

# Postcolonial emotionalism in shaping education: An analysis of international school choice in Sri Lanka

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*This research explores the proliferation of a newer kind of independent 'international' schools that has grown in popularity in an otherwise proscribed private education system. These schools provide both foreign and local curriculums in the English medium for a majority of local students. By welcoming students from all ethnic and religious backgrounds, international schools facilitate an agency for multiculturalism. However, the double-edged sword of business and education means that these schools are restricted to a minority that can afford the high fees.*

*In this paper, it is argued that English continues to be perceived as a reminder of colonial rule, a driver of social stratification and a destroyer of tradition contrary to a global language that is omnipresent in contemporary society. The study attempts to outline the reasons behind international school popularity and unpack some of the anxieties that this education system has given rise to in recent times. It looks at the government concerns as well as various stakeholder consternations of providing a 'global education for local students' via a mixed method research conducted in four contrasting case studies.*

*This paper contributes to the debates on private school choice and cultural capital; the verdict being that English proficiency and foreign credentials allow for a competitive edge in neo-liberal times yet grounding oneself in the local culture is of paramount importance if education is to be truly international.*

*Keywords: Sri Lanka, International Schools, Private English Education, Postcolonial emotionalism, School Choice*

## INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka is an independent island state off the southern coast of India, home to a population of 21 million. There are four major ethnic groups (Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims and Burghers) following four main religions (Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity) and speaking three official languages (Sinhalese, Tamil and English). The 'Mahavamsa' (an ancient text) portrays a special bond between Buddhism, the Sinhalese people and Sri Lanka. This connection between religion, language and national identity established in the ancient scripture depicts a portrayal of Sri Lanka as the exclusive homeland of the Sinhalese emphasizing an anxiety to 'revive, preserve and strengthen' this alleged ownership by the Sinhalese 'Lion' race. The Tamils on the other hand are characterized as a threat with historical antecedents that generate and sustain hostility

(Sharma 1976).

This strong culture of identifying oneself with ethnicity makes Sri Lanka a robust case for this research as contemporary education policies following the implementation of the 1956 'Swabasha Policy' requires all students to be educated in their mother tongue perpetuating ethnic segregation along linguistic divides with an intention to breed purity. Moreover, past negative experiences of private, English education leading to social stratification and the tainting of traditional values has meant that postcolonial education policies have focused on providing universal access to education at the expense of quality. A reform implemented in 1961 that is unique to Sri Lanka is the banning of any new private schools in the island.

Since then, there has been a profusion of independent primary and secondary education institutions claiming to be 'International Schools'. These schools exist within a loophole in the legal framework, established under the 'Company's Act' and are domains that strive to break ethnic, linguistic and religious divides by welcoming students from all backgrounds so long as they can afford the fees. However, in the process of creating a pluralistic generation with a global outlook, international schools also foster alternate identities that may not resonate with the Sri Lankan way of life.

This paper will examine the historical legacies that have led to the current public education dilemma and ultimately the emergence of international schools that at first glance seem to be a knee-jerk response to the increasing demand for private English education with a global focus. It will also outline some of the stakeholder rationales for selecting an international school education as well as their concerns regarding the provision of a global education in a highly commercialized setting for a local clientele. Finally, the paper will explore whether or not the altruistic goals these schools claim to aspire towards are actually met by incorporating intercultural education into their pedagogies.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Colonial rule**

During British rule following 1815, the education system of Sri Lanka underwent some major changes. The British commenced mass education and at the same time promoted a dual system of education. During British rule, vernacular primary schools continued to function and were, as Warnasuriya (1969: 814) denotes, 'meant for the poor and humble sections of the community and provided a narrow literacy program just sufficient to serve the needs of the class concerned'. However, more attention was placed on fee levying high status schools that operated in the English medium. These schools patronized by the elites provided high quality education for those who could afford to pay the fees and provided education up to secondary level. They were limited to a few urban areas and those who attended these schools gained most of the white-collar jobs during the colonial period. As Fernando (1977) observed, English was a 'passport' for better education, jobs and money and the elite who were educated in English were 'economically and culturally divorced from the vast majority of Sri Lankans'. As Punchi (2001:367) noted, this divide between those educated in English and vernacular languages meant that the 'English educated Sri Lankans began to look down upon their own people who did not speak English'.

## **Independence and the Rise of Nationalism**

Following independence, most of the political leaders that came into power were those educated in private missionary schools in the English medium. However, affiliations with the English language were seen as unpatriotic and at odds with the emerging sense of nationalism. Thus, English was subdued and the shift to education in the national languages took place. From the mid 1940s, free education was made available to all in the Sinhalese and Tamil languages. In addition, central colleges with a full range of facilities were established in each electoral division to ensure greater access to education for all (Punchi 2001).

One of the immediate effects of this was a rapid rise in educational participation. Urban, rural and gender discrepancies declined, unlike any other country in South Asia, and figures such as a 90% literacy rate were possible due to this freely available education in the native language (Jayaweera 1989). Wickramasuriya (2005: 172) contests this by claiming that despite the high human development indicators, Sri Lanka also has the highest suicide rate in South Asia signifying ‘frustration, demoralization, loss of opportunity, inequality and poverty’ within this highly literate community.

### ***Language***

‘Language in education systems has long been recognized not only as a very significant indicator of power relations in society but also as a very important instrument for continuity or change’ (Bray and Kao 2004:215). In 1956, under Prime Minister SWRD Bandaranayake’s government, the Sinhalese language was made the official language giving it prominence over Tamil and English (Richardson 2005). Bourdieu and Thompson (1991) highlight the significance of education in the creation and reproduction of socio-linguistic hierarchies when they state that, via agents of regulation and imposition, ‘legitimate languages’ are produced and thereby social inequalities are generated. This was the case in Sri Lanka as schools were segregated along linguistic lines. The ‘Swabhasha’ policy of 1956 required students to be educated in their ‘mother-tongue’. Sinhalese and Tamil medium schools were thus set up. Sri Lankan Muslims were able to claim Arabic as their mother tongue and therefore choose to be either educated in Sinhalese or Tamil schools. However, for the others, educational segregation based on language indirectly reinforced ethnic partition. As Davies (2004) notes, this segregation promoted inter-ethnic enmity and mistrust.

Even though the national schools have made many reforms in recent years to appreciate the multiplicity of ethnic diversity, Levinson and Stevick (2007) observe that there was little mixing between students who study in different mediums within the same schools. Wijewardena (1999) in his study of international school choice points out that a primary reason for opting for an international education was the provision of equal opportunity to any race or religion. This ‘ethnic sensitivity’ is further complemented via the gender-neutral co-educational system that international schools in the island offer, as opposed to many of the national single sex institutions in Colombo.

According to Gunasekara, Samarasinghe and Dharmadasa (1996), the possession of an international language in a post colonial era is regarded as advantageous and worthy of being preserved regardless of the circumstances under which it was acquired. English language however has contradictory effects. It can contribute to Western hegemony but at the same time can act counter hegemonically where access to English language means the access to global networks for a wider array of populations (Pennycook 1995). The issue

of language has always been surrounded by controversy in Sri Lanka. The long history of colonization has strengthened nationalistic sentiments to the point where private schools and English language today are symbolic of the injustices that prevailed in an education system that benefited an elite minority. Hence, political commitment to social welfare and providing equality of access to education has taken precedence over any reforms that attempt to improve quality. When regional disparities in facilities and resources showed up within the public education system, instead of ameliorating standards, curriculum standards were continually lowered so that well-resourced students would not dominate.

Politicians even today are afraid to make amendments to the language and private schooling acts. The masses, almost brainwashed by the works of socialist and left wing political groups, believe that allowing private schooling and private universities to operate in Sri Lanka would violate the fundamental rights of the Sri Lankan students by recreating the social divide that existed in British colonial times. When it came to the issue of language, once again the socialist parties equated language to class. This is what gave rise to the *Anti-Kaduwa* campaign where English, colloquially referred to as the *kaduwa* (sword) was seen as an instrument for cutting off opportunity and therefore something that needed to be destroyed.

### **The Private Education Debate**

The private schools started by Christian missionaries during British times were seen to evoke colonial pro-elitist sentiments. Thus, for those that grew up within the free national education system, private schools continued to be a reminder of colonial power and a driving force for social stratification. In 1961 therefore, the government decided to ban the establishment of any new private schools. Existing private schools were given the option of abolishing fees and receiving state grants to become semi-government assisted schools or continue to remain as unaided fee levying schools.

This form of resistance extended beyond schools to include tertiary educational institutions as well. Despite the national universities being able to accommodate only 3% of the age group entering each year, there are heavy restrictions on private universities. Again, socialist groups have almost brainwashed the minds of the students into believing that ‘any non-governmental involvement in tertiary education will result in the creation of an elitist culture which they will not be part of’ (Wikramanayake 2009:114).

Castles (1988:4) notes that the state is ‘at one and the same time the guardian angel of the capitalist economic process and the chosen instrument for protecting society from the corrosive impact of that process’. This is evident in the Sri Lankan government’s stance on establishing private educational institutions. Sri Lanka actively promotes private tertiary education from establishments that are linked to foreign universities as well as local private institutions by reframing the issues to avoid confrontations. Thus private tertiary education establishments are encouraged as long as they do not carry the connotation of ‘university’. Likewise, it is permitted to establish ‘International Schools’ (private fee levying secondary schools that teach in the English medium) under the Company Act with no government affiliations.

The fact that such higher education institutes as well as international schools are allowed to operate in Sri Lanka despite them creating the very same inequalities through the production of an English fluent elite minority is ironic. Hence, the reluctance to reinstate private education appears to have more to do with historical legacies associated with the

wording 'private education' and symbolic prejudices that have built around these definitions over the years.

### **Sri Lankan International Schools**

In recent times, a new set of co-educational, fee-levying private schools that teach foreign curriculums in the English Language have emerged, known as 'International Schools'. They have diverse modes of instruction, fee structures, curriculums and standards. However one thing that all Sri Lankan International Schools share in common is English medium instruction. Sri Lankan International Schools hence are primarily a language driven response to education. This is because English, despite being replaced by the vernacular languages still withholds a strong element of value in society. It is a prerequisite for private sector jobs and a valuable tool even when working in the public sector. Moreover, by welcoming students from all ethno-religious backgrounds, these schools also inadvertently contribute to breaking any racial barriers.

While the establishment of private schools has been officially banned in Sri Lanka since 1961, international schools operate under a loophole in the legal system, set up under the Companies Act and operate as private businesses. This has meant that International Schools are not regulated by the Ministry of Education and therefore show vast diversity in quality. However, the popularity of International Schools in Sri Lanka reflects the demand that is present for English education. In countries with limited financial resources, the quality of state run schools is debatable. The welfare state is no longer adequate or efficient enough. Hence we witness a shift towards private education. As Sen (1982:99) summarizes, 'the political consensus has shifted in many parts of the world to the point where the so called 'big government' of the welfare state has become the enemy of efficient and free markets, where citizens are portrayed as 'clients' of the state or consumers of government products and individuals are accepted on the basis of community. As part of the emergent neo-liberal logic, the expansion of consumer choice has trumped equity as a major political goal'. Thus there is "no choice but to choose" a private system of education.

International Schools with their modern curriculum are said to 'narrow the gap between the curriculum and the needs of the current employment atmosphere in Sri Lanka' (Jenkins, Berman and Jenkins 2005: 119). This re-introduction of English increases employment and educational opportunities only for a minority that can afford the high school fees. Hence, International Schools are criticized for widening the gap between the rich and the poor and are depicted as a threat to the national system of education (Wickramasuriya 2005). Another function of these international schools is to downplay ethnic differences by welcoming students from all religious and ethnic backgrounds. These schools encourage tolerance and promote multiculturalism. By celebrating festivals from all communities, international schools promote a more heterogeneous society. The stakeholders however are concerned that international schools encourage Westernization in place of traditional Sri Lankan values. As Jenkins et al. (2005:122) observe, if international schools teach English at the expense of the vernacular languages, Sri Lankan cultural identity can be threatened but if English is 'anchored in local cultural traditions', these schools can ultimately strengthen Sri Lankan culture.

Nevertheless, by imposing very high school fees, these schools accentuate class-based discrimination. The average term fees of Sri Lankan International Schools vary from

Approximately USD 65-300 to those that charge even higher rates such as USD 8000. Class, in this instance, can be purchased if one possesses enough capital (Jayawardena 2000). Thus international schools cut across the traditional schooling system by producing socially constructed knowledge of what it means to be classy, global knowledge in English and co-educational institutions. They are criticized by some for creating a new kind of privilege.

Amarasinghe and Ratnayake (2009) point out the advantages of establishing private schools in Sri Lanka by stating that they increase the volume of resources invested in education, and allow upper income families to participate in paid education that allows more public resources to be available for students from poor families. Moreover, if more private schools were established in the country, it would stimulate economic activity in a sector that has so far been restricted. Lastly, private schools are compelled to provide high quality education in order to compete with free public education. The fact that International Schools manage to exist within a loophole in the system without much opposition show that the real reason for the resentment of private schools has more to do with the historical recollections that continue to persist rather than a genuine concern for exacerbating social stratification.

There are, however, many disadvantages to choosing an international education. Some of these include a lack of national identity, lack of connections to local society, deficiencies in local language skills and the difficulties of having lasting friendships (Ezra 2007, Heyward 2000). As Hanchanlash and Rutnin (2004) note, the 'fourth culture kids' that attend international schools within their country of origin grow up in their country of citizenship espousing Western cultural values. They become alienated from their home culture to the extent that they 'feel like strangers in their own land'. They often also have a lower standard of literacy skills in their mother tongue even though it is the 'instrument of communication and understanding' within their home culture (Hanchanlash and Rutnin 2004:13). It is for this reason that national schools are resistant to international schools, 'fearing that their own culture may be contaminated by the Anglo-American' culture' that often predominates international school settings (Jackson 2005:207). However, it is important to realize that international schools cannot operate with absolutely no connections to the local setting as accreditation, authorization and quality assurance measures require international schools to have affiliations with national governing bodies (Hayden 2006). In Sri Lanka however, as international schools fall outside the Ministry of Education, there is little to no governance, making accountability of quality education a major cause for concern.

## METHODOLOGY

Four contrasting international schools from four different provinces of the island were selected using deviant case sampling. One case study was a high fee levying school from Sri Lanka's capital Colombo. Another was a high fee levying school from Sri Lanka's second largest city, Kandy. The third and fourth schools were from two more peripheral regions where the predominant populations are Sinhalese and Tamil alternatively. The third school was from the city of Matara in the Southern Province, while the fourth case study was from Jaffna in the Northern Province that was ravaged by the civil war for the past thirty years.

A range of international school stakeholders, namely parents, students, teachers and international school administrators, were targeted from each of these schools. These participants were provided with questionnaires in stage one and later invited to participate in interviews and focus groups. Two hundred questionnaires were distributed among parents and students in the initial phase. Focus groups consisting of about 8-10 participants were also conducted with teachers as well as students in each of the four schools. In addition, an interview each was conducted with sixteen parents, the Secretary to the Ministry of Education as well as the international school Principals.

The questionnaire data were manually entered in to statistical software and then analyzed quantitatively. Descriptive statistics were used through scatter plots, histograms and pie charts to show the various factors in play (see the table below). The qualitative data obtained was then analysed using grounded theory. Payne and Payne (2004:98) describe grounded theory as ‘a method of analysis where the theoretical statements are built inductively from coding and analyzing data’. It requires ‘defining and refining of conceptual categories which are then tested and retested with further data collection’. In grounded theory, ‘theory emerges from the data’ and is a ‘continuous method of discovery’. However, the researcher does not begin with a blank slate but brings in background knowledge from subjective life experiences (Strauss and Corbin 1998). The interviews and group discussions were analyzed from the time they were recorded using this method. Initially, ‘open coding’ was used to highlight items that seem important without too much overthinking. Next, ‘axial coding’ where comparison and grouping at a more intense stage was performed. Finally, all categories were unified around core categories in the ‘selective coding’ stage before certain theories were put forward (Strauss and Corbin 1998). In addition to manual coding, qualitative analysis was conducted using the software NVivo. This software facilitates coding of transcriptions as the transcription takes place. NVivo also allows for the creation of hierarchies of linked themes, create memos, coding templates, and transfer coding between the four different case studies.

## **RESULTS**

### **Why opt for an international education?**

#### ***Foreign Curriculum***

Most international schools offer a variety of foreign curriculums. The most common out of these are the British (Edexcel and Cambridge) syllabi, that the four case studies for this research offered, and the International Baccalaureate (IB) that only two schools in Sri Lanka follow. Foreign curriculums are constantly updated and contested to be of a superior standard. The interviews conducted highlighted that the standard of English and ICT were far superior in the international syllabuses. The textbook anecdotes, experiment procedures and in-text explanations were also deemed more modern in foreign curriculums. Another feature that international school clientele appreciated was the critical thinking and independent learning that these curriculums promoted. The Sri Lankan curriculum was criticized for providing the student with a lot of theory but not enough practical experience. The international curriculums are very much practice oriented and promote independent learning and fact-finding. This, parents argued, encourages students to take initiative and readily face challenges rather than develop a generation of individuals who need to be constantly spoon-fed information. The foreign curriculum also fostered

multiple non-academic skills such as inter-personal communication and group work, which again was highly valued.

### ***English Language***

English opens many doors. If one is fluent in English, they are able to gain access to a wider range of books, media and other material available through the World Wide Web. It helps communicate with a wider audience and ensures greater mobility. English has world recognition; it is symbolic of social and cultural capital and is seen by most parents as the way forward. Since the international schools teach all subjects in the English medium, the standard of English proficiency is significantly higher. This, coupled with the introduction of English literature from an early stage allows the international school students to possess a superior command of English. Parents, therefore claimed English as the primary factor for choosing an international education:

*“Now our son and daughter’s future is clear because they are learning in an International School they are fluent in the English. Now you can understand my English is not fluent no, I got my studies in the government school, I got a degree also but my English is not fluent...it’s mainly that I wanted him to have a good knowledge of English because that’s the most important thing” (Parent 5, Kandy)*

*“Actually parents, those who have missed the English education, they feel, why not give this. Because the parents think, because I did not get English, I couldn’t go to that level, I couldn’t get a job, I couldn’t go to a higher level in life so why not I give that opportunity to my children” (Parent 8, Colombo)*

Fluency in English combined with the global exposure provided by international school mean that students, even if they are not necessarily better qualified, can secure employment.

*“One student from here, he went for an interview with Dialog (a leading telecommunications company in Sri Lanka) and he only had O/Levels. He was selected over a graduate because of his English and the leadership qualities” (Vice Principal, SISM, Jaffna)*

*“In Jaffna, not all the schools teach English well so for jobs they expect English...so even if we fail examinations, the international school students, they get jobs outside” (Student 4, Student Focus Group, SISM, Jaffna)*

A quality education, parents illustrated, resulted in forward-thinking citizens who had good leadership, practical skills and were critical thinkers and independent learners as these were areas that the international curriculum placed more emphasis on. The co-educational and all-encompassing nature of international schools, furthermore, allowed students to mingle with various racial, ethnic and religious groups as well as members of the opposite sex. This was perceived to make them tolerant individuals with better socializing skills who were able to break cultural barriers and fit well within a pluralistic society.

The education received at international schools, hence go beyond the academic dimensions



to become a ‘lifestyle’ choice where children mingle with all kind of people and develop inter-personal communication skills. Most students were described as ‘polished’, meaning they were able to converse fluently and eloquently in an international stage. Several research participants stressed the importance of promoting a tolerant society stating that in a globalized world, people need to be able to get along with all different kinds of individuals.

The Principal of the Colombo case study (Kingston Institute, KI) remarks that for a trilingual country, Sri Lanka is lagging behind. Languages, he observes, should be a core strength in a country and not a divisive element. The physical location of Sri Lanka in the centre of Asia, coupled with its cultural diversity should be something that needs to be promoted in the global market. Investing in an international education hence facilitates a smoother transition to the global market. The Principal remarks:

*“Whatever the school, the question should be can the students compete in the market place? The market place is not local, it is global. So our students can compete in the global market place” (Principal, KI Colombo)*

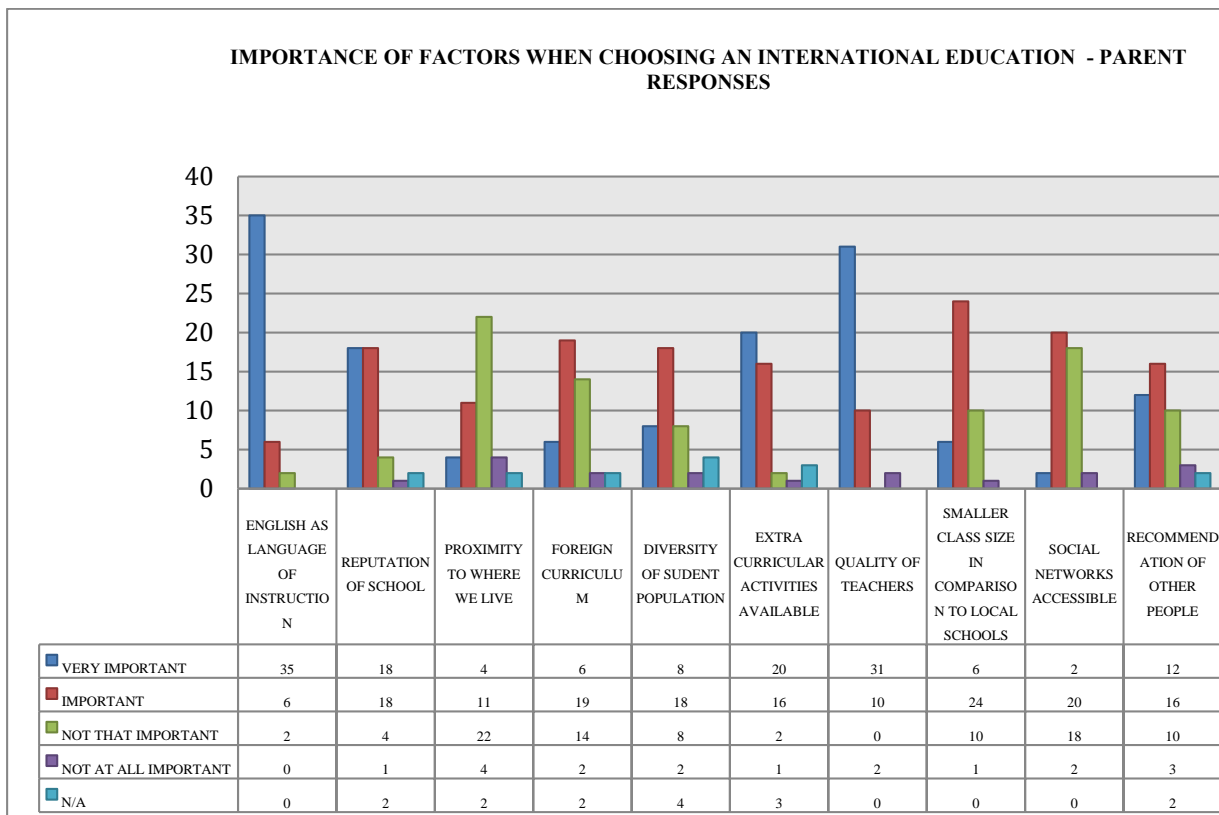


Figure 1: Parents’ responses to the importance of factors when choosing international education

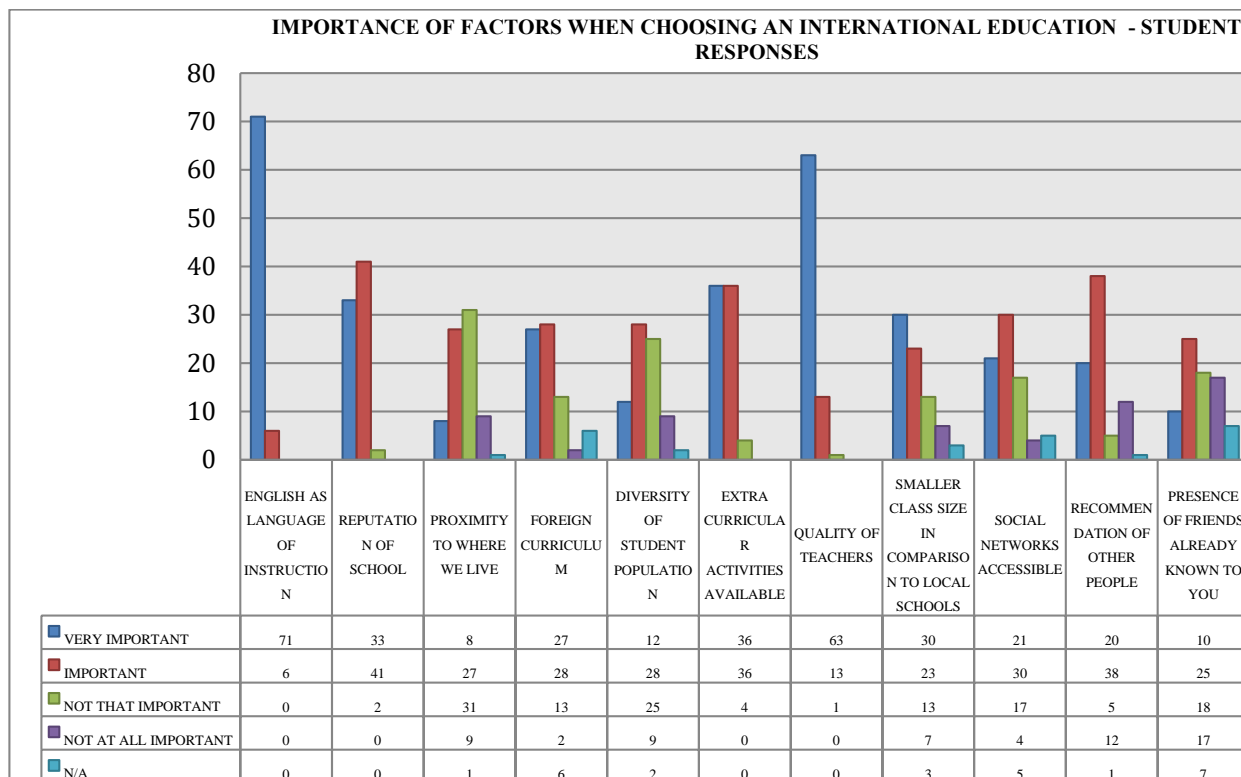


Figure 2: Students’ responses to the importance of factors when choosing international education

### Socio-cultural Impacts of receiving an International Education

#### *The creation of a Western cultural bubble*

International schools were accused of not giving their students enough opportunities to assimilate with the local culture. Since English teaching was the primary focus, mother tongue was often overlooked. As a result, the students sometimes were unable to communicate with locals. Another allegation was that international schools did not teach religion in schools that gave rise to individuals that had few good values ingrained within them. An outcome of this, parents often expressed, was that children grew up too fast engaging in activities that were inappropriate for their age. For example, parents indirectly raised concern about students having romantic relationships with each other and possibly engaging in sexual relations. Others were concerned about the norms and values that international schools fostered such as dress codes that were culturally inappropriate.

*“International school students are more advanced in both the good ways and the bad ways. What I see is that even though they go to internationals, children should be children. Now children who are 12 or 13 years do things that we do at 18 or 19. So when they become 18 or 19 they have nothing left to do. The children don’t have a childhood in international schools. It is because they are too advanced and want to hasten everything. They don’t behave like children in their childhood but they go to be like adults” (Parent 16, Matara)*

Another issue was that international schools did not encourage teaching Sri Lankan history or geography. Hence international schools produced a generation of Sri Lankans that had much knowledge about the outside world but little awareness of their immediate

surroundings. One dangerous outcome of not being familiar with their own culture was that international school students engaged in culturally inappropriate behaviour that sometimes even caused them physical harm. As one student focus group pointed out, it was 'inappropriate attire' or 'over friendly' interactions of female international school students that could lead them to be raped, or even murdered, in Sri Lanka!

*"We get more westernized when we come to these schools. Normally the girls get more westernized...start wearing all those westernized clothes and they forget our traditions. They move out with guys and all sorts...in Sri Lanka girls don't talk much with boys unless they are related or you know bonds or something like that. When you come to internationals they interact, they get a little too much. When they interact too much they end up getting raped or something...it leads to unnecessary things"*  
(Student 3, Student Focus Group, KI, Colombo)

While Sri Lanka recognizes private education as an essential driver for economic growth and choice as an intrinsic element of democracy that should be made available to the public, private education is a reminder of the stark inequalities that existed during colonial times. English education furthermore is not only represented as a form of capital available to a rich minority that often attends private schools but is also seen as a hindrance to the national traditions and cultural values. It is seen as a driver for Western ideals that contradict with traditional Sri Lankan norms. As international schools begin to grow exponentially in Sri Lanka without regulation, an issue that arises is about what is being taught in these schools. Sri Lankan international schools were criticised for failing to provide sufficient education about Sri Lanka. As the Secretary of Education pointed out, since the majority of students at these schools were Sri Lankan citizens, it was crucial that they were grounded within the local culture to begin with. By overlooking the teaching of history, geography, mother tongue or religion, international schools were producing a newer generation of Sri Lankans who didn't really fit in to their immediate surroundings.

*"We do have a long history, more than 2500 years...the objective of education development should be to produce fully fledged persons to the nation. The government is thinking that way; International Schools are away from our tradition as well as Sri Lankan objective because we do need to maintain the Sri Lankan identity. It is not happening in International Schools because one thing is the mother tongue. They are not promoting that one. Next one is, we do practice the religion and what is our history. Sri Lankans need to know what is our history and how generations and generations developed the country because then you have that strong feeling you know of belonging to the Sri Lankan nation and you are one of those persons with historical value. Not only Sri Lanka but all the countries believe that...children should start with the mother tongue...they have to be localized to start their life"*  
(Secretary of Education, Ministry of Education, Sri Lanka)

In extreme cases, international school students had such poor local language skills that they found it difficult to communicate with locals. However, in most instances it was more of a reluctance to mingle with those outside of the international school circles. It was an inability to communicate and a reluctance to mix that caused the 30-year civil war in Sri Lanka, which is why Sri Lanka has now switched to a bilingual policy where both Sinhalese and Tamil are strongly encouraged. According to the Secretary of Education,

there is no restriction anymore as to which medium of language you can choose to be educated in. International schools therefore should be aware of the long-term consequences that generation of Sri Lankans without the ability to converse in the local languages could produce and therefore attempt to bring in a localized education into their education system as well.

### ***Money-making Priorities***

The multicultural nature of international schools and their popularity for providing a wide range of extracurricular activities were sometimes critiqued for being mere excuses to charge additional fees. Moreover, being multicultural was described as a survival tactic rather than something implemented with genuine good intentions:

*“If you take Christmas season they have Christmas Carols and they charge a very big amount for it. So parents, not that they like or not that they want to, just because now they have put their children, there is no other option but to pay all the extra fees that they charge. Then you get Vesak (Buddhist Festival) Pirikara (offerings for the monks). For Iftar, I mean, our Ramazan (Muslim festival), fasting days, they organize to break-fasting. They should have it otherwise it’s difficult for them to survive. So that is just to make sure all communities will come” (Parent 8, Colombo)*

Another issue that the interviewees brought to light were that these schools failed to implement any disciplinary action against students due to fear of losing business:

*“At meetings the Chairman or Principal, they say, “these are the moral values and we want this type of children; you have to be useful citizens and all”, but when it comes to disciplinary side, though they preach like that they can’t take action, they don’t take action. They don’t even suspend or they don’t, like, put a child out because they fear in return there won’t be admissions” (Teacher 5, Teacher Focus Group, SIS, Matara)*

Moreover, teachers are constantly at risk of being fired at the slightest complaint made by students or parents. This is because finding a replacement for a teacher is easy compared to losing business through customer dissatisfaction. Children hence sometimes abused this knowledge to misbehave as they had the assurance that the school would always take their side instead of the teachers. In some cases, parents too increasingly interfered with teaching matters abusing their power, often threatening to remove their children if their requests were not met:

*“It’s really challenging... for the teachers, they are like sandwiched in between the management and the parents. They have to satisfy the management, they have to satisfy the parents” (Parent 8, Colombo also a teacher at KI, Colombo)*

*“Mainly it’s a business for them, they want their customers. If there is a simple complaint they chase the teacher out. They always...what they want is their customer. They don’t want the parent to take their child and go but more than that they want to chase the teacher out and there*

*is million to come, walk-in. Whether you are qualified or experienced or, the moment something happens you have to be ready to walk out. They just chase you out. That's because they want money, they don't want to lose their customers" (Teacher 1, Teacher Focus Group, KI, Colombo)*

## **DISCUSSION**

Westernization via international schools in Sri Lanka was seen as an impediment to tradition. International schools that try to be global as well as maintain ties with their immediate locality are as Lowe (2000:1999) describes 'caught in a dialectic of sub-nationalism and supra-nationalism'. Certain international schools are reluctant to embrace the languages, values and customs of the local culture. This lack of contact with local culture is usually a result of a preoccupation of winning over the international community. When international schools do interact with the local culture, the interaction is critiqued of being merely at a superficial stage that only delves into the exotic and merely touristic 'saris, samosas and steel bands' aspects of the local culture (Pasternak 1998:260). At other times, Heyward (2002:27) highlights that 'genuine attempts to engage with local cultures may unwittingly reinforce attitudes of superiority and paternalism of cultural chauvinism'.

At national level, introducing a curriculum such as the IB is seen as the 'acquisition of a form of cultural and symbolic capital that eventually contributes to a country's overall worth in a market driven economy' (Ong 1999:221). The primary focus of the IB is 'stimulating curiosity, inquiry, reflection and critical thinking (IBO 2002:1) by encouraging an 'eclectic, creative and independent approach to inquiry and learning' (IBO 2002:10). The IB allows and encourages insertion of local cultures into curriculum. However, teachers perceive international text as superior and are therefore reluctant to incorporate local culture into the curriculum of international schools. Although the nation state remains important and the national education system is far from obsolete (Green 1997), the local culture is often disregarded in favour of the global at international schools. The common belief here is that tradition is a hindrance to modernization. This is because tradition and modernity are seen as two dichotomies that are unable to co-exist within the same setting. However, traditional society itself is dynamic and constantly evolving. In Sri Lanka, the eroding of Sri Lankan culture via international schools was addressed in 2014 by the government through the imposition of compulsory local language, history and religious education to the international school curriculum.

### **Intercultural Education**

Cambridge and Thompson (1999, as cited in Allen 2004:112) highlight that 'international education can be interpreted as an ideological construct which promotes hyper globalism. Yet, the essential pro-democratic logic of internationalism stands in sharp contrast to the logics of globalization'. As Thomas (1998, in Hayden and Thompson 1998: 103-104) further elaborates, education for peace has ironically been made a priority by the same education ministers who 'in the contexts of their own national systems, have been traditionally associated with a mission of seeking to produce citizens proud of their national identities and heritage, and willing to give up their lives if necessary in the service of their country'. The focus of international schools to produce global citizens with national priorities thus at times contradicts their ideological stance. In the case of Sri Lanka, where the majority of students that attend these schools are locals, international

school curriculum should facilitate students to integrate with the masses. If not, the international school students grow up alienated from the majority of their own national peers in having more in common with people beyond their national borders, to the point that sometimes they have not had any physical connections with than those within their immediate vicinity.

One solution to these pitfalls in ‘international education’ is for international schools to instead promote an ‘intercultural education’. Luke (2004:1429) defines intercultural capital as ‘the capacity to engage in acts of knowledge, power and exchange across time/space divides and social geographies, across diverse communities, populations and epistemic stances.’ An intercultural education therefore requires teachers to access both local and global knowledge in order to understand and teach in local conditions. Local and global are intimately interconnected and an education that is aware of this fact and tries to genuinely promote this concept seems the most appropriate way forward for international schools. As Hannerz (1990) concludes, true cosmopolitanism requires understanding the place where one is situated in order to understand others. A relevant curriculum therefore keeps both these aspects in mind.

The pitfall of intercultural literacy however is that it may not necessarily ‘deepen understanding of others and their cultures; instead it may be a superficial emotional multiculturalism that is effective for teamwork in transnational corporations’ (Loh 2012: 222). This is because the aims of building intercultural awareness are not humanistic but primarily economically driven. It is fundamentally seen as a ‘way of giving rise to global workers to take part in global knowledge economy’. (Tarc 2009:109) Moreover, haphazard and improper implementation of intercultural education could help highlight confusing stereotypes. Stereotypes pose a real danger because they represent the unknown with negative characteristics that goes against the whole ethos of intercultural education. In a country like Sri Lanka, where long histories of enmity and mistrust prevail between different religious-ethnic groups, a superficial intercultural education that reinforces stereotypes merely for the sake of having a curriculum that addresses a multicultural student body can pose an even greater threat to the people. The good intentions of having an intercultural education, in this instance can sadly misfire reinforcing pre-existing divides.

An alternate option, then, for international schools is to try and foster multiculturalism within their student body. Multiculturalism, as defined by Hoopes (1979:21) is ‘the state in which one has mastered the knowledge and developed the skills necessary to feel comfortable and communicate effectively with people of any culture encountered and any situation involving a group of diverse backgrounds’. A multicultural person then is someone who has ‘achieved personal growth as a result of encountering cultural diversity, enhancing and extending their individual cultural identity’ (Allan 2003: 84). A multicultural education highlights the importance of interdependence, connectedness and perspective where perspective should be of both global as well as multiple local perspectives. As Pike (2000:66) notes, there is national distinctiveness on what constitutes as global education and ideological differences. The common thread in multicultural education then is ‘understanding similarities and differences among people’. With global education hence, national culture does not disappear into an ‘amorphous global pot’, because culture is ‘essentially about an individual’s sense of belonging’ (Pike 2000:68). Instead, multiculturalism is about cross-fertilization of ideas and practices.

The biggest issue for international schools however is that it is their superiority, as well as the view of separateness of these schools, be it religious, curriculum wise, etcetera, that tend to be a valid marketing tool for attracting customers. The challenge hence for international schools is to make them both selective and inclusive at the same time. That is, to juggle the dual promotion of an education system that reinforces privilege and promotes multiculturalism at the same time.

### **Embracing the global while safeguarding the local: A possible reality?**

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, gender, class, language, ethnicity and region of origin dictated the quality of education that an individual received in Sri Lanka. To counteract the unfair advantage that those educated in private English schools during the colonial times gained, the government actively encouraged free education in the vernacular. Educational inequality however continued to persist as the quality of Sri Lankan public schools was under serious scrutiny. A response to this was the emergence of international schools. However, these schools reinforced existing class divides based on language competency and led to a newer generation of Sri Lankan students that grew up in an alienated fourth culture environment. Despite allegations that these schools mar Sri Lankan traditions, their popularity reflects an urgent need for improvements in public education.

When governments take a neoliberal stance, the state is no longer able to satisfy the welfare needs of all of its citizens that expect protection (Wickramasinghe 2006). The political upbringing of Sri Lanka is such that postcolonial Sri Lanka expects complete protection from the state. As Wickramasinghe (2006:333) states, it is a ‘problem of self vision and national identity’ where people continue to see themselves as ‘a nation of proud and self sufficient peasantry’ even though the existence of such a prominent self-sufficient community is doubtful.

For example, Wickramasinghe (2006:334) relates the following depiction from a current public school textbook:

*The adventures of Nayana and Kumari, two children growing up in an idyllic Sri Lankan Village. The setting is timeless. The children collect fruits and play at selling them in a make believe shop while mothers cook and their fathers work in the field.*

A quick look around one’s surrounding paints a different picture entirely if one is able to see their surrounding objectively by isolating the imagery that is ingrained into the minds from an early age. Compare this to the social imagery painted via international school textbooks and it is apparent that an international curriculum prepares students for a 21<sup>st</sup> century education. The world of twitter and virtual learning networks is nothing new as international schools prepare students to face globalization. As Bourdieu (1984:32) remarks, ‘Education is in fact one of the most effective means of perpetuating the existing social pattern, as it both provides an apparent justification for social inequalities and gives recognition to the cultural heritage, that is, to a social gift treated as a natural one’. The education offered by Sri Lankan international schools paves a path for the accumulation of cultural and social capital. The English medium education offered at international schools, coupled with foreign qualifications, modern pedagogy, facilities and access to the wider world help students to reproduce advantage. Moreover, the long spanning historical connotations attached to fee-paying private schools and English medium education further

facilitates in the creation of an exclusive reputation that serves as a class distinguisher in some cases.

Gradstein and Justman (2000) observe that public schooling plays an important role in building social capital and, in particular, nation building in multi-ethnic countries such as Singapore. Contrastingly however, in the Sri Lankan education system where public schools are segregated along linguistic and religious divides, the international schools due to their all-encompassing nature tend to play a more significant role in fostering pluralism. Yet the business priorities of these schools sometimes mean that cross cultural education is merely a business tactic to keep customers of all faiths happy and is a superficial feature that is not genuinely practiced at a deeper level.

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