

The Colonial and Neoliberal Roots of the Public-Private Education Debate in Sri Lanka

David Golding

Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK

Abstract

The controversy surrounding Sri Lanka's privatising education system is one of the most pressing social and political issues facing the country today. This paper explores the history of this debate by drawing connections to broader processes of colonialism and neoliberalism. Particularly, this paper traces the shifting sociocultural functions of education in Sri Lanka. Colonial-era education in Sri Lanka provoked debates about access, cultural identity, and employment that somewhat resemble contemporary discourses on the role of international education in Sri Lankan society. As the world system shifted from colonialism to neoliberalism in the 20th century, Sri Lankan education began to de-emphasize government employment for its graduates. Instead, the education system became oriented towards the needs of the economy, especially in terms of private sector employment. While Sri Lankan education finds new purpose in preparing students for employment in the globalizing economy, it also risks reproducing colonial educational modalities by marginalizing local knowledge. By focusing on economic concerns and technical skills, neoliberal education threatens the strong emphasis on spiritual development and social welfare that has long informed Sri Lankan educational culture. If the Sri Lankan education system is to remain empowering and locally-relevant, it will likely need to

reconcile the economic demands of neoliberalism with the country's cultural autonomy and values.

Keywords: *Sri Lanka, colonial education, neoliberal education, educational culture, privatisation*

Introduction

In many countries of the Global South, transnational education has come to represent a significant portion of the educational landscape. It typically takes the form of locally-run private institutes offering classes to prepare for international examinations, which are often marked by educational organisations in the Global North. Examples include Cambridge International Examinations, Edexcel, Chartered Institute of Management Accountants, and International Baccalaureate. Transnational institutions have also played an increasingly significant role in education in the Global South, in the form of both of transnational partnerships between private schools in the Global South and institutions of Global North (Huang, 2007).

Sri Lanka's private transnational education sector has expanded rapidly in the past twenty years in the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels. This has sparked debate about the role of the state in providing education, and more broadly, the purpose of education in personal and social development. The issue has been elevated above a mere concern of educators and policymakers, sparking legal battles (Sooriyagoda, 2016a, 2016b), widespread protests (Edirisinghe, 2016; The Sunday Times, 2015, 2016), and heated debate in civil society. Despite the centrality of the public-private education debate in Sri Lankan public discourse, it is not frequently contextualised within the broader histories of colonialism and neoliberalism.

This paper traces the colonial and postcolonial socioeconomic transformations that have led to the contemporary public-private education debate in Sri Lanka. Specifically, it contextualises these local transformations within a broader neoliberalisation of education enabled by globalisation. It represents a response to political scientist Jayadeva Uyangoda's call for research into the possibilities for Sri Lankan universities to "resist the demands for the technicisation of education," demands which are embodied by a focus on "socio-economic surveys and producing policy-oriented survey reports," and instead for local universities to become centers of critical and theoretical knowledge production (Uyangoda, 2016, pp. xvii-xviii). Accordingly, this paper examines the history of the technicisation and privatisation of education in Sri Lanka, drawing connections to widespread trends in neoliberal education. In tracing the colonial history of the public university system, this paper draws considerably from an exhaustive study conducted by former Sri Lankan Minister of Education Wiswa Warnapala, titled *The Making of the System of Higher Education in Sri Lanka*. Warnapala's study has not been considered in extant scholarship on educational privatisation in Sri Lanka, despite offering critical insight into the little-researched topic of colonial higher education in Sri Lanka. Building from the research of Warnapala and other eminent Sri Lankan scholars, this paper argues that the processes involved in the neoliberalisation of Sri Lanka's education system are not entirely new, but rather they perpetuate modalities established during the late colonial era.

This research is informed by my four years of personal experience lecturing at both public and private universities in Sri Lanka. I am an outsider to Sri Lankan education who, as a white male from the Global North, risks colonising the spaces of both classrooms and scholarly discourse. I have therefore chosen to use direct quotations from Sri Lankan scholars when possible. This to some extent allows for local educational and cultural values to emerge through Sri

Lankan voices. It also reflects a key limitation of this research: historical injustices of colonial and neoliberal education are explored without drawing definite conclusions as to their alternatives. Although I have attempted to trace particular elements of Sri Lankan educational discourse that indicate possibly decolonising and liberatory approaches to education, the intention of this research remains primarily to promote the historical contextualisation of contemporary debates on educational privatisation in Sri Lanka.

The neoliberalisation of Sri Lankan education goes beyond the increased role of private institutes in the educational landscape. It involves a series of transformations to the global knowledge economy, the Sri Lankan public education sector, and to the cultural significances and values ascribed to the education system. At the heart of such changes to education are contested notions of exactly *what education is for* and *in whose interest education operates*. The neoliberalisation of education has eroded the roles of personal empowerment and social enrichment that were once prominent in Sri Lankan educational discourse. In this paper, these contested values will be explored in terms of education as a means of employment, education as cultural transformation, and education as social empowerment.

Colonial education for colonial employment

Central to current education debates in Sri Lanka is the question of the employability of graduates. The idea that education exists to prepare graduates for employment is also a notable characteristic of neoliberal education. Rather than emphasising the wide range of theoretical study, critical thinking, and personal development that constituted liberal education, neoliberal education narrows the scope of education to job skills, “practical concerns,” and marketability (Giroux, 2002). That being said, it would be a mistake to reduce the notion of education for employment in Sri Lanka to a recent phenomenon or

an exclusively neoliberal concept. A revisitation of the historical relationship between education and the colonial state will give context to the more recent shift towards neoliberal education.

Since colonialism, the Sri Lankan education system has had, as a major function, the production of a skilled labour force proficient in English. In 1799, James Cordiner, the British garrison chaplain in Colombo, advocated for an English-medium education in Sri Lanka to transform the upper echelons of the traditional society into a colonial administrative elite (Warnapala, 2011, p. ii-iii). Since the British Government relied upon an educated class of local administrators to manage its extensive bureaucracy, it served the interests of the crown to maintain a small English-language education system. This class used the English language and political power to profit from the colonial extractive economy. In the 19th and early 20th centuries:

The low country Mudaliyars [colonial administrators] who exploited the new commercial opportunities in rubber, coconut and the liquor industry, were able to obtain for their sons an expensive English education in Colombo. The schools which functioned in the backward rural areas were exclusively vernacular and the rural child had access only to an elementary form of education. (Warnapala 2011, p. vi)

Thus, the colonial order valued English as the language of modern colonial power and relegated Sinhala and Tamil to a rural “backward” imaginary existing somewhere in the past.

There is extensive historical precedent for the orientation of Sri Lankan education towards the benefit of a global economy centred in Europe. Britain was only interested in the education of the Sri Lankan population to the limited extent that was necessary to establish an extractive economy (Corea, 1969, p.

166). The British Government's universal policy was to limit colonial educational expenditures in proportion with the revenue generated from a given colony. Accordingly, the colonial administration increased educational expenditure in Sri Lanka during the 1890s as the tea and rubber industries grew markedly (Warnapala, 2011, p. vii). Sri Lanka's colonial administration mostly limited public educational spending to the western and southern coasts of the island because these areas were vital to the colonial economy. This restriction on public education expenditure created a demand for private education.

Private international education was first established in Sri Lanka in the form of missionary schools. Taking advantage of the education system's chequered geography, missionaries focused their educational efforts in peripheral areas like Jaffna as a way to Christianise the population (Corea, 1969, p. 154). The private international education system sought to expand access beyond the Colombo elite so that the broader culture could be Westernised. However, even in marginalized geographies, "the English Schools were fee levying private schools, [so] it was only the rich who could afford an English education" (Warnapala, 2011, p. vi). From its inception, the internationalised private education system in Sri Lanka served to expand access, but only to a limited extent. Rather than equality, the purpose was to maintain a social hierarchy reproduced through education.

The exclusivity of Sri Lankan education, which has historically restricted access to desirable jobs, was once maintained not by private education but by public universities themselves. In 1906, a small English-speaking group in Colombo organised as the Ceylon University Association. They advocated for the establishment of a truly local university, rejecting "both the 'affiliated' system and the British University examinations" (Warnapala, 2011, p. viii). They were concerned that reliance upon British universities limited the production of

national identity and knowledge. A local university would allow the administrative class to receive the qualifications necessary for government employment while relocating decision-making power to Sri Lanka. The Ceylon University Association achieved some success in 1921 with the establishment of Ceylon University College, although this institution initially prepared students for the University of London External Examinations without awarding its own degrees. Educators at Ceylon University College were concerned that external examinations did not foster creativity in students and were less relevant to local realities (Warnapala, 2011, p. 61). A similar concern is prevalent in contemporary Sri Lankan critiques of the externally-developed curricula implemented in private transnational education, suggesting that the country's educational curricula have not been thoroughly decolonised.

The Ceylon University College became the University of Ceylon in 1942, and with this change the institution gained the ability to grant its own degrees. It remained a “Colonial University... planted by the British” in Sri Lanka, and it was thus:

expected to fulfill the colonial objectives in colonial administration, into which they wanted to recruit local personnel... administrative services had been the chief source of employment in the colonial territories and the higher educational institutions primarily catered to this demand. (Warnapala 2011, p. 117)

English remained the medium of instruction, but many local languages were given departments, such as Tamil, Sinhala, Sanskrit, and Pali. The English medium preserved the exclusivity of the public university system, acting as a gatekeeper to lucrative colonial administrative jobs.

The University of Ceylon was relocated to Peradeniya in 1952. This represented a sequestration of higher education away from the population centre of Colombo and towards an isolated, Oxbridge-influenced campus. At this new location, the University of Ceylon “restricted its intake of students because [it was] expected to adhere to the colonial objectives of education,” namely to produce English-educated government administrators (Warnapala, 2011, p. x). The site chosen for the Peradeniya campus symbolised its economic significance: “Its location in the central highlands of the country... emphasized its special and exclusive role... [as] isolated from the people at large, accessible to and concerned with only the elite of the social order” (Jayawardana, 2008, p. 32). To reinforce that the major purpose of the University of Ceylon was to educate government administrators, the 1959 Needham Commission cautioned against the expansion of Sri Lanka’s higher education system without a corresponding increase in demand for graduates (Corea, 1969, p. 174). Today, access to public universities remains significantly limited, with public universities admitting only 17% of qualified applicants (Jayawardana, 2012).

Although the higher education system in newly independent Sri Lanka served a principally economic function, it was distinct from what is today known as neoliberal education. Since the function of the Sri Lankan higher education system during the late colonial era was to prepare public servants to act in the interests of society as a whole, the curricula focused on a liberal arts education that would produce socially conscious citizens. The initial departments of study were those of various South Asian and European languages, Classics and Philosophy, History and Economics, Geography, Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Botany, and Zoology (Warnapala, 2011, p. 52). The University Site Committee, which played a key role in the establishment of the University of Ceylon, envisioned that the curricula should give students “an opportunity for self-culture in the truest sense... for a sound, physical, social, moral, and

intellectual training which will fit him to take his proper place in the life of the country” (Warnapala, 2011, p. 76). This emphasis on liberal arts education would be later dismantled by a shift towards industry-focused national development, and shortly afterwards, towards a neoliberal form of education in which the aims of education stem from the needs of the market rather than the needs of society.

Despite the social welfare function of the university system, it retained exclusivity through its English-language medium. Only in 1960, when civil society pressured the administrators with nationalist and decolonising discourses, did the University of Ceylon significantly expand its enrolment and shift to the Sinhala and Tamil media. English-medium instruction was criticised as reproducing European liberalism rather than locally-relevant practical knowledge. The University simultaneously adopted “a curriculum with which an employable graduate could be produced” and introduced “courses with more economic and social relevance” (Warnapala, 2011, p. xii). Similarly, the Thistlewaite Commission said in 1967 that:

while a university must always be concerned to provide the students with a liberal education, it must also provide them with socially useful skills; that whenever possible, courses of study should be given a vocational emphasis in accordance with projections of manpower needs where these are available. (as quoted in Gunawardena 1982, p. 63)

In the decades to come, the practicality and applicability previously attributed to local-language instruction would shift to the English medium, corresponding with the privatisation and globalisation of employment in Sri Lanka.

The emphasis on employability in the private sector coincided with the marketisation of higher education, representing an important step towards neoliberalising education in Sri Lanka. The expansion of public university enrolment due to local language media, coupled with a shrinking postcolonial state, shifted the concern from graduate *employment*, which was relatively consistent during 1940s and 1950s, to a burgeoning graduate *unemployment*. To transfer the costs of education, and thus the risk of unemployment, from the state to students, public universities transitioned from granting bursaries to giving loans in 1969 (Gunawardena, 1982, p. 62). Higher education became a personal investment whose value was measured through opportunities to earn a higher income, replacing its traditional role as a social good. In 1971, officials of various government ministries “were consulted to arrive at estimates of future manpower needs in order to restructure the university courses” (Gunawardena, 1982, p. 63). Thus, the public education system formally established a pipeline from the new vocational programs to public-sector employment (Gunawardena, 1982, p. 66). These partnerships between government agencies and the university system had some success in the beginning, but would later become inadequate as the state and its employment opportunities contracted under neoliberal policies.

To counter the growing discourse that graduate unemployment reflected a deficiency in the education system, the Osmund Jayaratne Committee submitted a report in 1971 claiming that the employment problem was produced by larger systemic injustices. It argued that “unemployment is the necessary outcome of under development of a backward and lop-sided semi-colonial economy still dominated by capitalist interests” (as quoted in Warnapala, 2011, p. 236). This echoes the sentiments of other theorists at the time, especially those of the “new dependency” school. New dependency theorises a global division of labour in which capital-intensive, high-skill secondary good production is concentrated in

core countries and labour-intensive, low-skill primary good production is dispersed throughout peripheral countries (Chilcote, 1974, pp. 15-16).

Similarly, the Osmund Jayaratne Committee voiced concerns that Sri Lanka's history as an extractive colonial economy had left the country with a lack of demand for highly educated graduates.

Just a few years after the Osmund Jayaratne Committee's report, the Sri Lankan economy took a sharp neoliberal turn, generating new market demands for educated graduates. Rather than erasing colonial dependencies, however, this shift maintained Sri Lanka's status as a periphery within the global economy. Its education system reoriented itself towards private-sector employment in the transnational network economy while diminishing the role of education as a public good for the benefit of society.

Neoliberal education for neoliberal employment

In the late 1970s, Sri Lanka was subject to a structural adjustment programme that sharply reduced welfare services provided by the Sri Lankan state. This turn towards neoliberalism resulted almost immediately in increased economic disparities (Dunham & Jayasuriya, 2000). The opportunities for government employment further dwindled, leaving many graduates struggling to find work (Gamage, 2011, p. 31). The role of education in Sri Lankan society also underwent significant transformations and began to display some of the characteristics of neoliberal education: privatisation (Olssen & Peters, 2005), transnationalisation (Mok, 2008), a replacement of liberal arts curricula with technical skill development (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2000), and the marketisation of education as a personal investment rather than a social good (Levidow, 2002). Through this transitional period, the centre-periphery relationship between the Sri Lankan knowledge economy and its former colonial powers was maintained through a neoliberalised form of education.

In the 1970s, Sri Lanka suffered from declining terms of trade due to a sharp increase in global oil prices. To alleviate its economic woes, Sri Lanka accepted a loan from the IMF in 1980, which mandated a structural adjustment programme as a conditionality. The programme resulted in a decrease in social welfare expenditure and thus in the living conditions of many (Dunham & Kelegama, 1994, pp. 14-15). It also entailed a general diminishing of the role of the state in the economy (World Bank Group, 2012). As neoliberalism began to reorder global power relations, the colonial function of Sri Lankan higher education in preparing graduates for a Western-led and English-based knowledge economy was maintained in some respects while being altered to emphasise the growing private sector.

Since the state had a reduced role in the employment of graduates, the discourse on education as a means of employment became privatised. This has resulted in the localisation of a major crisis of neoliberal higher education, “a growing sense of uncertainty about the university’s role in society... it is no longer clear what universities are actually *for*” (Shore, 2010, p. 16). This uncertainty sometimes swells into dismissiveness in Sri Lanka. For example, a chairperson of a local private firm claimed that “A university education does not have any relevance for the private sector today, which needs performance and achievement from its employees more than academic distinction... [university-educated employees] have an inflated opinion of their academic paper-qualifications” (Samarajiwa, 1997, as quoted in Gamage, 2011, p. 32). Similarly, a management educator observed that “The private sector dislikes graduates because they do not contribute much to corporate success” (Samarajiwa, 1997, as quoted in Gamage, 2011, p. 32). This discourse, in which the value of university education is measured by the potential for earnings and profit rather than its social benefits, is characteristic of neoliberal conceptions of education (Levidow, 2002).

To address issues of private sector employability, a number of public satellite campuses, or Affiliated University Colleges, were opened throughout the country, many in rural areas. This system was intended to address the concerns of the student movements at the time, which protested the exclusivity of the public university system and the resultant difficulties of the popular classes to obtain private sector employment. Shortly after the inauguration of the Affiliated University Colleges, there was “deep dissatisfaction among the student community about the facilities provided at these institutions, the courses of study provided, and the academic standards of the courses,” concerns which were also voiced by faculty and staff (Warnapala, 2011, pp. 251-252). In this way, a neoliberalising public education sector simultaneously expanded access while reproducing global hierarchies of the knowledge economy within the local educational landscape.

As public-sector employment lost its predominance, and with it the liberal arts education that intended to benefit society as a whole, the public university system began to focus on the technical skills demanded by private-sector employers. In 1995, the Warnapala Committee released a report recommending various adjustments and expansions to the Affiliated University College system. Perhaps most significantly, they would be transformed into “Technological Universities.” These recommendations were informed by the Robbins Report, a British document that recommended the geographic expansion of the UK university system. The Warnapala Committee said that such a system in Sri Lanka would yield a multitude of benefits elucidated in the Robbins Report (Warnapala, 2011, pp. 254-255). For example, in urban areas, “The presence of a university can stimulate cultural activities” (Committee on Higher Education, 1963, p. 163). More generally, higher education should aim “to produce not mere specialists but rather cultivated men and women” (Committee on Higher

Education, 1963, p. 6). It aids “in developing man’s capacity to understand, to contemplate and to create... The good society desires equality of opportunity for its citizens to become not merely good producers but also good men and women” (Committee on Higher Education, 1963, p. 8). The Warnapala Committee claimed to be inspired by the Robbins Report’s vision for holistic education. However, the Committee’s recommendation for technical universities that “communicated knowledge rather than culture” limited the educational aims to produce specialised technical workers, in contrast to the spirit of the Robbins Report (Warnapala, 2011, p. 255). Wiswa Warnapala (2011), who headed the committee, later reflected that the focus on liberal arts had made higher education relevant only to an elite cadre of civil servants and government administrators, and thus “relevant to the needs of the country” but not necessarily to the masses seeking employment (pp. 308-309). His analysis assumes that only the upper classes are worthy or capable of engaging in the truth-seeking and deeply empowering aims of education originally detailed in the Robbins Report. The neoliberal knowledge economy required a Sri Lankan university system that would impart upon students only the technical knowledge necessary for employment at its periphery.

As the public-sector education system sought the global neoliberal economy, the neoliberal economy sought the Sri Lankan education system in the form of private transnational institutions. The primary function of such institutions is to prepare students for the global economy rather than local society. After surveying international school students in Argentina, Cyprus, El Salvador, Jordan and Thailand, Lowe (2000) theorised that international schools in the Global South are appealing in part because they offer an alternative to deteriorating public school systems (pp. 373-375). In Sri Lanka, the growth of the private education sector correlates with a number of deficiencies in the public education system, including overcrowded classrooms, poorly developed

curriculum, disparate levels of funding among public schools (Gamage 2011, p. 34).

The inequalities in resources between Sri Lankan public and private education have drawn concern from many. Public school teachers in Sri Lanka are worried that international schools enable a tiered education system that marginalises those in poor and rural communities. This inequality extends to employment opportunities, where employers often prefer graduates educated in international schools (Gamage, 2011, pp. 29-30). During the colonial era, the unequal distribution of British education in Sri Lanka was seen as ethnic favouritism and generated deep resentment (Sriskandarajah, 2005). Colenso (2005) has argued that perceptions of educational inequality remain a significant contributor to Sri Lanka's ethnic tensions. Thus, the de-emphasis of citizenship and social engagement that private education entails is not merely a theoretical concern. The privatization of education may constrain a social space that is vital for ethnic equality and post-conflict reconciliation.

The ongoing neoliberalisation of Sri Lankan education is not limited to the shift towards private education. Public institutions, and especially public universities, have enacted a number of reforms to adjust to the new global economy. For example, the Distance Education Modernization Project (DEMP), funded by the Asian Development Bank, sought to “help the Government of Sri Lanka implement its human resource strategy by modernizing the postsecondary education system, especially through the introduction of distance education and the promotion of public-private partnerships” (Asian Development Bank, 2013, p. 3). This included an expansive quality assurance regime that included “procedures, attitudes, actions and policies to ensure that quality is maintained and enhanced” (Warnapala, 2011, p. 323). The Sri Lankan university system is thus undergoing privatisation not just through the proliferation of private

institutes, but also in the decision-making apparatuses that govern public universities.

Initiatives like DEMP constitute an expansion of neoliberal governmentality into the Sri Lankan educational space. Governmentality is “the ensemble formed by institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations, and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific, albeit very complex, power that has the population as its target” (Foucault, 2007, p. 108). Although Foucault initially used this word to describe technologies of power that the state uses to govern a population, in the context of neoliberalism it has been adapted to describe technologies used by non-state actors such as intergovernmental organizations and private firms. It manifests in the neoliberal institution as an effort to “see like a state” (Scott, 1998, as cited in Kipnis, 2008, p. 282). This requires “that a series of regularization and simplification procedures be applied to governed objects to make them more visible and legible to leaders and bureaucrats” (Kipnis, 2008, p. 282). Instead of responding to the needs of state and society, academics orient their activities to meet the demands of private firms and transnational relationships. Simultaneously, “The traditional professional culture of open intellectual enquiry and debate has been replaced with a institutional [*sic*] stress on performativity... strategic planning, performance indicators, quality assurance measures and academic audits” (Olssen & Peters, 2005, p. 1). The adoption of corporate discourses, audit culture, and public-private partnerships under the guidance of intergovernmental development banks are all characteristics of neoliberal education. Despite their increasing prevalence in Sri Lankan universities, the national public discourse on the neoliberalisation of education is generally limited to concerns about private institutes.

Neoliberal governmentality is often at odds with the values of university autonomy and academic freedom that have long informed Sri Lankan higher education. Warnapala (2011) wrote that “Universities should enjoy the freedom of determining academic courses” (p. 264), and that it “is central to the concept of academic freedom that university teachers are free to devote a considerable part of their time to independent research” (p. 267). Academic freedom may be restricted by neoliberal technologies of governmentality such as those in those established under DEMP. Neoliberal governmentality operates in the university through “Targets and performance criteria... increasingly applied from outside the academic role that diminish the sense in which the academic—their teaching and research—are autonomous... academic freedom... [is] increasingly ‘compromised’” (Olssen & Peters, 2005, p. 326). In the context of transnational education in the Global South, this can resemble a neocolonial structure in which, as in during colonialism, educational programmes were strictly administered from abroad in the interests of a global economic order (Tikly 2004). If neoliberal forms of management gain influence in Sri Lankan universities, especially if administered by intergovernmental organisations like the Asian Development Bank, it could represent a recolonisation of Sri Lankan educational space.

Education as cultural transformation

Education has been long used in Sri Lanka as a mode of cultural transformation. From the colonial era to the present neoliberal context, international education has served to reorient Sri Lankan culture towards hegemonic values. During colonialism, these values were typically Christian and European. They were gradually secularised throughout colonialism and then neoliberalised after independence. What remains consistent throughout this history is the use of transnational education to centre the European experience and marginalise the local.

The cultural functions of colonial education were complimentary to its economic functions. British education in Sri Lanka “had a vocational purpose in producing clerks and other such servants of the State... [and] to re-align the loyalties of some in terms of ruler identification” (Warnapala, 2011, p. ii). In 1833, the Colebrooke-Cameron Commission, which consisted of a British colonial administrator and a British jurist, recommended the establishment of a university in Colombo with the aim of “preparing candidates for public employment and as an aid to natives to cultivate European attainments” (Warnapala, 2011, p. iv). European knowledge, education, and values were to “modernise” Sri Lankan culture and assist in their civilising process. To serve as colonial administrators, European-led education inculcated a small elite with “the language, religion, customs, and ideology of the foreign power... [to] the neglect and rejection of indigenous languages, rituals, and traditions” (Jayawardena, 2000). Since the colonial era, transnational education has almost completely ignored local knowledge, instead relying upon curricula, texts, and discourses imported from the Global North.

The British colonial administrators mostly excluded Sri Lankan cultural values from their school curricula. In the country’s first British-led schools:

no attempt was made to incorporate traditional elements of local education in school teaching. Little account was taken of sociological factors and environmental conditions. Children learnt out of books which were prepared for children elsewhere. They were not taught how to respond intelligently or emotionally to observation or experience. Consequently the average pupil resorted to memory work. (Corea 1969, p. 158)

This resembles the banking model of education that Freire (1996) criticised, which during colonialism served to teach inferiority to colonised students and generate internalised oppression. British education taught students to disregard

their own observations and experience, privileging a colonising perspective located externally from themselves and their society. The new hierarchy rewarded emulating European culture: “international education played a crucial role in the development of a professional class during and after the colonial period. Some elements of this class imitated and adopted western life styles, values and identities” (Gamage, 2011, p. 36). Similarly, the transnational educational institutes prevalent in contemporary Sri Lanka are appealing because they provide access to the international culture and symbolic capital of an English-speaking global elite (Lowe, 2000).

The colonisation of educational space in Sri Lanka has been met with considerable resistance. An early example is the 1959 Needham Report, which raised concerns about widespread dissatisfaction with the University of Ceylon because “The atmosphere of the University was alien and hostile to the traditions of the country... [with] ‘an ivory tower’ attitude devoid of responsibility to the nation... [and] of Departments devoted to the study of the cultural traditions of the country” (as cited in Warnapala, 2011, p. 219). The disconnect between the university system and the population was simultaneously economic and cultural.

The transition to neoliberalism generated a new form of cultural capital to be transmitted to Sri Lankan students through transnational education. The colonial education system reproduced the culture necessary for the functioning of the extensive state bureaucracy. The transition to the neoliberal economy has challenged the traditional relationship between the university and the state, which tasked the university with “promoting the idea of a common national culture” (Readings, 1996, as quoted in Shore, 2010, p. 16). In the neoliberal era, “the nation-state is no longer the major site in which capital reproduces itself and ‘national culture no longer provides an overarching ideological

meaning for what goes on in the university.” In place of the nation-state system is the global neoliberal economy, which today provides the employment opportunities for a large number of graduates. This, however, puts the possibility of a liberatory university education in peril. Shore (2010, p. 19) says that in the neoliberal education system, the state no longer sees universities as "sites for reproducing national culture, or educating people for citizenship or equipping individuals with a broad, critical liberal education," instead emphasising the role of the university in the global economy. The various conflicting demands upon the university system "leads to fragmentation, loss of identity and something akin to the concept of schizophrenia" (Shore, 2010, p. 19). In this light, the public-private education debate in Sri Lanka may be interpreted as not just a conflict between distinct social groups, but also as an educational culture thrown into crisis by the dissonant demands of the postcolonial knowledge economy. Neoliberalism has interrupted the identity reformation that appeared possible at the dawn of independence, instead relegating Sri Lankan society as again a peripheral territory within the global economy.

Today, transnational education is viewed by many in Sri Lanka as subverting local cultural values. After the turn towards neoliberal policy in the late 1970s, Sri Lankan culture played a diminished role in "identity formation and ideological orientation for many people" (Hettige 1998, pp. 8-9, as quoted in Gamage 2011, pp. 35-36). Instead, the "Almost unrestricted flow of information, media images and cultural goods into the country has facilitated the spread of new... consumption based life styles and social identities." These neoliberalised identities are reproduced in international education, which contributes to the significant demand for such institutes. Parents are compelled to send their children to international schools because they allow them to "access better trans-cultural capital." This feeds into the perception that

international schools cater “to a privileged strata in society whose values, interests and aspirations as well as ideologies are pro-Western, not Sri Lankan... those who are excluded... do not see the education made available through international schools as a liberating one” (Gamage 2011, p. 26). One teacher who Gamage (2011) interviewed said that “International schools fasten the destruction of national identity or what is left of it in the education system. Globalisation really means Americanisation. International schools prepare the background for Americanisation” (p. 37). The privatisation and globalisation of Sri Lankan education poses serious challenges to the country’s cultural autonomy and decolonisation of knowledge production.

International schools and other transnational educational institutes in Sri Lanka transform Sri Lankan culture by privileging the global and marginalising the local. In his study on international schools in Sri Lanka, Gamage (2011, p. 26) concluded that “The school culture, the exposure to electronic media, teachers from other countries, curriculum based on foreign institutions and requirements contribute to the generation of a different ethos and priorities among children.” The emphasis on foreign curricula resembles a colonial education system, which according to Freire (1996) functions to produce a “colonized mentality” in which the coloniser/educator possesses knowledge and the colonised/student is absent of knowledge. This form of education, which Freire called “banking education,” does not recognise the indigenous knowledge systems of the colonised, instead serving to transfer the coloniser’s knowledge and values to the colonised in a unilateral flow. Although writing in 1968, his analysis could equally apply to transnational education in Sri Lanka today, in which educators transmit foreign curricula to students, who are then assessed on their ability to reproduce this knowledge on examinations that are marked by overseas examiners. Banking education results in a culture where the colonised “want at any cost to resemble the oppressors, to imitate them, to follow them. This

phenomenon is especially prevalent in the middle-class oppressed, who yearn to be equal to the ‘eminent’ men and women of the upper class” (Freire 1996, p. 44). An internationalised and neoliberalised banking education sidelines local knowledge as lacking in economic relevance to the global job market, replacing them with cosmopolitan neoliberal values like conspicuous consumption and employment-based identities.

The neoliberalisation of Sri Lankan education has also engendered the erasure of indigenous knowledge production in the public higher education system. The 2005 Improving Relevance and Quality of Undergraduate Education Project, funded by the International Development Association and the World Bank, refocused the Open University curricula away “from traditional disciplines to more market-oriented courses” (Warnapala 2011, p. 314). These traditional disciplines were previously “enthroned within the system to promote indigenous culture, [and they] promoted a very powerful scholastic tradition in the intellectual culture, and the country” (Warnapala 2011, p. 318). Although Warnapala recognizes that indigenous culture contributes to the production of knowledge, he sees that knowledge as outdated and unfit for the global economy. Therefore, he claims that replacement of traditional disciplines with market-oriented education engenders a “modern University, which aspires to achieve a global status, [and which] needs a modern curriculum to enthuse students to study subjects that are relevant to the needs of the labour market” (Warnapala 2011, p. 318). An education system that is locally empowering and globally relevant must reconcile indigenous and global knowledge in a manner that posits them as mutually beneficial.

The shift towards neoliberalism could threaten to recolonise Sri Lanka’s education system. Although neoliberalism often draws from discourses of plurality and choice, it is evident that in the educational context, knowledge

from the Global North is privileged over local knowledge. For education in Sri Lanka to be both international and decolonising, it must respect institutional autonomy and local knowledge systems while critically exploring its linkages with the neoliberal economy and global culture.

Education as social empowerment

An understanding of education as an instrument of personal and social empowerment has been present in Sri Lankan culture before, during, and after colonialism. At various points in history it has been challenged or marginalised, but never at any time did it disappear entirely. By identifying and recovering some of this history, it may be possible to generate new insights into the ways in which local understandings of empowerment and liberation can inform a contemporary education system.

Sri Lankan indigenous education, which draws from the knowledge systems of vedic, animist, and Buddhist epistemologies (among others), manifests as “an education system gradually developed from the accumulated knowledge of many generations [leading] to the development of a whole person in a dynamic family and community context” (Haverkort 2006; Senanayake 2006). The Pirivena system, a network of institutions in which Buddhist monastics have conducted research since ancient times, featured a broad range of disciplines encompassing both practical concerns and spiritual fulfilment. Their scope “included the study of languages and literature, logic and philosophy, science and medicine, mathematics and economics,” along with art, architecture, and urban planning (Corea 1969, p. 152). The incorporation of Sri Lanka into the Portuguese empire displaced Pirivena education from the coastal areas, relegating it to the highlands and eroding its cultural and political influence (Paranavitana 2004). Throughout the successive Dutch and British regimes, the colonial education system further marginalised indigenous knowledge systems

by establishing Western thought as “true” knowledge, as was the case in much of South Asia (Seth, 2007).

While colonial education mostly understood local knowledge to be inferior to European knowledge, some British colonisers were sceptical about the civilising mission that their educational project involved. For example, Governor Stewart-Mackenzie administered Sri Lanka from 1937 to 1940 while advocating for a completely free education system based on local languages so that education would be accessible to Sri Lanka’s popular classes (Corea 1969, p. 155).

Another example is Alec Fraser, who was a missionary serving as the principal of Trinity College in Kandy for 20 years. Echoing the sentiments of Governor Stewart-Mackenzie, Fraser saw local-language education as facilitating both the interest “in the social and economic welfare of their people” and the “application of ideas to their known environment and conditions” (Ceylon Sessional Papers 1912, as quoted in Corea 1969). English-only education, he argued, “favours the tendency to think all local knowledge and local problems are unworthy of respect... [so that] thinking becomes unstable and a mere caricature of the real thing.” Despite the critiques of some British colonial administrators, colonial education generally sought to displace local knowledge systems.

During the transition from colonialism to independence, there was much discussion about the role of education in decolonising thought and forging new national identities. The potential for higher education to empower students through locally-relevant curricula was important in the founding of Sri Lanka’s first university. “Oriental Studies” was one of the three original subjects offered at Ceylon University College. The original proposal stipulated that the professorship must include one scholar of Sanskrit and one scholar of Pali (Jayawardana 2008, p. 16). One sociology course in 1949 even assigned

students to villages to conduct research (Jayawardana 2008, pp. 42-43). As the University gained an autonomous status, the University of Ceylon Act drew inspiration from a 1971 report produced by a committee of academics called the “Report on the Reorganization of Higher Education.” This report argued:

the duties of a University do not end with educating its own internal students and contributing to the sum total of knowledge. It must strive to influence other layers of society and help, even in small measure, to improve the general educational level. Apart from the contribution it could make, contact with the outside world would in turn have a healthy influence on the University and prevent its attitudes from remaining out of touch with social reality. (Jayawardana 2008, p. 51)

The report also expressed concerns about having syllabi developed by European institutions without consideration of the needs of local students and society (Jayawardana 2008, p. 60). They agreed that in the interest of Sri Lanka’s intellectual autonomy, the University of Ceylon should not prepare students for the University of London external examinations. The recommendation to decolonise the education system and emphasise its role in the welfare of society, postulated forty-five years ago, is perhaps more relevant today than ever.

To expand the social benefits of education across geographies, classes, castes, and ethnicities, Sri Lankan culture has had a strong ethos of universally accessible public education. The postcolonial “cry for free education was derived from anti-imperialist campaigns in the late 19th and early 20th centuries” (Gamage 2011, p. 37). In this spirit, the 1962 Universities Commission report said that despite concerns about employment opportunities, “nothing should be done to deny university education to any student who has the capacity to benefit from it” (Warnapala 2011, p. 226). The expansion of the university system beyond the English medium, and thus to the working classes, was the result of

an increasingly vocal rural population who demanded equal access to the fruits of education (Gamage 2011, p. 37).

A holistic approach to education has been elucidated by a number of Sri Lankan educational theorists. In 1969, J. C. A. Corea wrote that “The aims of education reach beyond material prosperity. The educator does little, if, in the midst of other business he does not encourage a sensitivity to the spiritual values of truth, beauty and goodness” (p. 175). The notion that should contribute to spiritual values is in stark contrast to neoliberal thought, which sees education as primarily a tool for developing human capital to benefit the economy.

More recently, Wiswa Warnapala (2011) has responded to the current wave of educational privatisation. He emphasises the potential for education to build a culture of peace and cautions that “The dismantling of the free education edifice, which still remains the window of opportunity for the rural child, would result in disastrous social consequences” (p. 330). Social consequences are of little concern to private educational institutes, who act in the interests of stakeholders rather than society. Thus, Warnapala critiques the neoliberal marketisation of education: “The advocates of foreign universities... need to be reminded that higher education... is not purely a commodity to be bought and sold on the international market. It represents an essential part of the country’s heritage...” (Warnapala 2011 p. 335). If the idea of education as a commodity threatens the country’s heritage, then neoliberalisation is force for cultural recolonisation.

Conclusion

The contemporary public-private education debate has roots in the neoliberal and colonial history of Sri Lanka. These histories reveal that the notions of education as preparation for employment, as cultural transformation, and as

social empowerment are not new nor static. As education in Sri Lanka is undergoing rapid change, its perceived purpose within society and culture is shifting as well. A critical and historically contextualised analysis of these processes is necessary if Sri Lankan education is to remain a force for social equity and peace.

For the present Sri Lankan education system to be personally and socially empowering, it must deeply consider the linkages between the colonial functions of education and their legacies within contemporary processes of neoliberalisation. Local sites of knowledge production, especially schools and universities, should consider decolonising some approaches to education, especially those that centre ideas and cultures of Europe and the Global North. The decolonisation of education is a complex and often conflicted process, particularly in the context of neoliberalism, and thus could be a fruitful subject for further research. It would likely involve a renegotiation of the terms of the relationship between transnational education institutes and their partner institutions in the Global North, reworking the present unilateral flows of curriculum development, student assessment, and institutional into a mutual dialogue that respects Sri Lankan cultural autonomy. It is probably impossible and undesirable for Sri Lankan education to distance itself entirely from the postcolonial and neoliberal knowledge economy. Instead, a key challenge for Sri Lankan education is to provide a platform for Sri Lankan perspectives to resonate throughout contemporary culture, not as marginal or peripheral, but as a significant influence in global knowledge production.

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Author details

David Golding is a doctoral candidate at Lancaster University. He lectures in peace studies and development geography at public and private universities in Sri Lanka. His research focuses on decolonising peace education and neoliberal governmentality in higher education.

David Golding

Department of Educational Research

County South

Lancaster University

Lancaster

United Kingdom

LA1 4YD

d.golding@lancaster.ac.uk