

## ISSUES OF MANAGERIAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY IN A DEVOLVED SYSTEM OF GOVERNANCE: THE CASE OF GENERAL EDUCATION IN SRI LANKA<sup>1</sup>

Sudatta Ranasinghe

### **Abstract**

*The system of general education in Sri Lanka underwent a significant change since school-based education became a devolved subject after introducing the Thirteenth Constitutional Amendment of 1987, which also led to the establishment of Provincial Councils as an elected body of governance at sub-national level. The sharing of responsibility for the management of general education by the Ministry of Education and the Provincial Councils has taken place without ensuring adequate institutional integration between the centre and the periphery, which has also led to unfavorable outcomes characterized by a drop in the quality of education as well as student achievement levels.*

*The issues of managerial and organizational capacity of the general education system focused in the present paper revolves around the problem of incompatibility between the required system of management based on empowered grass root level institutions including schools, and the existing system of education management in the provinces. The paper highlights several notable deficiencies such as shortage of qualified school principals and teachers, lack of managerial competence of educational administrators and the observed inequality in access to resources between the national and the provincial schools, which have had a negative impact on the overall performance of the education system.*

*Based on the data gathered through a sample survey of Provincial and National Schools and Zonal and Divisional Education Offices as well as discussions with central and provincial level educational administrators, the paper argues that deficiencies in management and organizational capacity have emerged largely due to lack of capacity building of the provincial education system since devolving the subject of general education to the Provincial Educational Authorities.*

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***Introduction***

At the threshold of the new Millennium Sri Lanka achieved a record adult literacy rate of 92 per cent which is the highest in the South Asian region. While being a developing country with a per capita income of 1200 US dollars, the average annual expenditure on general education in Sri Lanka has been about 3 per cent of the GDP. General education has also accounted for over 9 per cent of the total annual public expenditure. The government has been playing a major role as a provider of educational opportunities for the younger generation since the introduction of the free education policy in 1944. Currently over 3.9 million pupils in Sri Lanka receive education through 9700 odd government schools served by a teacher population of 190,000.

Devolution of power followed by the Thirteenth Constitutional Amendment of 1987 brought about a significant change in the structure of management of the general education system shifting the onus of responsibility for management of school-based education from the central Department of Education that came under the Ministry of Education, to a Provincial Education Authority (PEA) consisting of four tiers. The Department of Education which managed the school-based education in Sri Lanka prior to devolution had a coherent administrative mechanism comprising of Regional Directors of Education and Circuit Education Officers who ensured proper supervision of schools and maintenance of quality standards. Currently the task of managing the school-based education is handled by a four-tiered Provincial Education Authority consisting of the Provincial Ministry of Education, Provincial Department of Education, Zonal Education Office and the Divisional Education Office. Thus, one observes a high degree of fragmentation and a lack of coherence in the system of management since devolving the subject of education to the provinces.

The Ministry of Education (MoE) has played a central role at the national level by laying down policy guidelines and planning and facilitating education development. Even after devolving the subject of general education to the provinces the MoE has continued to play a highly visible role in managing the school-based education system through various modes of intervention. Currently the Ministry is engaged in administering some 325 “National Schools” as well as a special category of schools named “Navodya” schools. The latter category of schools has been selected from among less developed schools in educational divisions to be developed as model schools.

The MoE also handles several other activities such as conduct of national examinations through the Department of Examinations (National Evaluation & Testing Service), professional development and training of teachers through the National Institute of Education and the National Colleges of Education, curriculum development, educational planning and quality assurance and production and distribution of school textbooks and provision of other inputs such as free midday meals and school uniforms to students, which impacts on the delivery of school-based education through out the island.

The services provided by the Ministry of Education are no doubt critical for maintaining a satisfactory level of performance in the general education system. However, it has been argued that the initiative taken by the MoE to establish and nurture national schools as a distinct category has led to a polarization of school-based education in Sri Lanka. The National Education Commission has observed that the quality as well as performance of general education in terms of student achievement levels has deteriorated since devolution (2003). According to official sources, the poor level of student achievement is reflected in the results of the GCE (OL) examination. The data shows that of the pupils who sat the GCE (OL) examination in 2006 over 50 per cent had failed in Mathematics, and Science and Technology, and over 60 per cent had failed in the English language (Research and Development Branch, Department of Examinations, 2007). According to a recent study carried out by the National Education Commission covering a sample of 4054 students selected from 70 schools in different parts of the country, about 18 per cent of the students in Grade 6 could not write at all ( these facts were also highlighted in *The Hindustan Times* , May 22, 2007).

This situation raises doubts about the capacity of the PEAs in managing the school-based education system and also about the efficiency of the MoE in playing its role as a facilitator of education development. While there could be several reasons including lack of motivation and competence among the teachers that may have contributed to poor performance of students, it should be noted that institutional capacity as well as managerial efficiency tend to have a significant impact on the overall capacity of the system to achieve and sustain a high level of performance. Thus, it is important to examine the key issues of managerial and organizational capacity of the provincial education system and discuss their policy implications.

### ***The Post-devolution Structure of Education Management***

Prior to devolving the subject of education to the Provincial Councils there was a unified planning and monitoring system coupled with a coherent system of decision making under the central Department of Education. This administrative system established clear lines of responsibility and accountability for decisions through the Regional Directors of Education and their staff. For example, the Circuit Education Officer (later re-designated as Divisional Education Officer) reported to the Regional Director of Education in-charge of an educational region (an administrative district), and he was responsible for monitoring the performance of a cluster of schools. The CEO/ DEO also played the role of a linking pin between the schools and the Regional Education Office.

However, it could be seen that in the post-devolution era the structure of education management has gone through a process of fragmentation due to addition of new layers of management to the hierarchy, which has also caused a problem of coordination leading to low efficiency. In the context of recent educational reforms supported by the international donor agencies, the Provincial Educational Authorities were expected to take appropriate steps to ensure achievement of objectives pertaining to access, quality assurance, student achievement, efficiency and good governance. Achieving these objectives would depend to a large extent on managerial efficiency and competencies of education administrators as well as principals and teachers who manage the education system in the provinces.

According to the present structure of education management in the provinces, the Provincial Ministry of Education is responsible for policy matters, allocation of funds through the Finance Commission and coordination and monitoring of progress. However, as the provincial ministries of education handle several other subjects besides education in most provinces, it is unlikely that the Secretary of the Provincial Ministry of Education would be able to spend adequate time on matters relating to educational policies as well as performance. Further, the Secretary of the Provincial Ministry of Education belongs to Class 1 of the Sri Lanka Administrative Service and therefore may lack professional training or experience in education. In this context the Provincial Department of Education headed by the Provincial Director of Education tend to be the focal point of education management in the provinces.

In most instances the Provincial Director of Education, an officer belonging to Class 1 of Sri Lanka Education Administrative Service, is assisted by two Additional PDEs in charge of administration and development functions respectively. The Additional PDEs also belongs to Class 1 of the Sri Lanka Education Administrative Service (SLEAS). The Provincial Education Office is expected to perform the following functions:

- I. Inter-provincial and zonal teacher transfers
- II. Matters pertaining to teacher establishment and deployment within the province
- III. Provincial education planning through integration of zonal and divisional plans
- IV. Education development and curriculum implementation
- V. Human resource development involving capacity building of zonal and divisional directors of education as well as principals of schools
- VI. Coordination with the Department of Examinations for the conduct of national level examinations, and
- VII. Preparation of the provincial education budget with the assistance of the Deputy Chief Secretary (Finance) of the Provincial Council.

It was observed that the functions handled by the Provincial Ministry and the Provincial Department of Education varied between different provinces depending on the interests of the key officials such as Provincial Secretary of Education and the Provincial Director. For instance, the Provincial Ministry of Education in the Northern and Eastern provinces (which were temporarily merged earlier) played a key role in policy making as well as planning and performance monitoring. It was observed that the keen interest taken by the Provincial Secretary in the subject of education despite being an SLAS officer had led to this situation. In the other provinces it was observed that the Provincial Director exercised a greater degree of delegated authority. The structure of the Provincial Departments of Education was not uniform as it was found that in some of the provinces there were several Directors in-charge of different subjects and there were also Deputy Directors in excess of the approved cadre. Despite these variations the Provincial Departments of Education depended on the Zonal Education Offices for the purpose of implementing the provincial education plans. Each

Provincial Department supervised about 10 Zonal Education Offices which were vertically linked to the Provincial Department of Education

At present the Zonal Education Offices play a key role in the delivery of school-based education. A Zonal Education Office is headed by the Zonal Director of Education who is a Class 1 officer of the SLEAS. At the end of 2006 there were 94 educational zones under the nine provinces. Each Zonal Education Office supervised 3-4 Divisional Education Offices that were vertically linked to the Zonal Education Offices. Although the Provincial Educational Authorities are expected to have a cadre of 121 SLEAS Class 1 officers (9 PDEs, 18 Addl. PDEs and 94 ZDEs), the actual number of Class 1 officers reported to be serving in the provinces in late 2006 was only 12. In this context a majority of the Zonal Education Offices were headed by SLEAS Class 2 officers. According to the current organizational structure, a Zonal Education Office had one Additional Zonal Director who was responsible for teacher administration and three Deputy Zonal Directors responsible for education development, education planning and school administration respectively. The Zonal Education Office is expected to perform the following functions:

- I. Zonal educational planning ,budgeting and monitoring of progress
- II. Teacher establishment matters (teacher transfers within the zone and teacher salaries) and teacher deployment
- III. Teacher training and development
- IV. Construction and supervision of school buildings not exceeding Rs. 500,000 in value
- V. Upgrading or de-grading of schools and closure of schools
- VI. Supervision of national schools and type 1 A,B schools (It should be noted that Zonal Directors did not exercise supervising authority over the principals of National Schools who reported to the Director- National Schools in the Ministry of Education)
- VII. Non-formal and special education, and
- VIII. Assessment of school-based management

The pivotal role played by the Zonal Education Office with regard to appointment of principals, teacher transfers and teacher deployment and salary administration was found to be critical in ensuring efficient delivery of school education. It was observed that most Zonal Education Offices were not geared to perform these functions efficiently due to reasons such as poor management practices, non-availability of

competent staff and deficiencies in the physical infrastructure. Although Zonal Education Offices have been delegated with financial authority to facilitate efficient delivery of education, it was observed that budgeting and budgetary controls were weak due to lack of trained staff.

The Divisional Education Office, which is the closest administrative body to provincial schools, played an important role in providing administrative support services for day-to-day management of schools. At the end of 2006 there were 324 Divisional Education Offices functioning under the 94 Zonal Education Offices. While a Zonal Education Office covered about 125 schools spread over a large geographical area, the Divisional Offices covered about 25-30 schools in an education division. The Divisional Education Office headed by a Divisional Director or Deputy Director of Education performed the following functions:

- I. Supervision and monitoring of schools with the assistance of In-Service Advisors (one ISA per division is the current norm)
- II. Monitoring timetables and year plans of schools
- III. Divisional level planning and monitoring of plan implementation
- IV. Monitoring school budgets and expenditure and supervision of disbursement of funds
- V. Distribution of textbooks and school uniforms for students (covers type C,1,2 and 3 schools only)
- VI. Approval of duty leave of principals and teachers
- VII. Organizing divisional level core curricular activities and sports events
- VIII. Reporting to zonal education office on construction failures etc.

Though the DEO performed a multitude of functions connected with the delivery of education at the grass root level, the Divisional Director/ Deputy Director did not enjoy financial authority to allocate funds to needy schools. They also did not have administrative authority on matters pertaining to teacher transfers and deployment of teachers within a division. Thus, the lack of financial and administrative authority had restricted the capacity of the divisional education offices to make decisions for ensuring the efficient delivery of education at the grass root level.

Compared with the structure of education management that existed prior to devolution, the post-devolution structure that evolved over a period of time appears to be diffused and fragmented in character, which also caused adverse implications for coordination between different units. The core of the concept of devolution is the transfer of state power and authority to elected sub-national institutions of governance closer to the public that is to be served. Achieving the objectives of devolution therefore involves strengthening those institutions and building their capacity to manage the affairs efficiently and effectively. It has been observed that a necessary corollary of the transfer of responsibilities of governance is the transfer of expertise to perform the devolved functions. In the case of general education it appears that the necessary expertise had not been transferred to the institutions responsible for managing the education system though there had been an expansion of the administrative structure.

A study undertaken by the Sri Lanka Institute of Local Governance (2002) observes that the national public personnel framework has remained largely intact and thereby the centre had retained control over staffing of the public service positions whether at the national or provincial and local levels. In this context the staff grades largely comprising the officers of All Island Services have remained central public service cadres and the availability of such officers to the provinces had depended on the release of SLEAS officers from the central public service to the PEAs. As noted earlier the alarming shortage of senior SLEAS officers in the provinces is an indication of a serious deficiency in building institutional capacity of the PEAs.

### ***Background of the Study***

The empirical content of the present paper is based on the findings of a study on organizational capacity of the general education system carried out in the latter part of 2005 under the Education Sector Development Framework and Programme, a donor funded project implemented by the Ministry of Education. The study team was led by the writer and it covered national and provincial level education management agencies as well as a sample of national and provincial schools. For the purpose of data collection questionnaires and checklists were used covering a sample of 33 Zonal Education Offices, 58 Divisional Education Offices, 21 national schools and 80 provincial schools. The samples were drawn in a representative manner from each province and the research team visited the sampled offices and the schools for the purpose of data collection. In addition, four workshops



were conducted in Central, Southern, Western and Eastern provinces with the participation of relevant officials from PEAs. These workshops provided valuable insights in to issues of managerial and organizational capacity of the provincial education system.

### ***Study Findings***

The survey findings as well as the provincial level workshops revealed that there were serious capacity gaps in the provinces with regard to human resources, physical resources such as school buildings, laboratories, libraries and office facilities and infrastructure as well as teaching resources particularly in regard to subjects such as science and technology, aesthetic studies and ICT education. The survey also revealed deficiencies pertaining to managerial competencies of the decision makers at all the four levels of the provincial education system.

The study findings revealed that majority of the Divisional Education Offices that were sampled were ill equipped and were unable to exercise supervisory functions over the schools due to shortage of staff, particularly non-availability of competent officers. According to the study findings a majority of the sampled Zonal and Divisional Education Offices did not have the capacity to perform planning and monitoring as well as performance review functions effectively due to shortage of trained staff and limitations in physical resources. In particular, there were deficiencies in the available cadre of senior administrators as well as trained supervisory staff such as In- Service Advisors who are assigned the task of visiting schools and monitoring the quality of teaching. Most of the Zonal and Divisional Education Offices in the less developed areas such as Uwa, Northern and Eastern, North-Central and North-Western Provinces lacked even basic facilities to run proper offices. In almost all the provinces facilities for ICT application (internet access) were non-existent in the Zonal and Divisional Education Offices.

In the Northern and Eastern Provinces the survey findings revealed that none of the sampled Divisional Education offices had access to computer facilities and telephone facilities and about half of the offices did not have sufficient working area. Among the sampled Zonal and Divisional Education Offices it was hard to find a single office where seating facilities were available for the members of the public who visited the offices for various official purposes. In all the provinces it was observed that Zonal and Divisional Education Offices that were located

closer to urban centres enjoyed more facilities as well as staff compared to those located in remote areas. The study reported that in the case of three of the sampled Divisional Education Offices in the Central province the offices have been established in temporary locations using limited space borrowed from the Zonal Education Office or a school. In such places the available space was sufficient only to accommodate a table and a chair for the Divisional Director/ Deputy Director.

The gaps in organizational capacity were more pronounced at the level of provincial schools. Besides serious limitations in physical capacity due to lack of suitable space for class rooms, lack of equipment and furniture and non-availability of utility services such as electricity, water and telephones, the provincial schools were found to be handicapped in terms of availability of qualified teachers. According to the survey findings most of the provincial schools faced a severe shortage of trained teachers in science and technology, mathematics, English language, ICT education and aesthetic studies. There were also shortages of teachers in the second language (Tamil or Sinhala) in provinces such as Central, Uva, Sabaragamuwa and Northern and Eastern Provinces. Overall the teacher shortage was more pronounced in less developed educational zones. It was found that about 50 per cent of the sampled provincial schools in Uva, North Central, North Western, Southern, Central, and Northern and Eastern Provinces had been affected due to shortage of teachers in the above mentioned subjects.

The survey revealed that in remote educational zones a large number of schools did not have permanent principals as a considerable number of the incumbents were holding acting appointments. For example, the educational zones of Anuradhapura, Tambuttegama, Polonnaruwa and Hingurakgoda in the North-Central Province had 377 schools and 104 of them (27.5%) did not have permanent principals. In the North-Western Province the study covered eight educational zones which managed 356 schools. Among these schools 119 (33%) had acting principals. In the four sampled educational zones of the Uva Province the composition of acting principals was as follows; Badulla Zone 25%, Bandarawela Zone 39%, Wellawaya Zone 50% and Monaragala Zone 51%.

The survey also revealed that a significant number of Zonal and Divisional Directors were holding acting appointments as a majority of them belonged to Class 2 of the SLEAS. For example, in the Uva Province all the four Zonal Education Offices surveyed were manned by acting directors. According to the survey findings majority of the Zonal

and Divisional Directors as well as school principals have not had opportunities to undergo training in education management during the past two years.

### ***The Relationship between the MoE and the PEAs***

The linkage between the Ministry of Education and the PEAs had been modeled on a top-down and hierarchical structure which has not been effective in producing the desired results. For example, the existing system of educational planning and monitoring in the Ministry had not created the desired impact on the provincial education system due to poor coordination as well as lack of ICT capacity. It was observed that the benefits gained by the provincial education system through the present linkages with the MoE had not measured up to expectations. This was evident in the case of poor human resource deployment practices of the Ministry which had imposed constraints on the PEAs in managing the provincial education system.

It was apparent that the present system of service delivery through different divisions of the Ministry of Education has made the provincial educational authorities more dependent on the Ministry. To a certain extent the tendency toward centralization of various support services at the Ministry level has contributed to perpetuate the dependency relationship between the MoE and the PEAs and in effect it has contributed to limit the development of organizational capacity of the PEAs through their own initiatives. It has also been observed that the tendency among provincial educational administrators to seek support and guidance from the central Ministry had itself created an obstacle to the development of the provincial education management system.

The study findings suggest that the level of coordination between the Ministry and its national level agencies such as the National Institute of Education and the National Evaluation and Testing Service (Dept. of Examinations) had been weak. These agencies did not appear to have maintained a sufficient level of coordination with the PEAs, which in turn had resulted in a lack of utilization of available resources and duplication of effort possibly at a high cost. For example, due to lack of coordination between the NIE and the PEAs, the expected role of the NIE as a key provider of training in education management has not been performed to a satisfactory level. This has resulted in a training gap in the provinces on the one hand and underutilization of resources available the Management Training Centre of the NIE on the other. It was found that certain branches in the Ministry of Education have taken

steps to provide training opportunities for school principals and In-service Advisors attached to the PEAs instead of tapping the capacity of the NIE, which is mandated to provide training for educational service personnel.

The survey revealed that in regard to institutional capacity for delivering quality education, marked differences exist between the National Schools and the provincial schools located within the same educational zone. The prevailing management practices and procedures did not allow the weak provincial schools to benefit from the available resources of the national schools located in close proximity. For example, it was reported that in some National Schools the number of deputy principals had exceeded the approved cadre but they could not be transferred to the provincial schools to fill the vacancies of principals. It was observed during the study that a provincial school located in close proximity to a National School was short of a permanent principal. Though the National School had one deputy principal in excess of the cadre, the provincial school could not obtain the service of this 'excess' deputy principal attached to the national school to fill the vacant post of principal.

This situation has prevailed partly because the Zonal Director of Education did not have the authority over the staff of the National Schools to affect a transfer of a deputy principal of a national school in excess of the approved cadre to fill a vacancy in the post of principal of a provincial school. The same situation was observed with regard to science, mathematics and English teachers who were in short supply in the provincial schools. Where facilities for science, IT, and aesthetic education were concerned the provincial schools faced numerous limitations. Although these facilities were available to a satisfactory extent in the National Schools, the existing procedure did not allow opportunity for the children of the provincial schools to benefit from the resources available in the national schools.

### ***The Task Ahead***

The findings of the study suggest that there is an urgent need to take effective steps to arrest the tendency towards polarization of national and provincial schools and strengthen the provincial education system by focusing on critical aspects of performance. Based on the study findings it could be stated that human resource capacity building is more critical at this juncture in order to address the issue of providing quality education and reaching higher levels of student achievement. It

is necessary to build capacity of the PEAs to enable a comprehensive assessment of the current HR profile, plan human resource requirements of the provincial schools and recruit and deploy teachers and school principals to meet the current as well as future needs. Focusing on improvement of physical infrastructure may not bring about the desired results unless the pivotal role of the school is recognized. Thus, there is a need to replace the current model of education management in the periphery with a new model based on empowered schools that can play the role of a catalyst of education development and quality improvement. In reaching this goal one has to recognize the need to develop competent principals and teachers who can steer the provincial education system in the best interest of the students.

Perhaps it might be difficult to address the issue of empowered schools effectively within the existing institutional framework and the established mindset of educational administrators. As observed by Edward de Bono (1984) it is necessary to bring about a significant change in both the thinking as well as practice of management through the adoption of lateral thinking that involve questioning the fundamentals while exploring the alternative decision options with the participation of those at lower levels of the hierarchy.

It is necessary to question the rationale of the present approach to education management as well as the existing organizational structure and processes. The merits of the present form of centre- periphery relationship and the centralized nature of decision making that has dominated the current management practices needs to be re-examined. From a perspective of reengineering education management one can raise fundamental questions such as “why are we doing what we are doing at present? And “why are we doing them the way we are doing? These questions as suggested by Hammer and Champy (1996) would enable one to take a fresh look at the current process of decision making as well as its consequences. Also, one might be able to find innovative and effective answers to the problems that have affected the system of education management through a process of questioning the fundamentals.

According to the current thinking, an institution can benefit a great deal by adopting best management practices identified through study of local as well as foreign institutions that have reached high performance levels. On the basis of such practices it would be possible to establish benchmarks or norms with regard to critical performance

indicators pertaining to the teaching and learning process. For example, one might consider the possibility of adopting best management practices of the school-based management system practiced in Singapore.

If one takes an example of our own, the practice of monitoring teacher attendance and teacher's contribution towards covering the syllabi, which is being adopted in some of the schools in the Sabaragamuwa province with the participation of students, can be considered as an innovative management practice that has been effective in improving teacher's attendance and performance. In improving the performance of the provincial education system one should lay greater emphasis on those practices that enhances participation of the students as well as teachers in the management of schools. In developing and implementing such practices the autonomy of the school plays a vital role. This demands decentralization of authority to the school level and empowering the school principals to make decisions. In this process the Divisional Education Office should also be strengthened to play the expected facilitative role more effectively. Thus, the future prospects of change and development would depend to a great extent on our ability to adopt a new paradigm of management which is student centered.

### **Conclusion**

As revealed by the study the current managerial and organizational capacity of the provincial education system is inadequate to achieve the goals pertaining to quality, equity, access and educational achievement. The gaps in organizational capacity with regard to human resources and managerial competencies as well as physical and information resources have serious implications for performance of the provincial education system. On the one hand these capacity gaps reflect the consequences of the limited attention given to capacity building of PEAs since devolution. On the other, one might argue that the current capacity gaps reflects the incompatibility between the existing structure of education management and the desired system of management based on empowered schools supported by Divisional Education Offices with enhanced capacity.

The financial resources available to the PEAs had been found be sufficient only to meet the recurrent costs. Therefore, the provincial education system deserve additional funding through development projects assisted by the donors. It was revealed that the Ministry was taking the initiative to develop at least one school from each educational

division to the status of a full pledged school. Though this type of measures may address the felt needs of certain stakeholders, it is unlikely that the intervention of the Ministry of Education for developing selected schools in the provinces can address the issues of managerial and organizational capacity of the provincial education system. What is needed in the present context is to take radical measures to reengineer the provincial education system with enhanced organizational capacity so that initiatives may be taken to arrest the current trend of polarization as well as decay of general education in the peripheral areas.

Since devolving the subject of general education to the provinces the education system has become more vulnerable to political interference, which has also resulted in further deterioration of standards as well as management practices. This situation has got aggravated due to poor leadership and low competence of education administrators. Thus, it is necessary to initiate innovative structural reforms aimed at reducing the dependence of PEAs on the Ministry while strengthening the managerial competencies and leadership of the PEAs. In the long run the system should move towards empowered schools that can mobilize the participation of all stakeholders in order to ensure efficient and effective management of general education in Sri Lanka.

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