The Politics, Policies and Progress of Basic Education in Sri Lanka

Angela W. Little

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CREATE PATHWAYS TO ACCESS

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List of Acronyms

ADB   Asian Development Bank
AOS   Action-Oriented Strategy
CREATE   Consortium for Research on Educational Access, Transitions and Equity
DFID   Department for International Development
DSD   Divisional Schools Development
EFA   Education for All
ERIU   Education Reforms Implementation Unit
ESDFP   Education Sector Development Framework and Program
GCE O-L   General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level
HNCE   Higher National Certificate of Education
ISD   Improvement of Schools by Division
JVP   Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna
LSSP   Lanka Sama Samaja Party
LTTE   Liberation Tigers of Tamil *Eelam*
MDGs   Millennium Development Goals
NCGE   National Certificate of General Education
NEC   National Education Commission
NEREC   National Educational Research and Evaluation Centre
NGO   Non-Governmental Organisation
NIE   National Institute of Education
PSC   Public Service Commission
PTF   Presidential Task Force
SIDA   Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
SLEAS   Sri Lanka Educational Administrative Service
SLFP   Sri Lanka Freedom Party
UNESCO   United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNFPA   United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF   United Nations Children's Fund
UNP   United National Party
UPFA   United People's Freedom Alliance

Acknowledgements

Preface

This research monograph captures the twists and turns in the long pathway that Sri Lanka has followed in universalising access to basic education. The early success in extending the educational franchise can be traced to the successful pattern of self government prior to independence that provided policy continuity and allocated resources to island wide access to education. Post independence the consensus on the need to improve access to higher levels and invest in quality was maintained despite changes in political leadership. After instability and youth insurrection in the 1970s the political economy of educational investment began to change. Most obviously the education system began to become a forum of contested access as different groups increasingly saw progression to higher levels as the key to social mobility and employment. Political patronage also intruded into what had previously been a fairly depoliticised administrative system, as increasingly teachers appointment and posting came under the influence of elected politicians.

Most recently access and participation levels have remained high to the extent that over 90% of children complete 10 years of schooling or more in publicly financed schools despite relatively low levels of national income. The education system has probably become more stratified, and various initiatives including the introduction of national schools may not have developed in ways that were originally intended. However, the system continues to provide an impressive example of how universal access to education can be sustained. This has depended on consistent high level political will with a consensus amongst political elites, effective demand from parents and students which has generated pressure on the political system to respond to needs, Sri Lanka, and an effective education bureaucracy able by and large to deliver services at affordable costs across a wide range of locations.

This case study therefore provides a lot of food for thought about why other countries with broadly similar economic levels and colonial histories have found it more difficult to sustain improvement in access to education and still fail to enrol most children much beyond the primary school grades.

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Summary

Sri Lanka is hailed internationally for her achievements in literacy, educational enrolment and equality of educational opportunity. However, progress has not been straightforward due to the complex interactions between politics, policy formulation, and the implementation of reforms. This dynamic process has often led to contradictory outcomes.

This monograph describes and analyses the political drivers and context of educational reform from the colonial era to the present before an in-depth exploration of the origins and implementation of the comprehensive 1997 education reforms. Much of the evidence referring to the later period has been drawn from extensive interviews with 20 senior members of Sri Lanka's education policy community.

From 1931 to 1970 education policies were driven by the need to assert national control over an inherited colonial system and to create a unified system of education. Policy formation relied heavily on debate in public and in parliament, following practices of governance inherited from the former colonial master. The implementation of reforms was largely undertaken by bureaucrats and teachers without interference from politicians. This policy environment changed markedly during the 1970s as decisions regarding education came to be largely driven by the need to contain rising youth unrest. Debate was stifled both in the public domain and in parliament, and politicians became increasingly involved in the day-to-day practices of education, especially those concerning teacher transfers.

The 1997 education reforms were comprehensive, including programmes to ensure universal access to basic education and improvements in learning outcomes. They attracted considerable 'political will', a vague but much vaunted term in the international policy discourse. Yet, despite seemingly high levels of national political will, reform has not been plain sailing. School rationalisation has been impeded by community resistance and by bureaucratic demands insensitive to local conditions and cost constraints. The reforms in junior secondary education have been inhibited by weak leadership, lack of planning, heavy curriculum demands, and the absence of a pilot programme. The monograph explores the connections between the political and technical drivers and inhibitors of reform in practice and argues that low-level, as well as high-level political will, has played an active part in determining whether formulated policies are translated into action on the ground. Bi-partisan support for education policy is essential if implementation is to endure.

The Politics, Policies and Progress of
Basic Education in Sri Lanka

1. Education for Accelerated Development

Sri Lanka is hailed internationally for her achievements in literacy, educational enrolment and equality of educational opportunity. Access to education has been high. Table 1 shows the trends in education provision in government schools and literacy attainment over the six decades since independence in 1948.

Table 1: Trends in Education Provision and Attainment, 1950-2008

	1950	1960	1971	1981	1991	2002	2008
Government Schools	3,188	4,394	8,585	9,521	9,998	9,826	9,662
Students in Government Schools	1,349,345	2,192,379	2,828,070	3,451,358	4,258,698	4,027,075	3,929,234
Teachers in Government Schools	38,086	69,658	94,858	135,869	177,231	191,812	212,683
Student–Teacher Ratio in Government Schools	35	31	30	25	24	21	18
Student – School Ratio	423	499	329	362	426	410	406
Adult Literacy Rate	65	72	79	87	87	91	93*

Source: Figures for 1950-2002 are drawn from Aturupane (2009) and based on Department of Census and Statistics, Ministry of Education and Central Bank of Sri Lanka. Literacy rates are for Census Years, 1953, 1963, 1971, 1981 and 2001 respectively.

*The literacy rate for 1991 is estimated from the Household Survey. The rate noted for 2008 is the 2006 Household Survey figure. School data for 2008 are based on the Ministry of Education, School Census, Preliminary Report, 2008

Between 1950 and 1991 the number of government schools and students enrolled in them increased more than threefold and the number of teachers increased almost fivefold. Student-teacher ratios decreased from 35:1 to 24:1 while the adult literacy rate increased from 65% to 87%. Declining birth rates in the 1980s led to a decline in grade 1 admissions from the early 1990s and a reduction in the numbers of those for whom school places needed to be provided. Between 1991 and 2008 the number of students in government schools declined from 4.26 million to 3.93 million, while the number of teachers increased by 20%, the student-teacher ratio decreased from 24:1 to 18:1 and the adult literacy rate increased slightly from 87% to 93%.

Major policies for 'Education for All' (EFA) have been introduced periodically throughout Sri Lanka's history, even if they have been labelled with different terms. In the 1940s the Free Education Bill was based on the concept of the right to education and embraced free education from kindergarten to university. With its focus on the entire education system it was more inclusive than the international declarations of EFA at Jomtien and Dakar which

have focussed on basic education. From the 1980s policies for free textbooks, school uniforms, meals and transport have made Sri Lanka's education one of the most, if not *the* most, accessible in the developing world. At the same time there is considerable differentiation between four types of school. Type 1AB schools offer education up to the GCE A level examination in Grade 13 in science, arts and commerce. Type 1C schools offer arts and commerce, but not science to the A level. Type 2 schools offer a wide range of subjects to the GCE O level examination in Grade 11. Type 3 schools offer education up to Grade 5 or Grade 8. The majority of Type 1AB, C and 2 schools admit students from Grade 1. National schools are controlled by the Minstry of Education while Provincial schools are controlled by respective Provincial Ministries. Schools are further divided by their medium of instruction, either Sinhala or Tamil. Basic education in Sri Lanka spans Grade 1 to Grade 11.

This study focuses on the politics surrounding policies for increased access to basic education, which, in the current Sri Lankan context, means access to 11 years of general education up to the General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level (GCE O-L) exam. It does so by discussing the drivers for policy change, the machinery through which policy is formulated, the content of the policies, the process of their implementation and their outcomes. The study focuses on the General Education Reforms of 1997. However, in order to understand the politics of education policy formulation and implementation in the 1990s it is important to understand the policy environment within which such processes occur. Policies for EFA take root or not in a political and policy environment that has historical antecedents and current contours. These vary from country to country. In the case of Sri Lanka this environment involves, *inter alia*, an understanding of the shifts over time in the character of regime tensions, the underlying political drivers of education policy, the machinery of policy formulation, the roles played by politicians in policy formulation and policy implementation, and the implications of political devolution.

The evidence for this study has been drawn from extensive interviews with 20 senior members of Sri Lanka's education policy community. Interviews were conducted in English, transcribed and analysed. Interviewees included those who had been heads and members of the National Education Commission, the Ministry of Education, the National Institute of Education, the Presidential Task Force as well as university staff, trade union leaders and World Bank staff. Interviews were supplemented with analyses of policy texts from the 1990s and an extensive range of evaluation studies. Analyses of policy from earlier periods were drawn from the writings of others and from other writings on Sri Lanka by this author. The autobiographies and other written reflections of former Secretaries to the Ministry of Education and trade union leaders were particularly valuable.

This monograph starts with an overview of the political drivers and context of educational reform between 1931 and 1990. It moves on to a detailed consideration of the origins and implementation of the 1997 reforms as they relate to basic education. It concludes with a summary assessment of the drivers and inhibitors of the 1997 reforms, of the current policy environment, and reflects on the most recent attempts to give legal force to education policy.

2. The Political Context of Educational Reform: 1931-1990

Colonial Sri Lanka was known as Ceylon. Since 1931, when universal franchise was granted, three main sets of political force have driven policy reform in education. The first is political independence from British colonial rule. The second is the nationalist project, following independence. The third, stemming from the early 1970s, is political dissent among the youth and the need of the state to contain unrest.

2.1 Political Independence

Ceylon's political transition to independence was a relatively quiet affair. As Jayasuriya (1979) explains:

> At no time was there in Ceylon a mass agitation for constitutional reforms comparable to the Civil Disobedience Movement which took place in India. The Indian nationalist movement was, however, a source of strength for the Ceylonese, and Ceylon enjoyed the fruits of success of the Indian movement (Jayasuriya, 1979:426).

Unlike in India where independence was driven by a mass movement, agitation for constitutional reform and independence in Ceylon was largely a movement of educated elites. One group had been educated in high-quality English-medium schools and worked in the professions and in the plantation sector; the second group had been educated in one of the vernacular languages, Sinhala or Tamil; while a third group were English-educated left-wing intellectuals, many of whom had studied and lived abroad, especially in the UK (Jayasuriya, 1979).

But if the transition to independence in Ceylon was relatively calm and propelled by a movement peopled by elites rather than the masses, policies on education and social welfare more generally from 1931 were designed to promote access to education among the masses in return for their support for the political groups that espoused them.

> Universal franchise in 1931 and subsequently the forms of parliamentary democracy from 1948 engendered a sensitivity to the needs of voters that distinguished policy orientation markedly from the colonial era. The political pendulum swung from time to time and each government attempted to use the educational system to reinforce its policies and to further its political and social goals…All political parties, however, attempted to attack poverty through redistributive measures. A massive programme of social welfare was introduced on the eve of political independence (Jayaweera, 1986:12).

While all political parties espoused commitments to the expansion of educational opportunities, the details of how this would be achieved differed. From 1931 the formulation of policy arose out of debates between those who wished to transform colonial education policy, including colonial policy on mass education, and those who would continue to act 'in defence of vested interests created by colonial rule' (Jayaweera, 1986:2). The commitment to the expansion of educational opportunity strengthened after independence, but the points of difference between the parties lay mainly in policies on the medium of instruction, on where and how in the system selection based on academic criteria should occur, on the status of denominational schools, and on fees and private schools.

2.1.1 The machinery of policy

The political pendulum influenced the machinery of government as well as the general and education policy goals pursued. From the start of the transition to full independence, between 1931 and 1948, the subject of education was entrusted to an Executive Committee of Education of the State Council. The first chair of the Executive Committee on Education, known as the minister of education, was the legendary C.W.W. Kannangara. If the new State Council and its new Executive Committee were to function effectively, the Board of Education – its predecessor – needed to relinquish its role as policy formulator and assume that of advisory body. The transition within the machinery of government was far from smooth and deeply political. Jayasuriya (1979) describes the tensions well.

> No sooner than the Executive Committee for Education began to function, a draft bill taking account of the new situation was prepared, and sent to the Legal Draftsman in July 1932. For seven long years an intolerable situation existed, with responsibility for education torn between the Board of Education jealous of its rights under the existing Ordinance, and the Executive Committee for Education, responsible for getting money voted for education, answerable also to the people of the country for the state of education and yet with no legal standing in the Ordinance covering education. The standpoint of the Board of Education, with its predominantly Christian composition, on important issues was reactionary. The refusal of support for Pirivena education, opposition to the introduction of Sinhalese as a subject in English schools on the ground that Buddhism would be taught in an indirect way were part of the melancholy record of the Board of Education. It is a measure of the stranglehold that vested interests exercised of the body politic that this state of affairs was allowed to continue…in the final analysis, the fears were of the operation of democratic processes, and though their irrationality was obvious, they were expressed by powerful vested interests which had to be placated (Jayasuriya, 1979:445-446).

The bill was eventually placed before the State Council in 1938 and the ensuing debate was long. Education Ordinance no. 31 was passed in 1939.

Alongside the legal machinery, a Special Committee, chaired by Kannangara, worked on the content of plans for a national system of education, and debated a number of education policy themes. The issues that attracted most attention were five-fold. The payments of grants to denominational schools and the religious affiliation of managements and students was a major issue. A second was religious education and the introduction of a conscience clause. A third was the language medium of instruction. This was discussed extensively by the Special Committee and the State Council and led to the introduction from 1948 of one of the two vernacular languages - Sinhala or Tamil - as the medium in all government primary schools, with a phased introduction of English in the post primary grades. A network of central schools was established in rural areas to enable able but poor children to access high-quality education. Perhaps the most fundamental of the policies and the one that carried greatest appeal for the masses was the removal of tuition fees from all English-medium assisted or state primary and post-primary schools and from the teacher training colleges. The 'free education scheme opened the doors of English education to thousands who could not have afforded such an education' (Jayasuriya, 1979:524), even if this access would turn out to be short-lived, as the policies on vernacular education came to be extended to secondary education in due course.

In an insightful account of the process of education policy-making in Sri Lanka during this period, de Silva (2003) explains how Kannangara's Committee took three years to submit its recommendations, and how its report attracted much public debate in the press. Within the wheels of government the report went before the Executive Committee on Education and the Board of Ministers before the minister took a resolution to the State Council in 1943. If the passage of the Education Ordinance no. 31 of 1939 had met with resistance from those who had served the colonial government, the 1943 report attracted criticism from *both* the conservatives who defended the past *and* the radicals who described the proposals as too conservative. One of the radicals was Dr N.M. Perera, the leader of the Trotskyist Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) which was demanding full independence from Britain as early as possible. Perera was a strong supporter of free education and the expansion of educational opportunities but he was critical of the tripartite system of secondary education contained within the 1943 report. He viewed it as a copy of education plans then being formulated for England. Articulating his opposition from prison and castigating the Special Committee for its slavish dependence on an education plan 'drawn up for a different country with a different ideology' (de Silva, 2003:3), Perera accused the Special Committee of, *inter alia*:

> cribbing the senior school idea direct from the Spens report of England…the net result is a mess that makes a veritable hotch-potch of its own fundamental dish of free education. It is a sad commentary on our past system of education that those who pose as major educationists are incapable of independent thought (Perera, 1944, quoted in de Silva, 2003:3-4).

The State Council debated the resolution for 15 days and it was concluded a year later when it was finally passed with amendments in June 1945.

For the purpose of this case study the detail and timing of the resolution is less important than the process of policy formulation by which it came to be agreed. De Silva (2003) points out that while debate meant that some of the Special Committee's proposals failed to survive passage through the State Council, debate also meant that the policy formulation process was transparent.

> It was carried out in the open at a time when the word transparency was hardly in use with references to policy-making or, for that matter, governance. As toddlers in democratic governance, we had been quick to grasp two vital elements of the policy making process in a democracy, namely, (a) taking the public into confidence and (b) adhering to due processes and constitutional procedures in making public policy (de Silva, 2003:4).

While transparency of policy-making would continue to characterise the immediate post independence era, some of the themes of the political debate would change.

2.2 After Independence

After independence in 1948 the process of education policy formulation became gradually embroiled in new tensions between political parties. In education these revolved around education access and the nature of privilege, symbolised through language, religious affiliation, the ability to pay fees and academic selection. More general debates among political parties around language and nationalism would also have implications for educational policy in the years to come.

The first post-independence government was led by the right wing United National Party (UNP) of D.S. Senanayake. This government reviewed earlier policies and placed its proposals for reforms via a White Paper, following the practice then current in Britain. Of interest to the issue of educational access was the White Paper's recommendation that selection for secondary education at the age of 11 years be based on ability and a selection examination, but this was rejected by parliament, in favour of selection at fourteen years. Before independence the Special Committee had recommended the introduction of Sinhala and Tamil as the sole media of instruction in primary schools, the partial use of English in the post-primary grades and the sole use of English in the upper secondary grades. However in the early 1950s political agitation by the masses for the access to secondary education led to the increasing use of Sinhala and Tamil in the upper grades of government secondary schools. Sinhala and Tamil became the compulsory media of instruction in secondary from 1953 and for university arts courses from 1960.

1956 saw the election to power of the left-wing Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP), a coalition of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party and various Marxist/left wing parties, under the leadership of S.W.R.D. Bandaranayake. This coalition appealed to the interests of the rural masses, of rural teachers, of *ayuveda* doctors, Buddhist priests and agricultural labourers. Ability-based selection to secondary education after the age of 14 years, introduced by the previous government was abandoned. While the high-status privileged denominational schools survived the change of government in 1956 they would not survive its gaze in the lead-up to the elections of 1960. Their take-over was hotly debated, and, despite considerable resistance from Christians and Catholics, two Acts of Parliament (1960 and 1961) vested almost all assisted schools and their properties[1] in the state, contributing substantially to the consolidation of a unified system of education:

> The attack on what was seen as privilege was channelled through the political process at the general election of 1960 and the take-over of denominational schools was effected in 1960, in an environment that was not only emotive but also reflected the contemporary trend towards the nationalisation of economic and social institutions (Jayaweera, 1986:10).

The establishment of new private schools was barred in 1961, a legal restriction which remains in place today. The political battle over English and the vernaculars *appeared* to have been won, and a unified, if not national, system of education created:

> By 1960 therefore major colonial policies had been reversed. Language and religion ceased to be a barrier to educational opportunity. The education system was unified with only 63 schools out of over 9000 schools functioning as private schools. The national languages were the medium of instruction in the secondary school with an English stream for Muslim, and Burgher students (Jayaweera, 1986:10).

In an attempt to offer access to a diversified curriculum that reflected the needs of the national economy, the 1961 National Education Commission report recommended that four types of secondary school be established. In keeping with the theme of equality of opportunity these four streams were to be equal in status and access to them would not be based on an academic selection test. The 1964 White Paper proposed instead that these four types be combined into a single school but with four streams. Yet the government was

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[1] A very small number opted to become fully private, or unaided and non-fee-levying.

defeated in the 1965 elections by Dudley Senanayake's National Front and the White Paper stalled.

The new government prepared a new White Paper in which the idea of four types of schools was resurrected, but access to which would be based on academic criteria. The Paper was debated in parliament for two days and presented as a draft Bill a year later. However, the Bill was defeated in parliament because of the restrictions on access to high status secondary education for the lower classes that the scheme implied.

By this time political debate on education was also getting 'increasingly enmeshed in the web of political party rivalry' (de Silva, 2003:5). Swings in political regime were paralleled by the ritual overturning of education policy. Then, as now, elected politicians have a duty to determine education policies and to formulate these in line with larger political, economic and social ends. However, whether these education goals and policies should have been so subjected to the vagaries of the pendulum of political ideology began to be questioned.

The main points of ideological difference between the rival political parties were concerned with educational access and the criteria by which children were included and excluded from high-status educational opportunities at different stages of the system. The criteria in question were language (English versus the vernaculars), ability (selection/high standards vs. no selection/common standards at key transition points) and the ability and willingness to pay tuition fees in denominational and private schools.

Up to this point ethnicity had not emerged as a criterion of education access in a major way. Tamil and Sinhala-speaking children were able to join fee-free and fee-charging schools in the same way and to follow their education in their mother tongue. Differences in access between social groups were marked largely by residence (rural vs. urban), wealth and medium of instruction. An exception to this pattern was the group of Indian Tamil children resident in tea and rubber plantations whose education lagged behind all other groups (see Little, 1999, for an account of the growth of access to education among this community). However, ethnicity as a marker of access to education, in particular to university education, would emerge as a major political issue in the late 1960s, as a result of language policies introduced in public administration in 1956 after Bandaranayake's government came to power.

Controversially Bandaranayake's government introduced the Official Languages Act of 1956, commonly referred to as the 'Sinhala-only' Act, making Sinhala the sole official language of public administration in place of English. Proficiency in Sinhala not Tamil became a criterion of access to coveted government jobs. This political move enraged the Tamil speaking minority and also contradicted the justification advanced in 1944 for the introduction of Sinhala and Tamil as media of instruction in all schools: that *both* Sinhala and Tamil would become the official languages of Ceylon.

The Official Languages Act responded to, and reinforced, the growth of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism, which was in large part a reaction to the underprivileged status of non-Christian and non-English-speaking Sinhalese groups during colonial rule. In the 1960 election both of the main Sinhalese parties campaigned on an anti-Tamil line, promising to implement the 'Sinhala-only' Act of 1956 and to repatriate large numbers of Tamils who worked in the tea and rubber estates.

We referred earlier to Ceylon's relatively peaceful transition to independence. Contrasting it with the violence that led to independence in India and to the civil war in Burma, Ceylon's

transition was described as 'an oasis of stability, peace and order' (de Silva, 1981:489). However, as Gunatilleke explained, the transition was fragile:

> Political struggles which throw masses into action help in the formation of a unified national will. When the transfer of power finally takes place, the national leadership … is usually closely identified with the people, and the disciplines of development they choose to impose can command ready popular acceptance. Sri Lanka's political evolution did not provide the conditions for the emergence of such a charismatic leadership (Gunatilleke, 1974:7).

A national will of sorts did emerge, but it was not a national will and identity that transcended social, economic, linguistic, religious and ethnic divisions. It was an ethno-national will. Long before independence the British had been acutely aware of the role and the rights of minorities, especially those of the Tamils. Ideas about a federal constitution were advanced but never accepted by all political parties. Although the first prime minister, D. S. Senanayake, had promoted a Ceylon nationalism that emphasised the common interests of various ethnic and religious groups, including a secular state, a multi-racial policy and a single nation, this approach contained:

> a crucial flaw. It was basically elitist in conception, and it had little popular support extending beyond the political establishment (de Silva, 1981:496).

Beneath the aspiration of a nationalism based on the idea of a single, plural and secular state were ethno-nationalisms that were 'as insidious as they were truly formidable' (de Silva, 1981:496). The majority Sinhalese tended to equate Sinhalese nationalism with Ceylonese nationalism. The Tamils rejected this vehemently and developed instead an 'inward-looking ethnic nationalism' (de Silva, 1981:496). For their part, the Sinhalese and Tamil Christians resented the tendency of the Sinhalese to equate their version of nationalism with Buddhism. In practice it was the Sinhalese-Buddhist version of nationalism that became the dominant political force in 1956. Language would move to the centre-stage in all versions of nationalism in wider society and would carry particular significance in the allocation of the prized white collar jobs in the government sector. In the 1960 election the opposition UNP did little to dispel the idea that national identity meant a Sinhalese-Buddhist identity.

2.2.1 Political patronage and the implementation of education policy

Up to this point we have been discussing the political drivers and tensions inherent in the content of policy formulation. The role of politicians in policy *implementation* is a different matter altogether. By the mid-1960s the day-to-day practices of policy implementation were becoming increasingly subject to political influence, or 'interference'- the more usual term for such influence in Sri Lanka.

From independence in 1948 up until the early 1960s politicians had generally confined themselves to the business of debating and making education policy. Their influence was largely absent from the day-to-day implementation and administration of education. That began to change in the mid-1960s with the appointment of I.M.R.A. Iriyagolla as the cabinet minister of education and cultural affairs during the administration of the UNP, which was elected in 1965. Not only was Iriyagolle properly active in matters of education policy formulation but he took an active and, many would argue, positive interest in the work of his ministry, getting little by little more involved in implementation. Widely regarded as arrogant and abrasive in style and personality he brooked little opposition, especially from the universities. His reaction to those in the universities who challenged his ideas was often

fierce, including the refusal to give teaching appointments to B.Ed. graduates. However, during this time he worked through an education bureaucracy that was headed by a career civil servant, a member of the Ceylon Civil Service. The relative independence of the Ceylon Civil Service at this time served to inhibit the untrammelled involvement of ministers and other politicians in day-to-day implementation of policies.

2.3 Youth Unrest in the 1970s

By the 1970s, Ceylon's education system was becoming a victim of its own success. As Table 1 above shows, the number of students enrolled in school increased by over 60% between 1950 and 1960. The economy was not expanding fast enough to meet the job expectations of those who graduated from the different levels of education. Unemployment among educated youth surfaced quickly. Ceylon's strong welfare orientation to both health and education from the 1930s had led to reductions in death and infant mortality rates and increases in the rate of population growth. Between 1946 and 1963 population growth averaged 2.8% per year, leading to huge increases in educational enrolments, progression and outputs. The mismatch between the numbers of aspirant educated youth and available jobs became apparent during the 1960s and culminated in a rise in the general unemployment rate from 7.6% in 1963 to 19.8% in 1975. In 1970 alone, almost 80% of the labour force aged 15-24 was unemployed (Jayaweera, 1986).

In May 1970, a coalition of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), along with Trotskyist and Communist factions, came to power. In its election manifesto the SLFP promised to improve equality of access to education and to solve the growing problem of unemployment facing school leavers. At the same time the coalition favoured a weakening of the international links that had created economic dependency, and a strengthening of national autonomy in matters economic, political and cultural.

Late in 1970 an Education Review Committee was established to report on the restructuring of the education system, and in 1971 the Ministry of Planning and Employment published its development plan in which it was suggested that the present education system was over-dependent on examinations and diplomas and was failing to develop skills necessary for economic development. Education was judged to be divorced from the world of work and had pushed too many young people into a search for white collar employment. The school curriculum needed to be vocationalised. The review committee suggested that the GCE O and A level examinations should be replaced by the National Certificate of General Education (NCGE) and the Higher National Certificate of Education (HNCE) examinations respectively. These would correspond with an education of nine and 11 years, respectively, compared with the 10 and 12 years that had corresponded with the GCE O and GCE A examinations. Though the GCE O and GCE A level examinations were designed and run by Sri Lanka's Ministry of Education, their names and their histories were linked intimately with Britain and symbolised internationally-respected standards.

The proposals for exam reform attracted strident criticism in the press. Such a change, it was claimed, would interrupt the education of pupils and was simply change for the sake of change:

> The cry that there should be 'no more guinea pigs please' … from the main teachers' union, the Jathika Sangamaya, echoed a general reluctance to depart from the existing system (Lewin and Little, 1982:22).

Were it not for the events of 1971, that might have been the end of the proposals. In April of that year a youth insurrection, led by the *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* (JVP), gripped the country, paralysed its leadership and convinced many of the need for a radical reform of the education system and indeed of the constitution and political system itself. The JVP's opposition to current education policy was less to do with the type of education available to rural children and more to do with the continuing monopoly on high-status educational and occupational opportunity by the English-educated elite. The insurrection convinced even those who, just two months earlier, had criticised government attempts to propose radical reforms, that reform was necessary. The Education Review Committee resumed its work in June after the restoration of civil order and proposed 'a restructuring of the education system that was more far-reaching than it would have been had not the insurrection occurred' (Wijemanne, 1978). Those who had argued earlier that the time had come to abandon the structure and content of colonial education and examinations had won the argument about the need for reform.

During a discussion of the drivers of the 1972 education reforms, a former education officer and secondary school teacher at the time recalled:

> I think we have to thank the JVP for that. It is a strong way of putting it but because of that uprising, people realized that they can't go in the same sweet way with this kind of very lethargic kind of education…I remember the then secretary of education saying 'these young men and women have come out of the universities and they have joined this party and they have made this revolution which means that education has failed. We have to make them citizens who are able to help in the development of the country, as well as help themselves to better their living conditions' (Interview with author).

> Yes, a new light was cast because of the political interest in educational reforms. On one side the economy was not expanding and on the other side, these young people did not fit the jobs that were available. I think we must give thanks to the JVP and its uprising. When that happened people woke up. That was an eye opener for the government actually, young people coming out and having revolutions because they don't agree with the kind of education they have…In that sense politics was a good thing, a good interfering agent for the reforms to take place (Interview with author).

The development of the policy reforms was rapid.

> There was no time for White papers, or long drawn out debates and discussions. A major overhaul of education was undertaken in great haste with, of course, the attendant repercussions (de Silva, 2003:6).

The devil lay in the detail of the reforms. Directed mainly at secondary education, educators and educational administrators set about designing a more content-relevant curriculum. The designers of the reforms, based mainly in the Ministry of Education, judged that a relevant curriculum was one that would prepare the majority for their futures, which, in most cases, lay outside the formal sector of employment. The GCE O and A level secondary school examinations were de-linked from their British namesakes. In junior secondary education a subject named 'pre-vocational studies' was introduced to introduce practical and locally-relevant subjects that reflected local economies and oriented young people to future livelihoods. The subjects of science and social studies were made available to all students rather than the minority who had followed them through the more specialised single subjects such as physics, chemistry, history, geography and civics. The subject of Mathematics was

made available to all students and replaced arithmetic, commercial arithmetic and elementary mathematics that had been studied by the majority hitherto. While the reform of primary education was not central to the project of finding solutions to potential political unrest, it was seen as important in order to support change in the secondary grades. As the former Director of Primary Education and member of the reform team at that time recalled:

> …you can't just suddenly change the secondary without some kind of support from the primary (Interview with author).

Substantial reforms of primary education were implemented from 1972, based on the ideas of child-centred, activity-based learning prevalent at that time in the West (Peiris, 1983).

2.4 Constitutional Change, 1972 and 1978

Constitutional change in 1972 transformed Ceylon into the Republic of Sri Lanka[2]. The monarch, represented by her governor general was replaced by a president. In the first Republic the president was largely a ceremonial position aligned to no political party. Executive power continued to lie with the elected prime minister and parliament. This constitutional change would change the constellation of political powers over education in years to come as well as the machinery of policy and the environment in which it had to work. One significant change was the loss of independence of the Public Service Commission (PSC), responsible for the appointment of senior civil servants. The PSC came under the control of the cabinet of the government in power. Its loss of independence reduced the autonomy of public servants and increased their dependence on politicians for their day to day work, their appointments, their own promotions and transfers.

The first appointment of a non career civil servant as the chief bureaucrat in the Ministry of Education had occurred already in 1970 when the Sri Lanka Freedom Party won the general election. The new government was headed by Mrs Bandaranayake and Mr Premadasa, a former university lecturer in geography education, was appointed the new secretary to the Ministry of Education. Although both Premadasa and his additional secretary, K.H.M. Sumathipala, held positions filled previously by civil servants, they would come to be described as 'political appointees' rather than civil servants. In the lead up to the 1970 elections and after their roles were rather different from those of traditional civil servants. As one former education officer recalled:

> they conducted the political programme for the government, spoke on political platforms in the 1970 elections and they were given the top posts… And there was a lot of political - not interference - they did not interfere in your work as such but the curriculum revolves around the political - they were pushing it. They wanted a general comprehensive curriculum. They wanted some practical aspect thrown into the curriculum (Interview with author).

This former officer refers to political 'push'. Others might term this political will, generally considered to promote reform. Gradually this political will and push for change in curriculum policy would be extended to the deployment, transfers and promotions of teachers and education officers. Between 1970 and 1977 a number of teachers who had voted against the

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[2] Hereafter, Ceylon will be referred to as Sri Lanka.

government in 1970s were sent on 'punishment transfers', many to the far away and disadvantaged district of Moneragala. The general public began to use the term political 'interference' to refer to the increasing power held by politicians over the day-to-day practices of individuals. During this period the political 'chit' system became more and more influential in recruitment and selection for public sector jobs. While educational qualifications remained important prerequisites in job recruitment, political influence became an important additional qualification. Political patronage was becoming a key ingredient in access to jobs. It became commonplace for people to say 'education does not matter any more, it's all down to politics'. In fact this was never true since educational qualifications were, and continue to be, used as the first criterion in recruitment to government jobs. What had changed was the requirement of the additional qualification of the political chit. By the mid 1970s there came to be:

> a struggle within the government apparatus between the upholders of policy and those under the pressure to distribute jobs by personal criteria and under the temptation to enhance their own influence (Deraniyagala, Dore and Little, 1978:88).

The constitutional changes of 1978 were more far-reaching than those of 1972 and only served to increase the power of politicians over the implementation of education policies. In contrast with the constitutional changes of 1972, which introduced a largely ceremonial president aligned to no political party to be elected every six years , the constitutional change of 1978 transformed the role of president into that of a chief executive, with powers similar to, but rather greater than, those of a French president. However, beneath the president the former Westminster-style parliamentary system prevailed, with a prime minister, ministers and members of parliament elected every five years. Since the presidential and parliamentary elections rarely coincided this could, in principle, give rise to the cohabitation of a president and a prime minister representing different political parties and policies. Under the 1978 constitution the president can act at will, is not bound by the advice of the prime minister or cabinet of ministers, presides over the cabinet of ministers, and decides how many ministers there will be and their functions (Wickramanayake, 2009).

Proportional representation was also introduced in 1978. This had the effect of increasing the power of minority political parties which the major parties need to attract in order to form a government. Elsewhere I have demonstrated the power of the minority Ceylon Worker's Congress in bringing about educational change in the tea and rubber plantations in the 1980s and 1990s (Little, 1999). As we shall see, the political muscle of the minority and former insurgent and proscribed JVP would act as a significant break on a number of policy reforms in the 1980s and in the 2000s.

2.5 The Fate of the 1972 Education Reforms

The 1972 education reforms survived less than five years. Pre-vocational studies in the secondary stage and the replacement of the GCE O and A level examinations with home-grown and locally-named examinations taken at slightly different stages of the education system became very unpopular. Between 1976 and 1977 criticism of their content and manner of implementation mounted. The opposition to pre-vocational studies was voiced by rural parents and rural-oriented intellectuals who felt that curriculum provision based on local occupations reinforced class and caste divisions and deprived rural children of opportunities for advancement. The opposition to the exams focussed on their non-equivalence with the exams they replaced, their non-comparability with international standards and a general discontent with the requirement that a pass in pre-vocational studies be a condition for

progression to the senior cycle of secondary education (for a fuller analysis of this period see Lewin and Little, 1982).

In the run-up to the 1977 general election the right-leaning UNP declared that it would do away with these more controversial reforms:

> As a party of opposing convictions to the SLFP, and which traditionally drew its support from the business community and the conservative establishment, it was committed to returning to educational standards that were internationally comparable (Lewin and Little, 1982:29).

The UNP won the election with an overwhelming majority. The new minister of education acceded to the demands of the small but powerful group with interests in internationally comparable standards of examinations.

> The entire question of the curriculum has been severely criticised both by parents and educationalists as having been unilaterally introduced by the Government without carefully examining (a) the suitability of the subject matter (b) the books (c) the availability of teachers (d) the alignment of the NCGE examination with general practices in other countries. At the new 'A' level provision will be made to promote students should they so wish to sit the English (London external) 'A' level examination, in Sri Lanka (Ceylon Daily News, 2 December, 1977).

GCE O level and A level examinations were re-introduced. Many of the 1972-77 curriculum reforms were retained with a common curriculum for all students up to the end of year 11. The curriculum issue that had courted such controversy during the earlier period - pre-vocational studies - was resolved by its change in status from a compulsory, examinable subject to a non-compulsory, non-examinable subject. It was subsequently abandoned and replaced by technical subjects and the subject of 'life skills'. At the primary level, much of the 1972-77 curriculum reform was maintained, the school-entry age was lowered to five years and English was added as a subject from Grade 3 (Little, 1999).

The new government legitimated political patronage by establishing the Job Bank for the recruitment of all public sector staff paid below an initial basic salary of Rs. 6,790. All registrants with the Job Bank were required to hold specified educational qualifications *and* the nomination of an elected Member of Parliament (MP). If the MP was of the opposition party then the registrant was required to seek a nomination from a representative of the party in power (Deraniyagala et al., 1978:88). Thus was the right of politicians to 'interfere' and distribute patronage legitimised by the state.

2.6 1981 White Paper on Education

The new government presented a new policy for education in the form of the 1981 White Paper. *Inter alia* the White Paper recommended the introduction of a system of resource-sharing between schools through the creation of school 'clusters', with one school designated as the core school, with a core principal responsible for supporting teaching and learning across the schools through the sharing of resources. The ministry established clusters in many areas with enthusiasm but by 1984 it was already clear that the cluster system would not be adopted country-wide. The human and logistical issues in this new form of management of resources were never resolved. A reform of the educational administrative system was initiated in 1984. This introduced additional layers of bureaucracy at the divisional level with

officers working under regional offices, and at the zonal level for the purpose of educational planning.

One of the more controversial reforms proposed by the 1981 White Paper was the inclusion of continuous assessment - specifically the assessment of project work by teachers - in the GCE examinations. Introduced in 1987, it survived for only one year. Resistance to the reform came from five powerful groups. Teachers opposed continuous assessment because of their lack of preparation for this work. Parents opposed it because they mistrusted teacher judgements. The JVP opposed continuous assessment on the grounds that this form of assessment discriminated against the rural child. Owners of private tutorial businesses saw their profits undermined and university teachers were concerned about a dilution of standards. The practical skills component of the science GCE A level examination was also dropped because of the difficulty of moderating assessments of practical skills and a general mistrust of teacher-based assessment (Little, 1999).

In terms of the policy formulation process the government had reverted to the former British practice of publishing a White Paper for discussion through public debate and in parliament. However, the fate of this White Paper was sealed early on, and, as a former secretary to the Ministry of Education has commented, the White Paper:

> got trapped in the political act that we had by now learnt to stage with consummate skill! The ruling party, while being in the opposition, had exploited public disaffection with the 1972 reforms to gain political advantage, and now it was their opponents' turn. The White Paper became the red rag for mounting a frontal attack on the government, with radical youth providing muscle to the campaign. Street demonstration overshadowed more restrained and studied forms of dissent. The White Paper both metaphorically and literally went up in flames. Even school children who did not have even an inkling of what the White Paper contained were pulled out of their classes to voice their opposition to it. With a General Election not too far away, Government MPs got cold feet and pressurized President J.R. Jayewardene to shelve the White Paper (de Silva, 2003:7).

One outcome of reforms in the early 1980s was the establishment of the National Institute of Education (NIE) in 1986 through an Act of Parliament. The NIE took over from the Ministry of Education functions such as curriculum development, teacher education, training for education managers, evaluation and research.

The swings in education policy that followed the metronome of political power in 1960s continued through the 1970s and 1980s. Each successive democratic election was being used by the political party in opposition to feed on the population's disgruntlement with education. The intimate relationship between party politics and education policy reform was being reinforced time and again. Cross-party support for educational reform was absent and intense efforts by educational professionals and bureaucrats to implement various policies and programmes were thwarted.

2.7 Provincial Devolution, 1987

In 1987 the constitution was amended and a devolved system of governance through elected Provincial Councils was established. The long-standing ethnic conflict was the principal motivation for the establishment of a degree of self-governance for the provinces. Three lists (the provincial list, reserve list and concurrent list) and three appendices, covering the

subjects of law and order, land and land settlement and education, spelled out the devolution of powers. In education, considerable powers for planning and implementation were devolved to provincial ministries and departments of education. The devolved powers included the provision of facilities to all government schools[3], the preparation of plans, the supervision of the management of all government schools, and the development and implementation of annual implementation plans. The majority of schools came under the control of provincial ministries and departments of education and their funding was channelled from the Treasury through the Finance Commission via a provincial grant covering all sectors. No longer were the schools in the provinces (formerly the education regions) dependent on the central Ministry of Education for their funding. While the responsibility for some forms of educational planning would remain with the central ministry, ambiguities over the division of responsibilities for planning and policy interpretation - between the centre and the province continued. Provincial ministries and departments grew in size and power. Beneath the provinces, re-designated zonal offices were established and beneath them divisional offices. Attached to the divisional office were teacher supervisors who were the school teachers' first point of contact. Education officers were appointed at the provincial level with responsibilities for the planning and implementation of primary education and others for the planning and implementation of subjects in the secondary grades. These officers were responsible to superior officers in the provincial department and the provincial ministry, as well as in the central ministry.

As the layers of bureaucracy involved in education policy implementation multiplied, so too did the ambiguities of role, function and authority. Notwithstanding some curbing of political influence in the work of the education bureaucracy and schools in the early 1980s, devolution in 1987 increased the number of politicians and bureaucrats at the provincial level and multiplied the opportunities for political interference at the provincial level many times over.

2.8 Shifts in the Political and Policy Environment

This section has analysed shifts in the political context of education policy reform over the period from 1931 to 1990, subdivided into two: 1931-1970 and 1970-1990. In the early period the regime tension lay between those who supported colonial policies and practices and those who supported the creation of anti-colonial, national policies and practices. This tension continued into the post-independence period and was overlaid by those between socialist left and capitalist right. In the early period education policies were driven by the need to assert national control over an inherited colonial system and to create a unified system of education. In the later period education policy was largely driven by the need to contain youth unrest.

The machinery through which policy was formed also changed across these two periods. In the early period policy formation relied heavily on debate in public and in parliament, following practices of governance inherited from the former colonial master. In the later period debate was stifled both in the public domain and in parliament. To the extent that debate was tolerated (as in the discussions of the 1981 White Paper) the process aroused such opposition that new policies remained stillborn and had the effect of stifling public and parliamentary debate about education policy from that point on.

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[3] Except for national schools, managed by the Ministry of Education.

The involvement of politicians in policy formation and policy implementation changed significantly over the period. In the early period politicians confined themselves largely, though not wholly, to debate and decision about policy content. Policy implementation was largely undertaken by bureaucrats and teachers without interference from politicians. This would change in the 1970s as politicians became increasingly involved in the day-to-day practices of education, especially those concerning teacher transfers. With the loss of the independence of the PSC in 1972 political influence over the appointments of the senior and junior members of the education bureaucracy deepened.

Towards the end of the period in question considerable powers and financial resources in education were devolved to the provinces, changing the nature of the relationship between the central Ministry and schools, and the nature of links between officers, teachers and politicians. This shift in the responsibilities for the management of education also led to an increase in political influence in day-to-day implementation at provincial level.

These shifts in the policy and political contexts of education policy and their reform are summarised below in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Shifts in the political and policy environments for education policy, 1931-1970 and 1970-1990

Political and Policy Environment	**1931-1970** *From*	**1970-1990** *To*
Regime tensions	Colonial vs. National	Left vs. Right
Political driver of education policy	The creation of a unified system of education	The containment of youth unrest
Machinery for education policy formation	Government-committees; parliamentary debate; transparency	*Ad hoc* committees; no debate in parliament; loss of transparency
Involvement of politicians in policy and practice	Politicians debate and decide policy; bureaucrats and teachers implement	Politicians debate policy outside parliament. Politicians 'interfere' in day to day practices
Political involvement in the appointment of officers in education bureaucracy	Senior member of the Ceylon Civil Service heads education bureaucracy and acts independently of political parties	Career civil servant or professional non civil servant appointed by the cabinet of the day;
Centre-province responsibilities	Policy implementation in schools and regional administrations under the line authority of the central authority	Policy implementation in schools under the authority of the provincial ministry the provincial department, and the line ministry

3. Education Stakeholders in the 1990s

By the early 1990s the political role of education in Sri Lanka, as elsewhere in democratic systems, was linked to the number of voters involved in education in different ways. With around four million children enrolled, more than double that number of mothers, fathers and grandparents keenly interested in their offspring's education and around 200,000 teachers employed directly by government, politicians were aware of the mass appeal of education and its power as an election issue. Some Sri Lankan teachers maintain close links with politicians and the political process. Many teachers undertake unpaid work in the run-up to the elections and help conduct the elections at the polling booths. Teachers below a certain pay grade can take leave from their posts and stand for election. The run-up to an election is also likely to coincide with the appointment of large numbers of new teachers. New jobs mean new votes,and voters also need to be rewarded. During the 1990s President Premadasa sanctioned the large scale recruitment of some 35,000 A-level qualified persons as teachers. After the government changed in 2004, 40,000 graduates were offered jobs in government service. Indeed it had been part of the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) manifesto to offer jobs to unemployed graduates within three months of the election. This election promise was pushed hardest by the junior member of the alliance, the JVP. While this flouted government agreements with the international donor community to contain the expansion of government jobs and of teachers in particular President Kumaratunge bowed to pressure from the JVP on whom her coalition depended. While the Ministry of Education refused to take all the graduates it was offered, it had no option but to accept 17,000 (Interview with author).

As seen already in the description of the 1972 reforms, the national school curriculum embodies and transmits the values of political regimes. Changes of government in a democratic state see many shifts in policy and emphasis in the curriculum, especially in the subjects to be taught and in the medium of instruction. Different groups have different stakes in the curriculum. Educators act politically as they discuss and debate curriculum themes: local knowledge vs. universal knowledge, practical education vs. academic education, common vs. diversified curriculum, English-medium education vs. vernacular-medium education, single subjects vs. composite subjects. Elites and the masses have particular interests in some of these themes, especially diversified and common curricula and medium of instruction. Employers engage to an extent in discussions about practical and academic education. In turn, all of these discussions and different perspectives provide the fodder on which unions, politicians and political parties thrive.

Parents' interests in education reforms are crucially linked with their children's life chances. The closer a reform is to the points of inclusion/exclusion in the education system at which life chances are determined: the more there is resistance to it from those who perceive their interests to be threatened. So, for example, changes in assessment practices which determined access to further education and the labour market attracted considerable interest and resistance from middle class parents in the 1970s (Lewin and Little, 1982). Proposed changes in the criteria for admission to Grade 1 in prestigious 'national' schools and in the Grade 5 scholarship examination, which in turn improve life chances, arouse considerable interest and resistance among middle class parents and politicians. By contrast, changes in the detail of what and how children learn in the primary stage of education generate relatively little tension in the policy discourse among the general public of all social classes, even if it generates some debate among educators. What concerns parents, and especially middle class parents, most about primary education is securing a Grade 1 place in a national school or a school with a good record of educational progression and examination success.

Teachers act politically to support or resist change. In this they are often supported by their unions which are attached to political parties. In recent years proposed school management reforms - giving more control over resources to school principals and school boards - have been strongly resisted by some trade unionists fearful of the loss of control over teachers and the view that educational equality can only be secured through centralised education. Teacher appraisal schemes, designed to improve the quality of the teaching profession, have been welcomed at their initial stages by some unions and subsequently resisted.

Teachers rely heavily on support from the government in power for their transfers to preferred schools. As we have discussed already, teachers actively seek favours from ministers for transfers to better schools. Typically the process works by requesting an officer in the local *Pradeshiya Sabha* to send a letter (a chit) to the minister describing the virtues of the teacher and his/her loyalty to the government in power. The minister sends a letter to the zonal education office in support of the transfer. These exchanges may or not involve the payment of money by the teacher. What they do involve is an obligation on the part of the teacher to provide continued support for the minister and his/her party. Less formalised than the Job Bank Scheme introduced by the UNP in 1978, the current system relies on the same principle: securing a *chit* from a politician in order to secure an advantage in the job and job transfer market. In its report of 2003, the National Education Commission (NEC) writes openly and critically of the political patronage that pervades the education system and overrides merit in appointments, promotions, and transfers of teachers, principals and officers at both the national and provincial level (NEC, 2003:230).

The volume of public resources allocated to education also makes it a site of considerable interest to those who supply services to it: building contractors, text book printers and distributors, equipment suppliers and private tuition masters, to name but a few. Politicians may also have direct interests through the involvement of their relatives in the running of such businesses. Some suppliers of services work in the private sector (notably tuition masters) while some are already government employees (e.g. textbook writers). The relationship between policy reform and these stakeholder groups works directly and indirectly. Changes in assessment practices towards greater reliance on continuous class-based assessment proposed in the 1980s met with considerable resistance from the private tuition masters who saw the volume of their future business threatened. These powerful businessmen can work through various political channels to resist reform. Proposals in the 1990s to contract the writing and production of textbooks through open tender threatened the interests of government employees who have relied on these contracts for jobs and additional sources of income. Less directly, some stakeholder interests are manifested through webs of social capital and connections with politicians that extend beyond particular education reforms. Building contractors are less likely than tuition masters or textbook writers to engage in resistance to, or promotion of, specific education reforms (unless the building contractor is a politician or his/her relative). However, their economic interests are affected directly by the volume of building works in education *and other sectors* available in a local area. To the extent that their ability to win contracts in any sector is dependent on their connections with local politicians, their success in winning contracts will have implications for their future support for that politician (on a wide range of issues and not only education).

All of these broad practices underpin periodic reforms of education and formed part of the political environment in which the 1997 reforms were conceived and implemented. It is to these we now turn.

4. The origins and policy machinery of the 1997 Education Reforms

4.1 Youth Unrest in the 1980s

The origins of the 1997 education reforms can, like the 1972 reforms, be traced to youth unrest. Between 1987 and 1989 Sri Lanka was gripped by youth unrest on two fronts. The longstanding call for an independent state of Tamil *Eelam* in the north and east of the country since the mid 1970s had resulted in armed combat between the Sri Lankan armed forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil *Eelam* (LTTE) and associated groups since at least 1983. During the second half of the 1980s a second line of resistance to the Sri Lankan state opened up, this time in the south of the country, among the Sinhalese. These were disaffected, educated, rural youth and supporters of the same JVP political party that had led the insurrection of 1971. The grievances were the same. Notwithstanding changes in economic policy heralded by the change of government in 1977 and the rapid growth of the economy in the early 1980s, educated but unemployed Sinhalese youth in the south protested against continuing disparities in both education and economic opportunity. More prolonged and bloody than the insurrection of 1971, the 1987 insurrection was met with brutal force by the state. Many thousands of young people died. In the wake of the containment of unrest the government quickly established a Presidential Commission on Youth to investigate the causes of the insurrection. It found that education was yet again a culprit. By this time a new president, Premadasa was in power. His Commission on Youth drew attention to the discontinuities in education policy, and the changes and sometimes reversals of policy when governments changed. The Presidential Commission on Youth urged a definition of a national education policy as:

> one that will be liable to necessary alteration as changed circumstances may require, and as determined through national consensus, but not a policy to be affected by the vagaries of transient political majorities (Sessional Paper 1, 1990).

To take this forward it recommended that a new education policy formulation body - a National Education Commission (NEC) - be established.

4.2 The National Education Commission

The NEC was established in March 1991. Its purpose was to make recommendations and give advice to the president on the shape and content of national education policy. Up to that time the policy formulation function was the prerogative of the Ministry of Education. In parliament questions were raised about the need for a new policy-formulating body. However, the Bill was moved through by the powerful minister of education and higher education of the time, Lalith Athulathmudali, who described it as 'one of the most important bills in the history of education in this country' (quoted in de Silva, 2003:8). Moreover:

> The bill received the support of the opposition and was passed without a division, indicating that a consensus had been reached across the political divide on the need for a consensus on education policy (de Silva, 2003:8).

Designed to formulate national education policy and make recommendations to the president 'with a view to ensuring continuity in educational policy and enabling the education system to respond to changing needs in society' (NEC Act, section 8.1), the Act conferred a new legal meaning on the concept of national education policy. 'It no longer meant the education

policy that the ruling party or the government in power thinks is good for the nation' (de Silva, 2003:9).

The NEC was intended to be a policy formulation body that would act independently of the swings of political power. The commission would be appointed for a period of five years and would report directly to the president who retained ultimate power over which recommendations to implement. The membership of the NEC and its mandate were accepted by both the government in power and the opposition, but not before some detailed negotiations over the draft membership list. According to sources close to the process the initial list of members, included 'the usual political cadgers' (Interview with author). Intensive back-room activity resulted in a more balanced membership with at least two members with professional expertise in education and with a broad range of interests and backgrounds, from different ethnic groups, from urban and rural areas. Continuity between the views and aspirations of the Presidential Commission on Youth and the newly-formed NEC was secured by the appointment of the chair of the National Youth Commission as the inaugural chair of the NEC.

Shortly after its establishment the NEC consulted the public in the capital Colombo and in the 'outstations', through a series of public hearings. A large number of representations were made in person and in writing. As the former NEC chair recalled:

> Even members of parliament and leaders of all political parties came and gave evidence in front of me. I felt privileged to listen to them…The left party, the right party, the SLFP. They had a common cause…They saw it as a timely reform because until that time education was driven by an old ordinance…they saw the country not developing, even though education had been around for a long time. In far away places it was very bad… they gave very constructive suggestions. One person even came and cried. He said: 'I don't want my children to sit for this scholarship exam, grade 5. But the school is pressing them'. It was a kind of league tables like thing. He said 'please spare me the agony, we want our children to grow up here in our environment. I want my children to flourish here'. This was in Maho (Interview with author).

In May 1992 the NEC produced its first report in which nine national goals for education were set out, proposals made, issues and problems raised and priorities for action outlined (NEC, 1992). It reaffirmed a commitment to providing 'educational opportunities from childhood to old age' and the provision of a 'basic education and initiation into a variety of selected skills … to enable the individual to contribute culturally, socially, politically and economically'. Reflecting the conditions of unrest out of which the NEC had been formed, an overriding goal for the country was 'the achievement of national cohesion, national integrity and national unity'. This and other goals for national development were accompanied by lists of general and specific competencies that the education system could be expected to foster in support of them (NEC, 1992:5,7,11). This document was publically available from the Government Publications Bureau.

In 1993 the NEC produced a shorter follow-on document titled *Towards a National Education Policy (NEP).* The NEP set out six objectives for education, the principal features of an education system deigned to meet these objectives, and aspects of education in need of reforms. It also promised that 'a new Education Act supported by new Regulations embracing all aspects of Education will be promulgated to the meet the present day needs (NEC, 1993:3). The first objective was the 'democratisation of education to ensure universal and

equal access to educational opportunity' (NEC, 1993:1). This document enjoyed only limited circulation.

The main NEC policy actors in the formulation stage were a mix of administrators and educators. They dominated the policy discourse and produced the policy texts. There were university professors with knowledge about particular subjects in higher education and other educators with passionate interests in secondary and primary education. There were former university professors with specialised knowledge of education. There were experienced education administrators and managers and experts in teacher education and curriculum development and *ex-officio* members from relevant Ministries such as Education, Finance and Planning and the University Grants Commission.

4.3 Presidential Whim and Education Policy

Notwithstanding the considerable effort made by NEC members to listen to the views of the public through various consultation mechanisms, the process of policy formulation has been described as elitist, top-down and authoritative rather than pluralist and participatory (Wickramanayake, 2009). This approach was reinforced by the growing powers of the executive president. During his executive presidency Premadasa held the portfolios for education and higher education between 1992 and 1993. So much had the power of the presidency grown since the change of constitution in 1972 that, notwithstanding the creation in 1991 of a national education formation body (the National Education Commission): education policy was also subject to political whim.

A former secretary to the Ministry of Education and Higher Education recalls how the president sometimes took policy decisions 'even of great financial magnitude, virtually on the spur of the moment' (Pieris, 2002:591-592). The case in point was a quick-fire decision of President Premadasa in 1992 to introduce free school uniforms for all school children with effect from 1993. It is worth quoting at length:

> I had to leave for Polonnaruwa for the free school book distribution ceremony to be held at Bakamuna…At these functions the secretary had no particular role to play except sit there for three hours on the main stage. Therefore I did not even bother to take my spectacles along, leaving it behind in the hotel…Everything proceeded smoothly until the project minister for education services began speaking. The president's speech was to follow… Suddenly I saw the president looking back… I quickly got up and went to him. He seemed elated at the largeness of the crowd and their response. He said 'I want to give free school uniforms to the children from next year. Each one would require at least two sets isn't it? I was completely stunned, but stammered 'To all?'. He said 'yes'. I had the presence of mind to say 'but there are 4.2 million children'. He said, 'in that case we can make it one uniform,' and continued, 'Can you work out the costs?' 'When? I inquired. What he said to this would have killed me if I had a weak heart, 'Now' replied the president, 'I want to announce it in my speech!' That was President Premadasa. He went on the basis that nothing was impossible and many a public servant was faced with an impossible deadline. This day it seemed to be my turn. I walked back to my seat in a daze…Fortunately one of my accountants who happened to be standing at the back of the stage had with him a calculator…In the end we got the figure of approximately 700 million rupees…I walked quickly up to the president, gave him the figure, but warned him that there could be up to a 20% margin of error. He appeared startled at the cost indicated and said 'can't be so much'. The next minute he had to get up to

speak, but he was now more cautious. To the vast cheers of the multitude he announced that 'With effect from next year I will also try my best to give one set of school uniforms free to every child once a year.' The people cheered so loud and so long the effect was clearly visible on the president's face, that I knew there was no going back…The die was cast (Pieris, 2002:589-591).

Given the magnitude of finance involved, the distribution of cotton material for school uniform to the parents of each and every child in school, irrespective of the means of the household, must surely count as a policy. It is a striking example of spur of the moment policy-making by the president alone. It is thoroughly consistent with what we have described already, the belief held by politicians that they have the right to immerse themselves deeply in education - from spur of the moment decisions affecting millions of children to the day-to- day implementation of education, most conspicuously (though often covertly) through the appointment, deployment, transfer and promotions of teachers and education officers.

4.4 Change of Government, Continuation of Process

In 1994 a new left of centre government and a new president, Chandrika Kumaratunge, came to power. The formulation of the National Education Policy was a priority of the new government. To the surprise of some, the NEC survived the change of government and continued with its work. As one education officer commented:

> In most developing countries, when the government changes the education policies and reform are also changed. But in our country for the first time the president followed the recommendations done by a commission of an earlier government. This was a very good indication of the strong desire to do a real reform in education. I admired that (Interview with author).

The new president worked closely with her minister of education, a former school teacher, and asked the NEC to move forward on its recommendations. By this time the policy machinery for education reform in place in the country comprised a number of institutions. The NEC held a clear mandate for policy formulation. The mandates for other institutions were much less clear. In matters of both policy formulation and policy implementation the position of the Ministry of Education had been weakened over the years in part because of the establishment of the NEC and in part because of the 1987 constitutional amendment which had devolved considerable planning, finance and implementation responsibilities to the provinces, at least on paper. The dividing line between planning and policy is a fine one in the best of circumstances, and, in the early years of devolution at least, the provincial education department staff continued to look to the national ministry for guidance on both policy and planning in the traditional way. Over time, provincial education staff would find themselves caught in ever more complex webs of relationships within the provinces. A provincial director of education was answerable to the national ministry and to the national minister(s) of education, to the provincial secretary for education, to the chief provincial secretary, and to the provincial minister of education (often, but not always, the chief minister in the province). In the case of the planning of primary education in a province, responsibility lies formally somewhere between the provincial primary education coordinator, the provincial education planning officer, who are each in turn subject to the higher authority of their provincial director, provincial secretary and chief secretary, provincial politicians,

national ministry directors of primary and planning, national ministry secretaries and additional secretaries and national-level politicians.

The role of the NIE, established in 1986 as the flagship institution for, *inter alia,* curriculum development and teacher education, also became unclear. Echoing the ambiguity of roles and multiple lines of authority outlined above, Wikramanayake describes the tensions experienced by the NIE:

> Considerable misunderstanding has been caused by a lack of clarity in the functions and purposes of each body, and an overlapping of functions has caused tension and rivalry between them. For instance, research in educational studies is carried out by the National Institute of Education, the National Education Commission, the National Education Research and Evaluation Centre, and the ministry. Curriculum used to be the domain of the National Institute of Education, but more recently the ministry and the Department of Examinations have wanted to get involved in curriculum, while it is the National Education Commission that decides on changes in the curriculum (Wikramanyake, 2009:78).

Duplication of functions between the national agencies with responsibilities for education, duplication of functions across the ministry, the provincial ministry and departments, and long chains of command within and between the ministry and the provincial authorities led to the creation of a management structure that was inefficient and obsolete (de Silva, 2004). Taken together these duplications and ambiguities created policy voids between the national institutions and planning voids between the national and the provincial institutions (Little, 2003).

Amidst the ambiguities, the voids and the lack of coordination, there was a growing feeling on the part of the president that the existing institutions were doing 'business as usual' (Interview with author) and were not generating the results expected by the new president. By September 1995 the NEC produced *An Action Oriented Strategy Towards a National Education Policy* (AOSTNEP). The strategy was organised around five policy areas: extending educational opportunity, quality improvement in education, the teaching profession, technical and practical skills education, and the management of education and resource provision. The NEC's text failed to address:

> educational policy in all its aspects enabling the education system to respond to changing needs in society… the NEC had, for the second time, fought shy of coming to grips with the more critical and controversial issues in education, without reaching a consensus on which a NEP was a pure dream' (de Silva, 2003:15-16).

In his view, the more critical and controversial issues bedevilling education in Sri Lanka were the medium of instruction, the role of the private sector, the need to de-politicise teacher recruitment and transfers, and the procedures for the upgrading of schools (de Silva, 2003:13).

Still there was no policy text that had been debated in parliament and no steps had been taken to enact new legislation for education.

4.5 The Presidential Task Force on General Education

New momentum was given to the process of policy formulation by the president through the appointment of a Presidential Task Force for General Education in December 1996. Task forces were also established for tertiary education, and for technical education and vocational training. In the appointment of each of these task forces the president employed her considerable powers for educational progress.

The Task Force on General Education comprised a general committee and twelve technical committees with a mandate to create an action plan for the education reforms. To give the work of the task force added force, the president declared 1997 as the Year of Education Reforms. The task force was chaired by the minister of education and higher education and two deputy ministers were also members. Membership of the task force was drawn from among those already in senior positions in key institutions, including secretary to the ministry, the chair of the NEC and the director general of the NIE. On the predicament facing the president at this time, de Silva (2003) comments:

> It would not be difficult to understand the predicament the *Strategy Towards a Policy* document placed the president in. It provided her with neither a comprehensive policy framework that could form the basis of a national consensus, nor a strategy for achieving such a consensus. From the time she assumed office she had been telling the country that her government will bring about necessary reforms in education that will enable the country to meet the challenges of the 21st century, and she could not wait any longer. Her attention therefore shifted to a plan of action for immediate implementation by her government…The task force was given three months to submit its proposals (de Silva, 2003:17).

The task force's general committee met only twice - first to appoint the technical committees and second to consider their reports. The 12 technical committees comprised professionals handpicked for their technical expertise in different areas. In the case of primary education, a veteran of the earlier 1972 reforms, Ms Kamala Peiris, was invited to lead an 80-strong technical committee on primary and pre-primary education. Her team, handpicked largely by herself, comprised educators from the NIE, subject advisors from the provinces and practising primary teachers. Each technical committee adopted its own consultative process. In the case of primary education this included consultations with parents, teachers, and in-service advisors. This was a largely apolitical process in which technical committees worked through their own *modus operandi* and reported through the chair to the president. The president's role was central and crucial.

Less central was the secretary to the ministry. The nature of his involvement in the task force and in other meetings that would lead, ultimately, to the 1997 reforms is indicative of just how far the ministry had relinquished its role as policy formulator. On the one hand the NEC had been handed the policy formulation mandate in 1991; and on the other the provincial ministries and departments had been empowered with the day-to-day running of education since provincial devolution in 1988. The secretary saw his role as that of running the system rather than changing it. Recollecting his involvement in the 1997 reforms, he said:

> It is true I was there from 1992 to 1997 but what happened was that the secretary as you know has to run the system. And unless meetings are fixed in consultation with him or her, whoever is the secretary, you find last minute notices of meeting. It becomes impossible to go because you are required in parliament, you are required to

write to the president, you are required by so many actors and stake holders and in addition to the daily number of people coming to see you and the paper, and the deadlines and the projects and the foreign related issues, whether it's the Asian Development Bank or World Bank or United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific or whoever. So with all that, what really happened was I was not able really to get involved in the reform and maybe make my contribution in the way I would have liked. They did keep me informed, but what they do is, they send a fax and say there is a meeting taking place tomorrow at 3 o'clock. Now tomorrow at 3 o'clock I am (already scheduled to be) at a parliamentary committee. So you see because of…the way it was handled, particularly I suppose it may be because of the pressures from the president and so on to expedite matters. My impression is that the secretary didn't play that much of a role because of these constraints (Interview with author).

Presidential pressure would subsequently be described by the NEC as 'strong political will and commitment at the highest level' (NEC, 2003:16). The president used her considerable powers to push reform, to form task forces and to by-pass institutions that, hitherto, had not delivered what she wanted. Where did this strong political will come from?

4.6 The President's Political Will

Those directly involved in the work of the Task Force recall the president's leadership of the process, her invitations to breakfast meetings at her official home - Temple Trees - and her genuine interest in education. It was said by more than one interviewee that the president's children were at the time being educated in an English-medium international school in Colombo, and she is thought to have wanted all the country's children to have access to a similarly high-quality education. Political will and determination pervaded not only the formulation of the reform proposals but also the process of translating these into action.

Throughout the process a presidential advisor on education, who was also the NEC's vice chair for policy, was a key player. She mobilised the technical committees, ensured the active involvement of the NEC, and kept the president closely informed of and involved in all steps of the process. It is generally agreed that she played an extremely important role in maintaining momentum as the reforms moved from formulation to implementation.

The presidential advisor spoke of the president's 'huge passion for education' and her concern that although access to education was good there was a 'void' in terms of quality. The president was concerned that, despite Sri Lanka's good international ratings in the league tables on literacy, there were still children unable to read and write even at the age of 10 or 11:

> There was urgency on her part. I always knew when people have a soft spot for certain things. Well she always had a soft spot for education (Interview with author).

Widely read, the president was familiar with Tony Blair's views and very committed to bringing in change in education. Others referred to the president's earlier interest in education during her time as chief minister of the Western Province, while still others referred to her first-hand experience of the political and personal costs of the youth insurgencies. Her late husband, Vijaya Kumaratunge, a charismatic film star-cum-politician had been assassinated in the late 1980s by the JVP.

The presidential 'thrust' was a turning point for education:

> The president started attending task force meetings, chaired them herself, the minister and everybody was there in attendance and she used to call in the provincial chief ministers also off and on but fairly regularly to discuss and get things pushed. So it was a very important thing for us also because we were seeing the educational reforms that we proposed getting under way (Interview with author).

While the personal interest and commitment was palpable, the political benefits of concerted action in education would also have played a role:

> Education is a subject that is very close to the hearts of lots of people, because they either have children or grandchildren or they went through this whole system themselves and the education system reaches right through the country. There are 10,000 schools right round the country, so that gives it a certain degree of public popularity on the one hand and also public reach for a politician (Interview with author).

There is no doubt that the president's direct involvement in the process of reform led to an acceleration of pace. The Compulsory Education Regulations, enforcing attendance of all children aged 5-14 which had been mooted several years earlier in the work of the NEC were finally steered through parliament and implemented with effect from 1 January 1998. Simultaneously the primary reforms were launched in a pilot district, that of the president's own constituency, Gampaha. Yet still the reports of the technical committees and a 10-page Executive Summary of these actions had no status in parliament.

> The furthest the proposals went was the Parliamentary Consultative Committee on Education. Only a brief note on the reforms was placed before it, as a comprehensive document was not available at the time … a more comprehensive document entitled Reforms in General Education was issued later in the year in the name of the NEC. This document, for some unknown reason, was not made public. A request by the Opposition for a full debate on the reforms went unheeded. This is, despite the minister having given an undertaking in parliament in February 1997 that the reforms will first be discussed in the Parliamentary Consultative Committee and the cabinet, and thereafter placed before parliament…The Education Reforms of 1997 did not, therefore, constitute National Education Policy as the reforms were (a) not based on a consensus which transcends party politics, and (b) no declaration was made by the president under section 2(1) of the NEC Act (de Silva, 2003:19).

Moreover, the authoritarian style through which the reform process was advanced and led by the president did not lead to 'buy-in' by bureaucrats and other stakeholders on whom so much of the reforms implementation would depend in the longer term. Resentment and discontent was experienced by many in the education bureaucracy (Wikramanayake, 2009: 120).

4.7 The Succession of Education Policy Texts

Between 1991, when the NEC was established, and 1998 at least six policy texts and 12 technical committee reports advocating education reform had been produced. These are summarised below in Box 1. Only the first - the *First Report of the National Education Commission* - was considered in parliament, but as a paper for discussion not as a policy for

enactment. Also, some existed only in rough draft for long periods of time before they were edited and printed in sufficient quantity for circulation to anyone other than their authors. Drafts that did begin to circulate were sometimes poorly edited and sprinkled with inconsistencies. Indeed, it was a matter of some frustration among members of the international aid community intent on melding their programmes for action within national policy, that clearly written text setting out the purpose and description of the proposed reforms was difficult to find in the Ministry of Education through which they negotiated most of their work.

Box 1 Key Policy Texts leading to the 1997 Reforms

1. *The First Report of the National Education Commission,* National Education Commission, Sessional Paper V, 1992

2. *Towards a National Education Policy*, National Education Commission, 1993

3. *An Action-Oriented Strategy towards a National Education Policy*, National Education Commission, 1995 (unpublished)

4. *National Education Policy: a framework for action on general education,* 1996, Ministry of Education and Higher Education

5. *Reforms in Education, National Education Commission,* 1997

6. *General Education Reforms, 1997* the Presidential Task Force on General Education, 1998 (unpublished)

7. *Reports* of twelve technical committees of the Presidential Task Force

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4.8 Tensions in the Education Policy Discourse

No policy text emerges without tensions, both among those mandated to develop and produce it and those who are consulted or who make their views heard during the process. In the case of the 1997 reforms these included, *inter alia,* tensions between political parties, between committee members and between government officers.

A first tension was between those who emphasised the role of general education as a selection mechanism for higher education for the few and those who emphasised general education as a terminal stage of education for the majority. In the view of some task force members, the universities exert 'undue influence' on general education. They try to define the content of secondary education curriculum, especially in the advanced level classes, to such an extent that:

> students find they have already covered at A level the material they are being offered at the university. This influence washes back on the O level as a result, and on to still lower levels. It prevents children from getting very valid experiences, life experiences…This Grade 5 scholarship exam is also a result of that pressure. Making the child at age eight going for tuition classes just to learn two or three areas is ruining that person's outlook and that is crucial (Interview with author).

A second tension surrounded the issue of language and alleged differences between political parties in their willingness to allow children of different ethnic groups to learn and live together. As we have seen already, educational provision in Sri Lanka has been segregated by language medium of instruction since colonial times. Post-independence policies on the medium of instruction changed the role of English as a medium of instruction for a few to a subject of study for all, reducing its symbolic power as the colonial sword (*kaduwa*) that cut society into shreds. However, the policy also led to an ethnic segregation of the entire education system by language, Sinhala and Tamil. In some regions where one or other language group dominated segregation arose by default. However, in urban multi-ethnic areas the segregation was artificial and enforced; and even in multi-ethnic schools, there was a considerable gulf between communities. The Presidential Task Force attempted to move forward on the language issue. While the president and others were strongly in favour of strengthening the role of English, both as a second language and as a medium of instruction, there remained opponents to a strengthening of English, an opposition that appealed to nationalist sentiments and the place of English in colonial times:

A third tension concerned the private sector. The president and her adviser were pro-private sector and would have liked to open up education to the private sector. Other members of the task force were strongly opposed and drew support from the socialist lobbies. The pro-private sector reforms 'never went anywhere' (Interview with author).

A fourth tension emerged in relation to differences of view over the powers, roles and functions of the institutions at the centre of government administration and those at the provincial level. Still very new, the devolution on paper of considerable powers of implementation to the provinces led to multiple interpretations of who could, and could not, do what.

The resolution of these tensions took different forms. In the case of the private sector, the anti-private sector views were sufficiently strong to ensure that no recommendations about the private sector would appear in the 1997 policy text. In the case of English as a medium of instruction the tensions and resistances continued into the implementation phase. Proposals and plans were made for English to be employed as a medium of instruction where possible and the introduction of English as a second language. Resistance continued to be met, sometimes political, sometimes technical. 'There were always critiques, there were always people trying to unroll that reform' (Interview with author).

In the case of the respective roles of the ministry and the provinces, the debate about their respective roles was resolved neither one way nor the other. It was not very clearly laid out in the policy reform programme and 'it continued to be an area of discussion and debate going forward' (Interview with author).

While the examples above reflect the tensions apparent among those who participated visibly in the policy formulation process, other tensions were apparent among those who did not participate in policy formulation. These silent views are important because even if they do not surface during policy formulation they often emerge during the phase of policy implementation. In Sri Lanka teachers' unions are rarely consulted for their views on macro-education policy, yet they represent the majority of the very teachers who are expected to implement change on the ground. Consultation with unions often amounts to little more than the presentation of information about a change of policy that has been decided already. The perception, if not the reality, of exclusion from the formulation process is strong:

> In formulating and drafting the general education reforms, teacher unions or individual teachers were never consulted. At any stage of the designing and implementation process we were never given an opportunity to question, interact or participate in the reforms that were to make a sea change in Sri Lankan school education. The whole process was parachuted from the top and from abroad to the ground (Ceylon Teacher's Union, written submission to the author, April 2009).

Lanka Guru Sangamaya is the major Ceylon Teachers' Union, of 50 years standing, linked with the Communist Party of Sri Lanka, and currently boasting a membership of 50,000 teachers. Union officials emphasised that the 1997 reforms were introduced largely to contain, rather than resolve, the crisis in education that had emerged through the 1980s. Many of the same challenges continued even after the 1997 reforms: acute shortages of qualified teachers for rural schools, inequalities and polarisations of resources, the lack of professional training, inefficiency, and corruption within the administration of education:

> Instead of tackling these problems one by one and introducing a clear, coherent, effective system, the reforms are just old and not so old ideas imported from India, Malaysia, Thailand, Japan, Korea, South Africa, and Europe (Ceylon Teacher's Union written submission to the author, April 2009).

For this teachers' union the most outstanding matters of concern were the 'undue influence' of national and provincial politicians in the appointment, transfer and promotion of teachers, and on school admissions (Interview with author).

4.9 The Reforms Outlined

A set of 19 reforms were set out in the 1997 General Education Reforms policy text. While their precise wording and classification vary slightly in subsequent texts, the wording and classification of the reforms adopted by the NEC (2003) is adopted here. Figure 2 sets out the reforms under three broad headings. The reforms intended to extend educational opportunity, embraced compulsory education, the equitable distribution of educational opportunities, school rationalisation, early childhood care and development, special education for children with disabilities, and non-formal education. A second broad set of reforms was related to the curricula in primary, junior secondary and senior secondary education. A third broad area related to teacher education and management.

Figure 2: The General Education Reforms 1997

Extending Educational Opportunity	
Compulsory education	• Introduce compulsory education regulations • Appoint school attendance committees • Appoint school attendance monitoring committees locally
Equitable distribution of educational opportunities	• Return to the 1940s model of central schools by ensuring that every division has high quality facilities for secondary education
School rationalisation	• Re-organisation of schools into junior (1-8/1-9) and senior (9/10-13)
Early childhood care and development	• Develop programme of home-based activities for children with no access to pre-schools and day care centres • Expand provision of day care centres and pre-schools • Establish a child study centre in a university
Special education. children with disabilities	• Programmes to bring children with disability into the mainstream

Non formal education	• Act as lead agency to implement the compulsory education regulations • Provide education opportunities for out-of-school children
Curriculum and Related Reforms	
Primary education	• Child centred approach • Integrated curriculum across four subject areas - language, maths, religions and environment-related activities • Oral English introduced in G 1 and 2 for communication and formal English from G3 • Organisation of curriculum in three key stages KS1 (G1-2); KS2 (G3-4); KS3 (G5) • 3 teaching and learning processes, guided play, activity and desk work, with more play in KS1 and more desk work in KS5 • Identifying entry competencies to help teacher plan according to individual needs • Identifying essential learning competencies for each KS, to be assessed at the end of each KS • Class based assessment, school based management and continuous monitoring and supervision
Junior secondary education	• Curriculum changes in science and social studies • Life competencies replaces life skills • Activity rooms to be introduced and practical and technical skills emphasised • Introduce second national language • Strengthening of English programme
Senior secondary education	• G 10-11 identified as GCE O level grades instead of G 9-11 • Retention of 8 compulsory subjects with addition of technology to science and inclusion of literature as an option under aesthetic studies • Addition of 7 optional subjects from which 2 to be selected • G12-13. Reduction from 4 to 3 subjects to be offered at GCE A Level • Common general paper to be passed for admission to university • biology replaced botany and zoology; Combined maths and higher maths replaced pure and applied maths • Practical components introduced to agriculture, and sciences and projects/assignments in other subjects with school based assessments • General English made a compulsory subject in both G12 and G13 • Technology stream to be introduced geared to agriculture, industry and information sciences • 80% compulsory attendance proposed • New facilities
Teacher Education and Management	
	• Revision of teacher education curricula to support the curriculum changes in general education • Teacher appraisal system • School based management to be strengthened and amendment of the 1992 Act, Creation of school development boards • Restructuring of the administrative framework and clarification of the 'grey areas' created by devolution of responsibility under the 1987 13th amendment to the constitution

Source: abstracted from NEC (2003)

The reforms outlined in 1997 were comprehensive and ambitious. While they did not tackle what some have judged to be critical and controversial - the medium of instruction, the

private sector and teacher politicisation - they would still face considerable implementation challenges. It should also be clear by now that the proposals had a very long gestation period. While the 1972 reforms were drafted very quickly in the wake of the youth insurrection in 1971, the 1997 reforms would take a full eight years to emerge after the end of the insurrection of 1987-1989.

5. The 1997 Policy Implementation Process

Once formulated and produced as text, policies need to be implemented. A range of actors set about making sense over what they think the reforms are about and decide whether and how to translate their understandings into action. The descriptions of the reforms sat in documents produced by the Ministry of Education, the NEC and the NIE. These were usually available in Sinhala, and less often in Tamil and English. Moreover, where available, they were usually printed in small quantities. Rarely were the reforms set out in simple language or with messages for the benefit of teachers, parents and children. When guidance notes were prepared for teachers they were usually produced in batches of 10,000, the approximate number of schools in any one year, overlooking the fact that there were 200,000 teachers who needed to become aware of the reforms if they were to implement them.

5.1 The Education Reforms Implementation Unit

While progress towards tangible change on the ground was very slow in the first half of the 1990s, the continued and committed interest of the president in the second half of the decade created huge pressures for change. The Presidential Task Force and its 12 technical committees had injected new life into the policy formulation process and the creation of a set of action plans. Thereafter, a special Education Reforms Implementation Unit (ERIU) was established in the ministry to spearhead policy implementation.

The challenge now was to find a person of sufficient seniority and experience to spearhead the implementation process. A former secretary to the Ministry of Education had expressed some interest in the reforms to an old friend of his, the vice chair (planning) of the NEC. In seemingly no time at all he was quickly invited to head the ERIU at the level of director-general. He recalls having accepted the invitation:

> on the basis that there was a reform document which will be placed before parliament and before the people. I am being very frank here and have said this in many newspaper articles. Because the whole purpose of having a National Education Commission was to ensure that we have continuity in policies, we can't just pop and go things. I have seen enough of this happening from the time of the 1981 White Paper. There has to be a consensus, basic agreement, not on everything but the fundamentals, so that we don't waste our time, energy or money. No reform is better than reforms that go up and down and mess up the whole system. Because I was given the impression that that would happen I accepted. Then I was told 'OK, set up your own establishment' (Interview with author).

The new director general had questioned whether a new unit needed to be established in the national institution responsible for educational policy implementation. Those driving the change from outside the ministry felt that a large ministry, accustomed to handling the day-to-day bureaucratic matters of educational administration could not rise to the implementation challenges posed by the extensive education reforms. The director general was particularly wary of creating a separate, parallel administration, not least because he had been secretary earlier and would not have liked to have had a separate unit established to do what he, as secretary, was mandated to do. The NEC's response was twofold. A separate unit was needed in order to give momentum to the process of implementation; and secondly, since a re-organisation of the ministry was part of the reforms programme he was told 'we want you to handle that too'.

The new director general reasoned that he could do the job by working through the mainstream institutions and key persons from the ministry and the NIE rather than by setting up a 'separate empire':

> I will work through these people because that separate empire has to go one day. But the programmes have to remain. And the only thing is I want to work in the ministry office. I don't want to be at the NEC. I don't want to be away from the people who are doing it (Interview with author).

One of his first challenges was to persuade the president to pilot some of the reforms. Together with the chair of the Presidential Task Force's (PTF) technical committee on early childhood he argued for a pilot of the comprehensive primary education reform. Although not himself an educator, his years of public administration experience and his field experience heading up a pilot programme in 'life skills' education from the ministry convinced him that island-wide implementation of complex reforms *ab initio* would be a mistake.

> Now this is the mistake that a lot of us do. We don't realise that these political timetables or whatever do not work. So I said nothing doing, you must have a pilot project… But then the president was committed to all this. Believe me, it can be on record, they were not prepared to change because they said the president may not like it…I said you can do one of two things. You can go and tell the president that I am not prepared to take this project on that basis…or give me a chance of meeting the president. I am sure if I explain to her she will understand that. She's no fool. But there is no need for me to go to her if you can convince her. Otherwise tell her I am going. I am not prepared to. I have not committed myself yet. I will leave, let them find another person. So because I took a tough stand, they agreed to a pilot project (Interview with author).

The second challenge was financial. While the PTF technical committee had designed detailed activity plans, they had not costed these plans. The primary education programme's goals and comprehensive sets of activities are described well by Peiris and Nanayakkara (2000). No money had been set aside for re-designing classrooms to accommodate the activity benches, sinks and the running water outlined in the plans. An *ad hoc* solution needed to be found. The president identified some money that was left over from a programme in her electorate, the district of Gampaha. So Gampaha came to be chosen for the one-year pilot implementation. Considerable activity and media interest followed. Much of the detail of the programme's implementation was left to the director of primary education in the NIE.

The head of the ERIU became disillusioned; less with the technical detail of the programme which he felt was being handled well by the NIE and rather more with the political economy of the reforms, their acceptance to the general public and the underlying management structures to take the reforms forward. Among his concerns was the absence of progress in the movement of a 'composite' document for national discussion. While primary education was thought unlikely to generate much resistance, aspects of the secondary reforms, especially those concerning medium of instruction and subject boundaries were more likely to court controversy. There needed to be basic agreement between the two major players when a government changes. A composite document needed to be taken to parliament. Moreover, there had still been little movement in securing money for the reforms in the longer term.

> There was no money voted. Although I was told: "oh, we'll get a lot of funds, foreign aid, this and that", nothing came…I had to fight tooth and nail to get the money that was promised to me from Gampaha…the money was tied and the Treasury…you know, it's very difficult even when monies are voted in the budget. The Treasury can release monies only if there is liquidity…If income tax and customs and all these government revenues do not flow in, today you can ask for the 50 million rupees that is provided for in the budget but they will say 'no money, wait for some time'. Cash has to come. Not mere paper provision… I had to throw the president's name around with Treasury officials….They had some respect for me because I am a senior guy. So I had to throw my weight around with my juniors to get the money because I wanted the job done. You can't go on like that (Interview with author).

In order to anticipate some of the implementation challenges that lay ahead the director general commissioned an early evaluation of the reforms programme. This was conducted by a respected outsider with whom the director general had worked previously. The evaluator remarked:

> The Sri Lanka Education Reform Programme is without doubt one of the most far-reaching ever to have been launched in any country. It leaves virtually no facet of the education system untouched - from the organisational structures in the Ministry of Education and Higher Education and the National Institute of Education at the centre, through to the committees linking schools to the communities they serve at the periphery; and from the changes to Grade 1 and 2 curricula for the youngest pupils just entering school, through to the changes to A level examination syllabi, for the oldest pupils about to complete their pre-university education. At first sight the numerous components making up the Programme may appear heterogeneous. Closer analysis, however, reveals a linking theme: many if not most of them have as one of their main objectives an increased involvement of relatively junior stakeholders in decision making and problem solving…the overarching objective of moving towards a more participatory education system is one which can only be applauded (Somerset, 1998:62).

Ambitious reform programmes confront constraints of time, finance and human resource as well as political will. In the case of the primary education programme, the pilot year in Gampaha was judged to be likely to yield substantial learning benefits for those responsible for moving the programme to scale, country-wide. However, most of the reform components were not planned to include a period of pilot implementation. This absence of a learning phase, combined with the fact that many of those with responsibilities for design and implementation were assuming roles of responsibility for the first time in their careers, was a cause of some concern (Somerset, 1998:63). Of concern too was the absence in the early stages of detailed financial planning and raising of funds for all of the components of the programme. The commitment of the human resource - the change agents - was a crucial element.

> Even if sufficient funding is available and realistic time schedules have been set, a reform programme will fail unless knowledgeable and committed change agents are available, in sufficient numbers at all levels of the education system from the central programme designers to the teachers in the classroom (Somerset, 1998:64).

Identifying the central 'change agent' role to be played by supervisory teachers, or 'master teachers' as they were known in several of the reform components, Somerset (1998) asked

whether master teachers would be available in sufficient numbers to carry out the tasks expected of them and whether they were expected to focus at any one time on a limited or broad set of objectives. Were there sufficient professional development programmes to equip the master teachers to contribute effectively to the reform initiatives and for their role as teacher educators? Were there in place effective feedback mechanisms to promote two-way communication between teachers and project designers? Intended as an agenda of questions in support of the future implementation process, Somerset also urged a positive commitment to learning by all levels of implementor:

> When it comes to bringing about major reforms in an organisation as complex as an education system, there are no experts, but only practitioners - some more effective than others. And the most effective practitioners are those who are still learners (Somerset, 1998:64).

After little more than a year the director general resigned. The intrinsic complexity of the reforms and difficulties experienced in raising funds for even the pilot programme in primary education were simply too frustrating and challenging for a man of his considerable ability and experience.

5.2 Resources for Policies and Plans

The frustration experienced by the first director general of the ERIU in securing financial resources illustrates well the point that the term 'policy' has little meaning, bar ritual, if it is not also accompanied by detailed plans for implementation and allocated resources (Little, 2008). In Sri Lanka the allocation of financial resources was complicated further by provincial devolution. From 1988, and as a result of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, responsibility for the financing and implementation of education plans lay in the hands of the provinces. Up to this point, however, all the work on plans had been undertaken by the technical committees of the PTF, and this work had focussed on activities and not resources. In the case of primary education, this would be remedied through a planning exercise run from the ministry in collaboration with the provincial ministries and departments of education and the Department for International Development (DFID) of the UK Government. This resulted in detailed activity and financial plans for the development of primary education, based on the PTF proposals and covering a period of five years from 2000. Eight provincial plans and one national plan were developed in all three national languages, Sinhala, Tamil and English. However, detailed activity and financial plans for the other reforms recommended by the PTF did not emerge.

5.3 Change Agents on the Move

A significant feature of the implementation process of the reforms was the 'role-changes' of key policy actors over time. As the process rolled forward key actors changed their roles from that of policy formulator to that of policy implementor, while others adopted dual roles of formulator and implementor.

As described earlier, the chair of the 1989 Presidential Commission on Youth became in 1991 the director general of the NEC. A few years later he was also invited to become the director general of the NIE while still chairing the NEC. While some felt this would necessarily involve some conflict of interests, and was the subject of a question in parliament, the chair himself regarded the dual role as advantageous for implementation:

> I could talk with confidence about the ground situation. If not for that I would not have seen what was happening. Having it like a curtain around me, this gave me an advantage. And what I was saying had validity in that sense, in my commission. So I could even see the gaps that were emerging and take some action and advice.We did something about the English language scores, about teacher education and about practical and other aspects of education. All these were possible, I think, because of this nexus I had developed between the two (Interview with author).

As we have also seen already, a former secretary to the Ministry of Education in the 1980s was invited to join the ministry in 1997 as director general ERIU. Even though he resigned from this position in 1998 he remained deeply interested in education reform and in 2002 he acted as an observer to the Standing Committee on General Education of the NEC.

A former director of education became secretary to the NEC in the 1990s before taking up the role of special adviser in the ministry and *de facto* head of the ERIU. He would be joined at the ministry by the presidential adviser, with whom he had worked when she was the vice chair (policy) of the NEC. She became the secretary to the ministry of education in 2000. Key to the overall vision of the reform she now held a strategic position in the implementation process:

> In September 2000 I moved to the ministry as the secretary by which time of course most of the reforms were on board and much progress had been done but it helped at that time to move in as secretary because, as the secretary as you know you are the chief accounting officer, you are the CEO so lot of things that didn't get implemented because bureaucratic debates, I was able to facilitate and play a fairly important role (Interview with author).

Together with the head of the ERIU they were able to give the implementation process new momentum. As the head of ERIU recalled 'it was a good combination' (Interview with author).

Other moves were afoot as well. A university professor who had been a member of the assessment and examinations PTF technical committee moved to the Ministry of Education as an additional secretary in charge of educational development, with responsibility for implementing the reforms, alongside the director general ERIU. His successor was a secondary school teacher of physics and chief examiner who worked subsequently at the NIE as the director of primary education at the time of the 1997 reforms. He was later a member of the PTF technical committee on Early Childhood Education. In 2002 he moved to the ministry as additional secretary for educational development.

A former director of primary education in 1972 'retired' from public service formally in the 1980s but continued to work relentlessly for the benefit of primary education in Sri Lanka. She worked with foreign-funded primary education projects through the 1980s and 1990s, set up an NGO, sits on numerous committees including the NEC, and chairs the technical committee on early childhood education of the Presidential Task Force. In 2002 she took a World Bank-funded position in the NIE to support the work of the primary education group.

These mini biographies illustrate the density of professional networks in the public administration of education. By 1999-2000 a tight knit group of colleagues, several of whom had worked together in various roles, had moved from positions of influence in policy formulation to policy implementation.

They also indicate the importance of analysing policy formulation processes *over time*. Snapshots in time may identify current relationships between policy actors but they fail to capture historical relations between the same actors, and the fact that the same actors have adopted a range of roles related to both policy formulation and policy implementation over time. The practice of policy can influence policy reforms as much as reforms can affect practice, but this happens over time.

The academic literature on policy formulation and implementation includes a debate about the extent to which policy cycles - from formulation to implementation to institutionalisation and to evaluation - are linear or mutually interactive:

> One interpretation of the challenge to the linear, sequential policy cycle is to view everything and everyone as mutually interactive in space. Policy formulators influence policy implementers; policy implementers influence policy formulators. This view certainly resonates with policy practices as experienced on the ground. However it is also important to recognise that continuous as well as staged processes, multi-directional as well as linear processes are locked in to the logic of time. *Time moves forward*. While practices influence policy as much as policies influence practices, it is practices at time X that influence policy at time X+1, and policies at time X+1 that impact on practice at time X+2. Policies at time X+1 do not impact on practice at time X (except in so far as a policy actor's anticipation of a future policy might influence his/her practice at time X). (Little, 2008a:26)

Not only does time move forward, but as we have seen above, key policy actors move forward in time, some taking their earlier experiences as policy formulators with them to implementation and others taking theirs as policy implementers with them to policy formulation.

6. The Evaluation of the 1997 Reforms Implementation

An extensive evaluation of the implementation of the 1997 reforms was undertaken by the NEC in 2002, as part of a major sectoral review of general education (NEC, 2003). The NEC's Standing Committee on General Education and several subcommittees undertook a situation analysis, an evaluation of the effectiveness of the implementation of reforms introduced and a public consultation 'to obtain views and proposals from the general public, institutions and organisations (NEC, 2003:i). The evaluation was based on 23 studies commissioned from experts who were not themselves involved directly in the implementation of the reforms. Evidence on the primary reforms was drawn from studies undertaken by the National Educational Research and Evaluation Centre (NEREC). All of these studies were supplemented by 300 written submissions from the public and oral submissions from 39 organisations/individuals. The studies are synthesised comprehensively by the NEC in their *Proposals for a National Policy Framework on General Education in Sri Lanka* (NEC, 2003).

Those evaluations are synthesised here and are supplemented by original material gleaned from interviews with policy implementers and evaluators. While the reforms were far-reaching and embraced senior secondary education as well as early childhood education, this paper focuses on those reforms having the most direct bearing on meaningful access to basic education - (i) extending educational opportunity and (ii) curriculum renewal, quality and relevance.

Two proposals designed to extend educational opportunity were moved into the implementation phase in advance of the 1997 reforms. Both had featured in the proposals outlined in the document *Towards a National Educational Policy* (NEC, 1993). The first was legislation for compulsory education and the second was the creation of centres of excellence for junior and secondary education in rural areas. The latter had been outlined as a proposal for reform since 1989 in the report of the Presidential Commission on Youth.

6.1 Extending Educational Opportunity

Although the Education Ordinance no. 31 of 1939 provided enabling legislation on compulsory education the regulations were never enacted. Given the very high level of school enrolment in 1992, one would not have thought that compulsory education legislation would have encountered many obstacles. However, obstacles were there, and they emanated not from political parties or politicians or employer groups, but from a minority view from within the commission itself. The proposal moved 'to and fro' within the commission. As one commission member recalls it was 'one step forward and two steps back'. Eventually it was moved through to parliament where it encountered no resistance. Legal regulations, 'made in the furtherance of the National policy of the state to provide education for all children' were finally enacted in 1997 with effect from January 1998.

The regulations provided for the appointment of two local level committees - a school attendance committee and a school attendance monitoring committee. Based on a list of names of non-school going children provided by village administrators the school attendance committee was empowered to 'conduct inquiries, instruct parents to admit children to schools, grant exemptions where reasonable, monitor progress after three months, and report non attendance to the School Attendance Monitoring Committee' (NEC, 2003).

Perera's evaluation (2004) suggested that by 1999 large numbers of committees had been established but did not meet regularly; by 2000 most had ceased to function. A number of reasons were advanced for this disappointing outcome, including the

> lack of involvement by the Provincial education authorities, the failure to appoint convenors for the committees and the reliance chiefly on the Non Formal Education Division of the central ministry (NEC, 2003:20).

Nonetheless, Perera (2004) suggests that enrolment rates increased and dropout rates decreased in the period after 1998, though the rates among those living in low income communities, remote rural areas, plantations and conflict affected areas continued to give rise to concern.

6.1.1 Equitable Distribution of Educational Opportunities

The 1989 report of the Presidential Commission on Youth recommended an upgrading of facilities for junior and senior secondary education in rural areas to reduce educational disparities. In many ways this proposal harked back to the 1940s and the creation of central schools that offered the chance to rural children to move from small vernacular-medium primary schools to higher status secondary schools with good facilities. Many Sri Lankans born in rural areas, including many who would subsequently rise to senior policy positions in government, had benefited.

In the early 1990s the new scheme was launched as the Improvement of Schools by Division (ISD). Well funded, it targeted for development 297 junior secondary schools and 62 senior secondary schools. These, it was hoped, would become centres of excellence providing high quality education to children in living in rural, less privileged areas.

Implementation was interrupted by the change of government in 1994. The incoming People's Alliance Government (linked historically with the left-leaning SLFP) launched its own project - the Divisional Schools Development (DSD) Project with similar aims. The DSD Project was established in 1995 and targeted 347 schools according to criteria that were unclear:

> It was not merely a change of name from ISD to DSD which would hardly have mattered. There was a fresh selection of schools to be developed as centres of excellence…Only a few of the ISD schools were selected for development under the new project and I have no doubt that the previous selection had also been made on the recommendations made by politicians who belonged to the party that held power at the time. In a country where even nameboards have to be green or blue depending on who runs the government, could we expect even 'excellence' to be neutral in colour! (de Silva, 2006).

Progress was slower than expected and after the 1997 General Education Reforms some 134 of the 347 schools were identified for 'fast track' development. The project continued to attract the political will of the president and in mid-1999 a special unit was set up in the ministry under a senior administrator and was staffed by provincial coordinators. However, by 2001 the project was considered to have failed. The NEC noted that it was a matter for regret:

> that a project that was backed by political will and administrative support from 1997 to 2001 failed to produce a single 'centre of excellence'…the original Central Schools

had catered to the disadvantaged but the quality of education they had offered had facilitated upward mobility. On the contrary many DSD schools appear to be 'residual schools' that lack the capacity to compete with well equipped schools (NEC, 2003: 24).

So if political will at the highest level and strong ministry backing were present for the creation of centres of excellence across the country what was holding the programme back? In Kularatna's (2004) evaluation study school principals attributed the failure to a number of infrastructure, human resource, social and planning and management factors. The most frequently cited factor (mentioned by 40%) of principals was the absence of a proper system of supervision and progress monitoring of project implementation at ministry, provincial, divisional and school levels. Teacher shortages and the absence of specialist teachers were also cited by a sizeable number (32% and 27% respectively). Among the social factors cited were the preference by parents with adequate means to admit their children to urban schools rather than the rural DSD schools, the admission to DSD schools of children of a lower socio-economic status, political interference in the selection of project schools, and political interference in the allocation of resources to schools and school management.

The NEC's synthesis identified the 'intervention of extraneous factors in the selection of schools, principals and staff' as a 'fundamental flaw', where extraneous factors refer to 'political interference':

> Progress was stymied by the fact that several of the schools selected did not have the potential for accelerated development or were mired in a lethargic local policy environment. In this context the provision of inputs alone could not compensate for lack of strong commitment at local and school level and the inappropriate selection of schools. Inevitably, in the perceptions of parents and the community, many of the schools tend to be perceived to be the refuge of the vulnerable poor rather than centres of excellence that could provide a base for educational and socio-economic advancement (NEC, 2003:24).

Crucially the provincial authorities were not on board. The project was directed from the centre. The provinces felt no sense of ownership for the project and made no special provision in the allocation of teachers to these schools. It would seem then that political will at the highest level, backed up by a strong bureaucracy at the centre, are insufficient conditions for implementation on the ground. Political will at the highest level contends with political interference at the lowest levels which in turn influences the quality of persons chosen to lead initiatives on the ground. At the same time political interference has a demotivating effect on those who have not been singled out for political favours and who are then expected to implement new programmes.

6.1.2 School Restructuring and Rationalisation

The proposal to restructure and rationalise the school system stemmed from a desire to simplify the complex array of schools:

> At present there are schools with classes Year 1-13, 6-13, 1-5 and 1-8 in various parts of the island. There are schools called 1AB schools which have science as well as other streams in their A-L classes and schools called 1C schools in which the A-L classes do not have science streams (PTF, 1997:28).

An early policy text on restructuring had proposed that schools be divided into junior schools (Grades 1-8) and senior schools (Grades 9-13) (NEC, 1995). Its authors reasoned that students would be more likely to stay in school if that school offered education up to Grade 8 than if they were required to make a transition from Grade 5 to Grade 6 in another location. They also reasoned that a division at Grade 8 would facilitate 'the growth of a school culture more suitable to the two different age groups' (NEC, 1995:5).

The ministry took steps in 1996 to instruct the provinces to begin work on re-structuring, justifying this instruction in terms of the need to rationalise the school network and reduce wastage of scarce resources (Wehella, 2001). The policy discourse used the terms school 'rationalisation' and school 'restructuring' almost simultaneously. In turn, both were closely related to school 'closure'. For many years Sri Lanka's system has been characterised by a large proportion of small schools, the majority of which are located in rural areas of low population density. In 1997, 26.3% of all schools had fewer than 100 students (Little, 2008b).

A proposal to close small schools had circulated within the Ministry of Education since 1996 and although it fell outside the NEC proposals (NEC, 2003:25) it ran in parallel with them. The proposal to close small schools and amalgamate them with nearby schools was also incorporated into the World Bank's General Education Project-2 from 1999 as part of its programme to increase internal efficiency and reduce the number of uneconomical units.

Early in 1997 the PTF changed the restructuring proposal from 1-8 and 9-13 to 1-9 and 10-13, for reasons that are unclear (PTF, 1997*)*. The NEC and the ministry issued guidelines to zonal directors and zonal education planners on school mapping and preparing the ground for the restructuring exercise. A supplementary circular was issued in March 1997 advising the provinces that if any serious inconvenience or hardship for pupils had resulted from the implementation of the previous circular then the provincial authority should take reasonable and proper action (Wehella, 2000).

During 1997 and 1998 the implementation of the restructuring met with community resistance and from local politicians concerned about school closures in their constituencies. A senior educator recalls her concerns:

> Closing down of schools was a thorny subject. I remember World Bank had a 'wrap up' meeting to which I was invited. They were talking about the 'success' in the closure of schools. Success rates, percentages…they were saying the central province was the best with 88% success or something. So I asked 'have you done any studies about how many children would have stopped going to school because of your closure of these schools?' They said 'no such study has been done'. I said 'don't you think that that is something that is necessary? Children don't go to schools because you are closing down schools. That is wrong because we want EFA. You are going against EFA when you are doing this'. So then they said 'we will make a study' but I don't think they made a study at all (Interview with author).

By 1999 the World Bank Review Mission recognised that the policy framework for the school restructuring programme required a revision of criteria that was sensitive to ethnicity, religion, and the cultural and historical background of schools, as well as cost effectiveness. A crucial factor in the call for this revision may have been the gradual realisation that the likely costs of re-structuring were prohibitive. The NEC's assessment of restructuring referred to the 'sheer impracticability of the scheme…the possibility of increased dropouts…wide opposition and an abortive pilot project in a Colombo suburb' (NEC, 2003:25). The NEC's assessment of the parallel proposal to close small schools was equally

damning. In an independent study of 351 schools that had been closed in seven provinces the NEC reported that, far from eliminating waste, the school closures had been extremely wasteful (NEC, 1993). Over half the school buildings had not been used for any other educational purpose while some had collapsed and others had been used for illegal activities. Only two thirds of the schools had another school within a two kilometre distance, implying that one third of the schools should not have been closed down and that the poorest communities had suffered:

> As the indiscriminate closure of small schools is a violation of the entitlement or the right to education of the most disadvantaged segment of the population, a deplorable wastage of educational resources, and a reversal of policies for 'Education for All' (EFA), the National Education Commission urged the ministry to suspend the closure of schools till the situation of each school could be examined by the officers and the community (NEC, 2003:26).

The circular was withdrawn in March 2003. Some fifteen years after the NEC's 1995 proposals for restructuring, the basic structure of the system remains more or less intact. Far from decreasing, the proportion of schools with enrolments of less than 100, had increased from 23.3% in 1993 to 30.2% in 2007 (Ministry of Education, 2008). Small schools now comprise almost one-third of all schools in Sri Lanka.

6.1.3 Early Childhood Care and Development

The model of access advocated by the Consortium for Research on Educational Access, Transitions and Equity (CREATE) suggests that participation in pre-school education increases participation and learning in primary and secondary education (Lewin, 2007). Expansion of early childhood care and education has been central to international goals for Education for All. At the international education conferences held in both Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990 and Dakar, Senegal, in 2000, EFA Goal 1 emphasised early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Early Childhood Care and Development Goals, Jomtien and Dakar.

Jomtien	Dakar
1. Expansion of early childhood care and developmental activities, including family and community interventions, especially for poor, disadvantaged and disabled children	1. Expansion and improvement of comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children

The 1997 General Education Reforms distinguish programmes for early childhood education from programmes for pre-school education. However, most of the subsequent discussion appears to revolve around access and lack of access to pre-schools. The PTF of 1997 recommended the provision of incentives to provincial councils and local authorities to set up and maintain pre-schools, legislative provision for the regulation of pre-schools, the design of curriculum guidelines and the establishment of a university department of child development and a child study centre.

In its evaluation, the NEC describes a number of initiatives that have been taken by non-governmental organisations (NGOs), private enterprise, the Children's Secretariat, the NIE,

and by at least three universities. Participation in educational institutions of 3-5 year old children has increased from an estimated 40% in 1994 to around 60% in 2001 (National Education Commission, 2003). Some 11,000 institutions offering pre-school or day care were thought to exist in 2001 compared with 2,000 in the 1970s, but almost half appear to be unregistered. The NEC suggests that many pre-schools diverge from a pedagogy based on learning through play to 'a structure modelled on formal schools with little flexibility and with an increasingly competitive ethos (NEC, 2003:28). Physical facilities were minimal, training of heads and teachers in institutions inadequate and monthly salaries low.

Overall, the provision of pre-schools and day care centres was judged to have been 'unco-ordinated, uneven in quality, and replete with deficiencies and problems that need corrective action' (NEC, 2003:28). Many of these implementation problems stem from the distributed responsibilities for this provision. Most of the *de facto* responsibility lies in the private sector. Formally the 13th Amendment to the Constitution devolved implementation and legal responsibilities to the provinces. State responsibility for country-wide 'coordination' lies with a national lead agency, the Children's Secretariat. Periodically this agency is moved from ministry to ministry. Currently it lies within the Ministry of Social Welfare.

6.1.4 Special Education and Children with Disabilities

The National Policy on Education recognised the need for legislation that embraces present day needs in education, including the 'education of handicapped and gifted children and other children with special educational needs (NEC, 1993). *An Action-Oriented Strategy Towards a National Education Policy* (NEC, 1995) was silent on the needs of, and provision for, children with disabilities. The authors of the General Education Reforms policy text were more explicit and proposed a 'two pronged' approach to the needs of children with 'handicaps…due to physical, mental or societal problems' (PTF, 1997:25). The recommended approach was to bring children into the mainstream of education and, where this is not possible, to organise special schools or institutions. In addition, the special needs of fast learners were to be met through special vacation programmes.

The NEC notes that provisions in both the compulsory education regulations and in the child-centred, activity-based pedagogy of primary education were both conducive, in principle, to meeting the needs of children with special learning needs. A National Policy on Disability, led by the Ministry of Social Welfare, was being prepared for cabinet for approval, providing a broader framework for government action in schools, non formal and higher education programmes. The extent and nature of disability is unknown in Sri Lanka, though the NEC (2003) suggests that many children with disabilities do not enter school, that girls with disabilities may be less likely to enrol in school than boys and that, among those children that do enrol, many drop out. Few teachers have been trained to identify and teach children with disability, and there is a general lack of research on the educational needs of Sri Lankan children with disabilities.

6.2 Curriculum Renewal, Quality and Relevance

Two sets of curriculum reforms are of interest to the CREATE model of access. The first are the reforms on primary education and the second the reforms in junior secondary education.

6.2.1 Primary Education

In 1993 the authors of the NEP noted that:

the major focus of primary education will be the use of activity methods and integrated systems of teaching the young children. The greater emphasis will be on discipline, acculturation and balanced growth of body and mind (NEP, 1993:5-6).

Henceforth the curriculum would be organised around the development of five sets of basic competencies: communication, environment, ethics and religion, play and the use of leisure, and 'learning to learn'. The Action-Oriented Strategy of 1995 developed these further, noting that the educational process will be a synthesis of play, activity and formal learning, facilitated by well equipped classrooms. The General Education Reforms text (1997:11-13) went much further and outlined an 11-point plan of action, listed in Box 2.

Box 2 An 11-point plan of action for primary education

- Child, not teacher-centred education

- An integrated curriculum based around first language, religion, mathematics and environment

- The introduction of oral English from Grade 1 and formal teaching of English from Grade 3

- The division of the primary education stage into three 'key stages' - key stage 1 (Grades 1-2); key stage 2 (Grades 3-4) and key stage 3 (Grade 5) with combinations of guided play, activity and desk work appropriate to each key stage

- Identification of capabilities at entry

- Syllabus revision, and writing and production of text books, work books and supplementary materials

- Pre-service and in-service training in line with the new syllabi and teaching methodologies

- Class-based assessment

- Infrastructure, equipment and school environment

- School-based management

- Monitoring and supervision of the implementation of the reforms

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The primary education reforms were launched rapidly in 533 schools in the pilot district of Gampaha, the president's constituency. The authors of the General Education Reforms indicated that 'this district was chosen because, already, there was an ongoing primary school project sponsored by UNESCO' (NEC, 1997:13).

An early evaluation of the pilot reforms in the Gampaha district was undertaken by Perera and Dharamawadana (2000). Using a model of effort evaluation, process evaluation and effects evaluation they judged that considerable effort was expended in the design of curriculum materials, in the development of classroom infrastructure and supervision in teaching and learning, However, teachers felt that more effort was needed in integrating the teachers' guides, the textbooks and the workbooks and in demonstrations by in-service

advisors and teacher educators of how teachers should implement the new pedagogy. Only 20% of the teachers demonstrated competency in handling the new curriculum. Yet learning achievements increased, and appear to have continued to increase over time (Perera and Dharmawadana, 2000; NEREC, 2004; World Bank, 2005). The NEC confirms that the primary education reforms were 'well-designed and implemented systematically and that all stakeholders - students, teachers, officers and parents - had responded positively' (NEC, 2003:36).

Driven strongly from the centre, some felt that teacher and student creativity was stifled, that the needs of the more able children were being overlooked, that classroom infrastructure had improved but, in many cases, access to electricity and safe drinking water was wanting. Echoing the early concerns voiced by Perera and Dharmawadana (2000), the NEREC study reported that many classes continued to be desk, blackboard, book and teacher-centred, and teachers complained of resource gaps, large classes and time-consuming record-keeping. Wide disparities in infrastructure, learning and teaching processes and performance continued between the primary classes in different schools. While these gaps reflected broader socio-economic disparities, 'the reforms have not been able to bridge this gap and could have unwittingly widened it in the absence of a strong programme of positive discrimination' (NEC, 2003:37).

Some 10 years after the Gampaha pilot phase, some of those who had been most closely involved in the implementation of the primary education reforms reflected on the factors that had facilitated the reforms in the primary system and those that had inhibited them.

The primary reforms benefited from visions of what primary education could, and should, offer to all children. The PTF technical committee was led by Kamala Peiris who, though well into 'retirement' from public service continued to advocate a philosophy of child-centred, activity-based learning. The notion of 'tiny saplings' developing into 'sturdy trees' pervaded much of the discourse around primary education as the foundational stage of education (Peiris, 1983). Others in a position of considerable policy authority supported this philosophy, drawing from experience of their own early education:

> I (had) the freedom to explore. The fact that my mother was not forcing me to do anything was the first key point for me, and I felt every child should have that privilege, of being free to grow with the senior mature people guiding then and correcting them and not pushing them into positions…At seven years I was doing casting of metal. Of course this was deadly stuff. The vapour comes and it can kill you. But luckily I was doing it in the open air. I used to make my own toys. And so I thought I will expand on these, not similar to my childhood but in a way to give that freedom to the child. Make a rich environment irrespective of their financial position. That was my dream (Interview with author).

Others spoke of the parental support for the primary reforms. While some were suspicious of the role of play in learning others viewed them as 'nice and exciting' (Interview with author). Parents generally see education as 'something for the experts' to decide and while they did not demand or push for the reforms they did not oppose them either. The positive value attached to education by parents and families has a long history in Sri Lanka.

Teachers were judged to be generally supportive of the reforms in primary education. They engaged enthusiastically in in-service training programmes and some were involved in the development of curriculum material. They organised the school meals programme and participated in surveys of out-of-school children. There may have been some resistance from

older teachers. While teachers were generally supportive of the programme, formal evaluations suggest many were not translating the intended pedagogy into practices envisaged by the reform designers (Perera and Dharmawadena, 2000; NEC, 2003). Those who worked very closely with teachers and teacher supervisors remarked on the additional work incurred when teacher supervisors had been appointed on political criteria rather than merit. The former chair of the PTF Technical Committee on Early Childhood Education underlined the difficulties of establishing an effective monitoring system.

> I would say out of the seven reforms we suggested, only about two were put into operation. The curriculum part and the system part, the management of it. But even in the management part, real monitoring could not be done because you see, you must add also the fact that there were political appointments (among the teacher supervisors) which meant that the people who really deserved appointments did not get them while others who did not deserve got appointments. So when those appointments - teachers and officers, all levels came in - we said 'even if they are political appointments, they are there now. We have to train them'. Whatever happened, whatever changes were made, they could not be made in full because of these restrictions (Interview with author).

Media coverage of the primary reforms was extensive, national conferences on primary education were held, and festivals celebrating primary education were held at zonal, provincial and national levels. Parents were presented with booklets explaining the purpose of the reforms when they admitted their children to Grade 1.

But implementation has not all been plain sailing. A number of factors have inhibited implementation. Several interviewees spoke of the continuing distortion of the teaching and learning progress by the spectre of the Grade 5 scholarship exam, used to provide an avenue of access to Grade 6 in the popular national schools, and, in some cases to award bursaries. Coaching of children for this exam, both inside school and through private tuition after school hours and the weekends, was undermining the pedagogy promoted by the reforms, limiting the teacher and children's attention of the types of items and knowledge areas that are likely to appear in the examination. While some would like to see the exam abolished altogether others argue that unless and until schools admit children to Grade 6 based purely on residence then the national schools will continue to wish to use it or something similar for selection purposes. A teacher and trade union member underlined the tension between the Grade 5 scholarship exam and the curriculum intentions of the policy reform.

> The whole objective (of the curriculum reforms) is diverted because of the Grade 5 scholarship exam. For example in my school…the year 5 class starts early at 6 o' clock in the morning because of the scholarship exam. The children come and do past papers and close the school at 5 in the evening. In the curriculum reform there are 5 main competencies mentioned – communication, playing, morality etc. But everything was put aside because there was no time. (Everything) was diverted to the scholarship exam. The irony is this, the educators also come to school and in the discussions with teachers they say 'don't do the question papers', but they also come to school and ask 'how many students have got through the Grade 5 scholarship exam?' That is the irony. Because of the popular school system in our country the parents are blindly going after this exam (Interview with author).

Morale factors were also cited as constraints on implementation, especially long term implementation. After the initial few years of reforms, structures change for reasons that have

nothing to do with the reforms themselves and impinge on motivation. Meanwhile, underlying issues in the system of incentives kick back in and can override the objectives of the reforms.

Several of those closely associated with the NIE, responsible for the curriculum of schools and teacher education, pointed to the effect of the internal restructuring of the NIE on the morale and team work enjoyed previously by the primary education department. In the restructuring of departments into faculties, members of the primary team were distributed among faculties on subject lines. So, for example, the primary mathematics officers were deployed to the Mathematics Faculty, and primary language officers to the Language Faculty. While this reflected the subject boundaries between teachers in the secondary schools served by the NIE, it did not serve the 'integrated' curriculum approach adopted at the primary stage of education. The institutional identity of primary education was, it was felt by many, undermined and the morale of the officers responsible for primary education weakened.

Teacher morale also varied and was affected by myriad factors. While newly graduated and trained teachers approached their work with enthusiasm, some longer serving teachers fell prey to the frustrations of the system. Delays in salary increments, lack of school facilities and few possibilities to transfer to better schools, especially from rural to urban areas, were some of the disincentives that undermined teachers' commitment to the work of teaching and learning inside the classroom.

Trade union members identified additional issues. The trade unions were not involved in the early stages of policy formulation, neither in the run-up to the 1997 proposals nor in more recent rounds. This does not mean they were sidelined completely. Rather they are invited to meetings once proposals have been decided. Discussions with leaders of the two main teacher unions revealed that in general they are very supportive of many of the educational ideas that have been put forward in various rounds of reform.

> Theoretically what they put forward is right. We accept that. It's a good thing. Child-centered, competency-based, activity-oriented. These methods we accepted. But the problem is that there are 123 schools where only one teacher is there. He is not qualified and he has to do 5 classes, Year 1 to 5. And there are 320 schools – only two teachers are available there. And there are 1,553 schools where the number of children is below 50. These are the real problems. We have to solve these problems also. These matters were not taken into consideration (Interview with author).

Logistical challenges were also a concern

> Almost all the books, textbooks and the teachers' manuals were not on time for Grade 5. The worst was the Tamil translations. It took a long time to get the books. We made a big fight to send these books to the north and east (Interview with author).

The concerns of the trade unions have revolved around the expectations placed on teachers and the mismatch between the policy intentions and the ground realities of many schools.

6.2.2 Junior Secondary Education

In the NEP, junior secondary education was envisaged to be offered in Grades 6-8 of the restructured junior schools. In terms of curriculum, the junior secondary sections of the new junior schools were to be structured around the basic competencies outlined above for primary education and:

will consolidate the environment where the pupil is exposed to the many options which are available to him with regard to a career as to 'systems of knowledge'. We therefore suggest a staggered curriculum, 10 subjects in the Grade 6-8 and the student has an opportunity to choose among a wide range of subjects including his Mother Tongue, Mathematics, Religion and Life Skills being recognised as the only compulsorily taught subjects. At the end of Grade 8, the pupil will be tested on the subjects he has taken (NEC, 1993:6).

Technical and practical skills were to be offered during the afternoons through a range of vocational subjects to be taught by 'visiting teachers' from local communities - carpenters, electricians, farmers and others - 'so that the dignity of labour is fostered and acknowledged' (NEC, 1993:6). School farms were to be set up in agricultural areas. Guidance and counselling should be introduced, especially for those young people wishing to leave school before the GCE O-level. School exhibitions and school festivals should be encouraged:

> The alienation and isolation of today's youth seem to commence at a very early stage. The only antidote for such alienation is the revival of community and group activity on the part of the school children, where they not only have fun but also contribute to community life, parents, past pupils and members of the community should be encouraged to participate in all these activities (NEC, 1993:7).

The Action-Oriented Strategy (AOS) added other aspirations for the junior secondary curriculum.

> The curriculum will be designed with continuing emphasis on the basic competencies. The content will be arranged into subject areas as found at present to enable rigour in treatment and convenience in management of resources. However the integration of learning will be ensured through pupil projects (NEC, 1995:10).

Students will study a link language - Sinhala for Tamil-speaking students and Tamil for Sinhala-speaking students. Life skills will be included within 'technical and practical skills education'. School-based assessments of practical skills will be conducted and certificates based on this, plus a written examination in other subject areas, will be awarded. Unlike in the primary stage, where teachers will be allocated on a subject basis, and teachers will be expected to teach at least two subjects.

In the General Education Reforms document of 1997 the junior secondary stage had been redesigned as Grades 1-9 rather than Grade 1-8. Grade 6 was now viewed as a bridging year between the integrated curriculum of the primary stage and the subject-based curriculum of the secondary stage. Analysis of the 1995 and 1997 policy texts revealed that most of the earlier text remained in the later version, but with some changes. The 1997 proposed curriculum comprised nine subjects instead of 10. The subject 'life skills' was renamed 'life competencies'. 'Science' became 'science and technology'. The proposal to introduce the link language became 'the encouragement of the national language other than their own in play and activities' (NEC, 1997:14). Activity rooms were to be established in each junior school and 'concepts related to peace education, national harmony, democratic principle, human rights, gender equality and environmental conservation will be built into social studies and other subjects as appropriate' (NEC, 1997:15).

In comparison with the texts written about primary education, the texts on junior secondary in the three documents - NPE, AOS and PTF - appear to be fragmented, inconsistent with each

other, and poorly edited. Junior secondary education reads as the poor relation caught between the foundational primary stage and the senior stage where the all important selection examinations occur. Unlike the primary reforms which were trialled in the Gampaha district, no pilot of the junior secondary stage was planned or undertaken.

This author's reading of the three policy texts is confirmed by the NEC's assessment of the fate of the junior secondary stage of education five years after implementation, and by the reflections of case study interviewees:

> There is consensus among evaluators that regrettably, this component of the reforms appears to have been relatively weak both conceptually and implementation wise, lacking clear direction and cohesion. This confusion has been exacerbated by the *ad hoc* additions which have not been based on trial or feed back from the school system. (NEC, 2003:38).

> There was no focus on the junior secondary curriculum. No technical committee examined it. It was left to the NIE and to the swinging of the pendulum within it. The proposed spiral curriculum nearly destroyed the junior secondary curriculum (Interview with author).

Among the several implementation challenges identified by the NEC was the 'somewhat arbitrary' change in the grade span of junior secondary - initially Grades 6-8, then 6-9, resulting in a 'demotion' of Grade 9 from senior schooling to junior schooling and the labelling of Grade 6 as 'transitional' from primary to secondary. While the transition grades were changed, no serious attempt was made to reorganise the total curriculum and the content of some subjects. In evaluations commissioned by the NEC, criticisms were levelled against the new subjects in the curriculum, the preparedness of teachers for implementation, the absence of material resources (especially activity rooms) and the learning-teaching process, which deviated markedly from policy intention:

> Overall, evaluation studies indicated that the junior secondary curriculum tended to be heavy, the learning-teaching process teacher dominated and limited largely to conventional techniques such as dependence on blackboards, with minimal effort to promote activity based learning experiences as envisaged in the reforms. There is no evidence that 'concepts relating to peace education, national harmony, democratic principles, human rights, gender equality and environmental conservation'…. were integrated meaningfully in curriculum materials or teachers' guides (NEC, 2003:42-43).

Lack of leadership from within the NEC and the PTF on the junior secondary reforms also appears to have played its part:

> The reforms did take off with a bang. The primary reform in Gampaha was a showpiece because they could do something and could show the country this is happening. The other area of success was the A-level. There was a strong feeling that the A-level is not very effective or it does not serve its purpose. In these four subjects the students cram…but the medical and engineering people in the university resisted. Anyway entrance came down to three subjects. Also botany and zoology were combined into biology. Again the botany and zoology lobby were quite upset because I suppose careers are affected. But one of the members of the NEC took a personal interest and pushed and met the university deans and it was changed. So in A-levels there were gains and there were gains for primary education but in- between - in

grades 6 to 9 - there were lots of suggestions – activity methods, practical skills - …but there was nobody who gave it direction (Interview with author).

The lack of leadership was perhaps inevitable given the way the PTF and its technical committees were structured. As the NEC was to point out in its 2002 evaluation, unlike primary, which was assigned to the technical committee on Early Childhood Education in 1996, secondary education was not assigned to a particular technical committee and foundered as a result (NEC, 2003:38).

6.3 Underlying Drivers and Inhibitors of Reform

Many factors have influenced both the policy formulation and policy implementation processes. In the above sections factors affecting particular aspects of the myriad reforms have been identified. In this final section we highlight systemic characteristics of the Sri Lankan education system that affect all reforms and day-to-day practices, whether related to a specific reform agenda or not.

6.3.1 Bureaucracy

In many countries bureaucracy is often cited as an inhibitor of reform. Sri Lanka is no exception:

> The bureaucracy stage is massive…and there is no passion or drive (Interview with author).

> They are more scared of rules and regulations and other things rather than achieving results (Interview with author).

But bureaucracy does not always act as a brake; it can promote and facilitate change. In these cases leadership is crucial. The minister and the chief bureaucrat - in Sri Lanka known as the secretary to the ministry - are key to the daily conduct of the work of an education bureaucracy. Ministers come in all shapes and sizes. Some are good scholars, some are good managers and some are committed to a long period of service in a particular ministry. Others are waiting for a posting to a different ministry. Senior bureaucrats too vary enormously in their backgrounds and their orientation to the job. In comparing the role of the Ministry of Education in the implementation of the 1972 reforms with the 1997 reforms, several interviewees spoke of the difference between the respective secretaries: one was a university academic with a close affinity with the ruling party, the other an experienced career civil servant who stood above party politics. Another difference was that in the 1970s the ministry was responsible for formulating policy as well as implementing it; in the 1990s the ministry had lost its mandate for policy formulation and much of its power for implementation in the wake of provincial devolution. These structural differences would have affected the way in which senior bureaucrats played out their leadership roles. While leadership *per se* does not seal the fate of the implementation of a reform it is part of the mix of factors contributing to it.

6.3.2 Politicians and Political Parties

Individual politicians distribute patronage to those who have voted for them or who might vote for them in the next election. In contemporary Sri Lanka political patronage is a powerful systemic influence on education reform and practice. This is one of the reasons

politicians resist reforms that remove their grip on teacher recruitment and deployment and on admissions to popular schools, even if their own children are attending private schools or are being educated abroad. This desire is probably common to politicians of all political hues. In the current context, the role of political involvement in the appointments and promotions of teachers, principals and officers is of concern to everyone involved in education, save those who have benefited in the short-term. The leaders of two major trade unions explained their perceptions in stark terms:

> According to the education administration service there should be 200 officers who have got through the exams…Out of these 200 only one is qualified, 199 are unqualified and all are politically influenced officers. This is a great problem. For school principals also it's the same. That is the reason for the collapse of the education system in Sri Lanka. No qualified officers were appointed for the responsible posts. All are politically influenced. They are political supporters from the government in power…they are taking all the responsibilities and handling all the matters regarding the education system. The second team who operate the education system is the zonal education directors – subject directors and teacher instructors. They don't have the knowledge and right attitudes. They were also appointed by the politicians in that area. This is our problem that we are fighting about. What we pointed out to the ministry and also the media is to appoint the right people. They must have the paper qualifications (Interview with author).

The other major trade union leader echoed this view, even if his understanding of the number of qualified officers is at odds with the first:

> There is a national teacher transfer policy. But it does not work. The politicians, especially the provincial politicians, transfer teachers as they want. So this is the thing. Because of this there are a lot of problems. In the case of Sri Lanka Educational Administrative Service (SLEAS)…there are only three qualified Class 1 SLEAS officers. Only three qualified officers in the country. There are 197 vacancies. There should be 200 SLEAS Class 1 officers but there are only three in the country. How do you expect things to work smoothly? (Interview with author)

Overriding the aggregated actions of individual politicians is the collective support or resistance to reform offered by political parties. As noted earlier, the establishment of the NEC attracted all-party support. Even with a change of government in 1997, the chair of the NEC remained and was able to move forward the reform ideas that had been generated during the period of the earlier regime. This augured well for the survival of the reforms. The direct involvement of the president in moving the reform ideas into actions also contributed massively to the dynamism of the implementation process in its early years.

Despite all-party support for the initial stages of reforms it would not be long before politicians and political parties reverted to type and seized on aspects of the reform to promote varying interests. A former university academic and member of one of the PTF technical committees recalled:

> Primary education of course there was not much difficulty in pushing, because people liked and people accepted those. But when it came to the secondary level, there were some problems especially in the A-level (exam), and we had some big changes. The opposition party (at the time, the UNP) protested and especially the JVP. We had to argue with them about the rationale we had behind all these changes. They were

specially opposing the proposal to have…you know we have a special paper for entrance to the university. I was in charge of formulating the paper…They were thinking that it is a device proposed to penalise some sections of the society, especially the poor students as they don't have a good environment…they were thinking that we were purposely doing some kind of harm to them…So we had to prove, no it is not like that, it is based on a person's abilities (Interview with author).

While opposition from the JVP is to be expected on any reform which they view as widening the gap between the rich and the poor, the urban and the rural, opposition from the UNP was more puzzling. After all, most of the reforms were:

offshoots or expansions of what the UNP national education commission had produced in 1991…But later, when they see that the government is gaining mileage through these reforms, then the opposition becomes critical (Interview with author).

'Political will' poses a paradox. On the one hand the direct involvement of a head of state offers an enormous fillip to the process of education reforms and increases the chances of impact and success. On the other it provides a target for political opposition:

When the head of the state is involved the commitment is there, the support and all that is there but at the same time the opposition party will construe it to be politics. (Interview with author).

The role of the president in relation to the reforms becomes even more problematic when the major party remains in power but loses its majority (as was the case after the 2000 elections) or when the president represents one party and the prime minister represents the opposition (as was the case between 2001 and 2005). Overriding concerns about the stability of government and the need to balance multiple political interests can lead to indecision and absence of support for reforms at key moments:

there were many instances where she dithered, sometimes dithered to the extent of not going ahead with critical policies at the time it should have been simply because she worried that the government's stability will fall (Interview with author).

Clearly, political will is not simply the will of a single political leader or a set of statements put out in the name of a political party. It involves the combined wills of a critical mass of persons, acting out individual and/or party interests. Asked whether the governing party had a continuing interest in seeing the implementation of reforms succeed, a former secretary to the ministry replied:

The president wanted them to succeed 100%, but apart from maybe two or three people, I don't think a large majority of the governing party wanted them to succeed. I remember there was a meeting with cabinet where even the minister opposed his own cabinet paper for the proposed introduction of English medium to a particular set of classes. I mean his own paper, his own points and, apart from a few, the bulk of the cabinet supported him. Then again it was the president who had to intervene and say "no, we have to do it". So that's what I am trying to say. Whereas the president wanted them to succeed, maybe four or five others too, but the rest of them were not happy. They used to pick up on the failures, but they used to facilitate the failures also. And the bulk was not bothered. I mean their children were anyway either

destined to go to some university overseas or an international school. They just didn't care. There was no fire in the belly for education (Interview with author).

Indeed it is interesting to reflect whether reform success carries the same meanings for most politicians as it does for most educators. Politicians move from subject to subject. If they are ministers they move from ministry to ministry. Even if a member of cabinet has been a former minister of education it does not follow that he or she will continue to work in the interests of education. This is where education professionals and politicians probably have very different understandings of the meaning of 'reform success'. For an education professional or for a development agency working to support and finance the success of the reforms 'will be measured in terms of objectives of the reforms and to what extent were these objectives achieved in terms of particular outcomes' (Interview with author). However, for politicians the launch and the trumpeting of the reforms may be sufficient. An educator implementing reforms understands the length of time it takes and the effort involved for reforms to be formulated, implemented and sustained. The time horizon of an elected politician is much more limited. Unless the voters hold the politicians to account for the implementation success or failure of a trumpeted reform (which has not generally been the case in Sri Lanka), politicians need not worry unduly about policy outcomes. Indeed time is a crucial dimension of reform. While parliamentary terms of office are, in principle, of six years duration, the term of ministerial office can be much shorter. Between 1994 and 2010 there have been five general elections (1994, 2000, 2001, 2004 and 2010) and four presidential elections (1994, 1999, 2005 and 2010). In that time there have been eight ministers of education). Continuity and stability of political office is not a hallmark of the Sri Lankan policy environment.

Changes in government are reflected in changes in the education bureaucracy, especially at senior levels. Between 1994 and 2010 there have been nine secretaries to the Ministry of Education. Some have suggested that it is very unusual to find bureaucrats in senior government positions that survive several changes of government. When the Sri Lanka Administrative Service replaced the Ceylon Civil Service in 1972 patron-client politics became dominant:

> This not only lowered the quality of the staff working in government ministries and department, but has also contributed to the lack of continuity and orderly policy change in any given sector. As ministers change so do their clients, and with frequent changes in the bureaucracy it is difficult to proceed on any path to reform (Wikramanayake, 2009:128).

Most obviously, changes of government also affect the level of political will and support for ongoing reforms, and sometimes to their cancellation. Wikramanayake (2009:129-130) offers several examples. When the UNP won the 2001 elections the 1997 reforms were allowed to continue, but did not attract the same 'zeal' for implementation from the new government. The cohort of primary school children who had been learning through a revised curriculum and textbooks that were being introduced in a phased manner were stymied in their final year because the new textbooks and syllabi were not ready, despite appeals made to the incumbent prime minister by the president (of the opposing party) and the international community. In December 2005 a new president (albeit of the same governing party as the previous) was elected, and both the minister and secretary of education were changed. By this time a five-year Education Sector Development Framework and Programme had been developed by the ministry. The change required the employment of an additional consultant to ensure that the

programme carried the imprint of the new regime, leading to a delay of one year in its implementation. The introduction of Information Technology, a 'must' in a modern-day curriculum for schools, was also delayed by changes in the consultants employed by successive governments and the marginalisation of good technical work undertaken by previous governments.

6.4 Drivers and Inhibitors of Reform Implementation: an Overview

This section has explored a range of outcomes of the 1997 General Education Reforms, focussing on those with implications for access to meaningful basic education. It has identified a range of drivers of those reforms and inhibitors. The concept of access with which we have been working throughout this monograph has had at least two dimensions. 'Meaningful access' is subdivided into reforms that promote increases in access to enrolment in various stages and types of education and reforms that increase access to improvements in the quality and relevance of learning. Access to enrolment in basic education is subdivided further into those reforms that addressed compulsory education, the equitable distribution of opportunities beyond primary education and school rationalisation/restructuring. Access to improved learning opportunities are subdivided into reforms at primary and at junior secondary level.

Overall, the assessment suggests only limited progress on each of the reforms designed to improve the distribution of opportunities, some gains in improving the content and pedagogy of primary education, and fewer gains in junior secondary education. The drivers and inhibitors of each set of reforms vary, as do the role of political factors. We shall return to these points in Section 8, but before we do the international dimension of reform needs to be explored.

7. The International Dimension of Education Policy Reform

So far in this case study I have presented an analysis of reform in Sri Lankan education in terms of national and local drivers and processes. Increasingly, however, reform in Sri Lankan national education policy is subject to influence of various kinds. International influence takes many forms in Sri Lanka - through the provision of external finance, through the discourses about education and education policy associated through this finance, through the international professional networks of Sri Lankan educators, policymakers and politicians, through international conferences and through external education practices that take root in the country through cross border education of various kinds.

7.1 Finance

Historically, Sri Lanka's education system has been funded largely through domestic revenues. Through the 1970s and early 1980s limited funds were offered by the international community. The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) was the most consistent supporter of programmes for improvements in access to and the quality of basic education, especially in rural and plantation areas, through the 1980s and 1990s. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) supported a small schools programme for many years. Asian Development Bank (ADB) involvement started from 1984. The World Bank was a late-comer in 1989 with support for infrastructure, planning and management and the development of professional capacity in the provinces. Its arrival on the donor scene was headlined a year earlier by *The Island* newspaper: "World Bank to reorganise our education system"! (*The Island*, 27th September, 1988).

The World Bank rapidly became the major partner, albeit through the modality of loans rather than grants. By 1993 the World Bank made more resources available for education than all the other funders together, which, at that time comprised SIDA, UNICEF, UNFPA, ADB, UNESCO and West Germany (Alailima, 1995). In 1985 about 8% of total foreign assistance was spent on education, a little over 10% of total government expenditure on education and training (Lofstedt, Jayaweera and Little, 1985). In 1994 this percentage was similar, but the volume had increased massively. The annual volume of aid to education between 1982 and 1995 increased from US$2 million to US$33 million (Alailima, 1995).

In the 1980s and early 1990s both ADB and the World Bank made various attempts to influence educational policy directly. Some have suggested that the Bank's influence on the content of the 1997 reforms was overwhelming and that the content of two of its major loans approved in 1996 determined the work of the PTF appointed in late ahead of reporting in 1997 (Wikramanayake, 2009:165). In this author's view that argument overlooks the debt of the 1997 reforms to the deliberations set out in the 1989 Youth Commission, and the 1992, 1993 and 1995 texts produced by the NEC. There is no doubt, however, that there is a convergence between the content of the World Bank's plans and the policies and plans of government.

Indeed, though sceptical of foreign ideas and practices, the chair of the NEC regarded the availability of loan funds from the World Bank in the mid-1990s as fortuitous:

> Luckily at this time the World Bank also came in… they had a number of discussions with us [the NEC] and they offered to finance the implementation of the reforms. When we formulated the reforms we did not have the financial aspect in mind

because we were not sure how much money was coming and in any case the government will not be able to provide all the money. Ours were just a set of proposals, not a plan that could be implemented in detail as such (Interview with author).

In his view there was no inconsistency between a sceptical stance towards foreign aid and the use of a World Bank loan to fund aspects of the reforms if resources are used to fund proposals generated from within the country. One of the main planks of the 1997 Education Reforms was the restructuring of the education system into junior schools and secondary schools. He sought support from the World Bank to fund this but the alliance with the World Bank on restructuring was not plain sailing and it soon ran into the political turbulence:

> There were all these very nice people, they used to come and ask, what is happening, where should we go? They even accepted our proposals…all very valuable. But then they don't put the pressure on the government sometimes. They become bankers. They are interested in loaning the money, giving out bits and pieces so that we get the loan. They could have had a much stronger influence…we thought restructuring the school system was critical. Our commission felt it, because small schools were everywhere and there was no rationale behind them. That's the problem we saw …and the World Bank went along with that until some point. Then they gave it up because there was political pressure not to close down schools. Of course they had to play the political game. But they could have been much more pressing on the government (Interview with author).

As well as responding to proposals suggested by national policymakers the World Bank has, on occasion, attempted to influence government more directly, if unsuccessfully, and often encouraged to do so by senior ministry advisers. Askance at the degree of political influence over the creation of new jobs for teachers and in the deployment of teachers, the World Bank pressed the ministry to implement policies on teacher deployment in line with the needs of schools. Prior to a Government of Sri Lanka and World Bank loan for a major Teacher Education and Teacher Deployment Project being agreed, the ministry undertook to implement a teacher education policy which aimed, *inter alia,* to allocate teachers to schools based on a formula to restrict the number of years teachers should spend in 'congenial' and 'very congenial schools', and to link financial allocations to provinces to cadre entitlements, based on a formula rather than the number of teachers actually employed (World Bank, 1996:Annex 10). The policy ran into myriad difficulties, not least because of political pressure to recruit more teachers. A secretary to the Ministry of Education who inherited the project found herself caught between the World Bank and the government in the run-up to an election:

> One of the pledges the government gave was, at that point they will not employ any more teachers. They will not recruit any more. I think it was in 2000 or sometime then, one of those commitments we had made. Within a year there was an election and in order to curry favour with the local politicians the government decided to undertake to recruit another 10,000. And at that point the World Bank raised absolute fury and I remember someone met me several times to ask me to tell the president this cannot be done, it cannot be done, and so on. Well the government was going to do it. Whether the World Bank raised fury or not they were going to do it…So what I am trying to say is the influence the World Bank had in that sense was marginal (Interview with author).

Foreign funds consistent with the 1997 reforms flowed through a succession of projects that had started in the 1980s prior to Jomtien and long before the 1997 reforms themselves. SIDA funded major projects for the development of primary education in disadvantaged areas. Studies flowing from these fed into the deliberations of the NEC in 1992 and influenced their recommendations on disadvantaged schools in rural areas and the estates. The Germans and Japanese provided considerable funding for building new colleges of education for the training of teachers. After Jomtien, these projects continued. In addition a number of bi-lateral agreements with European governments, including the UK, Germany and Sweden supported discrete projects in primary education and were consistent with the post Jomtien emphasis on the importance of primary education. In that sense the Jomtien EFA conference had some influence in Sri Lanka but the influence was probably more indirect than might appear at first. It certainly had a direct influence on the priorities of many bilateral agencies. These in turn influenced their willingness to fund certain types of project and not others.

The DFID-funded projects in English, mathematics and planning supported the 1997 education reforms very directly. The English and mathematics projects were based in the NIE and supported the curriculum development work necessary to translate curriculum intentions in action through syllabus development, development of teachers' guides and support for teacher education. The work on planning was based in the Ministry of Education and was designed to develop five-year plans for primary education, both at the national level and in the provinces and zones. It supplemented the work of the technical committee of the PTF in several ways. It produced annual and five-year plans, focussed on financial planning as well as activity planning, and trained and involved planners in the provinces as well as in the centre in the formulation of plans (CEC, 1997). While it was designed to supplement and extend the work of the PTF it was perceived by some, initially, to be competing with it. In part this conflict of perceptions arose from different meanings attached to 'policy' and 'plans' by key actors (Little, 2003).

7.2 The Discourse of the Donor Assistance Community

A third line of influence from outside has been through a range of activities designed to support policy dialogue and evidence-based policy formulation. Many funding agencies attempt to influence policy formulation but the World Bank has been perhaps the most consistent supporter of research, studies, workshops, seminars and conferences designed to bring the education policy community together since the 1990s. A former Sri Lankan university lecturer who worked as a consultant to the World Bank in the 1990s and subsequently came to head up the World Bank programme in Sri Lanka recalls that:

> in the mid-90s policy formulation was more in terms of casual anecdotes and casual empiricism. The idea of a vigorous process of research on studies and consultation came from the Bank. The Bank said 'let's have a process of consultation and research and studies to widen the policy debate and discourse' (Interview with author).

7.3 International professional networks

In Sri Lanka the course of international influence takes several forms. The first is through professional ties with the education systems of other countries. It may be described as the borrowing of ideas and practices in education. Despite independence, the cultural ties and identities with Britain of many of those educated in the English-medium decades ago remained strong. Earlier proposals for a tripartite system of secondary education and

selection to secondary schools, manpower theories, and various curriculum ideas, all were drawn from outside. The 1972 education reforms in primary education were influenced by contemporary developments in England, not through any direct influence of a British-led programme in Sri Lankan, but indirectly through a Sri Lankan educator who spent a month in child-centred and activity-based classrooms in English primary schools, sponsored by the British Council. She was inspired to introduce similar practices in Sri Lanka and, together with colleagues working on parallel curriculum reforms in secondary education at a Curriculum Development Centre, was keenly aware of curriculum developments in the West, and borrowed selectively from them:

> The secretary told me 'now you are new director of education, you have to do primary education'. I was up the gum tree because I did not know anything about it. I had done a Masters in educational measurement in Cornell and come back and then this was given to me. Luckily the British Council gave me a one month tour in England. We had a seminar for two weeks and then two weeks of going to the schools and I said I want to go to the most rural schools, not town schools. So I was taken and got a lot of ideas, came back and then I had about 80 people from various branches of education at various levels to work with (Interview with author).

Between independence and the 1980s many foreign ideas were imported, often as a result of education administrators attending international conferences. This influence was not generally tied to donor-funded projects in any way, as these were very few in number, but stemmed from cultural ties and a continuing affinity of decision makers with Britain and other Western nations. Ideas, titles and names of educational practices and their reference points in the West were important. When the government changed in 1977, the all-important selection examinations in secondary education reverted to their former titles of GCE O and A level, even if some of the content and structure of the examination syllabi had changed. The majority of private sector schools prepare students for examinations of the London and Cambridge University Boards.

The 'key stage' nomenclature that framed the restructured primary education curriculum in the 1997 reforms borrowed terms from the post-1988 reforms in England, even if the meaning of the key stages did not map onto the same stages of education. So, this first line of influence may be described as the borrowing of ideas and practices in education. This is not to suggest that all Sri Lankan educators borrow freely from the UK or elsewhere. Indeed there are many senior educators, as well as politicians, whose usual stance is one of scepticism towards foreign ideas, practices and ideologies. A former chair of the NEC expressed such a position when he said:

> We are taught the slogan 'think globally and act locally'… Now what does Bush do? He thinks locally and acts globally. He drops bombs on Iraq, he exploits the South Americans, he tries to mess up China for the interests of Americans. We should be doing that too. I am not saying that we should ruin British people's lives but we should start thinking locally and acting globally...foreign influence can be improved (Interview with author).

7.4 World and Regional conferences

A fourth line of influence can be discerned through shifts in the discourse of education, EFA and the second Millennium Development Goal (MDG) for universal primary education. Many Sri Lankan educators are of the view that neither the EFA conferences nor the MDG

summit themselves had any direct influence on the nature of education policy in Sri Lanka (Little and Miller, 2000). Indeed some might argue that Sri Lanka's experience of educational growth has contributed in international circles as much to the discourse as it has taken from it. Sri Lanka has frequently been hailed for her strong performance in education, and her political stance towards equality of opportunity and social justice, in spite of low economic growth. The perceptions of those Sri Lankan officials who have attended conferences such as Jomtien and Dakar have been ambivalent. Some, aware of apparently good performance, have sometimes wondered why they needed to attend at all. Others felt that Jomtien and Dakar had added new dimensions to the discourse about education in Sri Lanka, highlighting in particular the need for an improved quality of primary education and the idea of monitoring progress towards goals.

> EFA…sort of came into our discourse…when I was in the ministry…We created a unit…to focus our attention not only on the goals of EFA but also on the MDGs, so that whenever we went to report on a conference, whether it's regional or elsewhere, we were able to go with some actual tangible data rather than just talking. …Whenever a team of officials went from Sri Lanka to any one of these, I have seen most of their talks and their presentations. We go lauding ourselves saying we are the best in the region in terms of the EFA goals, we have achieved this and that and so on….now if you look at Bangladesh and Nepal and Bhutan, we are fairly high. But…if you look at the EFA goals and look at particularly the vulnerable regions like the north and east, those statistics are nowhere near the national figures that we present at the international conferences. So to me, I mean it was a huge hypocrisy…If you look at the annual progress, really can we boast saying we are fine? My position was we couldn't. So that was another reason why some of the politicians and so on in some of the meetings I went to were not at all happy when I said look, I think we have a lot of socks to pull up because we are not looking at the disaggregated data (Interview with author).

Others spoke of the positive influence of the concept of EFA on the legislative process in relation to compulsory education. Sri Lanka had long had proposals for it, even if they had not been enacted:

> As a result we fell into a state of inertia, complacency. And with this present trend of EFA with Jomtien and Dhaka and all that, we had not followed up. So that's why we enacted new legislation on compulsory education. Really of course quantitatively we are alright but quality is really poor. And of course this north-east problem as long as the conflict is there…So it didn't fully influence education policy in terms of educational attainment, but certainly the idea that primary education was important and one should think of the quality of primary education became the foundation for what happened later. That dimension was brought to Sri Lankan policy-makers partly through these kinds of conferences and ideas.

Few Sri Lankans, if any, speak of the positive contribution that Sri Lanka's experience could and should make to EFA discussions in other countries. If raised at all it was usually by 'outsiders' or those working at a supra-national level (Little, 2003; UNESCO, 2002).

8. Conclusions

8.1 Drivers and Inhibitors of Reform

In section 6.4 a summary assessment of the outcomes of the 1997 General Education Reforms on access to basic education was outlined. Access was treated in two ways: access to opportunities for enrolment, and access to opportunities for learning. Together these constitute what CREATE regards as access to meaningful education. It was suggested there that each set of reforms was accompanied by a set of 'drivers' and 'inhibitors'. It was suggested further that while these might overlap from reform to reform, each reform would invoke its own combination of drivers and inhibitors. While most of these are internal to Sri Lanka, some originate from beyond Sri Lanka. The former were considered in Section 6 and the latter in Section 7. Figure 4 below synthesises the analysis in Sections 6 and 7.

The implementation outcomes of the reforms varied. The first group of reforms considered in this case were those designed to improve equality of educational opportunity (access) while the second were designed to improve the quality of the learning experience and learning outcomes. Under the compulsory education component the legal regulations were introduced but the related attendance and monitoring committees have not functioned well. Under the component designed to make opportunities beyond the primary stage more equitable the schemes to create or recreate excellent schools in rural areas have, in general, been unsuccessful. Similarly the proposals to rationalise the school system has had little effect on the closure of small schools. The proportions of very large and very small schools have increased over time. The reforms designed to improve the quality of learning in the primary stage of education enjoyed a high degree of success. By contrast, those designed for the junior secondary stage, floundered.

The reforms were analysed in terms of their underlying drivers and inhibitors and these in turn were classified as political, technical, administrative and financial. A few drivers and inhibitors were common to all the reforms. All benefitted from the establishment of a technical task force, led by the president and the minister of education, and the subsequent establishment of an administrative/management unit inside the Ministry of Education. The education bureaucracy, at the national and the provincial levels mediated the intentions of those in the task force technical committees who constructed the plans and the practices of the teachers in schools who implemented them. The bureaucracy inhibited some aspects of the reforms and facilitated others. During the first four years of policy implementation the Ministry of Education was headed by four secretaries. This did not facilitate the continuity of policy implementation. Finally, patronage politics between politicians, teachers, officials, parents and communities underpinned the day to day practices of education.

The reforms were also analysed separately. The compulsory education reforms comprised the passage of legislation and the appointment and functioning of attendance and monitoring committees. The former was achieved and was driven by high level political and administrative will, but not before some resistance from the education professionals/technicians had been overcome. The latter was driven by the administrative 'circular'. This drove the establishment of committees being established but their functioning was impeded for two main reasons, both administrative. The provincial administrations had not been involved in the formulation of the proposals, nor did the circular originate with them. Their lack of involvement led to a lack of ownership and a lack of drive to see through

the implementation. Moreover the administrative unit in the central ministry charged with overseeing this reform – the non formal education unit - was weak. The reforms designed to redistribute opportunities for high quality education beyond primary for children in rural areas was judged to have failed. Although the two implementation schemes had attracted high level political will, and ministry administrative support, as well as financial support from donors both schemes were inhibited by lack of ownership at the provincial levels, community perceptions and political interference in the selection of schools. The rationalisation reforms also failed. Driven by high level 'will' from the National Education Commission, the minister of education, the ministry and financial support from the World Bank, they were inhibited by communities and local politicians whose schools were likely to be 'closed' as part of the rationalisation, by initial ministry guidelines that were insufficiently sensitive to the particular conditions of schools, especially small schools in rural areas. A gradual realisation by the ministry and the World Bank of the scale of financial costs that would be incurred by rationalisation led to a slow down on implementation. In short these access reforms enjoyed high level political and administrative support as well as financial support from the international community. However, these ingredients alone did not guarantee smooth implementation.

Turning now to the major reforms in primary education and junior education designed to improve the quality of learning experience on offer to children who have enrolled, we see two more patterns of drivers and inhibitors. The primary education reforms are generally judged to have been the most successful. They enjoyed high level political involvement from their formulation as action plans, to the choice of the district for the pilot scheme and on into the country-wide implementation. They enjoyed high level technical involvement from the NIE. The provinces became involved in detailed activity planning and budgeting and external financial and technical support was available from the international community. The reforms were backed by media campaigns and activities designed to increase awareness and involvement of all teachers into the reforms but these drivers were tempered by inhibitors throughout. Structurally, the Grade 5 scholarship exam continued to drive the *de facto* curriculum, especially in the upper primary grades. Teachers' needs varied, some wanting more guidance and support, some less. Disparities in material resources impeded the implementation of curriculum and pedagogic reforms in some schools. The reforms relied very heavily on support for teachers from supervisory, or 'master', teachers but many of these had been appointed on political criteria rather than on merit and this compromised their effectiveness. Underlying all of these was the relentless process of teacher transfers between schools, a process supported by local and national politicians and officials. The reforms in junior secondary education enjoyed considerably less success. Although donor support was available, administrative support offered by the ministry and technical work undertaken by the NIE, these reforms did not enjoy high level political. Technically the work was 'unfocussed'. No technical committee was created for junior secondary. The curriculum expectations were too heavy and there was no pilot.

Taken together these findings suggest that reform packages for improvements in access to and the quality of basic education are multi-dimensional. While a few drivers and inhibitors were common to all components of the reform, specific components were accompanied by specific combinations of political, technical, administrative and financial factors.

Figure 4: The outcomes, drivers and inhibitors of the 1997 Education Reforms

		Outcomes	Drivers	Inhibitors
E N R O L M E N T	1. Compulsory Education			
	• Introduce compulsory education regulations	Done	High level political will High level bureaucrats and professionals	High level professionals
	• Appoint attendance and monitoring committees	Not functioning	High level bureaucrats issue ministry circulars	Role ambiguities. Provinces not involved. Unit in central ministry charged with follow-up implementation weak
	2. Equitable distribution of educational opportunities	Disappointing	High level political will Ministry support at high level Financial support from donors	Political interference in selection of schools, principals and staff. Some schools lacked potential from the beginning. Provinces not consulted and not involved in the programme Lack of understanding of programme and commitment of school staff Parental interests in urban national schools: selected schools were the 'refuge of the poor'
	3. School rationalisation	Not done	High level support from National Education Commission Minister's support Support from World Bank	Rationalisation perceived by community to be tantamount to 'closure' Community resistance Local political resistance Bureaucratic 'circulars' insufficiently sensitive to local conditions Financial cost too high
L E A R N I N G	4. Primary education reforms - content, pedagogy and assessment	Some gains	High level political will Strong bureaucratic and technical leadership from NEC, PTF and NIE Effort invested by NIE in technical design of curriculum, materials, training Media/awareness campaigns	Political interference in appointments of officers, compromising potential impact Uneven implementation - disparities in resources Teacher deployment and transfers, leading to large classes Some teachers wanted more guidance; some less Backwash from G5 scholarship examination

		Planning and budgeting at provincial and zonal level One year pilot in one district Financial support from donors	
5. Junior secondary education - content and pedagogy	Few gains	NIE actions Financial support from donors	No political focus Weak leadership from NEC and PTF (no technical committee for junior secondary) Poor design - inconsistencies in policy texts Curriculum expectations too heavy Structurally - 'poor relation' between the foundations of primary and the high stakes exams of senior secondary No pilot

8.2 The Policy Environment

We saw in section 2 how the environment in which policies for education would be formulated and implemented would shift over the period 1931-1990. Did the environment change over the period between 1990 and the present day?

Early regime tensions lay between those who continued to support colonial policies and practices and those who supported national policies and practices. This would be overlaid by those who promoted socialism and those who promoted capitalism. The swings in power between the right and the left would continue beyond 1990, with the right in power between 1990 and 1994, the left between 1994 and 2001, a period of cohabitation between late 2001 and 2004, and left since 2004. The process of policy formulation survived the regime change in 1994 and gained momentum between 1996 and 1999 when the president took a personal interest in them. When the government changed in 2001 the implementation of the reforms continued but attracted less enthusiastic support from the political leadership.

In the early period education policies were driven by the need to assert national control over an inherited colonial system and to create a unified system of education. In the later period education policy was largely driven by the need to contain youth unrest, especially in the early 1970s. The need to contain the Sinhala youth unrest of the late 1980s was the mainspring for the 1997 reforms. Throughout the period 1990 to 2009 the civil war between Tamil groups and the state in the north and the east continued, but this was much less of a driver of reform than the youth unrest in the south.

In section 2 we saw how the machinery for policy formulation changed from one based on public and parliamentary debate to more *ad hoc* processes in which policies came to be implemented before they had been aired in public. This would change from the 1990s.The NEC was established in 1991 with the express purpose of formulating policy and making recommendations on it to the president henceforth. It was also intended to be an independent body with membership drawn from across the political spectrum. In practice the NEC has continued to work as a commission, though from the mid-1990s some of its work was overtaken by a series of *ad hoc* bodies. In late 1996 the PTF was established to speed up the work on education policies and plans. In 2001 the NEC undertook its own comprehensive review of the implementation of the 1997 reforms and published its *Proposals for a National Policy Framework on General Education in Sri Lanka* in 2003. These proposals for reform - set out in more than 100 recommendations - represented three years of extremely hard and committed work by the NEC's Standing Committee on General Education. While it had been the intention of the NEC to set these before parliament they never reached their destination, stymied by a change of government late in 2001 which brought an opposition party prime minister into power under a president of the former ruling party. Although this was the same president who had steered through the 1997 reforms, the change of government weakened her position, brought a new form of political bargaining into play, a fragmentation of political will, and the ability to maintain the continuity of implementing reforms. In a break with a tradition established from 1991, in 2004 all NEC members were asked to resign and a new membership established. Even after 2004 when the president and the parliament were of the same political alliance, the president's will for reform in education was often stymied by the powers of the minority JVP who had won 39 seats in the 2004 election. The JVP was an important member of the UPFA and its support was crucial to both the formation of a coalition government and its survival. It has also resisted reforms designed to enhance the teaching of English, the re-introduction of English as a medium of instruction and reforms designed to encourage the participation of the private sector in the provision of education.

In 2008 an *ad hoc* committee was appointed by the minister of education to update and modernise the 1939 ordinance and its amendments and to write a new education act. Significantly, the NEC, the body mandated by parliament in the 1990s to determine education policy, was not invited to undertaken this important task. While the formal machinery for policy formulation remains the NEC, the informal machinery of *ad hoc* committees subject to political whim runs in parallel.

Earlier we saw how, from the 1970s, politicians became increasingly involved in the day-to-day practices of education and in the appointments, transfers and promotions of officers and teachers. This process has continued unabated from the early 1990s to the present day, accelerated by the appointment of large numbers of provincial government politicians since devolution. Periodically, even high-level bodies have called a halt to politicisation. In its proposals for a national policy framework the NEC made an impassioned plea for the elimination of politicisation from the education system:

> Political will at the highest level is needed to correct this situation. Unless politicisation is eliminated from the education system no amount of policy reforms, structural and organisational changes can prevent a total breakdown of the system. It is proposed that leaders of all political parties should agree to eliminate political interference in the education system, make a 'joint declaration'. In this regard and implement an action plan to achieve this goal on a priority basis in the best interest of the nation (NEC, 2003:243).

As we have noted already, the NEC's work would never reach parliament for a discussion of a 'joint declaration' to limit the extent of its reach into day-to-day implementation of education policy.

8.3 De facto policies for basic education

Formal policies are perhaps less powerful determinants of what happens in schools than *de facto* policies, represented by funded programmes of action. If the NEC's 2003 report and evaluations had less than their intended impact on parliament and public debate they had more impact on the Ministry of Education and the World Bank in the determination of the Education Sector Development Framework and Program (ESDFP) developed by the Ministry of Education and covering the period 2006-2010 (Ministry of Education, 2006). The ESDFP was developed through a series of planning exercises at school, provincial and national level, combined with public consultations. The World Bank lent support to the policy dialogue and planning processes employed in the development of the ESDFP. Intended to be a Sector-Wide Approach (SWAp) to educational development with 'buy-in' from all donors, the World Bank is currently the only external financier. The ESDFP was developed by education professionals and bureaucrats through a process starting in 2003 described as a 'collaborative effort of all levels where a blend of bottom-up and top-down planning approaches were adopted' (Ministry of Education, 2006:vi).

The four main themes of the ESDFP are consistent with all policy goals promoted through the 1990s by the NEC and the Presidential Task Force:

- Theme One: Promoting equitable access to basic education (G 1-9) and secondary education (G10-13)

- Theme Two: Improving the quality of education

- Theme Three: Enhancing the economic efficiency and equity of resource allocation and distribution within the education system

- Theme Four: Strengthening education governance and service delivery

Each theme, in turn, is subdivided into issues and objectives, and strategies designed to meet those objectives. In total some 37 strategies were developed to meet Theme One, 48 to meet Theme Two, eight to meet Theme Three and 15 to meet Theme Four. Implementation of this programme is currently in progress with the bulk of implementation lying in the hands of the provincial authorities and funded by the government with support from the World Bank.

While a well-funded programme might be considered to be a *de facto* policy, it still lacks the legislative power conferred on it by parliament and is forced to sidestep issues raised in many policy formulation arenas but never resolved, including those of the medium of instruction, the role of English, the role of the private sector, and the role of national schools. If they are to attract political legitimacy and legislative authority, these require widespread consultation and debate in parliament

Because strong political will for reforms expressed by one political party can generate political opposition to them, several of the case study interviewees, including two former secretaries to the ministry spoke of their desire to see education become a bi-partisan subject, outside the realm of party politics. One declared that a minimum of 10 years was necessary for reforms to take root and that a constitutional council, mandated by all parties to oversee education policy, is necessary. Policies for education for all and basic education are no exception and would benefit in the future from such bi-partisan support.

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Consortium for Research on
Educational Access, Transitions & Equity

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Report summary:
Sri Lanka is hailed internationally for her achievements in literacy, access to education and equality of educational opportunity. However, progress has not been straightforward due to the complex interactions between politics, policy formulation, and the implementation of reforms. This dynamic process has often led to contradictory outcomes. This monograph describes and analyses the political drivers and context of educational reform from the colonial era to the present before an in-depth exploration of the origins and implementation of the comprehensive 1997 education reforms. There is a focus on the role of political will, and emphasis on the need for bi-partisan support for education policy. Much of the evidence has been drawn from extensive interviews with 20 senior members of Sri Lanka?s education policy community.

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