



I go to a Type 1AB school.
This means I can study up
to the A-levels.
My teachers are graduates.
I want to go to university

I go to a Type 2 school.
Classes go up to the
O-levels.
Some of our teachers are
graduates.
If I want to go to
university, I must find
another school

I go to a Type 3 school.
Classes go up to Grade 5 and in some
schools up to Grade 7.
Some of our teachers are trained at
the national training colleges.
But others are not trained there. If
I want to go to university, I must
change schools.
My school does not have good
facilities.

**Let's Talk About Equity in Education in
the Time of Covid**

Democratic dialogue, active listening and inclusive citizen participation: creating spaces for inclusive civic participation in times of pandemic and social crisis

The objective of the project is to create spaces for inclusive civic participation during the pandemic and the socio-economic crisis that Sri Lanka is facing and to strengthen democratic institutions, the rule of law, and public accountability. As engaged citizens, we aim to ensure that government responses to the crisis are aligned to principles of constitutionalism and that government by exception will be restricted; misinformation and hate mongering prevented and that social solidarity will be strengthened through the positive engagement of change makers and influencers.

To achieve these objectives, the project has established an informal “civic watch” that analyses the government's rapid responses to health and economic challenges; promotes a public discussion on policy issues, documents fundamental rights violations; provides timely, fact-based information to citizens on emerging issues that impact on democratic values, constitutional principles and fundamental rights. The project also aims to conduct advocacy campaigns to strengthen democracy and the rule of law, as well as to conduct a needs assessment that enable citizens to articulate their needs, anxieties, and aspirations in the post-pandemic context.

This report was written by Michael Mendis as a contribution towards the project. The Law and Society Trust (LST) appreciates his engagement in this project. The views expressed in the article do not necessarily reflect the views of the Board or the Management of LST.

Cover art by Sangeeth Madurawala

Let's Talk About Equity in Education in Times of Covid

The world over, children's education has been one of the biggest casualties of the Covid-19 pandemic. Midway through March in 2020, as the pandemic broke out around the world, almost all countries in the South Asian region announced decisions to close schools as cases of the disease spread among their populations.¹

In Sri Lanka, too, as soon as news broke of the first locally detected case, rumours spread that the patient's son had also contracted the disease, which led parents of that son's schoolmates to clamour at the entrance to their school, agitating to remove their children from the premises.²

Health officials had acted swiftly to test the student in question and establish that he was negative. This notwithstanding, concern spread wide enough that, within the day, the Ministry of Education announced the closure of *all* government schools in the island³, and other schools followed suit, too.

When the decision was announced, it was characterised as an early start to the April holidays, with schools slated to reopen on the 20th of the following month. However, as it transpired, most students remained home for much of the following two years—deprived of their ability to access education.

Education inequities, pre-Covid

Despite the high literacy rates in Sri Lanka as compared to other regional counterparts, inequities in the education system are entrenched and long-standing. There are many methods to explore and describe these pre-existent inequities; however, for its purposes, this discussion paper relies primarily on key data from the annual School Census.

By the end of 2020, there were 10,155 government schools in Sri Lanka.⁴ These are divided into three major types of schools. **Type 1** schools provide classes up to Advanced Level. **Type 2** schools provide classes up to Ordinary Level. **Type 3** schools provide classes up to either Grade 5 or Grade 8.

Of the total government schools in Sri Lanka, about 72% (that is 7,223) schools did not offer classes in the Advanced Level (they were schools of Type 2 or 3). Of the schools that did offer Advanced Level classes (2,932), only 1,000 schools included classes in the science streams (i.e., classes in bio and/or physical sciences).

In Sri Lanka, in 2020, the majority of schools were Type 3 schools, amounting to 3,999. Within this category, there were 3,884 schools with classes from Grade 1 to 5, and 115 with classes from Grade 1 to 8.

¹ [UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia COVID-19 Situation Report No.2 for March 10 - 17, 2020 - World | ReliefWeb](#) (17.3.2020)

² [Govt. tightens COVID-19 prevention measures as total cases climb to two | Daily FT](#) (13.3.2020)

³ [Government schools closed from tomorrow till April 20th \(newsfirst.lk\)](#) (12.3.2020)

⁴ Ministry of Education, 'Annual School Census of Sri Lanka – 2020', available at: <https://moe.gov.lk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/cenreport.pdf> (accessed 18.1.2022). Hereinafter, School Census 2020. Statistics for 2021 were not available as of this writing.

According to official statistics, 319,405 students were admitted to Grade 1 in 2020. Of them, 40% were admitted to Type 3 schools. That is 130,009 students. In both previous years (i.e., 2018 and 2019) also, 40% of students admitted to Grade 1 went to Type 3 schools. This means 40% of students admitted to Grade 1 each year are expected to find another school to graduate to 5 or 8 years down the line.

However, though Type 3 schools are the majority of schools in Sri Lanka, they do not accommodate the majority of the student population. Of the total student population, only about 17% attended Type 3 schools in 2020. This is because, though most schools in Sri Lanka are Type 3 schools, they are smaller in capacity. Scattered across the island, they generally do not accommodate large student bodies. A majority of the Type 3 schools (that is, 1,317 of 3,999) accommodated less than 50 students in 2020. Only 46 of all Type 3 schools accommodated more than 1000 students.

On the other hand, about 9% of schools (i.e., 930 schools) accommodated more than 1,000 students at a time, and some of these schools can accommodate more than 4,000 students at a time. Incredibly, 43.2% of the total student population of 2020 attended one of these schools. In other words, while nearly half of the total student population were concentrated in a small number of very large schools, the rest of the student population were dispersed across a large number of very small schools.

Another important categorisation of Sri Lankan government schools is the national/provincial distinction. National schools are administered directly by the Ministry of Education (and thus have direct access to more resources). All other schools are termed “provincial schools” and are administered by provincial administrations. Of the 10,155 total government schools existing in 2020, 373 schools were classified as “national”. Of these, 372 schools were Type 1 schools (i.e., offering classes up to Advanced Levels); 1 school was a Type 2 school (i.e., offering classes up to Ordinary Levels). There were no Type 3 national schools in 2020. While, as mentioned before, only about 9% of all schools have the capacity of accommodating more than 1,000 students at a time, almost all national schools have such a capacity. In 2020, of total Grade 1 admissions, only 8% were admitted to national schools.

Another important indicator tracked by the annual School Census is the distribution of teachers across all government schools. Here, while 95% of all national schools had more than 50 teachers, 93% of all provincial schools had less than 50 teachers. As a whole, 89% of all government schools had less than 50 teachers.

There are five major categories of appointment relevant to teachers. They are as follows⁵:

- *Graduate Teachers* – basic degree, postgraduate diploma, postgraduate degree holders
- *Trained Teachers* – teachers qualified with a teacher-training certificate from a training college/national diploma holder of a national college of education/teachers having a 2-year diploma in science/mathematics

⁵ See, School Census 2020 (*supra*). These definitions are verbatim from the School Census report.

- *Untrained Teachers* – untrained teachers and 2-3 years other diploma holders and have been absorbed into the Sri Lanka Teacher Service
- *Trainee Teachers* – teachers not absorbed into the Sri Lanka Teacher Service
- *Other Teachers* – teachers paid by other government institutes and teachers paid by non-governmental institutes/organisations

Generally, the order in which these categories are presented also reflect the eminence and pay-grade of each category relative to the others.

In 2020, a total of 249,494 teachers were teaching in government schools in Sri Lanka. Of these, 48.7% were categorised Graduate Teachers. Of the total number of Graduate Teachers, 66% were posted at Type 1 schools (schools having grades up to Advanced Level), while only about 10% of Graduate Teachers were posted at Type 3 schools (schools with Grades 1-5 or 1-8).

Student-to-teacher ratios are an important indicator in education contexts which compare the number of students to the number of teachers available. A lower ratio generally means a teacher has more time to attend to a single student in her class. A higher ratio means the converse: a teacher has less time to attend to a single student in her class. When considering the student-to-teacher ratio of Graduate Teachers between Type 1 and Type 3 schools, it is clear that Graduate Teachers are inequitably distributed in Type 3 schools. To wit, in Type 1 schools, in 2020, there were 32.8 students to one Graduate Teacher, whereas, in Type 3 schools, there were 49.9 students to one Graduate Teacher.

Thus, in 2020, Graduate Teachers were highly concentrated in Type 1 schools, which are already well-resourced, while Type 3 schools had less Graduate Teachers to be shared among a relatively larger number of students at a time. Indeed, in practice, Type 3 schools often rotate teachers through more than one school within a school week. Of course, schools providing Advanced Level classes would naturally need more Graduate Teachers—however, given the many levels of disparate treatment that different types of schools are subjected to, one may legitimately wonder whether the government strikes an adequate balance in distributing its most qualified teachers across the different types of schools. As they stand, it is impossible to discern an answer to this question through School Census data on its own.

The foregoing analysis intends to sketch a general picture of the state of inequity within the Sri Lankan education system before the pandemic struck. The analysis considers three factors related to the school system—the relative sizes of schools and how the student population was dispersed across them; how the national/provincial distinction cuts across the issue of school size and student dispersal; and, finally, the distribution of qualified teachers across different types of schools (and the equitableness thereof).⁶ In summary, it is clear that a large portion of the total student population in Sri Lanka was concentrated within 9% of the total schools in Sri Lanka, which included almost all national schools, directly administered by the Ministry of Education. These schools also enjoyed the services of the largest number of Graduate Teachers. Meanwhile, the largest portion of schools are spread out across

⁶ Though the analysis considers only Graduate Teachers, this in no way is intended as a characterisation of Trained/Untrained/Trainee teachers as unqualified or inadequately qualified. Instead, the equitableness of the distribution of Graduate Teachers is taken to be an indication of the equitableness of the distribution of teachers overall.

the island, are of much smaller sizes, are administered by respective provincial administrations, include classes only up to Grade 5 or 8, and are staffed by far fewer Graduate Teachers. Though the School Census data provides no socio-economic details of the students attending the different types of schools, it would be interesting if this could be studied—especially to determine any patterns in the income levels, vocational backgrounds, as well as caste identities of students attending the different types of schools.

The phenomenon of “popular” schools within Sri Lanka is well known. An online policy dialogue on “Inequities in funding schools” held by the Education Forum Sri Lanka (EFSL) on February 13th, 2021, illustrated this phenomenon in detail.⁷ According to this discussion, a specimen Type 2 school (including Grades 1-11) of about 350 students would have an annual budget of about Rs 250,000 to cover the most essential needs of the school. However, only about 5-8% of this amount is covered by the government directly, while another portion of the budget is furnished by the government based on special applications by the Principal (i.e., this portion is not guaranteed to all schools). The majority of the annual budget for *essentials* is covered by the Student Development Society and parent contributions. In terms of the special needs of school, e.g., to extracurricular activities, student and teacher development, etc., the school received no funds from the government, and were dependent on the Principal’s fundraising abilities within the community. Some schools also raise revenues by renting its properties, where possible. By contrast, a representative of the Royal College Old Boys’ Union participating in the discussion reported that the annual operations budget alone of the school generally neared Rs 200 million.

In such a context, Grade 5 scholarships exert untold pressures on children as young as 10 years to earn a place in a popular school. The conventional wisdom among most parents is that, while a bright future is not necessarily guaranteed even to those who secure a place in a “popular” school, doom is a near certainty to all others who fail to do so. Whether or not this is true, close scrutiny of the School Census makes it clear that the education system is not only aware of the pyramidal structure of the resource distribution within the school system, but also in many ways reinforces the importance of securing places in popular schools. This is despite politicians often intoning their famous mantra that, “the closest school is the best school.”

Education during Covid and continuing inequities

The closure of schools resulting from the pandemic, and the ensuing move to “online education”, added new dimensions of inequity to the educational context described above.

Distance learning

Even though the government announced its decision to move to “online education”, it was never specific about the modalities of this new approach. Initially, the Ministry of Education deployed its regular online learning platform “e-thaksalawa” as well as educational programmes on television

⁷ See, Education Forum Sri Lanka, ‘[Policy Dialogue #12: Inequities in Funding Schools](https://educationforum.lk/2021/02/policy-dialogue-12-inequities-in-funding-schools/)’ (13.2.2021), available at: <https://educationforum.lk/2021/02/policy-dialogue-12-inequities-in-funding-schools/> (accessed 25.1.2022) (Policy Dialogue video available in-post.)

channels. The e-thaksalawa platform had been launched in 2013, and provided students with access to a variety of learning materials relevant to grades 1 through 13, in all three mediums. During the pandemic period, the government took steps to provide free access to the platform through any internet service provider.⁸ The Ministry also launched its educational programmes on the two public TV channels, Channel Eye and Nethra, in April 2020. Publishing a timetable in newspapers, the TV programmes provided lessons to Advanced Level, Ordinary Level and Grade 5 scholarship students.⁹ However, both these approaches were inadequate. The online learning platform had always been intended as a supplement to the traditional teaching approach, and was not geared to replace or substitute classroom-learning. On the other hand, the education programmes broadcast on TV catered only to three specific grades, and even then, had to accommodate far too many subjects per grade across the span of a weekly TV schedule. Besides, while the e-thaksalawa platform assumed that all students had access to the internet, the TV-delivered lessons assumed that students had the necessary environment to engage with and pay attention to lessons taught on TV. In addition to these measures, private TV channels as well as subscription TV services (such as Dialog TV and PEO TV) also came forward with educational content.



Meanwhile, teachers and principals began devising their own methods of delivering education to their students across all grades. These methods included teaching classes on group calls or Zoom meetings, sending video recordings of lessons via messaging apps, sending notes as PDFs via email, delivering printed notes to those without online access, following up with students

individually via voice calls and even in-person visits, etc. However, even with these measures, as early as May 2020, news reports started emerging of the difficulties various families faced in continuing their children's education.¹⁰ The greatest obstacle to online education among many families was the lack of access to the internet. On one level, it was an issue of devices: some families had no devices at all, at least none capable of accessing the internet at a level advanced enough to engage in online education (such as 3G or higher capabilities). On the other hand, some families did not have enough devices—children with many siblings but only one device in the family could not access online education simultaneously. Some children were dependent on their parents' work laptops or phones, which were also needed by those parents, being required to work from home. On the other hand, even where devices were available, many families found data to be unaffordable, which was expensive enough during ordinary times—but which, during the pandemic, with livelihoods lost or salaries slashed, had become that much more unbearable. Indeed, according to one pre-Covid study, the poorer 60% of the population could not afford the cost of 1GB of data as a percentage of their

⁸ [Sri Lanka: Internet access to e-Thaksalawa free for students without data charges \(colombopage.com\)](https://colombopage.com) (25.3.2020)

⁹ [Education Channel Timetable announced | Daily News](https://www.dailynews.lk) (28.4.2020)

¹⁰ See, e.g., ["පාසල් දරුවන් සිටින පවුල්වලින් 66%කට දත්ත වැය වැඩි වීම නිසා අධ්‍යාපනය සාර්ථක වෙයි ද? - BBC News සිංහල](https://www.bbc.com/news/health-55084444) (20.5.2020)

monthly income.¹¹ An issue faced especially by children living in rural areas was the lack of signal reception, or the available signal not being 3G or higher. During this period, images of students climbing trees and water tanks with smartphones to attend online classes was widespread across the media. An oft-cited study by LIRNEasia claims that only 34% of households with children have an internet connection, whereas only 48% of households with children have a smartphone or computer.¹²

Support to teachers

Meanwhile, discontent among teachers with the government worsened throughout the period of distance learning, and reached boiling point towards the end of 2021.¹³ Teachers and principals in Sri Lanka had long been struggling, through trade union action, to resolve a salary anomaly that they perceived as a serious injustice. While trade union action had been pursued in the years previous to the beginning of the pandemic¹⁴, the first such action planned for the year 2020 was to be the week of March 15, when schools were unexpectedly closed due to Covid-19.¹⁵

However, their discontent notwithstanding, the fact that teachers and principals showed great initiative in devising their own methods of online teaching when more senior education officials were less forthcoming is a well-documented fact.¹⁶ Yet, it soon transpired those teachers were in dire need of government support. A report by BBC Sinhala describes the extent of the expenses incurred by teachers in improvising online education with no training, guidance or monetary support from the government.¹⁷ In addition to the extremely steep data costs related to conducting online lessons for multiple classes per week, many teachers also recount the expenditure of obtaining devices (such as laptops and smartphones) which they had not possessed up to that point. Some teachers also acquired Zoom or Microsoft Teams packages at their own expense. Some teachers were also living in rural areas during lockdown, and struggled as much as their students in accessing a strong enough signal to make online lessons possible. Most teachers had children of their own struggling with the sudden shift to online education, and they had to split the scarce resources available to them between teaching their students and helping their own children learn.

It is in this context that, by mid-2021, the major trade unions representing teachers and principals entered a serious phase of trade union action, including public protests and demonstrations. As part of these actions, teachers also began abstaining from online education, on account of the inordinate expenses incurred for online teaching whilst suffering from a debilitating salary anomaly, and also on account of the injustices inflicted on poorer students by continuing the farce that was online

¹¹ Ayesha Zainudeen & Tharaka Amarasinghe, 'E-learning opportunities in the Asian global south' *LIRNEasia* (19.5.2020), available at: <https://lirneasia.net/2020/05/e-learning-opportunities-in-the-asian-global-south-presentation/> (accessed: 18.1.2022)

¹² LIRNEasia, *After Access: ICT access and use in Asia and the Global South (Version 3.0)*, (Colombo, 2019).

¹³ See, e.g., [Teachers & Principals protest across the Island, demanding solutions to issues \(newsfirst.lk\)](https://www.newsfirst.lk/news/teachers-principals-protest-across-the-island-demanding-solutions-to-issues) (25.10.2021)

¹⁴ See, e.g., [ගුරු - විදුහල්පතිවරු ලෙඩවීම සාර්ථකයි - ලංකා ගුරු සංගමය - Aruna](https://www.aruna.lk/news/2019/03/13/03-13-2019-03-13-2019) (13.3.2019)

¹⁵ See, <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/latest-indias-coronavirus-cases-continue-daily-decline-73965144> and <https://www.ips.lk/talkingeconomics/2021/06/07/mitigating-sri-lankas-covid-19-education-crisis-priority-areas-for-action/>

¹⁶ See, e.g., UNICEF, *Situation Analysis on the Effects of and Responses to COVID-19 on the Education Sector in Asia: Sri Lanka Case Study* (August 2021), pp. 28-29.

¹⁷ [අමු දරු රැකීමට ලැබෙන සෞඛ්‍යමය ඔන්ලයින් වලට වැය කළ දිසාපාමොක් ඇදුරු පරපුර - BBC News සිංහල](https://www.bbc.com/news/health-58111111) (28.7.2021)

education.¹⁸ Though the government was obstinate in refusing to oblige the unions' demands, even resorting to various repressive tactics including arbitrary arrests, come budget speech in November, the Minister of Finance resolved the salary anomaly in one fell sweep and a showy demonstration of power.¹⁹ However, the seeming ease with which Minister of Finance Basil Rajapaksa resolved the issue left one wondering why he did not resolve the issue much earlier.

School meal programmes

A major repercussion of the pandemic in relation to education is the impact the closure of schools had on child nutrition. While Sri Lanka has been carrying out school feeding programmes since as early as 1931, the current National School Meal Programme has been running since 2003. The government spends around Rs 5-6 billion annually on the programme, and implements it in almost 80 percent of all government schools, with about 1.1 million students benefiting from it.²⁰ The programme covers all schools with less than 100 students, students in grades 1 through 5 in some selected schools, and students of special education units. In addition to this programme, the government also carries out a "Food for Education" initiative (in partnership with the World Food Programme), as well as a scheme to distribute fresh milk to students of selected schools. To many children, the meal received through the National School Meal Programme is vital for their nutrition, often being the most nutritious meal that they receive in a day.²¹

However, with the closure of schools in the wake of Covid-19, students were deprived of this meal. Even though, with the support of the World Food Programme, the Ministry of Education provided one month's worth of take-home rations to "approximately 78,000 school children"²², that initiative barely scratched the surface of the approximately 1.1 million students who had previously depended on the school meal programme. In a context where malnutrition among children and adolescents has long been a serious public health concern, the disruption of the school meal programme jeopardised not only the health of many Sri Lankan children, but also by extension their future capacity to return to education. Generally belonging to the poorest of the poor, parents of these children now had, not only the additional costs of facilitating online education, but also that of providing for their children a nutritious meal which they had, in their poverty, grown accustomed to receiving through schools.

Examinations

¹⁸ See, Ceylon Teachers' Union leader Joseph Stalin explaining the unfairness of the online education approach on poorer students a year earlier: "[සාසල් දරුවන් සිටින පවුල්වලින් 66%කට ඉන්ටර්නෙට් නැ; ශ්‍රී ලංකාවේ ඔන්ලයින් අධ්‍යාපනය සාර්ථක වෙයි ද? - BBC News සිංහල](#) (20.5.2020)

¹⁹ [මාස හයක සටන අවසන්. ගුරු විදුහල්පති අයවැයේ යෝජනාව පිලිගනී - ITN News දේශීය පුවත්](#) (14.11.2021)

²⁰ World Bank, *Assessing Public Finance for Nutrition in Sri Lanka* (February 2020), available at: <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/33419/PER-for-Nutrition-in-Sri-Lanka-Assessing-Public-Financing-for-Nutrition-2014-2018.pdf?sequence=5> (accessed 18.1.2022)

²¹ [Nutrition crisis looms as more than 39 billion in-school meals missed since start of pandemic – UNICEF and WFP](#) (1.2.2021)

²² *ibid.*

As early as March 2020, the Ministry of Education was busy quashing rumours about the impact of the pandemic on national-level examinations.²³ Even by May, the government was repeating its position that the Advanced Level examinations would not be postponed.²⁴ However, by June, officials finally relented and announced that the upcoming Advanced Level exams as well as the Grade 5 scholarship exams will be postponed to dates in September.²⁵ However, soon after, then Minister of Education Dullas Alahapperuma was seen reconsidering the dates, stating that, in response to the requests of many parties to postpone the exams still further, the Ministry would be considering the “proposals and suggestions of A/L students, teachers and principals” in determining the date on which the exams were to be held.²⁶ The primary cause for the requests for further postponement was the failure in many schools to cover the full syllabus relevant to the exams, due to various pandemic-induced constraints.

However, even a month later, new dates had not been announced, when freshly reopened schools were closed again for a week in the wake of a new spike in Covid cases, including the discovery of three positive cases among students.²⁷ Soon, however, new dates were announced, with the Grade 5 scholarship slated for October 11, and A/L exams being set to commence October 12.²⁸ Ordinary Levels exams on the other hand which were slated for January 2021 were further postponed till March 2021.²⁹

Accordingly, A/L exams and the Grade 5 scholarship were held as planned in October 2020, amidst curfew, with students’ admission papers being declared curfew passes. Sixteen students who had tested positive and were receiving treatment for Covid-19 also sat for A/L exams from a special examination centre established in the Infectious Diseases Hospital, where they were being treated.³⁰

The next year, as students were preparing to sit O/L exams in March 2021, the Ministry of Education teetered on the subject of holding practical examinations for relevant aesthetic subjects. Initially, the Ministry announced that practical tests would be suspended and an alternative method of evaluation would be devised in lieu thereof.³¹ However, days later, the Ministry overturned this decision, announcing that practical tests would be held after all. No reasons were given for this change of heart. The practical tests were later scheduled for May.³² As the dates for O/L exams loomed ever closer, the Ministry announced the establishment of 40 special examination centres for students exposed to Covid-19.³³ A total of 622,305 candidates faced the Ordinary Level examination at 4,513 centres from 1st to 10th of March.

²³ [No decision to postpone GCE A/L exams | Daily News](#) (30.3.2020)

²⁴ [No truth to the '2020 GCE A/L - Time Table' circulating on social media: Commissioner of Examinations \(newsfirst.lk\)](#) (25.5.2020)

²⁵ [A/L examination postponed \(newsfirst.lk\)](#) (9.6.2020)

²⁶ [Ministry of Education to re-consider 2020 GCE A/L Examination date \(newsfirst.lk\)](#) (17.6.2020)

²⁷ [School holiday extended; new date for A/L exams to be decided \(newsfirst.lk\)](#) (18.7.2020)

²⁸ [New dates set for A/L and Scholarship exams \(adaderana.lk\)](#) (20.7.2020); [Grade 05 & A/L examination dates announced \(newsfirst.lk\)](#) (20.7.2020)

²⁹ [GCE O/L to be held in March | Daily News](#) (3.12.2020)

³⁰ [16 COVID-19 positive students facing A/L exam from IDH | Daily News](#) (24.10.2020)

³¹ [Practical exams of 2020 GCE O/Ls suspended \(newsfirst.lk\)](#) (6.2.2021)

³² [O/L exam evaluations to begin on March 27, practical exams to be held in May | Print Edition - The Sunday Times, Sri Lanka](#) (14.3.2021)

³³ [2020 GCE O/L: 40 Special Examination Centres \(newsfirst.lk\)](#) (24.2.2021)

Ahead of the O/L exams in March, then Minister of Education G.L. Peiris explained that, “the time of students would never be wasted under any circumstances,” and that “it was a priority of the Ministry of Education to formulate a structure that would enable children to complete their education without delay.”³⁴

Meanwhile, results of the A/L exams held the previous year were released in May 2021, with nearly 64% of the candidates qualifying to apply for university.³⁵ However, the total number of candidates actually gaining seats in universities is hitherto unknown.

Soon after the O/L exams were concluded, it was also announced that the 2021 A/L exams and Grade 5 scholarship will not be held in August (as was usual pre-Covid), and that a new date would be announced eventually.³⁶ In July, it was announced that the exams will be held in October.³⁷ However, as in the previous year, this decision was rescinded mere days later, with the Secretary to the Ministry of Education saying that the dates for the exams will be further reviewed and announced in due course.³⁸ The next week, the exams were announced to be held in November.³⁹ However, by October, then State Minister for Education Reforms Susil Premajayanth told Parliament that the dates of the A/L and Grade 5 exams would need to be revised on account of the pandemic situation as well as the ongoing teacher-principal trade union action.⁴⁰ However, a few days later, news outlets reported that, despite Premajayanth’s statement in Parliament, the Ministry of Education declined to confirm the postponement, stating that the Ministry had not made any official statement on the matter as yet.⁴¹ At the same time, the Commissioner General of Examinations did acknowledge that many schools had not covered the full syllabus due to various constraints, and it would be unfair to hold the examinations.⁴² Meanwhile, in a context where the Minister of Education Dinesh Gunawardena had informed Parliament in September that all A/L candidates would be inoculated with the Pfizer vaccine,⁴³ the government also faced criticism that the first round of doses had not been started in time for candidates to be fully vaccinated by the date announced for the examinations to commence.⁴⁴ Thus, as late as October, education administrators were mooting the inevitability of a further postponement of the exams, even as the Ministry was declining to officially confirm the same. By early November, however, the Ministry announced that the exams would be postponed, with the Grade 5 scholarship to be held in late January 2022, A/L exams to be held in early February, and O/L exams to be held in late May.⁴⁵

³⁴ [2020 A/L results out in April? \(adaderana.lk\)](#) (28.2.2021)

³⁵ [Sri Lanka: Nearly 200,000 candidates of 2020 GCE A/L examination qualify to apply for universities \(colombopage.com\)](#) (4.5.2021)

³⁶ [2021 Scholarship and A/L exams not held in August \(adaderana.lk\)](#) (14.2.2021)

³⁷ [Dates announced for GCE A/L exam, Grade 5 Scholarship | Daily News](#) (9.7.2021)

³⁸ [A/L and Scholarship exam dates to be further reviewed \(adaderana.lk\)](#) (11.7.2021)

³⁹ [Grade 5 scholarship, GCE A/L exams postponed | Daily News](#) (19.7.2021)

⁴⁰ [2021 A/L and Grade 5 Scholarship exams rescheduled again? \(adaderana.lk\)](#) (7.10.2021); [Sri Lanka’s Grade 5 scholarship, GCE A/L exams postponed yet again | EconomyNext](#) (7.10.2021)

⁴¹ [A/L postponement inevitable but no official statement so far – The Island](#) (13.10.2021)

⁴² *ibid.*

⁴³ [Pfizer COVID vaccine will be administered to A/L exam candidates | Daily News](#) (21.9.2021)

⁴⁴ [A/L postponement inevitable but no official statement so far – The Island](#) (13.10.2021)

⁴⁵ [O/L, A/L & Gr 5 examination \(2021\) dates announced \(newsfirst.lk\)](#) (2.11.2021)

Meanwhile, back in September, the Commissioner General of Examinations had announced that the deadline for accepting applications for the A/L exam and the Grade 5 scholarship would not be extended.⁴⁶ He further stated that the Department of Examinations had received 92% of the relevant applications for the Advanced Level examinations, while the Secretary to the Ministry of Education had issued a circular that if a student is unable to appear for the examination, the respective principals should bear the responsibility.⁴⁷ However, in the wake of exams being postponed at the last minute, the application deadline was, in fact, extended once again.⁴⁸

It is clear, considering the peripatetic arc of exam-related decisions emanating from education officials, that candidates for these exams were placed under immense pressure throughout 2020 and 2021. On one hand, there was the fear that exams would be held before the relevant syllabi were adequately covered. On the other, there was the uncertainty of changes to exam schedules even at the very last minute. While the possibility of contracting Covid was also omnipresent right throughout, some students were also compelled (by circumstance if nothing else) to face the exams from hospitals or special examination centres, while Covid-positive and receiving treatment. Though at least one Minister of Education explained this course of events as being in the best interests of students and the continuity of their education, one may legitimately wonder how many students were adversely impacted by these decisions of the government. Indeed, a large number of students may have undoubtedly preferred the quick disposal of these milestones for the sake of moving on with their lives and careers, especially if their education had not significantly been interrupted by the various disruptions of the pandemic. However, no doubt, a large swathe of students would have had to struggle through immense adversities to face the exams that the government insisted on conducting at all costs. Looking at their results, especially if they were not successful, these students may wonder forever—*what if things had been handled differently by the government?* The greatest tragedy is that they will never know the answer.

Male , 38 years, Portuguese Burgher, Eastern Province:

“Online education is limited to urban and rich families. Rural families with financial difficulties, faced many difficulties. The education ministry has not done anything at for the school system and for the students.....

.....At the University level, there are different initiatives for continuing the education process. The Eastern University signed an agreement with Zoom to provide a free platform for the students and the university teachers. Free internet facilities are provided for the university, but for the teachers and the students at school level, there are few facilities and limited knowledge about the technology... ..Teachers and students had to spend their own money on facilities such as android phones and paying the data charges. Some teachers even created and printed study kits and papers and they carried the printing and distribution costs without any support. Teachers struggled to find photocopy centers because most of them were closed due to the lockdown.

.....I think the government can initiate a trilingual web platform to share all the lessons for the students. The school curriculum is the same and therefore it is easy to conduct lessons. The cost will be less and it will create some relief for the students and teachers. Also, television, radio and youtube can be used as platforms to share the content with the students. I got to know that in Portugal, the education system is conducting lessons in this way during the pandemic.”

⁴⁶ [Application deadline for A/L, Scholarship will not be extended: Commissioner General of Exams \(newsfirst.lk\)](#) (15.9.2021)

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

⁴⁸ [Applications closing date for GCE A/L exam extended | Daily News](#) (9.11.2021)

Education Reforms

The natural question, at this point, is where do we go from here? Writing in January 2022, one overwhelmingly feels society, especially in the capital, lurching back to normalcy—despite the constant hailing of a “new normal” when the pandemic had initially struck. However, neither the old normal, pre-2020, nor the new one obtaining since the pandemic struck, treated the majority of school students fairly in Sri Lanka. The need for reforms is clear. Yet, the question remains, what shape should they take?

In April 2020, on the heels of the pandemic, the President appointed a 26-member Presidential Taskforce on Educational Affairs consisting of education and public administration professionals. By July 2020, the Taskforce published a comprehensive set of proposals for reforms to general education in Sri Lanka.⁴⁹ The recommendations cover a wide variety of themes, including issues such as modernising educational techniques, transforming student evaluation approaches, the curricular structure at various ages, alternative pathways to graduation, etc. This discussion paper will highlight some key proposals to the extent they are relevant to the issue of education equity, referring the reader’s attention to the source text for a closer reading.

Classification of schools

The report underlines a number of problems inherent in the school classification system described elsewhere in this paper. A key issue highlighted by the report is the link between a given’s school’s classification and its principal’s remuneration, which apparently unduly incentivises principals of Type 2 and Type 3 schools to pursue reclassification to a higher category without fulfilling the (resource-based) requirements relevant to such a category, for the sake of obtaining higher remuneration. On the other hand, the issue also presents education administrators with difficulties in sourcing high-quality principals for primary schools due to the link between lower remuneration and primary schools. A similar issue also applies to teachers in Type 2 and 3 schools, wherein those teaching at the primary levels are remunerated less. This leads better qualified teachers to seek employment in the higher category of schools, draining skilled teachers from smaller schools, though they constitute the majority of government schools in Sri Lanka. The perception of Type 1AB schools (i.e., schools including science streams at the Advanced Levels) as “better schools” also shifts the focus away from student-centred quality education as the main criterion for assessing a school’s performance. On the other hand, according to the report, most school development programmes also tend to focus on Type 1AB schools, both at the national and provincial levels, which reinforces their perception as “popular” schools. The cumulative effect of the current system is the draining of resources from small schools, driving teachers and principals away and discouraging student enrolment to the extent that such schools are constantly in threat of closing down. Naturally, children of the poorest, least influential families end up in them.

⁴⁹ Presidential Taskforce on Sri Lanka’s Education Affairs, *Re-imagining Education in Sri Lanka*, vol-II, Core Group Reports (n.d.), available at: <http://nec.gov.lk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/5.Re-imagining-Education-in-Sri-Lanka-Vol-II-Core-Group-Reports-by-Presidential-Task-Force.pdf> (accessed 24.1.2022)

The key proposal in this regard is to abolish the present classification system, shifting to a system in which schools are simply classified as either primary or secondary, and all schools currently including primary and secondary sections would be delinked in a “phased-out manner”, allowing their primary sections to run as independent schools. The expectation of this proposal is to create (local) networks of primary schools, which would feed secondary schools assigned for each such network. The report proposes the creation of 1000 national schools into such secondary schools. Thus networked, secondary schools would also be revisited to ensure that Advanced Level subject streams are distributed among them in an efficient manner, so as to redistribute the resources concentrated in those schools teaching multiple streams, which according to the report leads to wastage. Moreover, appointments of principals, teachers and non-academic staff would be on a needs-based approach only, and principals of higher service grades would be specifically drawn to primary schools, including with special incentive packages. This proposed new approach is expected to rationalise school administration, allow the development of high-quality secondary schools, reduce competition for popular schools, as well as shift more focus towards primary schools in terms of resource allocation.

Another key proposal in this connection relates to resource sharing. The report highlights statistics on the distribution of physical resources across schools (such as how only 3,800 of all schools have ICT labs and only 52% of schools with O/L classes have O/L Laboratories), and suggests the development of resource sharing models which would allow students of multiple schools to access resources concentrated within a given school. Similarly, according to the report, while the total teacher deficit in Sri Lanka is 66,512, and total teacher excess in Sri Lanka is 41,512. As such, the report also highlights the need for a programme to streamline the school system based on identified criteria and for networks of schools to share resources with a “centre school”.

Primary teachers and principals will be incentivised, motivated and recognised on par with secondary schools. The salary structures and other benefits of principals and teachers of primary schools are proposed to be upgraded, possibly on par with those of secondary school staff. Primary teachers and principals, especially those serving in rural, challenging locations would be accorded with additional financial incentives, affording special recognition in their performance appraisal schemes, transfers and promotions. Primary school teachers would also be especially trained for primary-level education, and teachers educated in science, commerce and technology streams should also be encouraged to become primary school teachers.

Student evaluation

The Taskforce report also highlighted problems related to the present system of student evaluation, which is focussed on three examinations: Grade 5 scholarship, Ordinary Levels and Advanced Levels. The report proposes shifting away from this system, which is based on a “summative assessment” approach, to a system based on “formative assessment”, wherein students’ learning is evaluated on an ongoing basis through assessments which shift the focus away from the ability of children to “cram” subject matter into a few-hour long written test, instead focussing also on children’s creativity, aestheticism, sports and community work, etc. The report also recommends panel-based assessments to maintain objectivity and fairness.

However, not ignoring the role played by the Grade 5 scholarship in the current context, the report proposes scholarships for talented and needy students based on simple tests held in Grade 5. In addition, a learning support grant is suggested to be provided to children in low-income families from grade 1 onwards, possibly combined with family-based subsidy grants. A simple test focussing on emotional intelligence, general aptitude, and essential learning competencies is proposed to be conducted to identify outperforming students of low-income cohorts (only children from families below the designated income level would be able to apply for the test). The Grade 5 scholarship will be replaced with a suitable, simple test to select children for admission to secondary schools. Establishing one thousand (1000) secondary schools fed by local networks of primary schools is expected to reduce parents' competition to admit their children to popular schools.

Further, in suggesting multiple pathways to graduation, including vocational, polytechnic, technical and other diversions for students while still in school, the report recommends a de-emphasis on the role O/L and A/L exams play in determining the future of students. Similarly, the report also promotes the idea of two tiers of mathematical education, wherein students who do not expect to pursue advanced mathematical studies are only expected to learn mathematics at a practical level. The proposals detail the multiple levels at which students may graduate to vocational training, whether after O/Ls or A/Ls.

Teacher development

In light of the various issues related to the availability of teachers within the Sri Lankan education system, the report also makes a number of recommendations in the field of teacher development.

Key among these is the introduction of a teaching licensing system, which would facilitate the accreditation of teachers. Teacher training would be improved to assist teachers to guide students' future through developing their skills broadly, covering critical thinking, enthusiasm in learning, as well as other social aptitudes such as altruism and empathy. The report highlights the importance of raising the social stature of teachers, especially through adequate remuneration and benefits, in establishing a superior education system. Moreover, while highlighting the primacy of the teaching service within the field of education services, the report also suggests that classroom interaction should be a prerequisite for all appointments in the Sri Lanka Education Administration Service, the Principals' Service, etc., rendering the Teacher Service would be the entry level to all educational services. The report also proposes the transformation of Teacher Advisors to a new service termed 'Learning Process Coordinators', who will serve as the link between the National Institute of Education and the classroom, sharing new knowledge with teachers, conducting model classes for teachers, and encouraging dialogue with teachers on teaching methods, learning processes, etc.

Conclusion

The pandemic caused exceptional strains, but fresh thinking on the reforms needed for the educational sector is taking place at the highest institutional levels. The clear obstacle in exploring these new policy directions is the lack of political will (dare we say, courage?). Though the set of reform proposals published by the mechanism established by the incumbent government are apparently comprehensive, successive national budgets of that same government have paid short shrift to those proposals. The

only recommendation seemingly adopted by the government is the establishment of 1,000 national schools—which was not an innovative proposal to begin with. In fact, in March 2020, days before the pandemic measures began unrolling, and weeks before the Presidential Taskforce on Educational Affairs was constituted, the government was on the brink of increasing the number of national schools to 500,⁵⁰ in line with the so-called 1000 National Schools initiative. While those plans seemed to have been spoiled by the pandemic (since the School Census of 2020 reports only 373 national schools), the 1000 National Schools initiative has since been revived.⁵¹ However, it is well to note that the Presidential Taskforce recommends establishing 1000 national schools in the context of its broader proposal to bifurcate all schools as either primary or secondary schools, as discussed above. In the absence of the latter, establishing 1000 national schools would do little to eradicate the inequities in education highlighted in this discussion paper, and would, in fact, exacerbate them further.

While it is a certainty that the worst of the pandemic’s impact affected the poorest of the poor, in all aspects including education, hard data demonstrating this fact is meagre and depends on many levels of extrapolation. Previous calamities the world over have demonstrated the concrete effects on children resulting from the disruption of their education. The government must take immediate, urgent action to ensure that those students left behind in education over the last two years are identified and returned to education, particularly by catering to their urgent socioeconomic needs. The government must also take immediate action to implement the strategies proposed by the Presidential Taskforce of Educational Affairs, as a matter of priority, to the extent that any economic crisis would not be successfully alleviated in the long-term without first eradicating the significant inequities in education that have prevailed in Sri Lanka for decades.

⁵⁰ [125 new schools to be named as national schools - Education Ministry \(newsfirst.lk\)](#) (8.3.2020)

⁵¹ [Sri Lanka: 1000 National Schools Establishment program begins tomorrow \(colombopage.com\)](#) (6.1.2022)