

# Parents' and Students' Perceptions of the Education System of Sri Lanka

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**Abstract** - Twenty-first-century skills such as critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity, are widely accepted as skills in high demand within modern working environments. National school curricula reforms in Sri Lanka attempt to propose pedagogies that disseminate content and design assessments to promote twenty-first-century skills. However, whether all stakeholders of the national school education agree to include such skills should be investigated before changes to curricula, policies and practices are implemented. The purpose of this study is to survey the perceptions of the main stakeholders of the national education system in Sri Lanka. The perceptions of parents, and students were investigated in this study. Seventeen (17) participants including nine (09) parents; three (03) school students, and five (05) vocational/degree level students) representing different social and educational backgrounds participated in the study. A standardized, semi-structured, open-ended questionnaire was conducted through virtual meeting mode. The 'Naturalized' transcription method was adopted in this study. Open coding of data revealed that more than 80% of the participants exhibited awareness of global 'good' practices and believed in the vital need for a change of policy and/or practice within the existing system. In addition, the participants expressed the need to improve students' emotional and attitudinal aspects within school setups. Interestingly some highlighted the need to consider external and control factors affecting policy/practice changes in education.

**Keywords:** *Global 'good' practices, Stakeholder Perceptions, Education reform*

## I. INTRODUCTION

More than one-third of the institutions in the Sri Lankan labour market have mentioned team working, oral communication, and the ability to take initiative as essential skills to be improved [1]. Hence, it could be argued that there is a lack of attention to improving such skills within school setups. First jobseekers from higher educational setups have reportedly possessed poor attitudes, personalities, and motivation [1]. When considering the preparedness of the first job seekers, irrespective of them coming from secondary school, vocational/technical institutes, universities/any other higher education setup; very close to 50% from each category were found to be possessing either average/poor/very poor conditions in preparedness [1]. This is undoubtedly an alarming situation forcing the stakeholders, especially the policy-making institutions to rethink the entire education system of Sri Lanka. Many reports on Sri Lankan labour market and human capital formation suggest the requirement to address the gaps existing within education and skill training [1]. The Sri Lankan education system is reportedly facing a challenge to improve quality and real-world relevance [1]. The rapidly changing world economy demands skilled employees whereas the education system is not producing them which creates a mismatch that requires immediate attention. This mismatch makes finding employment difficult for the younger generation coming out of the education system. Although the overall unemployment rate has dropped from 4.7% in 2015 to 4.4% in 2016, the unemployment rate of young people had increased from 20.8% to 21.6%. Among those with educational

qualifications equal to and above G. C. E. Advanced Levels have shown higher rates of unemployment (32.5%) compared to the ones with G. C. E. Ordinary Level qualification [2]. Sri Lanka has also reported providing poor quality education in Science and Mathematics fields [3]. Overburdening students with a massive content load with minimal utilization of student-centered activities is seen as the cause of low-quality education in Science and Mathematics [3]. Even though school curricula have been revised multiple times in the past few decades, little or no change can be observed in the quality of the school leavers [3]. Hence it could be argued that curriculum and policy changes targeted at enhancing educational outcomes have not yielded the expected results. The objective of this study is to understand the perceptions of all stakeholders of the national school education of Sri Lanka, prior to any reform recommendation. This is to ensure effective implementation avoiding the repetition of yet another reform.

## II. METHODOLOGY

The interview guide was prepared considering the aim of the study. Standardized semi-structured open-ended questioning with 'probing' questions and 'interpreting questions' were used after obtaining approval from an ethical committee. It was conducted via ZOOM. Participants' written informed consent, sharing information about beneficence, do no harm, confidentiality, and anonymity were carefully thought out and implemented relating to all interviews. Before the study, strategies for organizing, storing, backup maintenance, and disposal of all data collected were planned. Positive dynamics such as encouraging gestures/words, reflecting remarks, probing, etc were maintained throughout the interviews. The same basic questions in the same order were asked. This phase rests in the interpretive paradigm with socially constructed ontology and epistemology recognizing multiple realities and agentic behaviours. Limitations such as the challenges of Covid, and the post-economic crisis in Sri Lanka, could have affected the design and the outcomes of the study. The context-bound and socially situated nature, researcher as the key instrument, data being descriptive, and respondent validated could have resulted in more validity [4]. Non-probable, purposive sampling method for 'fit-for-purpose' was employed for individual semi-structured interviews. They emphasized their uniqueness and intrinsic value. There were 17 participants representing parents and students from different social and educational backgrounds. Reflexive notes maintained were used during the interpretation of data and dissemination of findings. The 'Naturalized' transcribing-intelligent verbatim 'method was adopted as a fit-for-the-purpose. Transcripts and translations were shared with the participants for their confirmation after spot-checking and proofreading. Transcribed data are arranged in a tabular manner against the background information for each data set such as participant's background details including education level attained and social and demographic details. Reduced data was analysed repeatedly and then compared, conceptualized, and categorized using labels/codes derived from the transcribed data. Open coding was performed by adding a new text as a comment to describe and categorize the text of interest. That generated the

categories. The first level of individual analysis resulted in the coherence and integrity of that individual. The second level of analysis identified themes.

	about it...I am not sure.”-O/L Student
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III. RESULTS

Some participants had dual roles which could have had an impact on their perceptions. Their education levels varied from O/L, A/L, first degrees, and above. Further, they represented social groups of the lower, middle, and upper-class families of Sri Lanka representing rural and urban demographic areas. Out of 9 parents, 5 were female participants and out of 8 students, 4 were female participants. All parents were from an age group of 30-45 years and adult students were from an age group of 20- 30 years. Transcripts are analysed to understand their perception of the existing education system of the country and their awareness of global practices. Their idea about adapting such attributes within our system was also encouraged to be discussed. Three main categories were identified. More than 80% of the participants had an ‘unsatisfied’ tone embedded in their discussion containing more than 90% of ideas criticizing or claiming for change regarding the current education system rating it ‘Bad or needing to be changed. This group consisted mainly of parents and students with vocational/degrees and above educational statuses. All of them had awareness of global practices and believed in the requirement of integrating such into the Sri Lankan system. However, they hardly considered the need of considering the local conditions when commenting on the suitability of such practices. School students had either mixed or satisfied tones embedded within their discussions. However, at some points, they shared contradicting statements during their discussions. They had very limited knowledge about global practices and did not feel confident discussing their ideas related to that.

Table 1. Selected quotes -Perceptions of the existing education system and awareness of global practices

Unsatisfied	<p>“Creativity is least encouraged in our education system. Kids are forced to follow instructions by exactly copying what their teachers would write with a piece of chalk on the board”-A parent with A/Ls</p> <p>“We have learned a good deal of physics, chemistry, etc. But we have not applied the knowledge or used it in a way it creates an income.”- A parent with a degree qualification</p>
Awareness of global practices	<p>“I believe our education system needs to change into a skill-based approach.”-A parent with a PhD</p> <p>“In other countries, students work in groups connected with society and practice collaborative group work throughout their education. But in our country, it is limited to very young age and slowly it diminishes and students become more self-centered and individual target oriented. This needs to be changed for good.”- A parent with a degree qualification</p>
Satisfied	<p>“Our teachers are teaching us well and all things are fine and we are very happy to go to school.”-A/L Student</p>
Unaware of global practices	<p>“Our teachers are putting their maximum effort and doing us the favour of educating us. If we don't get the benefit out of it, it's our problem. Maybe we should try hard and study more and more.”-O/L Student</p> <p>“I think I have heard...but I don't know much to talk</p>

IV. CONCLUSION

The trend of expressing more ‘negative’ comments about the existing education system alarms us about the requirement to understand the mindsets of the stakeholders holistically. Effects of decolonization could have played a role here. They also claim special attention to inculcating affective/emotional and attitudinal growth within students to shape them into holistic individuals. Hence, these could be a few areas where detailed expertise contributions are required before any educational reform. Few participants highlighted the importance of psychological stimulations to result in meaningful learning while motivating them intrinsically. It was depicted that stakeholders believed the Sri Lankan education system to be highly complex as it is affected by governing political bodies. Looking at factors such as parental influence, the impact of tuition, demand from the industry-private and state, students' preferences, administrative challenges, and resource inequalities as highlighted by some of the participants could indicate comparatively high stakeholder dependence across the system. Their ideas about its values and purpose and how financial, health, welfare, etc., could affect the policy of education could also be decisive factors within a wider context. The recent economic crisis and its influence could be a good example to look at. However, a wider study including other stakeholders such as teachers, industrialists, and academic administrators as well could provide a better insight into this. It is planned as future work. Sound analysis of the recognized problem using domestic and international research prior to determining and application of the solution is noted as mandatory in education reform. Several cycles of monitoring and implementation of improvement strategies are known to effectively end the ‘Cycle of planned failure’ in a reform. Therefore, a comprehensive analysis could be recommended to avoid rushing into premature actions. If not, the solution we propose could create opportunities for new problems due to a half-solved problem in the new context.

Reference

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