

Initial Impressions Regarding Sri Lankan Schools – Personal Observations by Ian Knight, October 2006

These comments are my own and in no way reflect the views or collective wisdom of colleagues or organisations with which I was associated during my recent visit to Sri Lanka.

After such a brief visit, I would not be so arrogant as to presume that I had any more than an initial impression of the manner and effectiveness of a system, based around brief visits to rural schools and large urban schools in Kandy and Colombo.

These notes are as much an aide memoire for myself; my personal commitment and that of my school, to supporting and working collaboratively with Sri Lankan schools, is ongoing and this was my first experience of the system.

It would not be appropriate to make value judgements about the relative merits or shortcomings of the Sri Lankan system compared to the British one – both have evolved due to different circumstances. However, I believe that much can be learned and shared across both systems. Regarding the links already in place with Astley, I believe there are real opportunities for collaborative working which will be to the benefit of staff and pupils in both countries.

From the outset I would formally and sincerely wish to thank all the Principals, staff and students of the establishments I had the opportunity to visit. Universally I was greeted with courtesy and enthusiasm. Staff have spoken freely regarding their role and its associated challenges, pupils readily engaged in dialogue and were always polite – and happy! A sea of smiling faces will be an enduring memory of my visit to Sri Lanka.

Any consideration regarding the system of schooling in Sri Lanka must be set within the cultural and geo-political context of the country.

- Despite laudable aspirations to create a 21st century economic and social system, Sri Lanka is a Low Income Economy- a Less Economically Developed Country - and as such has all the associated challenges; predominantly rural, agricultural based economy with a less than complete infrastructural coverage.
- Significant disparities in terms of provision, quality and opportunities between large urban centres, principally Colombo and Kandy, and rural areas.
- Disparity in provision certainly seemed evident when comparing urban and rural schools.
- The cultural heritage and pride in that tradition was evident in all the schools I visited. This was reinforced along with the religious philosophy to an extent far beyond that which could be achieved in the vast majority of British schools. Sri Lanka should be rightly proud of this ongoing ethos.

- There are clearly religious and ethnic differences which manifest themselves throughout the island. The current heightened levels of tension and conflict, particularly in the east of the island but clearly evident in Colombo, must require a vast and unsustainable amount of resources being diverted to the maintenance of law and order, at the expense of areas such as education.
- It is clear that the state and young people all value education extremely highly; for a low income economy to make such a commitment to free education for all, including the provision of school uniforms, across the country, is admirable. (It would seem appropriate that in the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka in remote locations one can see slogans such as, “A good education will provide us with a good future” painted in large letters along the sides of classrooms.)
- The Dec 26th 2004 tsunami, regardless of the tragic loss of life and ongoing trauma on a local and national scale, has had a massive economic impact with regard to the wider world’s perception of the country; this and the ongoing conflict has meant a massive reduction in tourist generated income, with associated shortfall in monies available for education.

Set within that wider context, my observations regarding schooling in Sri Lanka are as follows:

1. Curriculum

On the evidence I obtained from first hand observation and from conversations with colleagues from Britain and Sri Lanka, I would say that the curriculum is extensively based upon a model of a British grammar school of 30 or more years ago.

I did not see any vocationally orientated subjects, such as Business Studies, Design Technology etc., nor specific evidence of structured programmes for pupil personal development, collectively referred to in Britain as Personal, Health and Social Education.

Emphasis seemed to be very much upon the academic, with limited reference to those for which the academic route would appear inappropriate.

2. Teaching and Learning

Lessons were very much teacher lead, auditory and passive learning. Lack of space in classrooms prevented much pupil movement with limited interaction, peer assessment, group work and discussion. The impression given was that pupils were expected to answer questions and not encouraged to ask questions.

Assessment seemed to be by end of course examination. Certainly I saw no evidence of formative assessment, modular examinations or teacher assessed coursework.

On the evidence I obtained I would say that great emphasis is placed on the achievement of high exam passes, as a gateway for the small percentage of pupils

moving into further education and the smaller percentage moving to university. I did not see alternative assessment routes to O Level at pre-16.

Provision for pupils with Special Educational Needs and learning difficulties seemed to be poorly developed. The experience in poorer rural schools was that it was inadequately staffed with people without the suitable expertise to address particular pupil issues. This was basically down to an issue of resourcing which is linked to funding.

3. Learning Environment

Ignoring the obvious comparison with British schools which would be meaningless, I was struck by the poor quality of the environment in all the schools I visited, particularly those in the rural areas in the east of the country. Buildings inside and out would be more attractive if they were painted. Display materials would provide a stimulus for learning. Whilst the general fabric of the buildings seemed to be sound, I saw little evidence whatsoever of recent new building or refurbishment.

It should be noted that when I visited it was the dry season and external environments were very dusty. Most buildings were open plan without windows, to facilitate the free flow of air and to try to dissipate the build up of heat. Clearly there would be different environmental challenges in windy and wet conditions, not the least as in rural schools there was no provision to drain runoff from buildings and the rest of the site.

Of particular concern were the unhygienic toilet facilities. The provision for staff was basic in the extreme and I believe, anecdotally, that provision for pupils in terms of hygiene and availability for the number of pupils was even worse.

4. The rural effect

As I stated at the outset, it is not for me to make value judgements about which country's education system is the best as the circumstances are totally different.

However, what I would say is that, in the vast majority of cases, in Britain provision and quality of the education experience is on a par between rural and urban schools. In Britain certain city schools are entitled to additional funding due to particular socio-economic indicators. Without that additional funding, rural schools offer similar life chances to young people; the only disadvantage would be distance young people would be expected to travel in sparsely populated areas.

On the evidence I have seen this is certainly not the case in Sri Lanka. It seems to me that there is a clear funding and provision divide between quality of opportunity for young people in larger cities such as Colombo and Kandy, and that available to young people in poorer rural areas. It would seem, in my view, that the education system, including initiative and innovation along with funding, is centred upon and radiates out from Colombo; the further away from the capital, the poorer the funding and reduced opportunities available to young people.

In the village schools I visited, in Medagama and Nannapuruwa, I met highly motivated young people, eager to learn, who understood the importance of education. I met committed and enthusiastic staff doing their very best with extremely limited resources. I got the impression that staff and pupils in these rural schools felt they were the poor relations of the education system. My impression was that certain staff, allocated to remoter rural areas, would not regard the position as a positive opportunity to advance their career and, as such, this could have an adverse effect on their levels of motivation and subsequent effectiveness as teachers.

I saw what I believe to be enormous untapped pupil potential within rural schools. Pupils want to learn and value learning. However, to advance effectively post-16 and aspire to a university education is in reality, for an intelligent pupil of limited means coming from a remote rural area, virtually impossible. I understand that entrance exams only occur in the main cities, where privately funded additional tuition is available. In general terms, in my experience, the further east you travel from Colombo the poorer the educational provision and lower the life chances available to young people.

Postscript

Fantastic opportunities exist within rural schools in Sri Lanka to really move the learning agenda forward. The young people I met were charming, engaging, confident and keen to learn. I saw no evidence of behavioural issues or disaffection. I saw pupils and staff unencumbered by many of the issues faced by their British counterparts eg frequent testing, target setting, league tables and public accountability.

If I were in a position to suggest some strategies, which could have an impact upon achievement in **remoter rural areas**, given a realistic appreciation of budget considerations, they would be as follows:

1. Review funding available for resource provision in rural areas. There is the desire to learn and with a modest investment in additional funding, an enormous amount could be achieved.
2. Investment in the fabric of school buildings. A simple coat of paint in many areas would make an enormous difference. I am sure there would be many pupils willing to help with the work.
3. Review of curriculum. The focus is extremely academic with limited vocational opportunities for those young people who would struggle with the rigour of O Level. This is particularly crucial in poorer areas, with low levels of resourcing, limited opportunities for academic advancement and the likelihood of low aspirations. These pupils need to have the opportunity to demonstrate achievement based upon ability and aptitude, rather than on wealth and proximity to larger urban centres.
4. Invest in specific and targeted resources, including trained staff, for pupils with learning difficulties. My impression is that these pupils are currently marginalised and not part of an inclusive community.

5. Promote the notion of world awareness amongst these young people. Links, such as the ones we are creating at Astley, will be mutually beneficial to all concerned. To quote a former British Secretary of State for Education, "To be world class you must first be world aware."
6. The creation of an internet link in each school would provide a window on the world and a medium for ongoing communication which could really stimulate joint project work.

My time spent in Sri Lankan schools has had a profound and lasting effect on me. This will be a long term commitment and I will continue to do my best to keep the profile of this initiative high in people's thoughts.

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