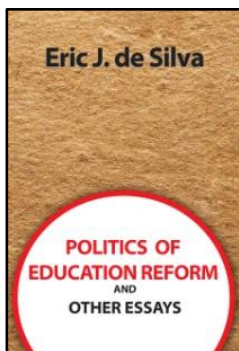


BOOK REVIEW



Eric J de Silva :
***Politics of Education Reform
and Other Essays***

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Introduction

The 1970s were an eventful decade for the education sector in Sri Lanka. The insurrection that took place at the turn of the decade clearly showed the need to change the existing system of education from one catering to the elite to one empowering the masses. The 1972 attempt to cater to this need was unsuccessful and did not appeal to the public who pursued social mobility through education. The new government that came into power in 1977 was eager to please the public that it reversed many of the introduced reforms. But the process of education policy reform continued with the 1981 White Paper. Eric de Silva, becoming the Secretary of the Ministry Education in 1980, clearly had the dual advantage of studying the attempts at education policy reform in the 1970s and the first-hand experience of education policy making in the early 1980s. In his book, *Politics of Education Reform and Other Essays*, he shares these experiences and knowledge by chronicling education policy making in Sri Lanka. Today's policy makers can learn several lessons from this narrative.

Education policy making in the country has never been easy

Eric de Silva's recount clearly shows the importance of obtaining public feedback before implementing education policies. The examples of education policy making in the 1970s illustrate this well.

In the early 1970s, just following the insurrection spearheaded by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), the main issue for education policy makers was establishing better linkages between education and employment. Eric de Silva clearly shows that even as far back as early 1970s, there was concern about the “premium on examinations, degrees and diplomas rather than on the development of skills ... necessary for economic development” (page 12). Even in the early 1970s there was a realisation that the curricula catered mostly for those intent on an education leading to white collar jobs. As such, it was largely irrelevant for those who failed to enter the academic stream leading to a university education. This resulted in an education and skills mismatch, which contributed to the large scale unemployment and social unrest the country experienced.

The 1972 proposals attempted to find solutions to these issues of the education system. They proposed to radically overhaul the education system in the country. They included many elements that are being reconsidered even today – such as the provision of a school completion certificate, introduction of vocational training, and better linkages between education and the general needs of the country. However, at the time the reforms were introduced, attempts were not made to think through all the aspects of the reforms. For example, although the intention of limiting access to the Higher National Certificate of Education (HNCE) was to limit the quantity of people aiming for higher education, the country was not sufficiently prepared to address the education needs of those who did not enter the HNCE course.

These limitations of the 1972 reforms came under considerable criticism of parents, teachers and the general public who were unsure of what the future offered under the new system of education. Eric De Silva points out several reasons for the unpopularity of these reforms. They were introduced without paying sufficient attention to their social impacts and the availability of resources to implement the reforms. The reforms also did not follow the earlier process of producing a White Paper for discussion prior to implementation. Given this, the reforms became a hot political issue, and resulted in being overhauled soon after the election of a new government.

Stakeholder discussions are necessary but useless without political backing

Learning from 1970s attempts at reforming education, in 1981 the government prepared a White Paper for wider discussion before implementing new policy. But the discussions were more intent on making political mileage before the upcoming elections rather than on finding a real solution to the problems of the education system. The lack of political backing for proposed changes resulted in policy recommendations not being implemented fully.

Independence in policy reforms can only work with political support

The lack of attention to education reform was at least partly responsible for the second insurrection in the country during the 1987 to 1989 period. Following this, education reforms received renewed interest in the 1990s. Learning from past failures of quick attempts to introduce reforms and the difficulties in finding consensus in the face of politicisation of education reforms, the 1990s used a new approach for education policy making in the form of an independent commission. The Presidential Commission (popularly referred to as the Youth Commission) appointed in 1989 to study the causes of youth unrest identified the need to reform education policy as priority action. The Youth Commission recommended the establishment of a National Commission on Education Policy. The main objectives of this education commission was to recommend changes to education policies in the country from time to time, to reflect changing circumstances globally and within the country and to find national consensus for these proposed changes. As a result of this recommendation the National Education Commission (NEC) was established in 1991 under the National Education Commission Act No. 19 of 1991, with the approval of all political parties (page 38).

Unlike in earlier mechanisms for education policy making, the newly appointed Commission had bipartisan support. The Chairman and the members of the National Education Commission were appointed with the concurrence of the Leader of the Opposition. Mr. Lalith Athulathmudali, Minister of Education and Higher Education, who presented the NEC bill in parliament referred to it as “one of the most important bills in the history of education in this country” (page 38).

The NEC prepared an initial report in 1992 detailing the existing education system, the educational goals of the country and the changes needed to realise the stated educational goals of the country. However, these recommendations were not fully implemented. Eric de Silva notes that although the National Education Commission (NEC) was established with the intention of depoliticising education policy making, it was only given powers to make recommendations. Implementing the recommendations was at the hands of the ministry in charge of education. From the author’s narrative what is apparent is that there was some confusion over this process.

Part of the problem in the absence of comprehensive education policy formulation was the lack of clear demarcation of authority. The new government elected in 1994 on several occasions reiterated their commitment to establishing a National Education Policy. With that backing in 1995, the National Education Commission submitted a new report: “An Action Oriented Strategy towards a National Education Policy”.

But this was not directly implemented. In 1996, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) came out with a document of its own called the ‘National Education

Policy – A Framework for Action on General Education (Draft Proposals)’. This led to education proposals being drafted by both the NEC and the MEHE in the 1990s. As a result of this confusion the NEC could not deliver the anticipated change in education policy making.

Political will alone doesn’t work without proper research based policy formulation and public consultations

As the process of education policy making was not going forward, in 1996 President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunge appointed a Presidential Task Force, with the Minister of Education and Higher education as Chairman, to come up with a plan of action for general education reforms to be implemented with immediate effect. The author notes that this Task Force ignored the attempts made at the beginning of the 1990s to depoliticise education policy reforms. The Task Force was able to produce what it referred to as an “Executive Summary of Proposed Actions”, a ten paged document, within three months of its appointment. But the proposals failed for several reasons. First, as they were hurriedly put together, they were not backed by a comprehensive study of the issues of the education system in the country. Secondly, they were not given the opportunity to be discussed in order to arrive at a national consensus. Lastly, there was no attempt to obtain the concurrence of the opposition for the proposed reforms.

Not surprisingly, the way the proposals were drafted received mounting criticism. Earlier President Kumaratunga had declared 1997 as the ‘year of education’. With this year of education almost coming to an end and the proposed reforms receiving increasing criticism due to lack of transparency, the latter part of 1997 saw several policy documents on education policy reform. The National Education Commission produced a printed document under the title ‘Reforms in General Education, 1997’. Although it was supposed to have been prepared on the basis of proposals made by the Technical Committees of the Task Force, it also contained some reforms not included therein.

Adding to the confusion, yet another document was presented in 1998 by the NEC called the ‘General Education Reforms, 1997’. However, this too was not tabled in parliament or opened for public discussion.

These activities clearly show the pitfalls of policy formulation without proper research, public discussion and the backing of other political parties.

Policy reforms should be done with clear objectives in mind – the case of School Rationalisation

The education policy reforms introduced since the 1971 insurrection have attempted to revise the school structure on several occasions for different reasons. The reforms introduced in 1972, increased the school going age from five to six with the intention of reducing the number of years of formal education, and saving funds for improving quality of education. However, these reforms were reversed in 1978, and the schooling age was again brought down to five years.

In 1996 the Ministry of Education introduced a school rationalisation system, to close down schools that did not have sufficient number of students after making alternative arrangements for them. The main objective of this exercise also was to improve the financial efficiency of education.

The Presidential Task Force appointed by President Chandrika Kumaratunga backed the proposal for restructuring schools for three different reasons. First, it argued that having an integrated school system from grade 1 to 9 will help to reduce school dropouts. Secondly, it argued that separating grades 1-9 (junior schools with a primary section (grades 1-5) and a junior secondary section (grades 6-9) will help to develop a school culture more appropriate to the different age levels of pupils. Finally it argues that senior schools (grades 10-13) will be able to provide more specialised courses and better facilities for senior secondary education.

However, as the author points out there are numerous counter arguments for these proposals. Also it was not clear whether the envisaged massive overhaul of the education system in the country would result in generating returns that justify the required investments. Further, proposed reforms had not taken into account the availability of funds to carry out the proposed changes to the education system. As a result, the proposed restructuring of the school system did not go ahead as planned.

Medium of instruction – an example of hasty policy implementation that led to confusion

In the face of rapid globalisation, the frequent use of English in the private sector to conduct business, and the need for competencies in English to obtain better jobs, especially in the private sector, the need to improve English education in the country has become an urgent need. Given this need, in 2001, under the then Education Secretary Dr. Tara de Mel, English was introduced as a medium of instruction in 2001. However, this was done without taking into consideration the capacity of the education system in the country to implement the policy. First, not all schools had the resources to offer English as a medium of instruction. Second, although schools were encouraged to

offer classes in English medium, there was no circular providing clear guidance on how to do so. As a result the initial proposal for introducing English medium education had to be changed several times over the years introducing many ambiguities to the system.

Conclusion

The above account illustrates only some of the examples of failed attempts to reform education policy in the country. Lack of clear policy making has resulted in two insurrections in the country. In the light of difficulties and failures in the reform process, comprehensive education policy reform remains a pressing need for the country.

This book offers valuable lessons to the modern day education policy maker on past mistakes in education policy making. It is highly recommended to anyone involved in education policy making in the country.