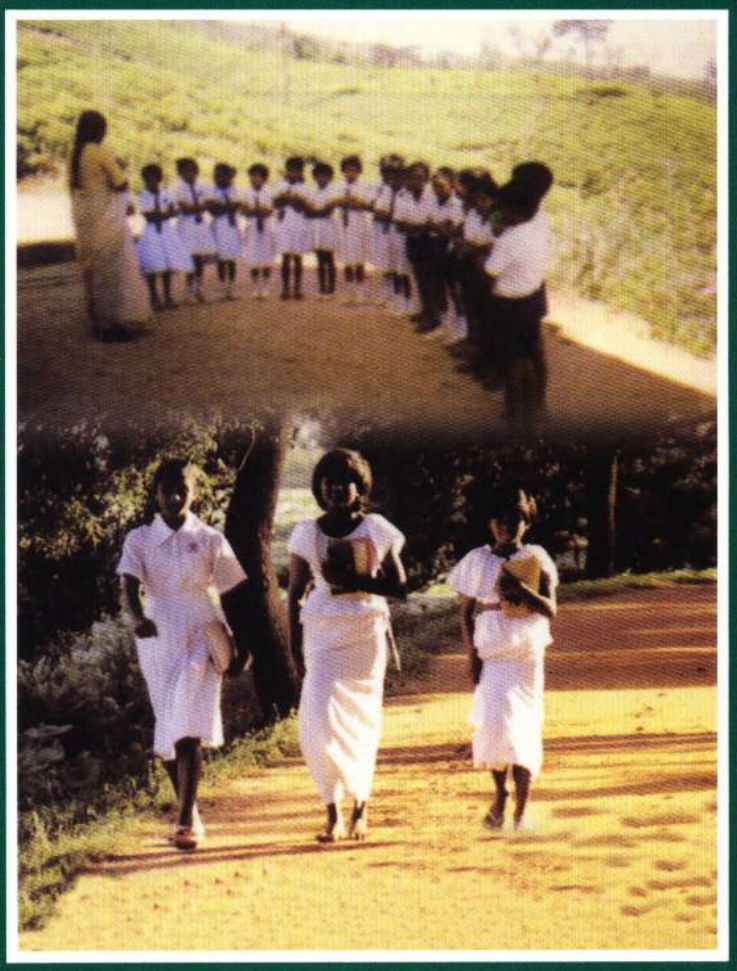
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The Delivery of General Education in Sri Lanka - An Alternate Approach



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1. Introduction

This inquiry seeks to probe into several inter-related issues concerning the current approaches followed by the Government of Sri Lanka for the delivery of education[1] by the public sector – with a specific focus on issues at the primary and secondary level of the delivery system. These issues relate to the structures, management, staffing and financing of the delivery system and its constituents.[2] The ongoing system is evaluated in terms of its relevance to the task of the development of the country's human resources in such manner as would contribute positively to meeting the current and future challenges of the Sri Lankan economy and society.[3]

Sri Lanka has, during its half century of post-Independence history, witnessed several attempts at effecting changes in the primary and secondary levels of its education delivery system. It is, however, difficult to say that any of them have been optimally successful in achieving the goals they sought. The episodes were driven by what was perceived to be symptoms of inadequacies in systemic outputs or by current ideological fads and sought to achieve quick results. However, they failed to focus on the basic structural weaknesses, which impeded the constituents of the system from effectively responding to the demands of the changing economy and the society.

It is the premise of this inquiry that unless and until these structural issues are effectively addressed, any future reforms of the content and direction of primary and secondary education would continue to yield sub-optimal, and even negative, results. The expectations that would be generated in them would remain unfulfilled. The logical outcome would be a persistent state of cynical dissatisfaction on the part of the citizens.

It is, therefore, the objective of this inquiry to identify the structural issues which require to be addressed and to examine the vested interests within the polity and the bureaucracy that obstruct them being addressed. It also seeks to suggest changes that need to be brought about and to propose an agenda of action for implementing these changes.

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[1] In this discussion the reference to "education" includes all aspects of skill development at the primary and secondary levels.

[2] Whilst the specific focus is on the primary and secondary system, it is envisaged that the analysis and conclusions would also prove relevant in an analysis of the dysfunctional situation that also exists at the tertiary level.

[3] It is the premise of the inquiry that a major constraint to the economic and social development of Sri Lanka is the quality of its human resources – in terms of skills, knowledge and attitudes.

These structural issues include issues of financing and management as well as issues related to ensuring quality of delivery of educational services. The issues that need to be addressed are identified through an assessment of the current structure. This assessment is placed in the context of the rapid changes in the economy and the society that impinge on education. It is essential that the changes that flow from the environment be taken into consideration in planning and implementing educational reforms. Failure, in the reform process, to appropriately and adequately respond to the demands that are posed by such changes would trigger a level of social unrest that would be well nigh impossible to contain.

The inquiry concludes with an appraisal of what the role of the State would be, in the context of the structural changes that are suggested. This, it is suggested, is an issue that has been avoided in previous reform episodes – based on an uncritical acceptance of an all-pervasive State as the basis of governance.

2. Current Structure

The current structure of primary and secondary education has to be understood in the context of post-Independence Sri Lanka evolving as a quintessential centrist State. All political cadres who have dominated the scene of governance since Independence have found a centrist polity to be an effective instrument of personal and group control of the society, the economy and the polity. It has been seen as an effective means of imposing ideological agendas on the citizens. An effective centrist State required that there be centralized management control of the delivery of all public goods and services. Primary and secondary education was no exception.

It is this preference for a centrist State that has set the framework for the manner in which the structure of the management of primary and secondary education has evolved in Sri Lanka.

Setting the small number of private schools[4] apart, the public sector schools in Sri Lanka constitute a "monolithic structure"[5] – brought within one umbrella as a result of the takeover of schools effected in 1960/1961. All issues that concern this "monolithic

[4] Within the small cohort of private schools are three subcategories. The original group of schools that opted to be out of the State system fell into two subcategories – the private fee levying schools (15) and the private non-fee-levying schools (53). The third subgroup comprise the recent institutions referred to as "International Schools" – over which the Ministry of Education has no "quality oversight".

[5] The "monolithic structure" encompassed 9887schools as at 2001.

structure" are decided upon at the Centre. Reforms and changes in regard to every aspect of primary and secondary education are planned and executed uniformly for the structure as a whole. Regardless of the socio-economic milieu within which individual schools are placed, they are expected to routinely follow the instructions that emanate from the Centre.

An overview of some of the key features of the current situation would serve to make the situation clear.

The curricula are monolithic and are centrally designed and promulgated. They do not brook any modifications to meet the realities of different cohorts of students, let alone those of individual students. The constituent schools of the system are compelled to blindly follow the curricula laid down. Any initiatives to introduce responsiveness of the curricula to the rapid changes in the demands of the employment market become victim to the inherent difficulties in reforming a monolithic system. More often than not, even the curriculum reforms that are initiated have their origin in the hierarchy of the central bureaucracy or in individual fads of political cadres or bureaucrats. Even these, by the time they grind through the wheels of the monolithic system, invariably end up being too little, too late.

The provision of financial resources is also planned and implemented for the structure as a whole. The principal objective of the provision of finances has become system-maintenance rather than the achievement of preset educational goals. Hardly any financial resources are provided for inputs other than salaries of staff. The institutional and procedural arrangements for financial administration in the education sector are highly centralized. Such centralization restricts any initiative by the individual schools to competitively apply the resources that are allocated to them to achieve operational efficiency. School heads - or even school management committees where they exist - have little budgetary discretion.

Recruitment of teaching staff is, to what has come to be, "pools of teachers"–either national or provincial - and not to individual schools. The specific concerns of locale and environment do not, normally, figure in the assigning of teachers to individual schools. The teachers, belonging as they do to transferable pools, view themselves as having minimal commitment to a specific school or to its students. They tend to regard the school to which they are assigned as a transient stop on a career path or on a merry-go-round of inter-station

transfers. They, thus, have little, if any interest in the development of the individual school or in the long-term careers of their students. The heads of schools have little or no say in the induction of specific teachers to the individual schools. They merely passively receive the bodies delivered by the fiat of super-ordinate agencies.

School management is only remotely accountable to the students and their parents at the community level. As constituents of a monolithic structure, individual schools are rarely subjected to peer competition. Thus, school management structures have little incentive to find the most cost-effective way to provide the type and quality of education that students and their parents would desire. Planning, which is carried out in institutional structures that are far removed from the school milieu, is focused on the school system as a whole. Thus, there is little leeway for education planners to make adjustments to different elements of the delivery process that would optimize relevance or cost effectiveness within the context of the local environment - whether in curriculum content, modes of delivery or unit costs.[6]

Local communities tend to regard the schools in which their children receive their education as extraneous implants – and not as integral constituents of their respective communities. More often than not, the genesis of the schools in the different communities could be attributed to initiatives and programmes that had their origin outside the community – in ministries and departments at the Centre. Historically, there has been little, if any, participation by the local community at the time of initiation – whether it is in regard to location, designing, staffing or financing. This feeling of the absence of community ownership contributes to an attitude of the schools and their improvement being regarded as being the responsibility of external agencies – vaguely under the umbrella term of 'the government' – and not their own.

Over the decades, the existing systems and structures have acquired a considerable body of vested interests around them - of teachers, politicians and bureaucrats. These groups exercise their considerable influence to perpetuate the existing systems and structures.

The teachers would desire to preserve their mobility, which would provide them with access to "more desirable" locations. They would also resent local oversight that would subject them to immediate accountability. This absence of local accountability enables them to ignore the interests of the students and the school and to focus their energies on the

[6] This is brought out in the discussion in Fernando, M.R. – "Financing of Education".

lucrative private practice of providing tuition. Their being members of "pools" provides them with greater bargaining strength vis-à-vis the government.

The politicians have a stake in preserving the opportunities they currently have of interfering in micro decisions that relate to the schools and teachers - which bring them considerable personal and/or political benefits. Interference in the posting, transfers and promotions of teachers, in decisions on the upgrading of schools and on expansion of facilities, in securing resources for school activities and the like are all areas in which individual politicians seek to play a role – seeking either personal benefits, political advantages or both.

The bureaucrats have similar interests as the politicians. They also have the added benefits of career advancements and career perks flowing from the expansion of supervising bureaucracy. Equally attractive to them is the sense of power and the opportunities for rent seeking that they gain from their supervisory roles.

3. The Changing Environment

Meanwhile, changes are occurring in the contextual environment in which general education is both demanded and provided. Some of the more relevant among these changes are identified in the ensuing discussion.

A major series of changes in the contextual environment relate to the country's demographic profile.

Sri Lanka has witnessed a progressive decline in the growth of population.[7] The continued slow-down will result in a decline of the number of pre-school children to 1.76 million at the turn of the century and a further decline to 1.65 million by the middle of the twenty first century. By 2051, the proportion of pre-school children in the total population is expected to be half of what it was in 1989.

Consequently, the school age population (5-14) would continue to decline till around 2011. Thereafter, it would increase marginally till 2051 - but at a lower level than at the beginning

[7] The rate of population growth which stood at 1 per cent at the beginning of the twenty first century is expected to decline thereafter to reach zero growth around 2050 (Sanderatne, N. p.2).

of the century. It will, then, decline again. By 2051, the school going population will reach 3.28 million – more or less the same as in 2001.

Thus, Sri Lanka will not, in the first half of the twenty first century, have to cope with an expanding cohort of school goers. As a consequence, it would not have to provide increased physical infrastructure – though spatial shifts in population may call for adjustments to existing infrastructure. The emphasis on investment in school education would, therefore, need to shift to quality improvement to meet the demands that would arise – particularly from the changes in the economy.

In the economic environment, agricultural production for the domestic market, which has over the ages been the mainstay of the economy, faces a series of challenges that have contributed to an increasing exodus of the workforce that is engaged in this activity. A major challenge is the economically un-viable size of agricultural holdings.[8] This, in the absence of any effective arrangements for co-operative management of agricultural operations, impedes the enhancement of the levels of productivity through the introduction of modern technology, which requires access to investment funding. Low levels of productivity result in low levels of income. The unremunerative nature of the activity tends to keep youth cohorts from entering smallholdings-based agriculture as an occupation. Nor are there any strategies to counter this disincentive. For example, the structure and content of the education that is imparted in the school system is not equipped to provide the youth with the technical skills that would help them to introduce modern technology to the activity of agriculture. The structures of the banking system remain unprepared to provide financial support for such modernization. The general education that is provided at the primary and secondary levels does not guide the young towards agriculture as a socially and economically desirable activity.

A major challenge that Sri Lanka faces is the resolution of the problem of the dearth of employment opportunities for the cohorts of youth who enter the employment market.[9] Expansion of employment opportunities requires the continued enhancement of investment in the economy. Given the inadequacy of local investment resources, this necessitates the

[8] The inter-generational fragmentation of holdings has, over the past half-century, been buttressed by government policy concerning alienation of Sate lands to the landless, which seeks to please the maximum number of citizens through the allotment of State land – whether such allotments are economic or not.

[9] Currently the rate of unemployment as indicated in official statistics stands at around 8 per cent. There are, however, considerable problems of credibility with this figure. If one is to give heed to empirical evidence, the figure would appear to be considerably higher.

increased attraction of foreign direct investment. In an increasingly competitive international environment for such investment, the availability of pools of skills that could support such investments becomes a critical incentive for their attraction. A key objective of the education system of a country that aspires to enhancing its portfolio of foreign direct investment should, therefore, be the expansion and upgrading of its skill pools.

The skill profiles as demanded by the investment community change rapidly. Hence, education and skill development institutions need to be constantly aware of the continuous changes in the demand for skills and be flexible enough to respond to such changes.

The spread of information has rapidly gathered momentum in Sri Lanka as a consequence of the rapid growth of the electronic and print media. The children, as well as their parents and guardians, are, thus, exposed to the radical changes that continue to occur internationally in regard both to the content of general education, as well as to the delivery techniques that are used to impart the new content. It is to be expected that the spread of the knowledge of such changes would be uneven across the country and across income profiles. Yet, it needs to be recognized that even with this uneven spread of information, there is in the society as a whole, a sense of being deprived of access to modern knowledge and skills. This is seen as a denial to the large majority of the new generations access to the types of employment that would bring them increased remuneration and a better quality of life.

The exposure to the widening knowledge and information base, as available through the media, has contributed to an expansion of the range of perceptions in the community. This has led to a situation wherein parents and guardians have come to expect a stronger role in the making of decisions concerning all aspects of the education of their children.

No longer are they content with being mere passive onlookers whilst politicians or the education bureaucracy are making decisions on issues that concern their children's future. They expect to contribute to the making of decisions concerning such issues as curriculum content, access to schools, the selection of teachers, classroom and other facilities etc..

The changes that have been discussed above have occurred, imperceptibly, over time. They have, thus, not been adequately taken into account in the several post-Independence essays of public policy management in regard to general education.

As the preceding discussion underscores, these changes affect a wide range of areas within the interface between the general education system and the aspirations for change from children and their parents. They also affect the process of meeting these aspirations. These changes in the environment should, therefore, have been the guiding framework within which public policies concerning reforms in the delivery of general education should have been formulated and implemented throughout the years. The available evidence, however, does not indicate that this happened.

This has contributed to a widening gap between the perceptions and expectations of the community of students and their parents and the realities concerning the outcomes of the policies and practices as relating to the content, delivery-management and financing of general education.[10]

The traditional approach to the formulation and implementation of policies and practices concerning the delivery-management of general education has been for the education bureaucracy, which perceived itself as being the sole possessor of knowledge and information, to make the necessary decisions through internalized processes and to announce them as *fait accompli*. Students and their parents – who constitute the community – passively accepted this in the past. The lack of access to information of alternative approaches as well as the general passivity of citizens in their interface with bureaucrats and politicians were the main contributors to this scenario.

But, increasingly, though imperceptibly, there has been a radical change in the situation. The increasing awareness of both students and their parents/guardians as to the possibilities and potential of education to provide both enhanced economic opportunities as well as an improved quality of life has led them to question different aspects of the current provision of education. The community is aware – even though in vague and general terms – that it is being short-changed.[11]

It is possible to observe a steady growth in the frustrations of the youth at the irrelevance of the exercise in which they are engaged – purporting to participate in an educational process that would lead to a qualitative improvement in their lives. It is clear that the cumulating of

[10] In a sense, the gaps in perceptions concerning these issues extend to other areas of education and training – such as tertiary education and the provision of technical skills.

[11] The frequent public demonstrations by students and their families are overt manifestations of the dissatisfaction that lies underneath.

these frustrations has resulted in the youth rejecting the frameworks of moral values that had, over the years, held the Sri Lankan society together.[12] Perhaps the most vivid demonstration of the breakdown of the moral and ethical frameworks that held the student communities together was the student violence and deliberate flouting of law and order that was seen in educational institutions at all levels, in 2002.

The events of 2002, if anything, served to underline the failure of the delivery of education at all levels of the delivery structure. They, more forcefully than anything else, signaled the need for change.

At the primary and secondary levels of general education, which is the focus of this discussion, the questioning has come to centre, mainly, on issues of the content of education; of quality of delivery; of financing; and of management, as well as on the precise role of the State. Each of these would be dealt with briefly in the sections that follow.

4. The Content of Education

The curricula and the pedagogical approaches that are currently prevalent in the school system constitute a core set of issues that are increasingly being questioned in public discourse.

Students and parents perceive the current school curricula to be lacking in the types of knowledge and information that would provide the skills that are mostly in demand in the contemporary employment market.[13] In the monolithic school system that is centrally controlled by the central ministry, there is no space for flexibility for individual schools to respond effectively to the varied needs[14] of the children of their local communities. Even deeper resentment is generated when it is found that some students, being in better financial situations and in closer proximity to metropolitan centres, are able to access educational services outside the State school system and, thus, are more advantageously placed in the competition for employment.

[12] The situation that prevailed in the early decades wherein educational institutions laid stress in the nurturing of these values declined with changes in teacher induction and the loss of individuality of schools.
[13] The growing demands in the employment market for skills in English language and in Information Technology are illustrative examples.
[14] These varied needs arise from the economic and social circumstances of the children's families as well as from the employment aspirations of the students.

The situation is additionally adversely affected by the prevalent pedagogical approaches in the schooling system. These are mostly centred on "rote learning" and are focused on success at examinations whose contents are predictable. The students are not encouraged to develop their capacities for analysis of problems and issues to arrive at solutions. This stands in opposition to the expectations in the employment market for skill-profiles that enable job-entrants to be independent and to weigh risks in decision-making. The employers, thus, are compelled to invest heavily in training at induction to counter the negative impacts of the content and pedagogical approaches in the school system.

In this situation, the students emerge from their years in the schools ill equipped to cope with the demands of the workplace. Thus, after considerable outlays of public funds, Sri Lanka has been burdened with a workforce that has acquired irrelevant skill profiles and is of indifferent quality. As must be expected, the lack of an adequately equipped workforce has been one reason that deters potential investors from making new investments or from developing those that already exist.[15] The outcome of this has been the inability of the economy to maintain a level of growth that would enable it to meet the expectations of the citizens.

Concurrently, the students are frustrated by their failure to obtain anticipated employment despite their years of schooling – a frustration shared by their parents. They were led, during their school careers, to believe that they were being appropriately equipped to enter the employment market. But, faced with the realities of the workplace, they find that they had lived – and worked hard – with false expectations. The frustration contributes to a resentment that gathers momentum as time passes – as is evinced by the ever-frequent demonstrations that increase in violence as they gather momentum.

The conclusion that emerges from the above discussion is that unless the twin shortcomings of irrelevant curricula and inappropriate pedagogical approaches are corrected, the current investment of resources of scarce public funds in the delivery of school education would only contribute to the increasing generation of social unrest.

[15] Available evidence even points to episodes of withdrawal of existing investments and shifting to other countries. Whilst the inadequate quality of the work force is one reason for poor investment interest, it needs to be recognised that poor quality of infrastructure, the security situation and inconsistency in public policy management are also reasons that contribute to the situation.

5. Quality of Delivery

A second set of issues revolves around the quality of delivery of primary and secondary education. This, in turn, is directly connected with the quality of the teaching staff.

There is an increasingly negative perception amongst the citizenry concerning the competencies of the teaching staff in the primary and secondary schools in the State system. The available evidence indicates that these competencies fall short of the pedagogical skills and the knowledge and information base that are demanded by the task content that is inherent in the development of the young generation to meet the demands of the society and the economy of the twenty-first century. Several reasons have contributed to this inadequacy.

There is inadequate emphasis in the training and development of teachers prior to their induction. There is an unstated but prevalent belief at the policy management levels that any individual who has succeeded in obtaining passes at public examinations such as the G.C.E. ("O" Level or "A" Level) or the Degree are, *ipso facto*, qualified to be teachers. In reality, it is those with such generic qualifications who have failed to obtain more attractive employment who seek teaching appointments. Aptitudes for teaching are seldom, if ever, assessed when recruiting teachers.

The failure, on the part of policy makers, to conceive of teaching as a distinct profession which demands specific attitudes and skills is at the root cause of the current malaise that has led to the crowding of the teacher-cadres with a multitude of misfits.

In the prevalent system, teachers are imposed on schools by a central bureaucracy. The local communities and the parents and guardians within them, have no say in the selection of teachers who staff their schools. The centralized system does not provide any space for consultations with them. They do not even have a choice between alternative candidates – let alone an opportunity to obtain applications from prospective candidates and to evaluate them. This situation serves to highlight the negative perceptions in the minds of citizens.

Teachers, in effect, are appointed to pools that are transferable. The result is that they consider the school in which they are serving at any given time as a place of temporary sojourn. There is a continuous search on their part for transfers to better-located schools.

The commitment-nexus between the teachers and their students that is a *sine qua non* for the effective nurture and development of the young is, thus, considerably eroded.

The results of the prevalent practices are several. To begin with, there are many instances of mismatch between the teacher-student ratios in better-situated popular schools and the less advantaged schools in more remote locations.[16] Secondly, is the reality that such less advantaged schools are foisted with less skilled and less qualified teachers. The uniform salary structures and the lack of independent finances at the school level to compensate for the more difficult living conditions of disadvantaged areas prevents such schools from attracting teachers of quality.

The general philosophy that underlies the approach to the centralized management of the government's "teacher force" of 194,104[17] appears to be one of benign neglect as far as their skill enhancement is concerned. There is no continuous assessment of the skills and competence of individual teachers. Skill profiles of teachers are not matched with the rapidly changing requirements of the teacher skills that flow from the need for the schools to provide an output as demanded by the changes in technology and competitiveness in the economy. There is, thus, no concern with the upgrading and re-tooling of teachers. This "laid-back" approach – of "once a teacher, always a teacher" - to the management of the most critical element in the delivery of education is at the root of the quality issue that has affected education in Sri Lanka.

Equally relevant to the quality of delivery are issues concerning facilities available in the schools. The current evidence indicates not only general inadequacy of provision of facilities but also glaring discrepancies among different areas of the country in such provision. The inadequacy of facilities includes laboratories, libraries, and access to computers - which directly affect the quality of education received by the students - as well as basic facilities such as space and buildings, furniture and sports facilities.

The net outcome of the situation discussed above is that it is the young who continue to be at a disadvantage.

[16] This is evident not only within Administrative Districts but also as amongst Districts.
[17] This is the figure for 2001 – as given in the Annual Report of the Central Bank of Sri Lanka for 2001.

6. Financing Issues

A third set of issues revolves round the emerging perception that the current approaches to the allocation of finances are based on historical precedents and that the deprived and less endowed areas continue to be shortchanged. The traditional approach to financing has resulted in the historical deprivations in less endowed areas continuing to be perpetuated.

The inadequacies of the current arrangements for financing arise, mainly, from the fact that the financial arrangements in the education sector –as well as the administrative structures and processes that support such arrangements - are centralized. The high degree of centralization acts as a damper to any competitive efficiency in the use of resources on the part of the individual schools that, at the end of the road, are the ultimate users of financial resources.

The prevalent schemes for the channeling of public funds do little to encourage its efficient use. To begin with, they are pre-identified as regards their use. This pre-identification tends, more often than not, to follow historical precedents. School management has little, if any, budgetary leeway. They act as passive recipients of allocations for pre-determined purposes. They have no real discretion in the use of such financial resources for purposes other than those for which they have been allocated. Thus, pre-itemized allocations are spent for the purpose for which they are allocated - whether they are a necessary priority or not.

Given the overall constraints of resources available for education, their allocation follows a predictable pattern. The first call is on maintaining the "teacher force" that is already in service. Having engaged them, it would be politically suicidal to deny them payment or to seek to reduce their numbers. Too little, therefore, is spent on other inputs relative to teachers' salaries.

Having no say in the allocation and use of resources, school management have little incentive to find the most cost-effective way to provide the type of education desired by the families in the local communities. They prefer to tread the traditional paths regardless of whether the education provided by them is of any relevance to the needs of the economy or the aspirations of the recipients.

It is the view of this discussion that a completely new approach to the provision of finances to schools is required – if schools are to become effective centres for the efficient delivery of education and skill development in their communities. Some of the key features of such a new approach are set out below.

The new approach should be based on the principle that schools, at the level of communities and sub-communities, are autonomous institutions that would be responsible for the delivery of education and training as required by the children and youth of the concerned community. The acceptance of the above principle should result in several steps.

- The initial step is for the unit costs of the constituent packages of education and training to be computed at periodic intervals. These unit costs would, obviously, vary. One such variation would depend on different grades[18] and on the inclusion of supplements. Another reason for variation would be the location of delivery – due to costs of inputs such as teachers being higher in certain areas (mainly remote areas) as against others.

- The individual schools should be entitled to recover such unit costs to meet their expenditure needs. Education and training of children and youth being the primary responsibility of parents and guardians, they should be the primary source of recovery. However, given the economic realities of Sri Lanka, a total recovery of costs from such a source would be unrealistic. Given that it is public policy in Sri Lanka that no child or youth should be denied access to education and training due to economic circumstances, it is, therefore, incumbent on the State to provide income-based subsidies to meet such unit costs.[19]

7. Management Issues

A fourth set of issues relates to the effective management of the delivery of schooling. Some of the negative features of the current situation concerning management have been identified

[18] These would, for example, be the primary grades, post-primary grades, junior secondary grades, senior secondary grades and vocational training programmes.

[19] Such subsidies could take the form of total or partial grants and of loan schemes – depending on income levels of families. Given that "unit costs" would be calculated with meticulous detail as to location-related cost differentials, it is the view of this discussion that the total demands on public funds would not materially exceed the present financing of the inputs by the government.

in the previous sections. Yet they would bear reiteration so that corrective steps could be launched in order to improve the effectiveness of delivery.

As has become clear from the earlier discussions, the current ineffectiveness of management stems, in the main, from the framework of perceptions within which management of delivery is structured. This framework of perceptions is one that has evolved over the years, from the time of the nationalisation of schools in 1960/1961. It is based on the assumption that – having been nationalised – the entire school system is "owned" by "the Government" and must be managed, in all details, by "the Government". In the Sri Lankan polity, "the Government" is conceived of as being the Central Government. It is, therefore, not surprising that the mindset at the Ministry of Education of the Centre is conditioned by the view that all public sector schools in the country should be micro-managed by the Ministry.

The "education bureaucracy", as is to be expected, is a strong proponent of this view – given the obvious advantages concerning career advancement and perquisites of office that they derive from the situation. Equally strong proponents are the trade unions – whether of administrative cadres or of teachers – given both the advantages and the sense of power which they derive from the coming together of large cadres. The politicians are not far behind in their commitment to this arrangement. It enhances their political visibility, gives them power and authority over a large work force, provides them with authority over large pools of resources and strengthens their positions in the polity.

Within this framework, the communities of parents became peripheral to the process of management of the schools. They do not participate in the process of making of management decisions – such decisions being made over their heads. If, as individuals or groups, they desire to influence any aspect of management, they, automatically, seek the intervention of a politician to carry their requests to levels higher than the community – and wait in expectation and hope for a favourable response. More often than not, decisions are thrust upon the communities who are left to wonder as to the reasons that lie behind such decisions. The local communities have no sense of ownership of the schools that exist to enable their children to obtain their education.

Given this situation, it is no surprise that those responsible for the management of schools[20] feel no sense of accountability for their performance either to the students or their parents/guardians who constitute their "customer base". The "accountability gaze" of those at the school level tends to turn away from the community and to focus upwards on the hierarchical ladder that extends right up to the ministry in charge of education at the Centre.[21]

Within this management culture any reforms to the system, its structures and its outputs are, invariably, designed at the Centre and are, then, thrust upon the school level. Being the outcome of closed-door consultations at the Centre and of the prescriptions of external aid providers, the reform agendas draw more heavily on theoretical constructs rather than on the realities of the situation on the ground. There is little or no opportunity, within this process, for the local communities to articulate their situation-specific concerns and needs. The reform processes also fail to mobilise the active support of the local communities for the implementation of the reform agendas. The outcome, more often than not, is that the reform processes and their agendas wither away and the students and their parents and guardians end up in a situation of worse confusion than before. In the end, the resources – both human and financial – that were invested in the effort produce no commensurate result.

The centralized management structure also tends to introduce a deadening uniformity amongst the large number of schools that constitute the monolithic system. The different schools lack individuality. They see themselves as units within a uniform integrated structure. They, thus, reflect a centrally imposed culture rather than the ethos and aspirations of the communities within which they are placed. There is but little competition amongst the different schools to achieve excellence.

The centralized management structure does not permit the individual schools to optimize the use of the facilities – such as laboratories, libraries, IT facilities, gymnasiums, classrooms – which are available to them. Any returns mobilized by them through such optimizing of use would not, under the current patterns of management, accrue to them and be at their

[20] This group includes the immediate heads of the schools or those responsible for supervising them at the different levels of the hierarchical structure.
[21] It is necessary that this situation be viewed in the context of the Ministry at the Centre being the real arbiter of such matters as transfers to favoured stations, promotions and foreign trips.

disposal for other preferred purposes. The possible use of such facilities for income-earning activities during periods of non-use is, thus, not explored. The result is the unnecessary replication of costs of providing such facilities to different organizations in the local communities.

The highly centralized and bureaucratically underpinned management structures also have a direct bearing on the issue of school admissions – an issue that causes considerable distress amongst parents of children of school-going age at the start of each school year. Whilst detailed arrangements would need to be worked out subsequent to the acceptance of the principle, it is essential that the future approach to school admissions should be based on the principle of responsibility, authority and accountability being vested for this at the school management level.

In the view of this discussion, the cluster of schools that exist at the level of each local community should make common decisions concerning admissions for each school year. Parents of eligible candidates should be required to submit applications – indicating their preferences – in advance of the end of the preceding school year.[22] All applications should be received and acknowledged at a central point.[23] These, then, should be considered, and decided upon, by a Committee on Admissions that comprises the heads of all the concerned schools. There, obviously, should be maximum transparency in the whole process.[24]

8. The Role of the State

The preceding discussions indicate the wide range of issues that need to be addressed in any exercise in bridging the gap that currently exists between the current performance of the schools and the performance that is required of them by the changing environment. The discussions also underscore the fact that basic to addressing these issues is the reaching of a consensus on the role of the State in regard to the delivery of primary and secondary education.

[22] Obviously, a cut-off date by which such applications should be filed would need to be set.
[23] An appropriate receiving point could be the Secretariat of the Local Government Institution or, in the case of large Local government Institutions, a series of focal points therein.
[24] There should be provision for appeals by the parents, on specific grounds, which should also be decided on by the Committee.

The precise role of the State in the delivery of education is an issue that has not been continuously or systematically examined in Sri Lanka.

All previous attempts at reform of the delivery of education have been based on the premise that the role of the State remained constant despite the changes in the environment within which such reforms were being initiated. The approach has, invariably, been premised on the assumption – whether perceptible or imperceptible – that the State (and its political and bureaucratic cadres) knew best. This approach needs to change. The ensuing discussion would, therefore, attempt to outline what the future role of the State could be as regards school education.

In seeking to outline the role of the State, the discussion recognizes the devolutionary character of the Sri Lankan polity. The role of the State would, therefore, be examined separately at the level of the Community, the Centre and the Region. Today, there is confusion as regards the roles at the three levels – with the Centre seeking to encroach on what should, normally, be regarded as the legitimate roles at the Community and Regional levels. Therefore, it is essential that the roles at each level be clearly understood.

8.1 The Community Level

It is worth repeating that, over the years, those responsible for public policy making in Sri Lanka appear to have forgotten the reality that schools function at the level of the local communities. It has escaped their attention that the schools exist to serve the capacity development of the children of the individual local communities - and should, therefore, be able to respond to the demands at the local level as these evolve in response to the economic and social environment around them. The reality that individual communities have varying objectives of capacity development for their children has tended to be glossed over in the search for a more "bureaucratically comfortable" regime of uniformity. They have, thus, tended to approach the schools as being merely delivery units of a centrally conceived product" and, hence, needing to be controlled and directed from the Center through a bureaucracy that is accountable to the Center.[25]

[25] School education does not stand alone in this context. Policy Managers in Sri Lanka – deriving their ethos from the traditions of the colonial era policy regime – have tended to be comfortable with "uniform products", centralized control, and "top-down delivery". The health sector provides a parallel example. In this approach, they have been backed by public sector trade unions – which derive their strength and power from the large size of membership who constitute their clientele.

The outcome of this policy orientation is that the communities at the local level have hardly any management role vis-a-vis the schools at that level. This, in the view of this paper, is a situation that needs to be reversed.

If the schools are designed to meet the education needs of the children of local communities, it is but logical that the local communities should bear primary responsibility for their management. Only such an approach will provide a framework within which the individual schools will be in a position to respond to the specific needs of the children of different local communities. The approaches to management at the local level will involve two levels of management responsibility.

- The specific tasks of day-to-day management would be attended to by school-specific Boards of Management. These tasks would include ongoing financial management, physical infrastructure management, and human resources management.

- The tasks such as the mobilization[26] and allocation of financial resources, the induction of personnel for the individual schools, the bulk procurement of supplies are better handled at the level of the Local Government Institution of the area. However, once finances are mobilized and are allocated, the prudent management of such resources should become the responsibility of the school-specific Boards as would be the effective management of the personnel – teaching as well as non-teaching – who are appointed to the individual schools. In both these areas, the Boards of Management should be accountable to the local community as well as to the institutional arrangements at the level of Local Government Institutions.

- In order to strengthen the accountability nexus between the Boards of Management and the local community, it is necessary to heighten the levels of transparency in the interface between the two. The introduction of an annual report by the Board of Management, which will be readily accessible by the local community, would be a useful step in this direction. The convening of an annual forum for the discussion of such a report would also be a means of mobilizing local community resources for the improvement of the contribution of the school.

[26] Financial resources would have to be mobilised from the Local Community, the Centre as well as from the Provincial level.

8.2 The Centre

Two clear conclusions emerge from the discussion thus far. In the case of the local communities, the new paradigm involves the acceptance of new responsibilities concerning the management of primary and secondary schools.[27] However, in the case of the Center, it involves both the giving up of functions that have been handled by it in the past as well as accepting responsibility for key functions that have not received adequate attention.

Over the years since the nationalization of the schools in 1960/1961, the institutions at the Central Ministry of Education have taken upon themselves the function of micro-management of the primary and secondary schools. A burgeoning bureaucracy has, naturally, grown up around this function. With the allocation of this function to Provincial Councils through the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution in 1987, the bureaucracy and its political masters at the Centre introduced a stratagem of converting large cohorts of schools as "National Schools" whose management rested with the Centre. In the decade and half since then, the number of such National Schools has been added to. This has increased the range of schools over which the Centre has direct management authority and whittled down the competence of the local communities concerning this activity.

The attention given to the micro-management function has been at the expense of the core mandate of the ministerial institutions at the Centre. The core mandate of these institutions should be that of policy management in regard to education and skill development at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels. This mandate includes

- The continued situational analysis of the education and skill development sector and setting time bound goals to be achieved in order to enhance its relevance and access;

- The analysis of alternative policy options that would best contribute to the achievement of the desired goals;

- The selection of the optimal policy options through such analysis and designing therefrom, an integrated policy frame with its time-specific targets for implementation;

- The designing of the necessary implementation arrangements; and

[27] A similar responsibility would be cast on them as regards vocational and technical training facilities at a parallel level also.

- The monitoring of the pace and impact of implementation.

The responsibilities listed above require the availability of institutional arrangements within the Ministry of Education at the Centre for several related tasks. These include policy research and analysis, continuing consultations with all stakeholders, the selection of optimal policy options, setting out implementation arrangements and the monitoring of implementation and the impacts thereof. Such institutional arrangements should have inter-relationships and be underpinned by uninterrupted sharing of information.

Such institutional arrangements do not yet exist in the Ministry of Education at the Centre – as there has been no perception in the Ministry that this is its core mandate. The institutional structures in the Ministry have, over the decades, evolved around the minutiae of the micro-management of the schools. Priority of attention has been on micro issues such as the recruitment, transfer and other personnel matters of teachers and other staff, the maintenance of infrastructure, provision of supplies and even of meals and uniforms for students – with their inherent daily pressures and demands. Education policy has, thus, received marginal attention.

The outcome of the failure of the Ministry of Education at the Centre to discharge its core mandate is clearly evident in the many-facetted malaise that, today, affects the State-run education delivery system. After more than half a century of post-Independence policy management

- Overcrowding and under-utilization of facilities exist side by side.

- Considerable disparities continue as between spatial areas and institutions in regard to the availability of teachers and facilities.

- The curriculum content and pedagogical approaches at all levels are at increasing variance with the needs of the economy and the society.

- There is a continuing under supply of trained competent teachers in the school system.

- Inadequacy of funding is exacerbated by the archaic financing systems that continue unchanged.

- A top-heavy bureaucracy that seeks to control rather than support the delivery system has evolved and has become a heavy burden on the limited public financial resources available for supporting education.

Hence, a critical step in any future process of reform of education is to redefine the role of the Centre - particularly of its Ministry of Education. It should be done in such manner that the Ministry is relieved of the burdens of micro-management of delivery institutions and made effective in its rightful role of policy management.

Another responsibility that would rest with the Centre would be the setting up of institutional arrangements for national examinations. This is important from the point of ensuring that the employment market would have confidence in the examinations that are conducted and in the performance of the candidates therein. Such central arrangements for the conduct of national examinations would also have the advantage of providing an independent mechanism for the evaluation of the performance of the different schools that would be spread across the country. However, a word of caution is necessary at this point in the discussion. The institutional arrangements that are established for this purpose should be fully autonomous and possess independent authority for the conduct of the examinations and not be an entity that is subordinate to the Ministry of Education at the Centre.

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8.3 The Province

The level of the Province entered the institutional arrangements for the management of the delivery of general, vocational and technical education as a consequence of the changes effected in 1987 to the Constitution through the Thirteenth Amendment.

The Thirteenth Amendment was a piece of legislation that was crafted in haste without adequate consultation and a proper appreciation of either its linkages or its implications for sequential changes in institutions and processes. In retrospect, it is also clear that there was no commitment on the part of those who held the reins of power in the Centre[28] to the

[28] These include both the political functionaries as well as the bureaucracy.

devolution of political and administrative authority that was implicit in the constitutional reforms.

The delivery of primary and secondary education and training is one area of public sector activity that has become a victim of the failure to institutionalize an effective system of devolved management. This has been exacerbated by the failure of the political cadres at the Provincial level to fully comprehend their own role and responsibilities concerning the management of the delivery of education and training, to define their tasks and functions and to design the structures and processes for them.[29]

It has, therefore, become necessary to examine afresh the issue of the role of the Province in the management of the delivery of primary and secondary education and training. These are set out below.

- The Community level would be responsible for the management of the individual institutions that fall within its purview and the teachers for the different institutions would be recruited by the institutions themselves. Hence, there would not be a provincial "cadre" or "service" of teachers to be managed by a provincial bureaucracy.

- Similarly, as the individual institutions would be financed through the "per-student-unit-costs" that would accrue to the institutions, a provincial bureaucracy would not have the responsibility for approval of budgets or the allocation of financial resources.[30]

While the above roles and functions are removed from the provincial level, several other tasks will be left for the institutional arrangements at this level.

- One such would be the management of the Social Security Fund that would be required to subsidize the unit costs that would be due from students who fall within pre-set income levels. The resources for such a Fund would come from allocations from the

[29] This failure, of course, was not restricted to the sector of education alone. It is replicated in other sectors including health care, agriculture, transport, infrastructure etc. The failure was principally the outcome of the Provinces – having no alternative example – seeking to imitate the Centre.
[30] There would, in effect, be no budgets at the provincial level for the recurrent expenditure of primary and secondary level education and training institutions.

- Centre and from provincial revenues as agreed between the Centre and the relevant Province.[31]

- The second would be the provision of investment resources that are required for upgrading the infrastructure of institutions[32] in order to meet the demands for enhancement of the quality of education and training. In the short and medium term, the local communities are unlikely to be able to raise the necessary resources for these purposes. In addition there would also be a need for the removal of historical disparities amongst local communities with regard to facilities for education and training. The financial resources for such Investment Funds would have to be provided by the Centre as well as the Province concerned, as per arrangements to be made from time to time between the two levels.

- A third responsibility of the Province would be the periodical monitoring of the performance of the education and training institutions within the concerned province. Such monitoring would, necessarily, have to be within pre-set national guidelines concerning standards. The task of monitoring would also entail the oversight of the rectification of defects and shortcomings as revealed through the monitoring exercises – as well as the suspension of Boards of Management when the required rectification is not carried out according to pre-set time targets.

9. The Support Requirements of Schools

The effective delivery of education and skill development at the level of the school requires the provision of a range of inputs of support. It is important that the responsibility for the provision of the several inputs be appropriately assigned, after careful study of the options, to institutional arrangements at each of the three levels of the polity. This issue will be addressed in the discussion that follows.

[31] As the payment of unit costs subsidies would be a transaction between the Social Security Fund and the concerned institution, it would be unnecessary to have a network of sub-provincial offices. A small-sized office at the provincial headquarters – adequately underpinned by appropriate information technology would suffice.
[32] This would include the expansion and upgrading of buildings and furniture, the provision of modern technology and equipment, the expansion of libraries as well as the provision of ancillary facilities.

9.1 Teachers

Whilst curricula, equipment, supplies and infrastructure provide essential supporting roles, it is the quality of the teachers that would, ultimately, determine the quality of the education that the young receive. There is a general consensus amongst the citizens that the quality of education is sub-optimal at present.[33]

It is possible to identify several factors that contribute to the current situation and to suggest steps that could be taken to improve the quality of education.

The first is the absence of commitment on the part of the great majority of teachers to the specific schools in which they serve or to the specific cohorts of students, whom they teach. The system of recruitment of teachers to a national pool and their deployment to different schools on a time-bound basis is a major contributory factor to this lack of commitment. This is particularly so in the case of the schools which are located in remote and difficult areas from which teachers seek escape almost from the time that they are posted there. The teachers have no interest in school development.[34]

Thus, a critical input that would be required by the schools and training institutions is a regular supply of appropriately trained teachers. It would, naturally, be the responsibility of the institutional management at the community level to programme the requirements of different categories of teachers over the short and medium term. Given that a supply of trained teachers is not available in the labour market, it follows that there will need to be an anticipatory process of planning and execution of programmes for the training and development of teachers.

One of the critical changes proposed in the earlier discussions is that teachers should be recruited to specific schools and that they should remain in them. There, however, cannot be any objection to teachers seeking appointments in other schools on their own and being recruited by such schools on their own merits. What is strongly advised against is the practice of routine transfers of teachers from school to school.

[33] The proliferation of tutorial classes and the desire of parents to send their children to such classes, even at considerable financial sacrifice, provide clear indication of the parents' perceptions.
[34] There is anecdotal evidence that points to the contrary in the "pre-nationalisation" era when teachers were recruited to specific schools and remained therein through the bulk of their career.

In the future reform agenda provision should, thus, be made for the concerned institution to have the final say in the selection of the inductee.

It is possible to approach this objective in two ways. One would be to process the selection from a pool of already trained teachers. The other would be for the institution to pre-select candidates with the basic qualifications, aptitudes and attitudes from the labour market and to have them trained as teachers by appropriate institutions. The latter could, however, lead to time lags. It is, therefore, suggested that the former course be adopted – at least in the initial stages. It should be possible for the Institutes of Teacher Education to monitor data concerning teacher movements and to decide on their intake in a manner that would not lead to over-supply.[35]

It is the view of this discussion that all future recruitment of teachers to primary and secondary schools should be confined to candidates who have successfully completed appropriate courses of study at the Institutes of Teacher Education. Taking into account the fact that teaching should be regarded as a profession with a range of sub-specializations, Institutes of Teacher Education should be so organized and equipped as to provide the required range of such specific skills.

An important question is the organisation and management of these Institutes of Teacher Education. Hitherto, the Government at the Centre has managed them – a situation that has been an impediment to the Institutes being adequately and speedily responsive to the changes in teacher development that are demanded by the changes in the social, economic and knowledge environment. It is, therefore, recommended that whilst the initial investments in the establishment of these Institutes are borne by the Government at the Centre, Boards of Management specifically created for the purpose manage them.

Obviously, the Institutes of Teacher Education would require financial resources for their operation. The required financial resources should be obtained through recovery of pre-set unit costs from the trainees. Of course, there should be arrangement for Social Security Funds to pay such unit costs on behalf of trainees whose income is below pre-determined levels.

[35] The task of matching of demand and supply should be approached in such a manner as would ensure that the supply would cover the specific pedagogic disciplines as would meet the requirements of the different schools over a pre-determined period of time. This is a task that would involve considerable detailed planning.

The aspects of remuneration of teachers also influence the quality of performance of teachers. The practice that currently prevails as regards the salaries of teachers is that they are placed on salary scales that are common to the country as a whole. They move upwards from salary scale to salary scale depending on length of service and, of course, promotion to positions of heads of schools. There is no incentive within the salary structures for teachers to produce more than the average performance. A change is urgently called for.

It is, therefore, suggested that the salary scales be regarded as "salary ranges" and that the Boards of Management of individual schools be given the authority to determine the specific salaries to be paid to individual teachers and the periodic increments of salary to be given to them.

Determination of salary points would need to be governed by such factors as quality of life in specific locations, as well as the availability of particular skills and subject proficiencies. The objective should be to attract and retain teachers of quality. In the case of the determination on payment of salary increments, decisions should be influenced by the quality of performance of the individual teachers – so that there is a benefit accruing to the teachers on account of consistent high quality of performance.

An important factor that would contribute to good performance is that of regular performance appraisal. A practice of annual appraisal of performance of each teacher should be institutionalized. Such an appraisal should be based on assessments of skills and knowledge, the performance of the student cohorts for whom the teacher is responsible as well as surveys of views of parents. Such performance appraisal should be linked to the payment of annual salary increments and the quantum of such increments.

9.2 Cost Reimbursement

Two major recommended changes to the current arrangements will be apparent from the preceding discussions. The first, is that the institutions that provide education and training at the primary and secondary levels should be autonomous in regard to their management. The second, is that there should be predictable sources of finances to underpin such management. The negative consequences of the current methods of funding such institutions through disbursements from centrally controlled financial resource pools – based

on assessed expenditure requirements – would be apparent from earlier discussions. An alternative approach is, therefore, called for.

Such a new approach should be based on a system of recovery – by the school or training institution - of the unit costs of delivery from, or on behalf of, the students or trainees. Whilst students and trainees whose income is below a pre-set level should receive support from public funds for payment of their dues, the others should do so directly.

The setting of unit costs should, obviously, be based on detailed analysis of the costs of the wide range of inputs that are involved in the activity of provision of education and training. These would, amongst others, include the salaries of teachers and other supporting staff, maintenance of infrastructure facilities, costs of library facilities as well as laboratory and IT facilities, and the costs of provision of ancillary facilities[36]. It is appropriate that there be consultations with the widest range of stakeholders in carrying out the analysis and that maximum transparency prevails in the process. These would influence the acceptance by the citizens of the outcomes.[37]

Several other factors require to be kept in view in carrying out this exercise. The first is that the unit costs would not be uniform for Sri Lanka as a whole but would vary as between the different regions. For example, costs of teachers would be higher in the remoter areas of the country.[38] The second is that unit costs would not be constant over time. They would change as costs of inputs vary – as they must. A third is the importance of involving the local communities in the consultations. They should not be treated as passive recipients of decisions made by a distant bureaucracy.

9.3 Infrastructure and Supplies

Infrastructure[39] and supplies are two areas that require continuous attention in the management of the delivery of education and training, as any lags in this regard would directly affect the quality of delivery.

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[36] These would include sports facilities etc.
[37] Given the sensitivity of the issue and its novelty in the Sri Lankan context, acceptance by the citizens would be critical to its implementation.
[38] For example, attracting teachers of quality to remote locations would – until there is parity in the availability of facilities that contribute to quality of life – entail the payment of compensatory allowance.
[39] In this discussion, `infrastructure` would include not only physical infrastructure but also all forms of facilities.

Two sources of funding should, normally, be involved in regard to the upgrading of infrastructure. The first would be pools of funds comprising allocations from the Centre and subventions from the Province for upgrading of infrastructure. It is logical that these pools of funds be managed by the Provincial Councils and allocated – after processes of due consultation – to specific schools for agreed projects of upgrading. The other source of funding would be resources raised by the school itself from the local community. The management of the expenditure of the funds – whether allocated by the Provincial Councils or raised from the local community - should be the responsibility of the Boards of Management of the school concerned. Rules and regulations for such expenditure should be pre-set, in the form of manuals of instruction, by the Provincial Councils -which should ensure that appropriate audits are carried out in regard to compliance. Again the importance of transparency cannot be over-stressed. Audit reports should be available not only to the providers of funds but also to the local community.

The resources for the procurement of the regular supplies that are required by the schools would come from the funds that would accrue to the relevant schools from the unit cost recoveries effected by them from and on behalf of the students.[40] The management of such funds should, therefore, be the responsibility of the Boards of Management of the different schools. However, it needs to be recognized that joint procurement of supplies by a number of schools could assist in cost reductions. Therefore, such a practice should be encouraged. The area of operation of a Local Government Institution would provide an appropriate grouping of schools for such joint procurement – a task in which the Local Government Institution could play a useful supportive role. What is, however, critical is that transparency and accountability to the local community should prevail in such procedures.

10. Implementing the Changes

What has been recommended in the discussion so far is a radical change in the organization and management of the delivery of primary and secondary education and training. They imply a total reversal of the culture and practices that have grown up after 1960/1961. Hence it is important that the process of change be launched only after careful planning and preparation. The discussion that follows will, therefore, focus on several of the key elements in the planning of the process of implementation.

[40] As discussed earlier, the computation of unit costs would include costs of such inputs.

10.1 Support Constituencies for Reform

Such planning needs, first of all, to recognize the strength of the vested interests that would seek to impede the reform process as well as to formulate strategies to weaken and counter them. If this initial step is overlooked, the reforms will remain a mere wish list on paper. Critical to a package of such strategies would be the creation and strengthening of a support constituency for the reform agenda. This is a task that should receive priority attention. Past experience in regard to episodes of reform in the public sector in Sri Lanka point to a different experience. Those responsible for effecting reforms have tended to assume that the reforms are readily understood and would be supported by the citizenry – leading them to brush aside the need to build support constituencies. The outcome has been reforms being abandoned or losing their momentum on the way.

The support constituencies need to be deliberately organized and not be vague and fluid. Therefore, an option to be seriously considered is the organization of such support groups around each school or cluster of schools.

An important element in the creation and strengthening of a support constituency would be a properly planned programme of public education and awareness creation. It needs to be kept in mind that the reforms that have been proposed in regard to the delivery of primary and secondary education and training are radical and unfamiliar to the average citizen. Therefore, they could create a sense of insecurity in the minds of those affected. Hence, it is critical that the public education and awareness creation programme is carefully designed and crafted as well as effectively implemented. Integral to the implementation of such a public education programme is the effective monitoring of the impact of its implementation.

10.2 A Comprehensive Approach to Planning

It is critically important that the total agenda of reforms be planned as a whole. Piecemeal planning and announcement of the reform agenda would create confusion in the minds of citizens. It would also generate resistance, led by groups with vested interests, to individual elements in the agenda - as they are announced to the public at different points of time.

Equally critical is that the planning process must be so structured and organized that there is continuous interaction amongst the several groups that would be working on different issues. The process must not be one where the agendas on each issue are worked out in

isolation and are then assembled together at the end. Such a process would result in contradictions being discovered only during the stage of implementation - when implementation begins to falter or when anticipated outcomes do not materialize.

Over the years, considerable research and study has been conducted on most of the issues that are likely to figure in the reform agenda. Whilst some of the research and study has been carried out under the aegis of the government, there is also a sizeable volume of research and study carried out on the initiative of civil society organizations, academic institutions and individual researchers. Hence, it would be superfluous to spend time and resources to carry out basic research on such issues again. What would, however, be important is to gather the outputs of the research and to organize these outputs in relation to each issue to be addressed in the reform agenda. These, then, could be the bases on which each group working on specific issues could carry out its analysis to advance the options concerning the action steps to be taken on each issue.

10.3 Main Issues

The reform agenda, whilst being comprehensive, should avoid being overcrowded. It needs to be recognized that the reform process would not be a one-time activity. It would be more in the nature of a continuing process that responds to changes in the environment of primary and secondary education and training. It is in this background that the succeeding discussion would identify the main issues to be addressed in the immediate reform agenda.

- The first set of issues centres on school management. These would include the constitution, responsibilities, authority and accountability of School Management Boards. They would also embrace the approaches to be adopted for the clustering of schools for more effective management as well as the roles and responsibilities of Local Government Institutions in regard to school management.

- Related to the above, but requiring special elaboration, would be the clearer definition and demarcation of the role of the Provincial Councils and of the Centre in regard to the effective management of primary and secondary institutions. Special attention is required on this set of issues in view of the radical changes that would, in the new arrangement, be required in regard to the traditional roles hitherto played by the Provincial Councils and the Centre.

- A third set of issues concerns teachers. These would include the pre-induction training and education of teachers, the changeover to their induction by individual schools as against the present recruitment to "pools", and the continuous upgrading of competence through appropriately structured programmes of in-service education and training. A critical issue within this package would be the designing of modes of remuneration and compensation to ensure that all schools – irrespective of their location - would be able to attract and retain teachers of quality and that remuneration would reward performance.

- The fourth set of issues would focus on the future financing of primary and secondary institutions of education and training that would be based on a shift from the current system of financing of inputs to one of funding outputs. These would, first of all, include the formulae for setting of unit costs[41] of provision of services that are to be recovered by the institutions. A second set of sub-issues would deal with the criteria that would determine the provision of State support to children of specific income groups in such manner that all children would be able to equitably access primary and secondary education and training regardless of their income levels. A third set of sub-issues would relate to the setting up of institutional arrangements to provide such access support as well as to continuously monitor changes in eligibility.

Whilst the four sets of issues and their sub-issues have been set out separately in the preceding discussion, it is necessary to stress the reality that they are inter-related. The policies that would be formulated and implemented in regard to each of them would, naturally, have an influence on the others. The degree of success or failure in regard to any one of them would have direct implications for the success or otherwise of the whole agenda of reforms.

10.4 Institutional Arrangements for the Reform Exercise

This reality has a direct bearing on the institutional arrangements and processes that are adopted for the planning and implementation of the reform agenda. Whilst not seeking to set them out in detail, the succeeding discussion would emphasise some of the guidelines which, if followed, would have a positive impact on the final outcome.

[41] It needs to be re-stressed that these unit costs would vary according to grades of study as well as the costs of inputs (such as teachers' remunerations, procurement of supplies) that would depend on location.

The initial step in the process would be to formulate a comprehensive set of Terms of Reference for the reform exercise. It is important that the Terms of Reference be comprehensive in that they cover all the issues that have been listed in the earlier discussion. What would be paramount is that all those involved in the formulation of the reform agenda are equally aware of the full Terms of Reference and of its details. It has been the view of this discussion that it would not be possible to formulate responses to a particular Term of Reference without a full awareness of the totality of the reform agenda that is being pursued.

These Terms of Reference should, in their formulation, have continuing inputs from the citizens. Those who formulate them should proactively seek such inputs. The consideration that has been accorded to such inputs in the formulation of the Terms of Reference should be reflected in the preambles to the Terms of Reference that are finally formulated.[42]

The institutional arrangements for the formulation of the Reform Agenda should provide for a two-tier structure. Specific Study Teams that would deal with each item of the Terms of Reference would constitute one tier of the structure. The primary task of each of these Study Teams would be to collect and analyze data concerning each item of the Terms of Reference and formulate its findings.

The other tier would comprise a Review Group that would include the leaders of all the Study Teams as well as a limited number of members-at-large. The main task of the Review Group would be to continuously assess the tentative findings and recommendations of each Study Team. The fact that the leaders of all Teams would serve on the Review Group would provide an opportunity for the assessment of the impact of the different findings on the full range of elements of the emerging Reform Agenda. This would also be the appropriate forum to suggest modifications to the findings. It is important that there be the fullest feedback of the decisions of the Review Group to all the Study Teams. The flow of information should be wide and comprehensive.

Where appropriate, there should also be inter-Team meetings that would draw in all members of the concerned Teams – and not be confined to the leaders. The inter-actions at these meetings should be comprehensive and frank – such that the widest range of views would be brought to bear on the outputs of all the different Teams.

[42] This would enhance the sense of ownership of the reform agenda amongst the citizens.

Each Team, in their analyses and the formulation of recommendations should interact with citizen groups, academics, trade unions and political groups. What is essential is to avoid the situation wherein the elements in the Reform Agenda become restricted to the thinking and views of merely the members of the different Teams.

It would be a healthy practice to issue, from time to time, White Papers containing tentative findings and recommendations. This is essential to enable citizens to react to recommendations whilst the process is under way – so that necessary amendments could be effected before the Reform Agenda is finally set.

The Reform Agenda as it is ultimately formulated as well as the timetable for its implementation should be placed before a Select Committee of Parliament for its consideration. It is equally important that the White Paper should also contain the representations received from the citizens in the process of preparation.

The findings of the Select Committee should go before the Parliament for its approval of the Reform Agenda and the time frame for its implementation. The responsibility of Parliament does not end at this point. It is essential that within the time frame that is set, there be periodic reviews of the progress of implementation as well as of the impact, by the same Select Committee of Parliament. Such reviews should best be instituted at intervals of six months. The findings of the Select Committee should be tabled in Parliament.

10.5 Location of Responsibility for the Reform Exercise

The traditional approach to exercises of this nature would be to assign the responsibility for planning and implementation to the ministry concerned with the specific sector. This was the approach that was followed in the past in regard to attempts at reforms both in the education as well as the health sector. None of these attempts yielded the results that were anticipated by the citizenry. Hindsight indicates that much of the failure could be attributed to the placing of responsibility for the formulation and implementation of the reform agendas in the hands of the same institutions that had both carried the responsibility for the situation that requires reform, as well as been the milieu within which the vested interests that are averse to reform, have found refuge.

Given the unsatisfactory experience of the past, this discussion would suggest a different approach in regard to the planning and implementation of the reform agenda that has been proposed.

The Office of the Prime Minister should assume the responsibility for the planning and implementation of the Reform Agenda in regard to general education. The institutional arrangements in regard to the Review Group and to the different Teams should place them within the Office of the Prime Minister. Obviously, there would need to be a small Task Force that would service the Review Group and the Teams in regard to their work – including the interface with the citizens, the preparation and publication of the White Papers, and the submission of matters to the Parliamentary Select Committee. The Head of the Task Force should report to the Secretary to the Prime Minister.

It cannot be stressed strongly enough that any other institutional arrangements would not be optimally effective as they would lack the authority that would be necessary for backing a reform agenda as radical and far reaching as that which is proposed. Institutional arrangements that are locked into sectoral ministries would, if one were to go by previous experiences, be overwhelmed by entrenched vested interests. The reform agenda, after initial euphoria, would gradually lose its momentum.[43]

11. Conclusion

The preceding discussion has sought to provide an outline of what is amiss with the delivery of general education in Sri Lanka at the primary and the secondary levels. The discussion points to two realities.

The first, is that the current malaise is the outcome of the continuing failure, over the decades, to effect the on-course corrections to the content of and to the management of the delivery of general education that were demanded, over time, by the changes in the environmental context.

[43] The past exercises in Presidential Commissions and Task Forces on Health Policy and on Education Policy as well as the sad saga of the implementation of the recommendations of the Administrative Reforms Committee provide examples of such fiascos.

The second, is that this failure was the direct outcome of the stranglehold that the anti-reform vested interests had on the very institutions that should have led the reform agenda.

It is the second of these that the proposed reform agenda seeks, particularly, to correct through the institutional arrangements and processes that have been proposed above. Therefore, it is expected that future exercises in reform would attach primary importance to the institutional structures and processes for the planning and implementation of the reform agenda and not launch the exercises until these details are appropriately settled.

Otherwise, what would happen is what has, so often, happened in the past. There would be initial euphoria accompanied by high expectations on the part of the citizens. Reforms would be announced with high publicity. Their implementation would be smothered by the reactions of the anti-reform vested interests. The citizenry would be disillusioned and would, increasingly, be resentful. What would be most counter-productive would be that repeated episodes of disillusionment could lead to violent reactions.

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