

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).

