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# **Education Policy Reforms and Implementation of Sri Lanka**

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## ***ABSTRACT***

Education is the most influencing single factor to bring about human development and change to any society. In Sri Lanka, a package of comprehensive education reforms was first introduced in 1945 with the distinguished leadership of Dr.C.W.W.Kannangara. In general, subsequent governments which were elected since independence in 1948 supported and contributed further expansion of education reforms bringing about many desirable outcomes. However, Sri Lanka has not been able to generate sustainable economic growth and employment based on human capital.

There were many instances where we failed in policy implementation rather than policy formulation. Education system has been badly affected by the political interference since mid-1970s and at times tried to handle day today administration as well. We have not been able to foster skills and vocational education in par with the general education, which has been highly exam oriented. Much attention needs to be given to learning outcomes to be achieved as skills for the learner who in turn can face the challenges in real life situations.

## **Introduction**

Education is the single most influencing factor in enhancing human development and social change and the level of development of a country. It is also the most powerful tool to bring in any change to an individual and through him to society and sustain that change. When perusing the development history of any country, one would come across situations where a country had made attempts to foster its education policy and identify strategies and plans to implement that policy expecting to generate some desired results. Sri Lanka was ranked 72 out of 189 countries in the world registering a Human Development Index (HDI) value of 0.782 for 2019, which is the highest in South Asia. This has been commended by many parties as a great achievement, particularly due to the fact that Sri Lanka's per capita income is just above US \$ 4000 even in 2018. This positive outcome is mainly attributed to the provision of free of charge education covering the entire island since 1945 with the implementation of the education reforms of Dr. Cristopher William Wijekoon Kannangara. There are many positive outcomes brought about by these reforms and other subsequent reforms, actions by elected governments over the years.

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However, questions are raised as to whether the above policy reforms and actions in education have brought about the expected results measured in terms of creating job opportunities, helping the factors to foster economic development, inculcating the values in the minds of learners that support the country's long-term development etc.

In view of the foregoing, this paper tries to survey main education reforms, the results brought about by these reforms, understand the challenges in policy making processes and implementation approaches that have resulted in host of problems affecting the development efforts of the country. Finally, special attention is made to identify areas that need policy actions and implementation strategies to resolve problems in education understanding the market realities here and abroad.

**Background**

The two decades starting from 1925 looked very bleak when gauging at the situation at home and abroad. In Europe, the period 1928-32 marked the Great Depression where there was an economic calamity resulting in huge unemployment and reduction of income. This affected the economies in the periphery such as Sri Lanka in respect of its agricultural exports like tea, rubber and coconut. At the same time, Sri Lanka suffered its worst health hazard in 1934, resulting in an unprecedented death toll due to malaria. Towards the end of 1930s, the Second World War started and continued up until 1945 causing an enormous damage to life and property in many countries, where the hotspot was Europe. Due to the shortage of food items, many countries, including Sri Lanka, had to start new social welfare schemes which included food ration.

Socioeconomic situation in the island by 1940 was very poor, where 55% of people had found employment in the agricultural sector with very low income while life expectancy at birth was reported 42 years. Percentage of people who were reported to be 'no schooling' stood at 68%, while the percentage of those who were with secondary education was reported only 11% in the same year (see table 1). This background necessitated to improve the country's education as the first priority to uplift the income and socioeconomic situation of the masses.

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Table1: Some Socioeconomic Indicators of Sri Lanka

<b>Indicator</b>	<b>1940</b>	<b>1960</b>	<b>1980</b>	<b>2003/4</b>	<b>2014</b>
Population (Mn)	6.2	9.8	14.7	19.2	20.5
Number of schools	2400	5000	9414	10,093	9887
Literacy rate	40%	72%	88%	93%	96%
Life expectancy at birth (yrs)	42	61	69	74	75
Infant mortality per'000 births	141	68	34	17	15
Birth per '000	38.4	36.6	28.4	18	17
Death per '000	20.3	8.6	6.2	6	6
Population growth	3.2%	2.8%	2.1%	1.3%	0.8%
% of no schooling	68	26	15	8	Less than 1
% with secondary education	11	27	42	39	85
% employed in agriculture	55	53	51	33	31
% unemployed in LF	-	16.6	24	9	4.4
Per capita income US\$	n.a.	187 (1970)	540	997	3280 (2013)

Source: Annual Reports of the Central Bank of Sri Lanka (various issues)

### ***Intervention of Dr. C. W. W. Kannangara in educational reforms***

Dr. Kannangara entered the National Legislative Council by winning the by-election for Southern Province held on 23.5.1923. He was re-elected at subsequent elections held in 1924, 1931 and 1936. With the recommendations of the Donoughmore Commission, State Council replaced Legislative Council as the National Legislature in 1931. Donoughmore reforms allowed Sri Lankans to elect 46 State Councilors and these elected councilors were granted seven portfolios where education was one. For the first time, State Council was made up of Executive Committees and Ministers. Dr. Kannangara was the first Chairman of the Executive Committee on education. Accordingly, he became the first Minister of Education in Sri Lanka and continued to be the Minister of Education for 16 long years, repeatedly.

Prior to education reforms, there had been no standardized system of education covering the entire island. By 1939, there was a mix of schools – education in Sinhala schools and Tamil schools, both government and assisted, was entirely free, while school fees were payable in English schools and bilingual schools. In the case of government schools, total expenditure was met by the government while the entire salary bill for teachers was paid by the government in the case of assisted schools. School buildings, equipment and text books were provided by philanthropists for assisted schools. In the case of assisted English schools, government paid only about 50% of the salary bill of teachers while the balance had to be met through school fees.

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The Education Ordinance of 1939 gave the Executive Committee of Education the authority to create new Laws for a new education system in Sri Lanka, ensuring that all children in the country, regardless of social class, economic status, religion or ethnicity, had equal access to education. In 1942, a special committee was appointed to report on the status of education in the country and Dr. Kannangara was made the Chairman of this committee. Accordingly, the report which was issued in 1943 made several recommendations providing lasting value to the nation by way of ensuring the people's right to education.

These recommendations came into operation on October 1, 1945 under the directions of Dr. Kannangara as the Minister of Education. And these recommendations were popularly known as 'Free Education Reforms of Dr. Kannangara'.

#### **Major educational reforms introduced by Dr. C. W. W. Kannangara**

- a) Education was made free of charge from Kindergarten to university for all children enrolled. Government started making payments of salaries to teachers directly.
- b) Mother tongue was made the medium of instructions in primary schools. English was to be taught in all schools from grade three.
- c) Three types of schools were proposed – secondary schools leading to university education, senior schools leading to polytechnics and practical schools to agricultural colleges.
- d) It was emphasized that school curricula should be based on “3 H” principle where “head, heart and hand”, represented ‘intellectual ability’, ‘fostering emotional feeling’ and ‘practical skills’ respectively. It is here accepted that a child's emotional well-being is just as important as intellectual and practical ability in education.
- e) Establishment of central schools with a view to providing high quality secondary education to students in locations outside the major cities.
- f) An annual scholarship program was launched to provide opportunities for a limited number of best performers to get free board and lodging in the hostels of the central schools.
- g) Establishment of an autonomous university.
- h) Facilities were provided for adult education for illiterate adults.

#### **Subsequent policy reforms further facilitating free education reforms**

When looking at educational developments, it can be stated that all governments elected after independence continued to support the free education scheme taking efforts to expand the education at all levels. From 1931 to 1970, education policies were driven by the need to have national control over a colonially inherited system

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and to create a unified system of education. Major issues to be tackled during 1940s affiliation of students (b) religious education (c) medium of instruction at school and (d) removal of tuition fees. In the early 1950s, political agitation by masses on secondary education led to the increasing use of Sinhala and Tamil in the upper grades of government secondary schools. Sinhala and Tamil became compulsory media of instruction in the secondary education from 1953 and in Arts Degree programs of universities from 1960.

The take-over of denominational schools was hotly debated before and during the election of 1960 and despite considerable resistance from Christians and Catholics, two Acts were passed in Parliament in 1960 and 1961 vesting almost all assisted schools and their properties in the state. The take-over of denominational schools was effected in 1960 while the establishment of new private schools was barred in 1961. With these measures major colonial policies related to language and religion ceased to be a burden to provide education opportunities and substantially contributed to the consolidation of a unified system of education. The government of 1960-1965 further facilitated the expansion of free education mainly in three fronts: (i) established a large number of new schools, (ii) a large number of schools were up-graded to Maha Vidyalayas providing more opportunities to rural students in senior secondary education and (iii) provided free of charge text books and mid-day meals.

However, results of the free education scheme after about 25 years of its implementation did not seem to meet the expectation of the masses in full. "Education was indeed free to all in theory but in practice what was free was a good education for the few and the bad education for the many. In other words, From the point of view of quality, free education was more a mirage than a reality. Even as at the year 1969, education involving science and mathematics whether at school level or at the university level is denied to the mass of children, and is available only to a small minority.

Moreover, there are astounding inequalities in the per capita pupil expenditure by the government on different schools." (Jayasuriya, 1969, p.86)

Education reforms in the 1970s to 1990s mainly arose from the need to contain the youth unrest that was shown in the form of demands by the rural Sinhalese youth to reduce disparities in education and employment opportunities. The Education Review Committee appointed in late 1970 suggested that General Certificate of Education in Ordinary Level (GCE O/L) and General Certificate of Education in Advanced Level (GCE A/L) need to be replaced by National Certificate of General Education (NCGE) and Higher National Certificate in Education (HNCE). This was mainly to provide

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job related skills and to use resources available locally to develop the country. Educational reforms in 1972 further expanded facilities and made attempts to improve the quality of education with the introduction of English, Mathematics and Science education to all schools. Substantial reforms of primary education were also implemented from 1972, based on the idea of child-centered, activity-based learning. Though these reforms were seen as far reaching from the point of view of resolving unemployment and supporting economic development, many obstacles cropped up in the implementation. Among others, non-supportive nature of the majority of teachers on account of lack of facilities for the new teaching environment and the objections of parents due to limited options available for their children at rural schools were noteworthy. With the new Constitution introduced in 1972, Public Service Commission (PSC) came under the control of the Cabinet of Ministers and hence, the independence of the PSC was lost. Political interference in the form of transfers, promotions, appointment of teachers and education staff gradually affected the system. The new government which came to power in 1977 took steps to return to the earlier system as promised in the campaign leading to the election.

One outcome of reforms in the early 1980s was the establishment of the National Institute of Education (NIE) in 1986. The NIE took over from the Ministry of Education the functions such as curriculum development, teacher education, training for education managers, evaluation and research. With a view to sharing limited resources among a few schools in an area, clustering of schools was proposed in 1981 but was not successful in implementation. The major change in the 1980s was the devolution of power into provinces by an amendment to the constitution of Sri Lanka in 1987. With the establishment of nine provincial councils, hitherto a unified system of central government policy making, planning and implementation of many subjects and functions which included the subject of education were to be managed under two authoritative systems of central government and provincial administration. This situation affected the implementation of reforms and the political interference into day today activities grew in addition to the implementation of projects and programs at districts and divisional levels.

The decade of 1990 was a busy period when it comes to education policy formulation and implementation. The policies formed during this time were highly influenced by the youth unrest experienced during 1987 and 1989. One of the major steps taken for policy formation was the establishment of National Education Commission (NEC) in March 1991, which was given the responsibility of making recommendations and giving advice to the President on the shapes and content of National Education Policy. This was a major deviation of policy formulation process, as it was the Ministry which undertook the task of leading policy formulation process and implementation. The first report of the NEC came in 1992, reaffirming educational opportunities from childhood to old age, basic education and a variety of skills that the individual is able to contribute to society and the economy.

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The new government, which came to power in 1994, also gave high priority to education reforms. The president closely worked with the NEC at the start and NEC produced its policy document by September 1995 titled 'Action oriented strategy towards a national education policy'. Main five areas highlighted in this document were; extending education opportunity, quality improvement in education, teaching profession, technical and practical skills education and management of education and resource provision.

However, presidential taskforce for general education was appointed in December 1996. Task - forces were also established for tertiary education, technical education and vocational education. Although the access to education in the country was quite satisfactory, there were quality issues. Though international ratings on literacy was something to be proud of, there were still children who were unable to read and write at the age of 10 and 11 years, indicating poor quality of education, which was the concern of the President, who had a passion for quality improvement in education. Education reforms in 1997 was comprehensive in the sense that those tried to enhance both education opportunities and the quality of education. Reforms were targeted to address the themes of compulsory education, equitable distribution of education opportunities, school rationalization, curriculum changes and other developments to primary education, junior secondary and senior secondary education.

By introducing new regulations, compulsory attendance of all children from age 5 to 14 was imposed from 1.1.1998. Though monitoring committees were appointed at village level to monitor student attendance to school, it was not very successful owing to the fact that committee members were not so keen to attend to the task. Improvements of Schools by Division (ISD) program were in place in early 1990s targeting 279 junior secondary schools and 62 senior secondary schools, but with the new government in 1994, Divisional Schools Development (DSD) project came in 1995 targeting 347 schools. Only a few schools, selected under the earlier program, was included in this project. School selection criteria was not clear under the new program. Political interference in the selection of schools, principals and staff and the lack of support from provincial administration into the program have led to poor results.

It was found that schools with less than 100 students had increased from 23.3% in 1993 to 30.2% in 1997. There were four types of schools. The type 1AB offers A/L in all three streams of Arts, Commerce and Science, while type 1C offers A/L in Arts & Commerce. Schools under type 2 offers a wide range of subjects up to O/L, while type 3 provides education up to Grade 5 or 8. Under schools restructuring and rationalization, some curriculum changes and redesigning of Grades were implemented. In general, changes affected on primary education was commended but

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many suggestions were made regarding the changes for Grades 6 to 9 where activity based and practical skills were tried to be brought in. Proposed changes to A/L curriculum, particularly to reduce the number of subjects from 4 to 3 were accepted. When the rationalization of schools came, it had resistance from the community as they perceived it as closure. Local political resistance was also noteworthy. At the end it could not be implemented.

Technical subjects that were introduced to the general education system in 2007 as Practical and Technical Skills (PTS) are taught from grades 6 to 11. The PTS component consists of five broad areas of technical education, namely basic technology, textile technology, agricultural technology, and business activities with ICT incorporated into each area. The thirteen years of General Education Program the piloted in 2016 and 2017, tried to provide opportunities to all children to enroll in vocational stream after GCE O/L, including those who do not achieve higher academic performance at GCE O/L. at that point, the need to develop and implement a technical and vocational education and training was recognized under a broader and

### **Major benefits of education reforms**

Though there are a number of weaknesses and problems experienced in the implementation of education reforms, right throughout from 1945, and also the results realized contrary to expectations, one cannot underestimate the benefits that Sri Lanka has achieved through these reforms that have brought the nation to the status of a learned society. One cannot be unkind so on to not to appreciate the yeoman service rendered by Dr. Kannangara to uplift the value of the nation by ensuring the right to education to everyone, without discriminating on the grounds of race, religion, cast or other social status.

Sri Lanka is hailed internationally for its achievements in literacy, equality of educational opportunity and educational enrolment. Adult literacy had increased from 65% in 1950 to 93% in 2018 while the number of government schools went up from 3188 to 10,174 during the same period. The teacher – student ratio in government schools was reported to have declined from being 35 in 1950 to 17 in 2018. The number of students enrolled in government schools was reported to have increased from 1,349,345 in 1950 to 4,213,729 in 2018. As regards educational enrolment, the primary and secondary net enrolment ratios were reported as 93.9% and 95.8% in 2017 respectively. These are noteworthy achievements for any country.

### **Problem areas**

One of the issues that has not sufficiently been addressed so far is the weak holistic view in education policy making. Although it is very necessary that general education, technical and vocational education, and the higher education be looked at one single

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whole, it is absent in practical policy formulation. More attention is given to general education at the expense of other areas of education and particularly of the technical and vocational education. In many years after independence, separate portfolios for school education, technical and vocational education, and higher education had learnt to eulase and they worked separately. Because of this situation, benefits of education in terms of creativity, employment, social cohesion among communities etc. can be limited, while at the same time costing more public funds than otherwise.

One of the major problems, in Sri Lanka, lies more in the implementation than in the policy formulation and this is more pronounced in education since the implementation of Dr. Kannangara reforms. In many instances, policies were formed without giving due consideration to implementation issues and it should be taken to the people for their own benefit. School rationalization program under 1997 reform package where rural masses took that effort as an attempt to close their school. Too much political interference at district and divisional level in particular has badly affected the performance of the program. Selection of schools under school development programs has provided enough evidence to prove this matter. Some of the proposals, under the free education could not be implemented successfully. For instance, proposals to establish practical schools leading to agricultural colleges had to be abandoned, while senior schools leading to polytechnics were not successful as expected. Teaching of English to all children from grade 3 was not given much attention until mid-1970s. Although English is taught as a second language in all schools, only around 10% of students achieve the targeted level of mastery in the language with very poor writing skills. It was the view of many educationists that curriculum development of school education was biased towards developing intellectual ability of the student. No sufficient attention was made to improve practical skills and foster emotional of the student. Though the number of central schools was increased over the years, the quality of education in many of these new schools was not up to the level expected.

When one looks at the technical and vocational education in Sri Lanka, one has to admit that there is a considerable difference in the facilities provided for this sector compared to the general education sector. They have limited facilities with poorly built workshops. 'In terms of size of the institutions, nearly 70% of Technical and Vocational Educational Commission (TVEC) registered training institutions deliver 3 or lesser number of courses. Nearly 7% of registered institutions offer 10 or more courses which shows that majority of vocational training institutions in the country are smaller than a primary school in rural area' (NEC, 2018).

Due to this situation, a young learner, leaving school, is not attracted to these centers. The intake capacity of public training institutions per year is approximately 140,000 while it is 50,000 in registered private institutions.

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There is a dearth of qualified academic staff in technical and vocational education sector and it is always a challenge to attract, recruit and retain qualified instructional staff mainly owing to the considerable remuneration gap between the industry and Technical and Vocational Educational Training (TVET). Institutions for those with similar qualifications. With relatively poor facilities in TVET institutions together with a shortage of qualified and experienced academic staff, it is understood that the training provided at these centers, except for a few in limited training areas, is of a lesser quality than expected.

On than why that there is noticeable overlap between the training programs available at the public sector three main training providers: Department of Technical Education and Training (DTET), National Apprentice and Industrial Training Authority (NAITA) and Vocational Training Authority of Sri Lanka (VTA). Quality standards vary according to the size of the training center and there is an increasing trend in the different of the level of quality when the center is getting bigger. Concededly the situation in Korea, Singapore or Australia, they have a limited number of TVET training institutions but with very good facilities imparting high quality market oriented training programs. Though the number of training centers were increased intended quality training to the young learner is not realized in the majority of the programs.

There are two major problems in the higher education sector in Sri Lanka. Although the country has invested a large sum of money in higher education since independence, that invested has not been successful in creating enough higher education opportunities for the youth. In 2018, out of the total students who sat for the GCE A/L examination, 64.4% was eligible to enter the university whereas only 19.1% of the eligible students was admitted to state universities which is the main route to higher education in the country. In that year, the number admitted to state universities was 31,451.

The other problem in the higher education sector is graduate unemployment. Finding a suitable job after graduation is a significant challenge for most of the graduates, except for a few degree programs. This could be a result of the lack of opportunities created by the economy one side and the mismatch of skills between the graduates produced by the university and the market requirements on the other.

### **Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

There is always an argument among scholars about the prime objective of education in which one group of scholars holds the view that 'education is for wisdom' and it is not limited to some knowledge and skills but broadly relates to thinking and creativity. Another group is of the view that education should provide wide applicability to the recipient suggesting that one be equipped with knowledge, skills, abilities and positive

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attitudes to integrate successfully with society, enabling him to find an employment, which assures him of better standard of living than otherwise. A World Bank study (2002) points out that tertiary education is important to build capacity and reduce poverty when it is accessible to all. This study also highlights the fact that tertiary education is vital to Increase social capital and to promote social cohesion which are found to be important determinants for growth and development of a country. Education is considered the most powerful tool of initiating, achieving and sustaining the progress and development of a country. It can be used to mitigate disparities among different segments of people facilitating conflict resolution. Hence, the challenge, today, is to find ways and means of facilitating each and every learner to realize one's full potential for the benefit of the learner himself and the society at large.

In the context of educational development in the advanced economies, much attention is paid to the learning outcomes to be achieved as skills facilitated through a subject curriculum at school rather than the knowledge gathered through the learning experience.

These skills are to facilitate the learner to face the challenges in the real-life environment. Life and career skills are the generic skills facilitating to adapt to different situations in life and career, work place and society. Communication skills, collaborative skills, critical thinking skills and creativity are such generic skills and these can be mastered with any core subject if the instructional methodology facilitates to improve them. The information technology and media skills are also important and those can be mastered with all subject areas. Apart from these, some important skills referred to as 'soft skills' relates to the ability of a person to work in teams, his level of motivation and commitment, how positively one takes a challenge entrusted to him, leadership skills, ability to obey and listen to what extent one can work independently etc. which are important aspects from the point of view of employers. Though the skills-oriented curriculum is normally found in skills and vocational education, it can also be used to enhance life and career skills by suitably incorporating them into General Education.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Considering the policy reform processes and implementation mechanisms applied over the period from 1945 to recent times and the results obtained and problems faced costing a considerable resource in the education sector in Sri Lanka, some conclusions and recommendations are given as in the following.

- (a) The contribution made by the leadership of Dr. C. W. W. Kannangara is unparalleled to any such contributions by others in the education sector in Sri

- (b) Lanka. The comprehensive reform package implemented since 1945 centricly changed the socioeconomic fabric of the country drastically.
- (c) All elected governments since independence in 1948 supported to expand the free education scheme. However, the policy making and implementation was not successful in scribing balance between the main sub sectors: General Education, Technical and Vocational Education and Higher Education. The technical and vocational education has been left behind without giving due consideration to skills education. Therefore, it is recommended that all educational sub sectors be put under one Cabinet ministry, as it has been done today, to get the right interaction between these sub sectors maximizing benefits.
- (d) In practice, policy implementation has become more difficult than the policy formulation. Many programs were not successful or have failed totally in the implementation. When new policies are formed, enough attention should be given to implementation issues and the manner could be overcome. Ad-hoc arrangements towards developing policies and policy implementation have proved unsuccessful and unsustainable.
- (e) Political interference into day today affairs gradually increased since mid-1970s and it has adversely affected the education system. It is unfortunate that political partiality has become a factor to get teacher transfers in some cases. Transparent system of personnel administration should be promoted minimizing such occurrences.
- (f) It is recommended that the child-centered and activity-based curriculum at school be further expanded looking at best practices in the developed countries where major emphasis is given to learning outcomes to be achieved as skills. General Education curriculum in Sri Lanka should increase to develop life and career skills and also soft skills in addition to information technology skills.
- (g) Facilities which include learning environment and improved workshops should be considerably enhanced in technical and vocational training centres in line with the standards applied in developed countries such as Australia, Singapore, and South Korea. Special attention should be paid to improving teaching quality at these centres providing better training to the trainers. The quality of training programs should be standardized by evaluating the recipients of training and be matched with the above countries mentioned. Those who obtain training will be able to find employment anywhere in the world.

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