A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS ON THE URBAN SCHOOL EDUCATION SECTOR AND THE REPRODUCTION OF SOCIAL INEQUALITY: A CASE STUDY

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1) INTRODUCTION

Education is an activity which plays a significant role in a society. Its aims and methods depend on the society in which it takes place. The Asian subcontinent is home to almost half of the urban population in the world and the majority of them belong to shanty and slum communities living under impoverished conditions (Jack, 2006 cited in Lakshman. I, Ekanayaka & Lakhman W.D, 2016). Most of the time, researchers and educationists use the term 'urban' to introduce black, brown and poor students. Some others use the term 'urban' to introduce large districts, or schools which are located near a central city or schools which have comparatively high rates of exam failures, less parental involvement or high rates of teacher inactiveness. It is important to identify that there are factors related to social inequality which could create barriers for the fulfilment of the need for a better education and the full participation in the education of students from those communities. Considering the above facts, the importance of studying the said research topic, and the research problem whether the urban school education sector reproduces social inequality in Sri Lankan state school education system is clear.

1.1 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The main research objective of this study is to identify the nature of social inequality reproduced in the state urban school education sector in Sri Lanka.
Sub-objectives of the study are as follows:
- ➢ To identify the contribution of the educational curriculum in reproducing social inequality in state urban sector schools.
- ➢ To identify the contribution of urban school subcultures in reproducing social inequality in state urban sector schools.
- ➢ To identify the external power groups that influence to reproduce the social inequality in state urban sector schools.

1.2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In order to study the research problem, the following research questions were formulated:
- ➢ How is social inequality reproduced through the school curriculum?
- ➢ How does the sub-culture of state urban school education sector contribute to reproduce social inequality?
- ➢ How do class factors contribute to reproduce social inequality within the state urban school education sector?
- ➢ What is the impact of external power groups of schools on the reproduction of social inequality in the state urban sector school education?

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Students of 2 state urban schools located in Colombo district, under the governance of the Colombo Municipal council were selected in order to collect primary data. Colombo has been considered the commercial hub and the main urban area of Sri Lanka with a population of over one million people. Respondents were selected using purposive sampling and one girls' school and one boys' school were selected to have insights on both

female and male students' points of view. Students representing grade 5-13 were selected. Structured interviews were conducted with 10 teachers and semi structured interviews were conducted with 25 students and their parents/guardians. Two structured interviews were conducted with officials related to the education system of the country, considering them as key informants. Therefore, this study can be considered a case study specifically dealing with those cases. Limited number of respondents were included due to constraints of time and resources. Secondary data were used in the data analysis. This is a qualitative analysis and the thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. Ethics towards the participants, institutions, and data were protected.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As explained in Social Institutions in Encyclopedia of Quality of Life Research (2016), a social institution is a behavioral system that interconnects and functions across the whole society. Education can be defined as a social institution which enables and promotes the acquisition of skills, knowledge and the broadening of personal horizons (Giddens & Sutton, 2013, p. 870). Education is a process by which the society transmits its accumulated knowledge, skills and values to their next generation. Education plays a significant role in the process of socialization, process of transferring culture to the next generation of the society while it is also important in generating knowledge individually and socially (Wijesinghe, 2016). Education is a process that has been developed through a long-term process based on a historical background. In small scale, non- literate societies such as hunting and gathering bands, formal education was non-existent. Young people learned their lessons for all times largely by joining the round of the group. In more complex pre-industrial societies, specialized education institutions slowly developed, along with the specialized role of the teacher. However, they provided formal education only for a small minority of the population such as the future members of the class of clergy and the wealthy. Formal education for the masses was only provided after the industrialization (Haralambos & Heald, 1980, p. 172). Education is provided free of charge only in certain countries although free and compulsory state education is largely taken for granted today and regarded as a perfectly normal and natural state affair (Durkheim cited in Haralambos & Heald, 1980, p, 172). When considering the present school system in Sri Lanka, there are 10,390 government schools. The curriculum is offered by the Ministry of Education. Schooling is compulsory for children from 6-16 years of age. Government education is state funded and offered free of charge until the university level. The state education structure is divided into five parts as: primary, junior secondary, senior secondary, collegiate and tertiary. Moreover, there are 33 non-fee levying private schools and 33 fee-levying autonomous private schools (Sri Lanka Fulbright Commission, 2012).

In a discussion on the urban education, we have to understand what a 'city' is. Through the concepts of Geminschaft and Gesellschat (1887), Tonnies sketched out an evolutionary view of the development of human society. The period of industrialization that began in the late 1700s and transformed the European societies signified a change from community to association. Tonnis saw that the transition from community to society resulted in a weakening of social ties and loss of a shared sense of belonging to a meaningful community (Tonnies, 1887 cited in Niriella, 2014). Durkheim discussed the same issue claimed by Tonnies under the concept of mechanical solidarity and organic solidarity. In the pre-industrial villages, individuals were held together by mechanical bonds of kinship and social interdependence. In contrast, in the industrial city, the individuals were bound together by the division of labor; which is called organic solidarity instead of mechanical solidarity. According to Simmel, small-town villages develop strong and intimate ties with the ones they interact. The world of capitalism which exists in cities is an impersonal world of pure monetary exchange. The city allows to have cultural freedom. It has signs of modernity that we can also call urbanism. According to Weber, the medieval city was a

"fusion of fortress and market". In the contemporary world, new global cities have emerged and those have come to play an increasingly important role in directing the development of the world economy (Tonnies & Simmel cited in Niriella, 2014). Worth (1938) attempts to identify the differences between the urban and rural life. He saw the defining characteristics of the town as,

1) the massive size of its population
2) its high population density and
3) its social diversity.

The large and dense population of cities resulted in a high division of labor. Relationships were segmental because people did not know each other as rounded individuals and saw only the segment or section of personality related to a person's role (Worth, 1938 cited in Niriella, 2014).

Urban schools are often classified as urban because of the characteristics related to the varsity and the people in them (Milner, 2012, p. 557 cited in Massey, Warrington & Holmes, 2014, p. 173). Schools that are classified as urban, regardless of their physical location, are often interpreted and portrayed negatively (Milner, 2012; Noguera, 1996'; Watson, 2011 cited in Massey, Warrington & Holmes, 2014, p. 173). Correspondingly, urban students are uninterested and uninvolved (Watson, 2011 cited in Massey, Warrington & Holmes, 2014, p. 173).

"I belong to a sub religious group; I have studied at a few other schools, too. Before I entered this school, I went to a school where only the students of the same religion studied. I joined grade 9 of this school as I wanted to follow English medium education. I tried a few schools, however I faced issues in finding a multi-cultural government school around Colombo" (Field Data, 2019).

The above quote is important to understand the nature of concerns that have to be addressed through urban education. Urban education is defined in many different ways. The most accepted definition of urban education refers to the schools in metropolitan communities that are typically diverse, characterized by large enrolments and complexity with many struggling with the growth. The public schools in these urban communities often serve students representing many ethnic minorities as well as multiple languages, and have a greater concentration of the poor. Some of these same urban issues are in the 21 century challenges faced by the suburban and even rural schools. Although there are many differences between children attending urban schools, many of the students are often tied together by their socio-economic level in the urban context. Many of them are poor children. Poverty affects children adversely. Moreover, they have little opportunity to change their own circumstances. Social phenomena such as drug and alcohol abuse, crime, violence and family issues impact urban children; and often result in psychological impacts such as lowered self-esteem and feelings of hopelessness on the part of children and youth in urban public schools. Students in the urban system may need different types of support to ensure their learning as they represent different cultures, ethnicities and socio-economic groups.

One of the pioneer liberal thinkers of education, Apple has criticized the reproduction of inequality within the education system. As he explained, the education system is seen as 'the result of a continuing struggle between and within dominant and dominated groups'. The education system plays a vital role in promoting ideological hegemony by which it advantages some groups in the society, especially the rich, whites and males. The curriculum and textbooks preserve and distribute what is perceived as 'legitimate knowledge', that is, knowledge that 'we all must have'. This legitimate knowledge is the knowledge of the economically and politically new petty bourgeoisie in the society. School

is a 'market product' of which the price is determined by the results is produces. Class struggle in the society is reproduced in school (Apple cited in Haralambos & Heald, 1980). According to the data gathered, there are few facts which reveal how the urban education reproduces inequalities in the society. Even within urban areas in the country, there are many types of schools. Mostly the urban national schools are located in the hub of Colombo and there are many disadvantaged non-national government schools around the periphery of Colombo. Most importantly the difficulty to get admission to the privileged Colombo national schools with pro-English and upper middle-class subculture reflects how state urban schools in the country reproduce inequalities.

"Our schools have adequate facilities, in my point of view, but not as much as the national schools. We participate in competitions and all with them. However, sometimes we do have language disparities, especially when it comes to English medium stuff and even our ways are different. I don't mean to say that those schools are superior to ours or anything of the kind ... we love our school as much as they love theirs" (Field Data, 2019).

Rupasinghe has observed that the prestigious urban schools stood well above the other school types in achievements while the deprived schools in urban slum areas were relegated to the lowest position in the hierarchy of schools (Rupasinghe, 1984 cited within the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, 2014). According to Rupasinghe and Perera (Rupasinghe & Perera, 1987 cited in The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, 2014, p. 27) there are few types of schools in the country as,

• Colombo popular schools
• Colombo middle level schools
• Colombo non- affluent schools
• Suburban schools
• Outstation schools
• Rural schools

"I think…. it's yes, indeed! Our school's old boys' association does make a huge impact on new school admissions. And as a student here what I really see is, they are always very active in most of the major projects carried out in the school. They act a major role. I think it's mostly for the betterment of the school" (Field Data, 2019).

According to the above quote by a student at the state urban national school I interviewed, external power groups (for example, the old boys' association) of their school have a greater impact on school activities. However, in under-privileged, non-national and peripheral state urban schools it is not the same, as highlighted by the following claim of a student of such a school:

"We didn't have an A/L Geography teacher for quite a long time, however, there was a possibility to get a teacher through the fund of the old student's association, but we didn't have enough money or enthusiasm to have a one" (Field Data, 2019).

A pioneering functionalist Durkheim described the major function of education as the transformation of society's norms and values. According to Durkheim, society needs a sufficient degree of homogeneity to survive, and the education perpetuates and reinforces this homogeneity by fixing the child towards collective life demands. Without these 'essential similarities', co-operation, social solidarity and therefore social life itself would be impossible (Durkheim cited in Haralambos & Heald, 1980, p. 173). Another functionalist, Parsons argues that after primary socialization within the family, the school takes over as the 'focal socializing agency'. School acts as a bridge between the family and society as a whole, preparing the child for his adult role. Schools act as the main agent of

training 'universalistic' standards which are different from 'particularistic' standards prevailing in their own families (Parsons cited in Haralambos and Heald, 1980, p. 173). Even in the urban education sector in Sri Lanka, education has become a channel of upward mobility. Although there are such privileges of education within the state urban school education of Sri Lanka as well, there are many instances which reproduce inequalities among students, parents as well as teachers.

The Marxian view of the nature of the society questions primarily, "How is the educational system shaped by the economic infrastructure?" Questions which derive from this such as "How does the educational system produce the kind of workforce required by capitalism?" involve an investigation of the links between power, ideology, education and the relations of production in a capitalist society (Marx cited in Haralambos & Heald, 1980, p. 179). According to the primary data gathered, economic capabilities of the family do have a significant impact on their children's education in the state urban school education sector in the country. Most significantly, the private tuition culture of the urban school education sector has a major impact on their academic outcomes. However, there are negative impacts such as the tendency to get overwhelmed by education, lack of involvement in extracurricular activities and unwanted competition in education, while there is a very intense competition among schools. The ability to get children to interact in tuition classes would depend on the financial capacity of their parents.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Education has become an essential activity in the present social life. The Asian sub-continent consists of a higher number of urban areas where urban schools are located. The majority in these areas live under impoverished conditions which have effects on the urban school education system. Sociological underpinnings of the school education system in urban areas can be understood and explained in many ways. However, students in urban schools may also need different types of support to ensure their learning as they represent different cultures, ethnicities and socio-economic groups; or else, they would experience inequalities within the education system owing to their social classes, sub cultures, ways of life, etc.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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