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## Education, Citizenship and Development in Sri Lanka

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## Education, Citizenship and Development in Sri Lanka

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### Abstract

*Sri Lanka's post-independence social and political discourses have been dominated by issues connected with education, citizenship, national identity and economic development. This essay, based on some of the more recent social science research literature, provides a brief overview of the interconnections and interdependencies across the domains of education, citizenship and development. While much of the social science literature dealing with education, national identity and development have remained largely segmented, the analysis here is an effort to demonstrate how the three areas are closely interconnected. The essay also identifies the need to adopt evidence based public policies to bring about desired change. The key challenge is how to align education, national identity and development in order to achieve wider societal goals of national integration and inclusive and equitable development. Social science research has a critical role to play here, not only to inform social and political discourses on the above issues but also to guide the process of public policy making in the relevant sectors.*

**Keywords:** *education, citizenship, development, public policy, social justice, societal goals*

**Introduction:**

The title of the present essay refers to three broad areas of public policy, namely, education, citizenship and development. In this essay, for want of space, no attempt is made to provide any detailed account of each one of the three areas based on the wide-ranging social science research literature available to readers. Instead, the focus of the paper is on some of the important interconnections across the three domains in the light of Sri Lanka's experience over the last several decades. The main purpose of the essay is to identify and highlight the country's key challenges and dilemmas in finding complementarities across the education system, the formation of modern citizenship and the development process.

**Education and Wider Societal Goals:**

Education is widely recognized in many countries in the modern world as a means of achieving larger social and economic goals of a society. So, modern education systems are often designed in such a way as to facilitate the achievement of such wider societal goals. On the one hand, in many countries, the youngsters are provided with a broad-based education that enables them to fit into a society based on modern ideas and values. It is hoped that they eventually become active and responsible citizens of a modern state (Dewey, J., 1916). It is also in the context of general education that some of the traditional divisions in society are relegated to the background making it possible for youthful members of society to forge social and cultural bonds and identities that transcend their primordial identities (Little, A. & Hettige, S., 2013).

On the other hand, education is also widely accepted in modern societies as a means of imparting knowledge and skills that are vital for social and economic progress, besides helping youth to achieve their life goals such as intellectual, social and economic advancement as well as health and wellbeing. Moreover, the knowledge and skills can range from very basic social skills to sophisticated scientific knowledge needed to address complex problems at different levels in diverse spheres.

The multifaceted development of the individual through education mentioned above is a complex process that involves the exposure of children and youth to a wide-ranging process

of learning and interaction both in and outside educational institutions. Educational policies often determine how this process unfolds both within and across countries.

In order for the education system to play the two vital functions mentioned above, educational planners and policy makers have to develop and manage educational institutions on a rational basis. In other words, they have to ask the question whether the educational institutions in the country are operating in such a way as to help us to achieve educational and other related national goals. This question pertains to both the education system as a whole as well as to its constituent parts at different levels such as pre-schools, primary and secondary schools, diverse training institutes and universities.

When the education system does not function in a desirable manner, it gives rise to various problems that have implications beyond the education system. This does not mean that the problems emanating from the education system can be dealt with within the confines of the education system itself. Hence, the need for an integrated and holistic approach to educational development in the country necessitates inter-institutional collaboration in order to enrich the teaching and learning processes. For instance, the development of diverse competencies and skills among students requires inputs from a range of institutions at different levels.

### **Towards a Holistic and Integrated Approach to Educational Development:**

When we examine Sri Lanka's education system today, it is highly doubtful whether it fulfills the expectations with respect to many of the important aspects of education mentioned earlier. The dominant tendency within the system continues to be providing educational certificates to youth at different levels. This has given rise to a situation where the overwhelming pre-occupation of both the policy makers and educational administrators with formal examinations at the expense of many broader aspects of education such as intellectual and personality development, formation of social and cultural identities, development of diverse skills and multiple literacies such as scientific, environmental and digital literacy, acquisition of substantive social and moral values and citizenship education. The broader aspects of education mentioned here are critically important for life and functioning of individuals and groups in modern societies in the 21st century and beyond, particularly in view of the huge challenges that all societies face.

As a result of the persisting narrow focus of the education system, a majority of children and youth continues to move up the educational ladder, often securing formal educational credentials, without necessarily acquiring the diverse skills and attributes mentioned above. For instance, the ability to use a language in an effective manner is not always found among those who have reached higher levels of educational attainment, let alone effective multilingual skills in a country where such skills are critical for upward social mobility as well as living in a multi-ethnic, multi-religious society.

It is also common knowledge that many educated youths do not possess much needed social skills. These skills are required in our daily lives whether at work place or in a community setting or even a household. Inter-personal communication, leadership and negotiating skills, public relations, decision making skills, basic competencies in managing a household, etc. come to our mind in this regard. There are also more specific skills that are needed in many work and domestic situations, depending on the specific roles that individuals play. Even a manual labourer working in the construction sector can benefit from the kind of training he or she has received from a general education, provided that the school system is equipped with the resources needed to provide the desired skills some of which are mentioned above.

As regard citizenship, general education system should provide opportunities for children and youth to interact, exchange ideas and learn about each other across primordial divisions of kinship, caste, religion and ethnicity. On the other hand, this could happen only when there is a common language of communication. Many people used English as a link language in the past. Those who were upwardly mobile then had to learn English in order to get into newly established formal institutions in both the public and private sectors and modern professions such as law and medicine. What is also significant is the composition of the student population in an educational institution. De facto or officially sanctioned segregation of students by ethnicity or religion can result in the formation of exclusive social and cultural identities among children and youth in a plural society leading to serious long-term adverse consequences (Hettige, S., 2011).

The repeal of English as the official language and the introduction of swabhasha education in schools and universities after independence resulted in a gradual decline of the use of English as a second language. As a result, even most of the educated youth in the country

became mostly monolingual. This was particularly so at lower levels of the social hierarchy where children had no opportunities to learn English outside the education system. The general education system became segregated on ethno-linguistic lines. This situation prevented children and youth belonging to different ethno-linguistic communities from interacting across community boundaries. While they continued to form their own separate identities, little or no opportunities were available for inter-cultural learning and the formation of a broader national identity, a pre-condition for national integration. The country's ethnic problem has become almost intractable at least partly due to the wide gap between ethnic communities partly created by the language barrier (Hettige, S. & Gerhard, E, eds. 2015).

Swabasha education was introduced with good intentions. Learning in the mother tongue was widely accepted as the most desirable option for children in the formative years. Learning in a foreign language can lead to alienation of children from their own culture, society and history. Yet, the educationists at the time felt that it was necessary to translate material available in other languages into local languages thereby making the decision to establish the Educational Publications Department under the Ministry of Education in the early 1960's.

Though some important publications were translated into local languages in the initial years, not more than a fraction of the vast body of literature became available in local languages. The situation has become worse in the recent years due to the fact that the translation of books into Sinhala and Tamil became almost impossible for want of competent translators and financial resources. Today, most of the books available in our university libraries are in English but most of our students cannot easily read them.

If the students cannot read the books available in the libraries, how can they acquire new knowledge? The inability to use a second language is a major handicap for most students in schools as well as in the universities. The knowledge of a second language among the country's youth is so low that even many English teachers are not competent in teaching the language. Unable to read original texts, a majority of the students are almost totally dependent on rote learning and a few publications available in local languages. How can such students excel in their studies and reach a high level of academic achievement and personal advancement?

**Education and Development:**

Development is an idea that has figured prominently in the social and political discourses in this country for many decades. Yet, when you closely examine the process of economic development, it becomes quite clear that it is not simply a technical process guided by experts, namely economists and planners but a much wider process of social, economic and environmental change guided by diverse ideas and interests in modern societies. This is an important and vast subject that cannot be discussed here for want of space but suffice is to say that it involves difficult choices that we have to make, based on objective facts or evidence emanating from lived both experience and empirical research as well as substantive values that we want to promote through the development process. Today, this truism has become obvious in this country and across the world, as is evident from the huge challenges that all human societies are facing due to mindless pursuit of unsustainable development and its consequences such as climate change, persisting and even growing global and local inequalities, environmental degradation and widespread natural disasters. But, unfortunately, the critical link between development on the one hand and social and environmental concerns on the other is often ignored by many policymakers in this country. Returning to the wider societal goals of education, it is necessary to recognize the fact that we are living at a time when economic and social development in the country demands highly competent professionals and skilled human resources. The fast-expanding service industries and technology-based production require employees with the ability to learn new skills rapidly. Access to information and knowledge available from internet-based sources depends largely on language skills. Have we been able to equip our younger generations with such linguistic skills? In spite of repeated appeals many people have made to authorities to address this issue without further delay, our leaders and educational authorities have continued to be silent on the matter. While it is urgent to develop and implement an effective national action plan with the support of experts, external agencies and others, the authorities seem to be preoccupied with procedural issues like school admissions and distribution of computers to schools, both of which can be easily delegated to officials in the relevant public institutions.

People in this country remember some of the past leaders who had a vision and the capacity to understand the policy options to address critical issues. But many politicians have just

come and gone in recent decades without making much of a contribution to national development and public welfare, let alone effectively addressing critical national issues.

As indicated above, the country's education system is beset with a number of serious structural and other problems. The language issue is one of them. Another is the 'persisting diploma disease' that prevents children from striving to acquire much needed skills and basic competencies. Growing inequalities within the education system over the last few decades have not only created grossly unequal educational opportunities but also a deep sense of marginalization and social injustice in the minds of adversely affected segments of the young population. As widely discussed and documented, frustrated and disillusioned youths belonging to different ethno-religious communities have joined violent, anti-systemic political movements in recent decades, leading to widespread political violence, loss of many innocent lives and the destruction of economic resources (Hettige, S.1992a, 1992b).

The above and other related problems have far reaching consequences beyond the education system. It is unfortunate that we do not have many policy makers in the country who are capable of comprehending the complexity of the issues and the need to resolve them in a rational manner by implementing evidence-based policies, within a reasonable period of time . The result is the perpetuation of a defective education system, not only adversely affecting the life chances of generations of children and youth but also contributing to a range of social, economic, cultural, political and environmental problems. This is what the citizens of Sri Lanka have witnessed in the country for many years.

**Conclusion:**

In this essay, an attempt has been made to look at some of the interconnections across education, citizenship and development in Sri Lanka in the light of the country's recent experience with respect to educational development, formation of citizenship and the process of economic and social development. As is well known, there is a vast social science research literature on the three broad areas touched on in this essay but no attempt has been made here to give a review of this vast body of writings for want of space. What has been attempted here is to show that education, national identity formation and development are so interconnected and interdependent that issues in one domain cannot be dealt in isolation



of the issues in the others. Hence, emphasizing the need for a holistic and integrated approach to education, national integration and socio-economic development.

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