles

are important categories for social analysis. One teacher made clear the role of international schools in no uncertain terms. "International schools fasten the destruction of national identity or what is left of it in the education system. Globalisation really means Americanisation. International schools prepare the background for Americanisation".

Impact on Free and Universal Education: Equity vs. Affordability Debate

Educational opportunities available freely to various social groups are significant in that they later provide access to wider opportunities in the society and globally such as employment, migration, material rewards, status, education of children. Free universal education is an ideal that many international funding agencies are advocating for developing countries today. In Sri Lanka's case, it has a unique place as the cry for free education was derived from anti-imperialist campaigns in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Several generations benefited after independence from the free education policies as access to so-called privileged schools, and elitist University of Ceylon were broadened. University education moved away from an elitist one to a mass education. Abeysekera and Uyangoda describe the place free education held in Sri Lanka's recent history as follows:

Free education', nonetheless, is an enduring myth among nationalist and radical groups in Sinhalese society. This myth originates from a powerful sociological fact that was evident in Sri Lankan society over the past sixty years: free education had played a socially emancipatory role for many persons of the oppressed and backward class and caste groups while enabling the middle strata to achieve further upward social and economic mobility. As an integral component of Sri Lanka's welfare state, free education also became in the ideologies of nationalist and radical groups a basic entitlement. (1997: 1-2)

Around the time of independence (1948), the cry for free and universal education became a crucial issue resulting in the Education Act of 1945. Kannangara Report of 1943 provided the impetus and inputs for the Act. "Fee paying schools were also asked to join the free education scheme by 1948. Many did. Others were given an extension" (Jayasuriya 1969: 28). By this time, large masses of population, especially from rural areas, who didn't have access to fee-paying, urban schools, which created an English speaking exclusive class of people eventually settling into privileged middle ranking positions of power, had already been empowered with voting powers. As Sri Lanka's political landscape changed along with independence, rural masses gained recognition as a power block to be reckoned with by the politicians. Political leaders of different parties had to address issues that disadvantaged the masses. Education facilities in rural areas were one such issue. Expansion of Swabhasa medium schools became a popular demand and political leaders addressed it to win votes.

However, Jayasuriya (2000) suggests that “the egalitarian objectives of these social policies were only partially achieved”. He states that after the 1977 neoliberal economic policies 'the social justice rationale of these policies as regards distributive justice and mobility has become more and more problematic' (2000:11). Writing about the shift from public to private sector, he says that “the increased privatization of welfare was most evident in the public utilities, particularly transport and the healthcare field.... Likewise, in general education as well as higher education the public-private mix became diluted in favour of the private sector” (2000: 19).

It is not surprising then that with the expansion of fee-paying international schools that came to the scene in the 1980s and 1990s- a transitional period in Sri Lanka's economy and social welfare - questions are being raised about the egalitarian aspects associated with these schools. With privatization and internationalization of education, affordability has become the criteria for access rather than merit or the need. This goes against most of the values and ideals underpinning 'education for all' concept and ideal also.

There are others who see the merits of international schools and internationalization of higher education. Even some of those who are critical of internationalization, admit the positive aspects. One can see a dichotomy of views with regard to the expansion of higher education opportunities through international providers. Those who benefit from such expansion usually tend to have positive opinions whereas those who can't access such education tend to have critical views. For example, a former educationist whose children have benefited from higher education in Australia and New Zealand had the following to say:

If we take countries like ours, this is in line with democratisation of education. People will have more chances to study. Because of high competition to enter the universities our students, about 75%, are unable to enter university though they pass Advanced Level....but now they can go to another country or follow the same course in an international institution in Sri Lanka. Some students did not have the opportunity to follow the subject areas they wanted. For example, computer studies, information science, aeronautical engineering, nursing. But now this facility is available and if this trend continues our students will have more areas to select. Earlier, unless you are very bright you cannot enter a university. So students had to struggle hard at Advanced Level. And some committed suicide because after getting three “A” passes for Advanced Level (A/L) could not go for medicine, engineering or management. But now education is not a threat to this category of students. (Personal Communication, 2002)

Referring to her own children, she said:

Education was a problem for parents too. For example, when the JVP problem (rebellion in the South led by this political party in 1989-90) was there and when universities were closed for years we had to send our children to these countries

spending all what we had. If there was an international university in Sri Lanka we would have sent our daughter there. It saves money. Lot of our friends educate their children at ITS (International Technology School) and they say it is cheaper for them. In addition, they can keep the children with them for two years in Sri Lanka. Students got outside exposure also and they will be fit for the future world with new work experiences. It's always good for personality building and this involves lot of interaction. They will be able to work or live anywhere in the world. (Personal communication, 2002)

These views reflect a different kind of value system, pragmatism, overseas exposure, access to a better product compared to merely waiting for or going through a free product such as the free education. Even some of the well-known advocates of free education have sent their children overseas for a different kind of fee-paying education or on scholarships received from sponsoring institutions. This trend has grown significantly in the previous decade. Thus in today's Sri Lankan discursive context there is a certain degree of hypocrisy when it comes to discussing the merits of two forms of education. In some situations, pragmatism wins over the rhetoric on free education. In others the reverse occurs. Free education is being used by some political parties such as the JVP as rights children and youths should have in society irrespective of their socio-economic, geographical or ethnic background. In this context, the government is highly reluctant to allow fully-fledged international/private universities to operate in the country. There is however a plethora of foreign universities marketing their programs and in some cases offering courses on partnership arrangements with local private agencies with a stake in education field.

Amelioration of Class Divisions and Conflicts due to the Differences in Education.

How far internationalization does, in particular international schools ameliorate class differences and divisions in society? In what ways are these divisions amplified or narrowed? It is important to address these questions because if they contribute to further amelioration of divisions in society, it can lead to social conflicts and even violence. Sri Lankan society has experienced widespread anti-systemic violence, especially since the 1970s largely led by youths that were educated in the Swabhasa medium and found no suitable employment in the state sector. As noted earlier, private sector employment was limited in that the employers preferred youths with certain attributes that the public education system could not produce.

As in other post-colonial societies, the division between English educated and Swabhasa educated middle class is a significant one in the Sri Lankan society. The author has examined this aspect in detail elsewhere (Gamage, 1999). Hettige also describes the emergence of trananationally oriented new urban middle class with better opportunities in the private sector. "They also come from broadly similar backgrounds, i.e. Westernised, English-

educated, urban-middle class, etc. and cut across ethnic boundaries. Moreover, their higher incomes permit them to indulge in broadly similar consumption patterns, i.e. Modern, Western style consumption, and there fore become members of a distinct status community defined by a shared life style” (Hettige, 1998: 94). Among others the establishment of dozens of international schools and colleges in the capital city providing English education to the children of the wealthy and the members of the NUMC is considered as an indication of the modern Western consumerism (Hettige, 1998: 95).

The two elements i.e. English educated versus the *swabhasa* educated youths experience differences in income, life style, status, class position, attitudes and consumerist behaviour in their day-to-day lives, especially in urban areas. Often these experiences lead to antagonistic attitudes. There is a gulf developing between the two segments even in ideological terms. Hettige characterises these ideological differences in terms of universalism and particularism or nationalism. In essence, one segment of the new middle class is positioning as a superior one in relation to the other segment. Internationalization of education plays a crucial role in this segmentation.

The frustrations of the *swabhasa* medium students from the public education system go deeper than mere individual psychological and physical conditions such as stress and violence. They are connected with sociological and cultural interpretations given by academics, other intellectuals, and political parties that draw support from youth constituency, and the day-to-day experiences of difference and contradiction.

What is at stake here is a kind of 'segregated teaching and learning environment' where the medium of instruction, educational philosophies, values and practices and the facilities play a significant distinguishing role. One factor that contributed to the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka after independence was the segregated education provided by the public system to Sinhala and Tamil children who subsequently found no common ground or medium for interaction and understanding when they became adults having to work in the state and or private sector or in fact compete for employment. “Most youths in the country have been born and brought up in ethnically segregated environments. Living in the same country, and competing for the same resources and opportunities, it is natural that they become suspicious of each other and treat 'the other' as their competitors. Being exposed to 'particularistic' historical narratives through school texts and other material available in the vernacular, and not having opportunities for social interaction across ethnic boundaries, even so-called educated youth remained mostly parochial in their world view” (Hettige, 1998: 88).

Will the segregated education provided by international schools in the English medium, and public schools in the Sinhalese and Tamil medium continue to create a similar division in society on language and class grounds and generate further conflict? This is an area that further research is necessary.

Conclusion

Nature and quality of education received are important contributors in Sri Lanka in the reproduction of class differences, and unequal educational and employment opportunities. Creating two types of education, and privileging one over the other, particularly through the Western value system means not a reduction in class inequality but an enhancement of it in this particular case. Furthermore, a large population who have to put up with low quality public education is deprived of access to an international education perceived to be better in many respects. Out of the international education, coupled with privileged public schools in urban areas, a new elitism is being created in the society. The examination of various public and teacher discourses has allowed us to become aware of the contours of related arguments and counter arguments.

Some questions that arise from the discussion in the paper are the degree to which international schools, in addition to providing children with knowledge and skills for future employment, also contribute to the production of socially responsible and socially conscious citizens who are able to empathise with the plight of fellow citizens. The arguments about class differences, elitism and privilege, equity and access issues directly relate to this. The cultural arguments lead us to the broader debates about nationalism in comparison to transnationalism and globalisation.

Public education vs. international education highlights significant disparities existing in terms of the acquisition of new knowledge and skills, opening and closing of doors, rural and urban disparities, as well as class disparities. As described earlier, internationalization of education is happening in more ways than via international schools. This paper did not explore these other avenues in depth, including what is happening in the public education system. The paper is also not based on first hand study of international schools or public schools. Rather it is based on an analysis of relevant discourses as available in published literature and limited data collected by the author. However, the analysis provides insights for exploring various themes, issues, debates and hypotheses outlined here through further research in the context of Sri Lanka and the South Asian region.

The paper shows that while for the children who can access international education, in some cases with a degree of financial hardship, internationalization has provided relief, for the majority who are either excluded from obtaining any kind of quality education, or those who go through the public education system which is facing a crisis in terms of providing quality education and recognition, international education is not a desirable and affordable option. Internationalization creates an exclusive group of youths who will enjoy better opportunities in the society- a process with stark parallels with the formation of an elite group in Sri Lanka during its colonial period and afterwards. Thus in the minds of those excluded, international schools and internationalization generate negative resonance with the colonial past and what it meant to majority population who are underprivileged in the society.

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