

Original Research Article

Education in Sri Lanka: A Historical, Administrative, and Contemporary Overview with Emphasis on Secondary Schooling

ABSTRACT

Aims: This research aims to comprehensively explore the historical evolution, administrative intricacies, and current state of secondary education in Sri Lanka, with a particular focus on the post-independence era. It seeks to provide valuable insights into the challenges, initiatives, and policy measures that have shaped the educational landscape in the country.

Study design: The study adopts a historical research design, meticulously tracing the trajectory of education in Sri Lanka from ancient times through the colonial periods to the contemporary era. It places a particular emphasis on the post-independence period, scrutinizing administrative reforms, decentralization efforts, and the structure of secondary schooling.

Place and Duration of Study: The research is conducted in Sri Lanka, encompassing various regions and educational institutions across the country.

Methodology: Grey literature, including historical documents, archival records, and unpublished reports, serves as a pivotal source for this study. Government reports, policy documents, and contemporary educational sources are analyzed to provide a nuanced understanding of the challenges and initiatives in Sri Lanka's education system. Internal memos, working papers, and non-peer-reviewed literature are utilized to dissect administrative structures, policy measures, and curriculum development.

Results: The research reveals the intricate historical journey of education in Sri Lanka, highlighting the impact of colonial rulers on the traditional education system. Post-independence challenges and initiatives, such as decentralization efforts and administrative reforms, are scrutinized. The contemporary education system, including diverse school categories and the flow of education from preschool to tertiary levels, is comprehensively analyzed. Key policies, such as free education, medium of instruction, and compulsory education, are detailed to showcase the government's commitment to inclusive and accessible education.

Conclusion: In conclusion, this study provides a holistic understanding of the multifaceted dimensions of education in Sri Lanka. By examining historical roots, administrative intricacies, and the current state of the secondary education sector, the research sheds light on the enduring pursuit of knowledge and enlightenment in Sri Lanka's educational journey. The findings offer valuable insights for scholars, policymakers, and those interested in the dynamic evolution of education in the country.

Keywords: Education, Education System, Secondary Education, Sri Lanka, Educational Reforms

1. INTRODUCTION

Education in Sri Lanka has undergone a transformative journey shaped by its rich historical roots, colonial influences, and post-independence endeavours. This article offers a comprehensive exploration of the educational landscape, with a particular focus on secondary schooling. From its temple-based Buddhist origins to the intricacies of colonial rule by the Portuguese, Dutch, and British, each chapter of Sri Lanka's educational history unfolds. Emphasising the post-independence era, the narrative delves into the challenges and initiatives, including decentralisation efforts and administrative structures. A meticulous breakdown of the contemporary education system illuminates the diverse array of schools, mediums of

instruction, and geographical categorisations. The flow of education from preschool to tertiary levels is dissected, underlining key milestones and policy measures such as free education, multilingual instruction, and compulsory education. The study also navigates the intricate landscape of curriculum development, tracing its evolution from the 1960s to pivotal reforms in 1998. This exploration serves as a holistic guide to understanding the multifaceted dimensions of education in Sri Lanka, providing valuable insights into its historical evolution, administrative intricacies, and the current state of its educational system, with a particular emphasis on the secondary school sector.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses Grey's literature. Grey literature is a valuable asset in enriching the research methodology for the study on the education system in Sri Lanka. Beyond the confines of peer-reviewed journals and mainstream publications, grey literature, including historical documents, archival records, and unpublished reports, serves as a pivotal source. This inclusion allows for a more profound exploration of the evolution of education during colonial periods, shedding light on the nuances of school systems introduced by Portuguese, Dutch, and British administrations and their impact on the traditional education landscape.

The post-independence era comes under scrutiny through the analysis of government reports and policy documents, providing insights into administrative reforms post-1948. Grey literature is instrumental in unravelling the challenges faced in decentralising educational administration and understanding the minimal impact of these efforts. Examining contemporary education, unpublished reports, policy briefs, and internal documents contributes to a nuanced understanding of the current state of the education system, including challenges related to resource constraints and societal dynamics.

Delving into the administrative structure and policy measures, grey literature extracts information from institutional reports and internal memos to illuminate the hierarchical organisation of the education system. Similarly, in the realm of curriculum development and reforms, grey literature sources such as internal working papers and unpublished records trace the evolution and impact of significant reforms, notably the 1998 curriculum reform. Furthermore, grey literature plays a vital role in understanding the aims of education and the implementation of key policies, including free education and compulsory education. Lastly, in exploring vocational training and its alignment with national goals, the analysis of internal reports and non-peer-reviewed literature helps comprehensively examine the impact of vocational training programs on broader goals of human resource development and economic contribution. By integrating grey literature comprehensively, this study aims to present a thorough understanding of the education system in Sri Lanka, enriched by diverse perspectives and historical context.

3. EDUCATION IN SRI LANKA

Sri Lanka had a total number of 10,194 schools in 2017, including 1029 1AB secondary schools, 1818 1C secondary schools, 3288 type 2 secondary schools, and 4059 type 3 primary schools. The school student population of the country in 2017 can be summarised as follows: there is a total of 4,165,964 students. Every year, around 322,135 children are admitted to grade one classes in government schools. The teacher population in Sri Lanka in 2017 was 241,591. In 2015, the average student-teacher ratio in Sri Lanka was 17 students per teacher in government schools (Ministry of Education, 2017). As this study's population is secondary school children, it is appropriate that there should be a brief history of school education in Sri Lanka from ancient times to the present.

3.1 Brief History of Education in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka had a temple-based Buddhist religion-dominated education system prior to the colonial period. With the arrival of colonial agents, the traditional school education system in Sri Lanka was changed. The

Portuguese arrived in 1505 as the first colonial agent and began ruling the country. They led the country for about 150 years. Subsequently, the Dutch defeated the Portuguese and took control of the country. After 150 years, the British took over the ruling power of the country from the Dutch. They ruled the country until we gained independence in 1948.

3.1.1. School Education in the Colonial Period in Sri Lanka (1505-1948)

The concept of the 'school' was established for the first time in Sri Lanka during the Portuguese period. They introduced the 'Parish School' to Sri Lankan society. The current school system was established during the period of the 'colony' in Sri Lanka. The school organisation established by colonial agents in Sri Lanka is still in place, albeit with some changes. Under the Portuguese, the education system was in the hands of the missionaries who established missionary schools with the sole intention of propagating the Roman Catholic religion. Since the colonial agents introduced this system of education, the local traditional education system has been neglected, and as a result, the Western model of schools has become very popular in the country (Ruberu, 1962a, 1962b; Ruberu, 2003).

The Portuguese rulers brought both Franciscans and Jesuits, who founded 41 parish schools and three Franciscan and two Jesuit colleges. The Dutch, who followed the Portuguese, replaced the Catholic parish schools with schools allied with the Dutch Reformed church. Both the Portuguese and the Dutch used religious conversion to encourage access to educational opportunities. "The administrative structure set up for education by the Dutch was impressive" (Jayasuriya, 1976). During the period of Dutch control, schools were operated by the 'Scholarchal Commission'. The commission of Colombo had superior power and authority. At least once a year, the school was inspected by school inspectors who were appointed by the commissions. Students were fined if they did not complete compulsory school education until the age of 15 years. The examination system in the schools was very simple during that period; children were examined in reading and writing. In addition to the parish schools, the Dutch established a 'Seminary in Colombo' to provide higher education in Sri Lanka (Jayasuriya, 1976). However, the education system established by the Dutch was very useful during their ruling period. The quality of education provided by the parish schools in the Dutch period was relatively more satisfactory than the education during the Portuguese period (Jayasuriya, 1976; Ruberu, 1962b; Sumathipala, 1968).

A very significant contribution was made towards school education and university education by the British in Sri Lanka from 1796 to 1948. Some of the key aspects of education in Sri Lanka, the school curriculum, the structure of the school system, school management systems, and the university system were introduced by the British and have continued to date. Some of the key aspects of education in Sri Lanka, such as the school curriculum, school system structure, school management systems, and university system, were introduced by the British and have been maintained to this day. The British governors, too, continued the parish school system even during the British colonial period with some amendments. However, in 1812, a 'mission school' was established in Colombo. The Baptist and the Wesleyan missions administered those schools.

3.1.2. School Education After Independence in Sri Lanka

After independence, on many occasions, Sri Lankan officials of education made significant efforts to decentralise school education, education management and administration of the government schools. Though the government of Sri Lanka had made considerable efforts for decentralisation of educational administration with a vision to enhance the efficiency, effectiveness, and productivity of the school education system, the effects were minimal. Significant changes were made in the school management sector after independence. It can be listed as the establishment of 'Central Schools', the introduction of free education from Kindergarten to the University in 1947, the taking over of the denominational school and establishing a national system of education in 1961, the remarkable education reforms implemented in 1972, the introduction of a white paper on education in 1985, the establishment of the National Institute of Education (NIESL) in 1981, the establishment of National Colleges of Education (NCoE) in 1986, the devolution of power to provincial councils in 1987, the establishment of the National Education Commission (NECSL) in 1991 and the introduction of ESDFP educational reforms in 2006 (Colenso, 2005).

Immediately following independence, the government was concerned with closing the gap between the central government and the schools. Therefore, in the decentralisation process, some layers between the central ministry and the schools were established to bridge the gap (Perera, 2006). The need for more human and other resources obstructed the decentralisation of school education in Sri Lanka. Physical resources such as buildings, furniture, materials and vehicles as well as committed, qualified, talented, dynamic and skilful people restricted decentralisation. Therefore, the efforts could have been more successful to the expected level. Even though the government attempted to delegate power to the schools, most school stakeholders often rejected those opportunities.

It seems that the Sri Lankan social and cultural situation has slowed down the decentralisation dreams and aims. Direct participation of stakeholders such as teachers, parents, or members of the outside community in decision-making has not been increased. Many school stakeholders saw decentralisation as more of a theoretical concept than a functional one. Barriers posed by the bureaucracy of the government organizational structures and traditional views of the people slowed down the positive changes of the government towards school education in Sri Lanka. However, many significant educational management reforms made by the education authorities on several occasions after independence can be identified (Perera, 1997).

3.2 ADMINISTRATION OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

The education system in the country has a top-down approach. The central government is responsible for the entire management of the education system. However, to a certain extent, the functions have been decentralized to provincial authorities with the 13th amendment to the constitution in 1987 (Ministry of Education, 2004). Table 1 Shows school categories in Sri Lanka.

Table 1 School Categories in Sri Lanka

Type of the school	Description	No
1. Based on Functional Grade & Streams		
Type III:	Primary School which includes classes from Grade 1 to 5	4,059
Type II:	Junior School Grade 6-11	3,288
IC:	Senior Secondary Grade 1- 13 only Arts and commerce streams are taught at grades 12 & 13.	1,818
1AB	Senior Secondary School which has classes from grade 1 to 13 and all three streams: Arts, Commerce and Science are taught at grades 12 & 13.	1029
2 Based on Medium of Instruction		
Sinhala	Schools where only Sinhala medium instruction is available	6,332
Tamil	Schools where only Tamil medium instruction is available	3,009
Sinhala & Tamil	Schools where Sinhala & Tamil medium instructions are available.	75
Sinhala & English	Schools where Sinhala & English medium instructions are available.	558
Tamil & English	Schools where Tamil & English medium instructions are available.	173
Sinhala, Tamil & English	Schools where Sinhala, Tamil & English medium instructions are available.	47
3 No. of schools by local government area		
Urban	Schools where situated in municipal council and Urban	1,078

	councils	
Rural	Schools where situated in pradeshiya sabah	8,934
Estate	Schools where situated in tea and rubber plantation sectors	843
4 Other Category		
National Schools	Number of schools have been brought under the direct administration and monitoring of Ministry of Education.	353
Provincial Schools	Other schools excluding national fall in this category. The schools are administrated by the provincial councils.	9,841

Source: Adapted School Census Report, (Ministry of Education, 2017)

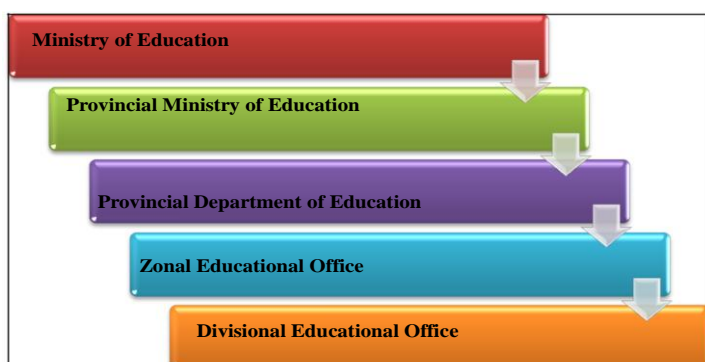


Figure 1 Educational Administrative Hierarchies in Sri Lanka

Source: Adapted based on the descriptions from NEC 2009:28

The devolution was made to ensure that the provincial councils helped in the implementation of the education policies at the grassroots level. Figure 1 shows the educational administrative hierarchy in Sri Lanka.

It shows the centralised administrative hierarchical order in the country's education system. Even though there are nine provincial education ministries, they need to have the power to make policy decisions related to curriculum development and implementation. They help implement the policies adopted by the Ministry of Education. There are other institutions that are functioning under the Ministry of Education (MOE), and they are in three categories: Departments, Statutory Boards, and public enterprises (Oulai & Da Costa, 2009). The National Education Commission (NEC), the National Institute of Education (NIE), the National Library and the Documentation Service Board (NLDSB), and the National Book Development Council of Sri Lanka (NBDC) are the Statutory Boards under MOE.

3.3 THE CONTEMPORARY STRUCTURE OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

The current system of education system can be divided into six parts viz as shown in Figure 2. Students sit for two national-level exams, namely GCE O/L (General Certificate Education Ordinary Level) and GCE A/L (General Certificate Education Advance Level) at the end of the senior secondary and collegiate level schooling, respectively.

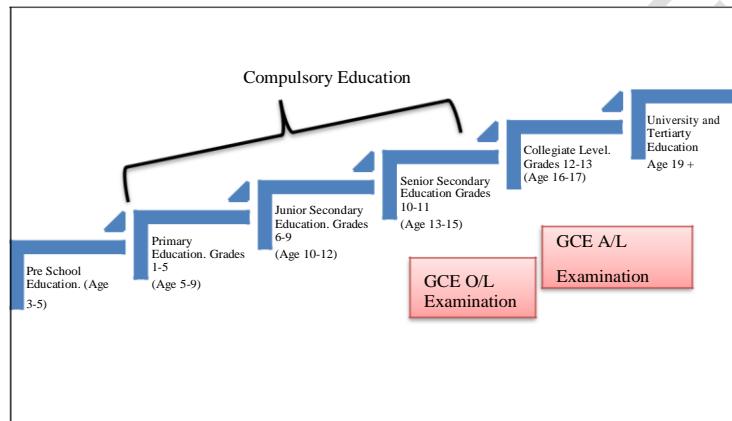


Figure 2 Flow of the Education System in Sri Lanka
Source: Nawastheen (2014)

The education system in Sri Lanka is structured to cater to various age groups and academic levels. Preschool education, designed for children aged 3-5, is monitored by the Children's Secretariat and operates independently of general education. It is facilitated by local government bodies, the private sector, and religious or volunteer organisations. General education officially commences at age 5, encompassing primary education for the 5-9 age group, junior secondary education from Grade 6 to 9 (10-13 years old), and senior secondary education for 14-16 year-olds, culminating in the General Certificate Education (Ordinary Level) Examination (GCE O/L). The success in this examination guides students in selecting their subsequent education stream.

The next phase is the Collegiate Level or GCE A/L, a two-year program leading to the General Certificate Education (Advance Level) Examination. Here, students choose specialised streams like Science, Arts, Commerce, or Information Technology based on their interests and requirements. Tertiary education encompasses university-level studies, with admission granted to those who pass the G.C.E A/L examination. However, as per the University Grants Commission (2010) report, the number of students qualifying for university admission is competitive, with only a fraction gaining entry. Additionally, vocational training opportunities are available for school leavers through government, private sector, and non-governmental organizations' (NGO) operated institutes, contributing to a diverse and comprehensive education landscape in the country.

3.4 AIMS OF EDUCATION IN SRI LANKA

Sri Lanka stands out in the South Asia region for its exemplary educational achievements, as recognised by scholars such as De Mel (2007) and Little (2010). The country has garnered global acclaim for its commitment to equal opportunity, widespread educational enrollment, high literacy rates, and accessible education, attributes largely attributed to the proactive measures taken, particularly in the form of free education, by successive governments since 1945. The present education policy of Sri Lanka is shaped by the National Education Commission (NEC), which outlines key national goals for the educational landscape (National Education Commission, 2003). These goals encompass the fostering of a distinct Sri Lankan identity, emphasising national cohesion, integrity, unity, harmony, and peace while acknowledging the cultural diversity inherent in the nation's plural society. The policy also aims to preserve the nation's heritage while addressing the challenges of a dynamic global environment. Additionally, it underscores the importance of social justice, a democratic way of life, and the promotion of human rights, duties, and obligations, fostering mental and physical well-being and nurturing creativity, critical thinking, and responsibility. Moreover, the policy highlights the role of education in human resource development, contributing to the individual and national quality of life and economic progress. It seeks to prepare individuals for adaptability and change management in a rapidly evolving world, instilling attitudes and skills conducive to securing an honourable place in the international community based on principles of justice, equality, and mutual respect.

3.5 FREE EDUCATION

The commitment of the Sri Lankan government to the welfare of its students is evident through a comprehensive array of support services. Notably, free textbooks and annual school uniforms are provided to all primary and secondary students, ensuring accessibility to essential educational resources. As outlined by the Ministry of Education (2008), the government extends its support further through scholarship schemes, offering financial assistance to deserving children, thus fostering inclusivity in education. Additionally, transport subsidies facilitate students' commuting to school, promoting attendance and access to educational opportunities. The government's dedication to the holistic well-being of students is demonstrated by the provision of free medical inspections in schools, inclusive of dental care, and the distribution of free spectacles to those in need. Moreover, identified schools with undernourished children receive supplementary feeding, addressing nutritional concerns and promoting a conducive learning environment. These multifaceted welfare initiatives underscore the government's commitment to ensuring that socio-economic factors do not hinder students' access to quality education and well-being.

3.6 MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION

The provision of education in local languages stands as a pivotal element in Sri Lanka's educational landscape, with constitutional backing outlined in Article No 46 (A) of the 1978 Constitution (Government of Sri Lanka 1978, 2000). This constitutional mandate ensures that individuals have the right to be educated in either Sinhala or Tamil and, when feasible, in English. As documented by Little (1997), the historical transition from English to Sinhala or Tamil as the medium of instruction began soon after the country's independence, reflecting a commitment to broadening educational access beyond the elite. This shift, initiated in primary schools in 1948 and subsequently in secondary schools and university arts courses, marked a transformative period in Sri Lanka's education system.

The Ministry of Education (2008) emphasises the practical implementation of language-based instruction, where Sinhala and Tamil serve as the primary mediums in government schools. This accommodates the linguistic diversity of the major ethnic groups, including Sinhala, Tamil, and Moors, allowing students to learn in accordance with their linguistic preferences. The Ministry's data from the 2017 School Census reveals a substantial enrollment of 3.05 million students in the Sinhala medium, with 1.02 million in the Tamil medium and 0.08 million in the English medium, demonstrating a balanced distribution of schools

among these linguistic mediums (Ministry of Education, 2017). This commitment to linguistic inclusivity underscores Sri Lanka's dedication to providing an education system that respects and accommodates the diverse linguistic identities of its populace.

3.7 COMPULSORY EDUCATION

In addition to free education, the compulsory education policy also contributed to the high achievements in education. Every citizen of the country has the right to education, and it is guaranteed by the constitution, which is the supreme law of the land. The right to an education is guaranteed by the Sri Lankan constitution.

According to No 27 (h) of the Constitution (1978, 2000), “the complete eradication of illiteracy and the assurance to all persons of the right to universal and equal access to education at all levels” is the fundamental duty of the Government of Sri Lanka. The country's general education is governed by a 72-year-old education ordinance that has been modified frequently. According to the National Education Report (2009), the governing ordinance for education is as follows: “The provisions of the Education Ordinance No.31 of 1939 as amended by Ordinance Nos. 61 of 1939, 21 of 1945, 3 of 1946, 26 of 1947, Act No 5 of 1951, 43 of 1943, 37 of 1958 and the law of No 35 of 1973 govern general education today.”

In addition, there are some other ordinances and amendments related to general education that have been brought from time to time. The compulsory education for the age group 5-14 has been enforced by the constitution (1978; 2000) and the Education Ordinance No 31 of 1938 for 5-14 age groups. Article No 22 (6) of the Constitution (1978, 2000) declared that: “Every child between the ages of five and fourteen years shall have access to free education provided by the State”

In 1947, there was an amendment to increase the age limit for compulsory education for up to 16 years. The National Education Commission (2003) report stated there were no proper mechanisms to ensure mandatory education until 1997. A monitoring strategy was introduced to provide compulsory education and school attendance for the school-going age group by the Gazette notification No 1003/5 of 25 November 1997. Two committees, namely, the School Attendance Committee (SAC) for each Grama Niladhari Division and the School Attendance Monitoring Committee (SAMC) for each Divisional Secretariat Division, were appointed by the Ministry of Education. However Perera (2004), Arunatilake (2006) and National Education Commission (2003) report revealed that the committees' activities needed to be more satisfactory and functional by 2000. The enforcement of compulsory education in the country has contributed to high school participation levels, and the result is the country's high literacy rates.

3.8 SCHOOL CURRICULUM IN SRI LANKA

In the immediate aftermath of gaining independence, the Sri Lankan government prioritised the reduction of the gap between the central government and schools, leading to a decentralisation process that introduced intermediary layers between the central ministry and educational institutions. This decentralisation aimed to enhance local autonomy and address the unique educational achievements of Sri Lanka, characterised by high literacy rates and gender equality in educational participation within the South Asia region. Education's pivotal role in the lives of the populace contributed significantly to Sri Lanka's global admiration for its accomplishments in enrollment, educational opportunities, and literacy rates (Little, 2010).

As noted in the Report of the National Education Commission (2009), the post-independence era in Sri Lanka witnessed substantial socio-economic transformation, with evolving population, economic, and social factors influencing the education system. The introduction of systematic curriculum development in the 1960s marked a critical juncture with the establishment of the Curriculum Development Centre (CDC). Subsequent major educational reforms in 1972 paved the way for the expansion and strengthening of the CDC, and the establishment of the National Institute of Education (NIE) in 1985 further solidified its role in national curriculum development (National Education Commission 2010:62).

Perera (2008) emphasised the dynamic nature of Sri Lanka's general education curriculum, undergoing significant policy changes in 1965, 1972, 1978, 1985, 1992, and 1998. Influenced by developments in comparable regions, the 1998 reform, aligned with the recommendations of the National Education Commission (NEC), is particularly noteworthy. This reform was a response to the pressing need to develop essential competencies among children, marking a transformative phase in the country's educational landscape.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the journey of education in Sri Lanka is a narrative that unfolds across centuries, encompassing religious foundations, colonial interventions, and post-independence aspirations. The historical underpinnings, notably the transformative impact of colonial rulers, have left an indelible mark on the educational fabric. The post-independence period witnessed a dynamic interplay of challenges and initiatives, with a noteworthy focus on decentralisation efforts and administrative adjustments. The contemporary educational landscape in Sri Lanka reflects a diverse and comprehensive system, ranging from preschool to tertiary education. The pivotal role of policies, such as free education, multilingual instruction, and compulsory education, underscores the nation's commitment to providing accessible and inclusive learning opportunities. The intricate process of curriculum development, influenced by both national needs and global trends, further illustrates the adaptability and resilience of the education system. As Sri Lanka continues to navigate the ever-evolving landscape of education, understanding its historical foundations, administrative intricacies, and the structure of its secondary schooling system becomes paramount. This comprehensive overview not only serves as a valuable resource for scholars and policymakers but also invites reflection on the nation's commitment to fostering a well-rounded, accessible, and forward-looking education for its citizens. Through the ebb and flow of historical changes and contemporary challenges, Sri Lanka's educational journey remains a testament to the enduring pursuit of knowledge and enlightenment.

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