

# Critical Discourses on Globalisation, Knowledge Economy and Public Education: the case of Sri Lanka<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

This paper focuses on the learning processes by the youth within the formal public education system in Sri Lanka. Learning processes and outcomes by children who go through the public education system in Sri Lanka have been the subject of critical comment and public policy over the decades. For any serious consideration of the learning processes of the young people, we have to examine the social contextual factors and public discourses on education. In the paper, I explore the contextual, epistemological, ideological and pedagogical constraints for effective learning and different paradigms such as the modernist, postmodernist and critical theory-based frames of thought. I further examine the role of public schools and the teachers in educating the young in Sri Lanka to be critical thinkers, and proposes a democratic schooling framework based on the postmodernist/poststructuralist and critical education literature.

I argue that in addition to teaching a curriculum, schools have responsibilities to produce ‘public intellectuals’ who are capable of engaging in socially relevant criticism of the problems and issues existing in society. The teachers, instead of viewing themselves as powerless, can in fact play a critical and constructive role in advancing a critical discourse among their colleagues as well as the youths under their care. To achieve this, they need to permeate the ‘social integration discourse’ and embrace a ‘socially critical approach’. It is only then that the youths will be able to break free from the hierarchically imposed discourses and pedagogies that make them socially invalid outcasts, and develop critical abilities and contribute to a vibrant democracy and society as well as an alternative public education system catering to their needs and aspirations.

The challenge facing teachers, teacher educators and educational reformers is whether we continue with a narrow technocratic model with no relation to a progressive ideology and social consciousness (indeed the governing ideology is either conservative or liberal), OR a modernist model that

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<sup>1</sup> This is a revised and condensed version of two papers delivered at two international conferences: (1) Exploring Cultural Perspectives Conference, Florence, 2004, (2) International Youth Conference, Colombo, 2004. I am grateful to the UNE faculty of education, health and professional studies for an international travel grant that facilitated my participation in the Florence conference, and to the organizers of the conference in Colombo for providing a travel grant to attend the international youth conference.

support and reinforce existing power structures, discourses, languages OR a critical-radical model which has close relation to a liberation/emancipatory ideology and political action.

The main thrust of my argument is that a 'social justice model of education' and 'democratic schooling framework' are far superior to an 'integration model' or 'managerial/technocratic model' espoused by funding agencies, policy makers and certain academics because the former can provide a broad based, contextually sensitive and relevant, individually rewarding education as compared to a narrowly defined skill based education. School education must prepare young people to achieve broader objectives such as social harmony, flexibility in work place, interpersonal relations and communication, global citizenship and belonging, empowerment of marginalised groups, alleviation of social inequality, and critical thinking and reflecting abilities.

We may argue that the school education system in Sri Lanka -a two tier system consisting of private and public - is designed to 'reproduce' the existing economic and power structures and relations as well as the inequalities and injustices associated with these. An essential aspect of this modernist project is the construction of 'modernist subject', The 'social mobility discourse', 'globalisation discourse' and 'social integration discourse' adopted by politicians, policy makers, funding agencies and academics are part of this project as epistemological paradigms and critique embodied in these discourses are essentially 'modernist'. In this paper, the main argument is that we need to adopt a 'postmodernist - critical education perspective' in order to address the learning needs of the young population in Sri Lanka. What knowledge, learning, teaching approaches, methods are necessary for this kind of education?

Learning is a process that has to be assisted by the teachers, schools, learning methodologies, goals etc. Learning occurs in a global/national, social, economic, political and cultural context. Motivation for learning is not found among all young people. Abilities of the young people who come to the classrooms can be mixed. They have varying degree of contextual pressures. Structures and organisations put in place may not necessarily work for the advancement of learning goals. Learning goals, approaches, methods and curriculum may not be suitable for the context.

Some of the questions we can raise in this context are:

- a. How to fit in with the globalising higher education and employment market?
- b. How to enhance the public education system for producing young people with not only the skills and knowledge required by national and international agencies but also as 'public intellectuals'?
- c. How to address the circumstances -individual, contextual, and educational - of those who are not achieving the expected level of excellence.
- d. How to create a society with lesser conflict and more harmony by using education, teaching and learning

Sri Lankan educationists and for that matter those of South Asia have much to gain by examining the critical thinking found in the various theoretical frameworks, ideas and positions described in the paper. Main thrust of the paper is to convince the teachers and teacher educators that they can move beyond merely being functionaries of a knowledge economy, and become advocates of critical thinking as part of their teaching profession. Students in schools also are able to follow the same and become critically reflective learners who are able not only to understand the broader social contextual issues affecting their lives and learning but also advocates of change with appropriate conceptual tools.

## **Hypothesis, Methodology and Data Sources**

This paper is not based on a hypothesis-testing sociological piece of quantitative research. However, the argument advanced here is that the kind of education received from the public education system is not helping most of the young people to enter the world of work or further education successfully. A few do well but the most do not. In this context, what are the ways to improve this situation? What teaching & learning approaches and methods can be used to support students? What can the teachers do? What can the schools do as a whole? What can the government do? The two competing discourses are either appreciative of public education as it helps a section of the youths to enter higher education and employment OR critical of the same for various reasons such as the poor quality or standards, incomparability, inequality and injustice. The author argues that we need to move beyond this binary division and embrace alternative approaches to learning or schooling in order to address the structural, epistemological, pedagogical deficiencies, and controversies.

Data come from the review of literature, personal observations, and feedback from teachers and students obtained during visits by the author to Sri Lanka.

### **PART - I**

## **Globalisation, Education and Learning**

Globalisation is associated with several defining features. Expansion of capitalism and the integration of economies provide expanded employment and training opportunities. Internet and other communication methods, diaspora networks, deregulated global labour market, out migration and educational opportunities, international schools are part of this process. Other features are the diminishing role of governments and increasing significance of multinational companies, higher cost of living and lack of price controls, privatisation of government enterprises, quality control, efficiency and redundancies. Social costs of globalisation are tremendous, e.g. impact on traditional values and norms. Demise of the welfare state and the introduction of economic rationalist policies and practices where user-pay for services are the key, higher taxes and increased competition are several other features. Increasingly, even education is not considered as a public good that the state has to provide free because the young people are entitled to it. Social obligations of the citizens are emphasised over the responsibilities of the multinational corporations. Learning outside public schools is possible for a fee e.g. Internet cafes, private tutorials, international schools. While the doors are open increasingly, they are closed more and more due to the inability of many young people to meet the costs and the English language requirements.

When we examine youth and learning in a globalising world, it is not sufficient to look at what learning is necessary to 'fit into the requirements of the global and national economies' as if they are benign entities creating only the good for the society. Globalisation processes and agencies create greater inequalities as much as they assist some sections of the population to fulfil their aspirations. We need to examine the features of young people who are rejected by globalisation processes, what kind of learning is suitable for them to not only 'fit in' but also to acquire a critical and realistic knowledge and understanding. In other words, we have to problematise 'learning' in the globalising context and reflect on the realities more than simply following the popular, political, business and media rhetoric.

Globalisation creates winners and losers. To some extent, the winners come from the public education system also. In Sri Lanka, education has helped young people to be socially mobile and get into professions and other positions in the dominant authority system and its various arms, as well as to go abroad. However, it has excluded or disqualified many more from the same recognition/success and thrown into the margins of society and economy resulting in not only considerable frustrations but also

radicalisation in thought and action leading to periodic violence. Globalisation has to be viewed as a process with two faces. It applies to education also.

In recent times, education has received considerable attention from the authorities in Sri Lanka not necessarily because of an intrinsic desire on the part of decision-makers to alleviate inequalities and injustices created by the existing power relations, economic structure, and education system itself, but because of the fact that in the opinion of the many those who missed out from the economic miracle took up arms against the state and engaged in anti-social, violent activities. The basis of such writings is to find ways of teaching and learning in order to avoid conflict and violence. While this effort is appreciable, we need to examine as a matter of fundamental interest the varying ways that the existing power relations, economy, education system, etc. exclude youths leading to injustices and inequalities. 'If one considers social inequality to be one of the reasons for youth revolts in 1970s and 1980s, it is pertinent to examine how these (international) schools can aggravate social inequality and ultimately lead to harmful social effects which may be costly' (Kularatne 1995: 22). Issues in relation to these schools have been elaborated in several articles written by Sri Lankan educationists Shiksha 2 Education magazine 1995).

### **Education and Learning: is it an emancipatory or regulatory practice?**

If we employ a postmodernist perspective, we can question the modernist foundations, assumptions and functions of social sciences including education. It problematises education theory and practice and their epistemological basis while examining social and political factors that impact on public schooling. Furthermore, it questions the categories used in current educational discourses such as those found in the disciplines, e.g. knowledge, learning, educated subject. It also provides tools of analysis for us to be critical of the power relations within schools and in the social context. Furthermore, some of their writing provides a different kind of conception and explanation regarding social change as compared to the modernist conception and explanation. Postmodern/poststructuralist writings provide us with a reconceptualisation of modern institutions such as schools and universities.

According to Usher and Edwards (1994: 26-28), a significant merit of postmodernism is the strong critique it presents about modernist assumptions, ideals and processes including education. It requires us to be sceptical about the dominant taken-for-granted paradigms in education whether they be liberal, conservative or progressive. Postmodernists charge that education is located in the modernist tradition. PM 'suggests a way of looking differently at education as a social practice, at educational processes such as learning and teaching, and bodies of knowledge and the way they are organised and transmitted'. However, postmodernism does not provide 'a new definitive perspective from which a new set of prescriptions and techniques for organising teaching and learning can be generated'. The remaining question, then, is whether it is only a perspective?

As an intellectual position, postmodernism is a process of reflecting on the condition of modernity and postmodernity. It questions the assumptions of modern condition and the means of achieving knowledge. It recognises 'the need to problematise 'systems' of thought and organisation and, indeed to question the very notion of 'system' and systemic explanation. Postmodernism 'encompasses a condition, a set of practices, a cultural discourse, an attitude and a mode of analysis' (Usher and Edwards 1994: 7).

Postmodernist approach makes it possible to understand and explain the oppressive functions of education. Writing about the creation of powerful subjects by education Ball states that 'Education as the primary institutional experience of virtually all young persons, is fundamental to a Foucauldian analysis of modern society' (Ball 1990: 5). 'But education works not only to render its students as subjects of power, it also constitutes them, or some of them, as powerful subjects' (Ball 1990: 5).

Drawing from Foucault's writings, Usher and Edwards provide us an account of the 'themes and issues in education theory and practice which postmodern approaches problematise' (1994: 84). A major theme is the centrality of education in the construction of modernity in Foucault's thought. 'Modern forms of governance and social discipline are secured through education.... In this respect, education is not simply that which goes in schools but is an essential part of governmentality, a crucial aspect of the regulatory practices of a range of modern institutions' (Usher and Edwards, 1994: 84). 'Education as a social apparatus is itself a game of power and is dependent on other relations of power....it is one of the modes, in our culture, by which human beings are made subjects' (Simola et al in Popkewitz and Brennan 1998: 69).

As Marshall suggests (1989:108-109), rather than being emancipatory, humanistic progressive forms of education may represent 'Ever and more subtle refinements of technologies of power based upon knowledge which has itself been produced within or used by the discipline of education. This knowledge, constituted in practice, comes in turn to legitimise practice...power is still exercised in the search for normal and governable people' (Marshall as quoted in Usher and Edwards 1994: 94).

The human subject therefore has a paradoxical position in relation to the human sciences, as it is both an active knowing subject and an object being acted upon. It is both a subject and (an) object of knowledge. Educational discourses elaborate this paradox, where 'students' become objects of knowledge and thereby subject to power which, at the same time, in certain ways, constitutes them as powerful subjects, with some being constituted as more powerful than others.

(Usher and Edwards 1994: 94).

Popkewitz and Brennan state that 'We can think of educational studies, then, as a social mapping of the region and its inscribed boundaries. The regional focus enables an understanding of how particular rules and standards of truth cross institutional patterns...Curriculum becomes, from this point of view, part of a discursive field through which the subjects of schooling are constructed as individuals to self regulate, discipline, and reflect upon themselves as members of a community/society' (Popkewitz and Brennan 1998: 13). For example, teaching community or community of intellectuals.

This implies a functionalist position rather than a critical one. Instead of citizens who function as public intellectuals working to improve democracy (as critical education theorists propose), they become normal, good citizens who follow the rules and standards and receive rewards in return. Consensus and cohesion are to be ensured by this rather than conflict and tension which can lead to change.

Review of these ideas shows that education creates unequal power relations. It can be emancipatory for some only, ie. Those who master the discipline. What about others? As educators, do we create them all equals? Do we worry about those who don't perform? Do we have to anyway?

How does this operate in our classrooms? Through the pedagogies (of power) used by teachers? How does this operate in our educational institutions? What are the technologies of power based on knowledge that operate in the education field? How do they oppress the teacher and the learner? What arguments have been constructed within relevant discourses to show education's humanist, emancipatory, progressive nature? Can we examine these in social justice discourses as currently operational within our education institutions and their social context? The literature reviewed for this paper highlights certain characteristics and the role of the teacher.

Postmodernist thinkers seek to change the discourses and practices that construct reality in a certain way (eg. modernist), and advocate the value of alternative discourses and practices that construct reality differently or a different reality. They believe that the educators have a unique role to play in this.

The value of being located in the postmodern is the greater possibility for disruption of the 'given'; and in education there are far too many givens in need of disruption. The emphasis on methods and techniques is itself a product of education's humanistic discourse. More than ever, then, education needs a critical scepticism and a suitable degree of uncertainty.

(Usher and Edwards, 1994: 31).

Foucault's work offers an important critique of humanism, and specific conceptual apparatuses for developing a more politically effective intellectual' (Popkewitz and Brennan, 1998: 27-28).

According to Simola et al, it is not helpful to see 'the teacher only as a pawn in a game of power or simply as an independent individual agent' (Simola et al 1998: 85). In this view neither complete determinism, nor complete autonomy is indicated.

According to Fendler (1998: 44-45), what is teachable (teaching desire or desire for education) has also changed significantly. Pedagogies and assessment techniques designed to cultivate the intellect, discipline, behaviour, and social responsibility are not enough now. Aspects of the self-made teachable include love, pleasure, feelings, wishes, fears, and anxieties - constituents of the private self. Educational goals now require that students be "motivated" and have a positive attitude. Teachers now have to address these desires.

### **Technocratic vs. Democratic Schooling**

State has entrusted formal education institutions the task of providing education (knowledge, skills etc.) to the populations of societies. Contemporary social theories interrogate how educational institutions actually do this, and importantly how power and dominance are constructed by way of various discourses and discursive practices. They question the ability of the formal education institutions to do the job in a socially critical and responsible way. In fact, some theorists suggest that the formal education institutions create a different kind of inequality based on dominant power relations, disciplinary discourses, assessments, examinations, and the production of 'educated subjects'. Likewise, there are various debates about the meaning and purpose of education. 'Scholars using the emerging discourses of feminism, postcolonialism, and cultural and literary studies are rethinking fundamental relationships between language and experience, pedagogy and human agency, and ethics and social responsibility as part of a larger project for promoting democratic schooling in a social-cultural-educational world of human making' (Leach & Boler 1998:149-150). Postmodernists and critical education theorists also present us with alternative paradigms of thinking on education.

During a recent talk delivered at the University of New England, Australia Clive Graham commented on the end of welfare state and the emergence of knowledge economy in western societies. He said, ideas for making money are driving the economy. Definitions of what constitute knowledge have been broadened to include the needs of the economy and the state. Our education system separates thinking from doing. However, the new economy does not buy this. Education system has been democratised but it is rooted to the past than the future. Usefulness of the disciplines is under doubt. They may have a use in the academia not in the real world. Transdisciplinary contextualisation of knowledge is the current need. This is in the interest of the student as well as the economy. He advocated rethinking pedagogy for innovation and advantage (application). If our aim is to encourage student participation in learning, we have to connect our pedagogy with knowledge economy. Pedagogy should be contextualised, made innovative and transgressive. Pedagogies that produced workers for the regulated welfare state are no longer suitable for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Teacher is no longer the fountain of knowledge. The issue is what ideas in education/pedagogy are making people rich? ***There is a need for developing***

*critical thinking with applicability* (Graham 2003). In response to his lecture, a teacher in the audience said that the one to one interactions between the teacher and the student in schools are still very important.

There is a counter view to the kind of argument put forward by Graham, especially based on justice and equity grounds. It highlights the deficiencies in the management or technocratic view of education and learning.

According to Lovat,

There appears to be a widespread view that something is ‘wrong’ with present education...The solution to this, we are informed by the politicians and others, is to make education more like the corporate sector, more technocratic and more managerial...Yet, in both general society and educational contexts injustices and inequalities, particularly in terms of gender, class and ethnicity, continue to be perpetuated and these are becoming more entrenched. Many of the gains made in these areas are under threat, and schooling contributes to maintaining the status quo of a society where ‘differences’ become ‘disadvantages’ which are held to be ‘natural’ and ‘justified’.

(Lovat 1992: 243)

Some writers ‘argue for replacing the discourses of management and efficiency for a critical analysis of the underlying conditions that structure school life’ (Aronowitz and Giroux 1993:38). To Lovat (1992), **The dilemma confronting us is having to choose between educating teachers to enable future generations to learn the knowledge and skills necessary to build a principled and democratic society vs. producing an agency for the reproduction and legitimation of a society characterised by a high degree of social and economic inequality and reinforced by management discourse. Teacher education programs have not given teachers the conceptual tools in order to view knowledge as problematic, as a historically conditioned, socially constructed phenomenon.** Kanpol believes that ‘A technocratic mind-set at best is beset upon students. The limitations of this methodologies-only teacher education are clearly evident the moment a pre-service teacher is met with a population of students in which these so-called “methods” do not work’ (Kanpol, 2001: 181-182)

Hidden curriculum is a powerful means by which education and schooling maintain the status quo in the societies with all its inequality and social injustice. According to the proponents of ‘socially critical orientation’ to curriculum, education must engage social issues and give students experience in working on them, e.g. critical reflection, social negotiation, organisation of action. School should be a special place where students can develop social life through action (Kemmis, Cole, and Suggest 1983:9).

According to Garcia, ‘It is not the role of the schools to prepare for specific jobs. Rather, schools must teach academic skills that develop students’ intellectual abilities and that involve students in learning activities that enhance human relationships, critical thinking, and civic responsibility’ (1999:87). Schools equip students with the intellectual, cultural and social capital necessary to pursue a wide range of post school opportunities’ (Collins, Kenway and McLeod 2000: 39).

Are our educational institutions organs of the state or public spaces? Are our educational institutions sites for self and social transformation? Are they sites for democracy and active citizenry? Do they address social inequalities or do they in fact create social inequalities? Are they emancipatory public spaces or regulatory spaces using technologies of power to define and classify the subject - the young students? What are the technologies of power and domination used in regulation? Are teacher education programs serving to reproduce technocratic and corporatist ideologies? What should be the basis of counter-hegemonic, emancipatory education? What is required to develop prospective teachers as critical theorists rather than classroom managers who are able to affirm the discourse of freedom and democracy?

## PART - II

### School Education in Sri Lanka and the Youths? Different Discourses

Contextualising learning or education by the youth is an important theme emerging from this exposition of ideas about education for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We can raise some related questions from these ideas:

1. How can we develop 'critical thinking with application' in the young people in schools?
2. What knowledges should be taught, why and how?
3. Should the schools cater to the needs of knowledge economy, if so, how?
4. What should be the nature of the relationship between the teacher and the student?
5. What should be the nature of the pedagogy suitable for effective learning?
6. How can we change, develop, amend schooling (and the learning provided within schools) to address the concerns of the context (economic, political, social, cultural, historical)?
7. What is the place of democratic schooling in all this?

Another question is whether Sri Lanka needs an education system that simply caters to the knowledge economy (or globalised or open economy) or an education system that provides a broader education and learning opportunities where critical thinking and student empowerment are encouraged and social justice parameters are addressed? In this paper, my focus is on the latter - although I recognise the importance of the former as a necessary requirement. I focus on the role of schools, teachers, curriculum, pedagogy, and ideology in learning where emphasis is placed on the context and its impact on education. As learning by the youth is not an isolated act and it happens in a specific historical, economic, political and cultural context, it is necessary to examine learning in context, the changing context due to what we call 'globalisation'. In doing so, I emphasise the need to consider school and school education (or the teaching-learning process) as a contested terrain rather than as one which is totally and exclusively determined by the state or the economy.

No doubt that in the Sri Lankan context, the state plays a significant, in fact the key role in determining the curriculum, educational reforms, salary levels, pedagogy, etc. The educational policies, programs and administrative set up designed and managed by the state over the decades mainly embrace a management discourse. However, when we look at the public schools, we can see that there are competing discourses including critical ones. Examples are the discourses on international and public education, free and quality education, social integration and conflict prevention, national identity and culture maintenance, English and Swabhasa education, unemployment and education.

Are the governmentality and associated technologies of power employed in the schools defeating the purpose of learning? For example, is the heavy emphasis on examinations as the main form of assessment, an instrument or technology of power deprive the youths a broad based education and learning opportunities? Is it depriving them of their childhood and youthhood? Is the education developing a deficit personality devoid of characteristics desired by the parents, employers, and the community at large? Is it producing a subject desired by the state for its own governmentality and regulation? In order to find answers to the foregoing questions it is necessary to look at the discourses on education prevailing in Sri Lanka.

Writing about free education and the deteriorating quality in schools, Abeysekera and Uyangoda pointed out that what remains is the mythology of free education.

If the existing system of school and university education were to continue for the sake of preserving the concept of free education, its immediate victims would be the vast masses of persons of lower and middle class backgrounds, whose children are destined to receive a low quality, substandard and goal-less education through the public education system...Our real problem now with Sri Lanka's 'free education' is not whether education is free of fees or not, but whether Sri Lanka's younger generation receives a quality education... The examination orientation of the existing free, public education system has paradoxically given rise to a lucrative private sector in school education, which still remains an informal sector, although it operates within a well organised network.

(Abeysekera and Uyangoda 1997: 2).

Quoting from Balasuriya (1989) Udagama says, 'Our education system is a disaster as far as the creation of a common Sri Lankan identity. The educational system is examination oriented, individualistic, competitive and largely theoretical; our academic curriculum neglects personality development, social concern and service' (Udagama 1990: 12). Quoting Hewage, he further states that 'The schools did not develop the basic value of respect and concern for the human person, in spite of the stress on religious education. Our school model, too, could not accommodate our various cultures, ethnic groups and languages in a meaningful way and as a result the system alienated and marginalised rural youth and youth especially from minority groups' (1990: 12). 'The present malaise in our society may be turned into a problem and a national challenge. If we are ready to learn from our past mistakes, misunderstandings and wrong concepts of education, the opportunity should be grasped now. We have to redefine aims and goals of education for the whole nation' (1990: 12). Comparing with the system we inherited from the British, he emphasises the need for a political education to develop a cohesive society.

On the impact of international schools, Kularatne says (1995: 21-22):

Education in Sri Lanka has entered a new phase with the introduction of International schools. Highly affluent parents are better placed to opt for education in international schools and they no longer depend on the effective performance of the heavily subsidised national education system...Students from higher social background who study in these institutions have an edge over those who study in Sinhala or Tamil medium, mostly from a rural background...In addition to the language factor most government schools are under staffed, with shabby buildings and poor learning resources...These schools inevitably reinforce and exacerbate the disparities between different socio-economic classes of the country. This also leads to a deterioration of the public schools system and distorts the national education policy in Sri Lanka.

The point to consider here is the role of school education (public and private/international) in accelerating social inequality, disadvantage, marginalisation and stresses. In this regard, a recent contribution from a leading international school in Colombo to a newspaper supplement on international schools gives further insights:

An international school in a Sri Lankan environment, but, devoid of the stress and unrest of the Sri Lankan youth who go on a rampage at the mere spark of misguidance to destroy the peace of our society. No brawls amongst students, no black eyes or bruised limbs are evident this being proof of the harmony prevailing in school, encouraged by the environment created, to train the students to discipline themselves with no orders from above as the school anthem proclaims (2003: 13).

The question is why can't the public schools create such environment?

Commenting on the meaning of education, Jayasinghe says,

Education is not merely preparing students for examinations and helping them to obtain high grades but the overall development of the students. Education is a life long process. In a rapidly changing world education should equip the ‘school leaver’ with appropriate skills, values and powers of reasoning which will facilitate his adaptation to the modern world... We have to design our system of education making sure that the end products will be well-informed responsible citizens of Sri Lanka and yet be fully aware of what is going on in the world. Any system of education today should contribute to the goal of creating a world which will protect the environment and which is free from terrorism and war and hunger and poverty

(Jayasinghe 2003: 15).

Referring to the stress levels of students, he states:

Recent surveys and research show that a lot of students are under tremendous pressure to perform. Stress levels are high due to the volume of homework, assignments and deadlines. Some students even refuse to participate in extra-curricular activities for fear of falling grades. This has robbed them of their childhood. I am fully aware of the fact that a lot of work has to be done - yet too much stress on a child on account of studies is counter productive in the overall process of education.

(Jayasinghe 2003: 15).

Gunawardena’s view, based on an analysis of the data from a National Youth Survey, is not encouraging:

Largely, the National Youth Survey Data point to a situation explained by the “correspondence theory”, rather than the “human capital development theory”, where the hierarchical social structure is reproduced through the school system with benefits from education, accruing mainly to the more privileged. The extent to which “resistance” exists in education cannot be ascertained due to the type of data collected by the Survey.

(Gunawardena 2002: 115)

Nonetheless, as argued in this paper, through further research it is important to examine the extent to which resistance to an education system which reproduces the status quo in class, power, ethnic, gender and cultural terms continues. Questions about the exam orientation highlight the need for alternative teaching and assessment approaches and methods. Sri Lanka’s government has taken some steps to address this through education reforms implemented in recent years. However, the meaning of education, its goals and competencies need to be broad based in order to cater to contextual factors impacting on the learning processes. As Udagama states, we may have to redefine our aims and goals of school education to make it more appealing and useful to the youths that are being subjected to regulation. We need to find ways to make them critical thinkers through the curriculum, pedagogy and policies.

In Sri Lanka, there is a dominant academic, policy and public discourse on youths, with implications for education and learning, that can be called ‘ integration discourse’ (Hettige and Mayer 2002:7-8; Uyangoda 1995: 11-14). It is based on a functionalist approach and seen as a way to explain, understand and overcome conflicts between the youth and the political authority. It advocates greater space for youth participation in the economy, development projects, political system, and other social

institutions while engaging in a critique of where things have gone wrong in terms of youth mal-integration.

Societal integration refers to the creation of space for youth and youth activities in the construction of community and in community development..To formalise structural mechanisms through which youth become integrated constructively into society is rarely formulated into the objectives of development initiatives. Rather active decision-making outcomes imply the belief that social integration follows economic integration, and that as long as economic integration cannot be realised, there is no valid space for alternative efforts at social integration.

(Hettige and Mayer 2002: 8)

Political and social integration has been based on the assumption that the state has a responsibility to look after the future of the youths. 'Sri Lanka's traditional approach to social integration has been anchored on a generalized social welfare policy. The basic assumption in that approach is not a complicated one: it is an obligation of the state to distribute its surplus among practically all social classes.. If the state does not ensure for different social strata - from rural peasantry and students to urban entrepreneurial elements - access to state resources, the state easily runs the risk of attracting anger and hostility of these affected social groups' (Uyangoda 1995:12). Integration discourse is related to free and fair education' often counterpoised with criticisms of international schools. Here public education is perceived as a right of every child, and there are various arguments and criticisms about the deteriorating standards or quality and the need for reform.

The government has implemented educational reforms already but there is a long way to go in terms of their success. The need for state funded public education to maintain national identity and culture, give opportunities for all children to higher and further education, and useful employment continue as a key discourse. Yet on the other hand the public education system is perceived as exam-oriented, narrow, and preparing students for limited higher education places rather than the globalising knowledge economy and expanding private sector. The integration discourse embodies a critique of the system as well as its justification as a free education measure.

## **Feedback from the Teachers and Students**

In this section I examine social contextual factors related to education of youths based on relevant literature and the interviews/survey information obtained from teachers and students,. Here we need to ask what factors contribute to better learning by the youths? What obstacles and challenges are there for the youths for better and effective learning? How do the global, national and institutional factors impact on the teaching-learning process?

Factors impacting on the learning process as identified from these sources are:

- Staff-student ratio
- Status of the teacher and salary
- Teaching ideologies and methods (teacher focussed or student centred?)
- Curriculum and its relevance
- Skills, knowledge, qualities of the learner; their suitability to the employment market
- Quality of education in schools
- Economic difficulties, and those from the home front
- Personal motivation and the role of peers, teachers and mentors
- Facilities, aids, etc. e.g. libraries, access to internet, photocopying, telephone, newspapers;
- Learning difficulties in subject areas

- Hierarchical/traditional teaching approaches and methods e.g. content/exam oriented.

According to a graduate teacher who travels about 100kms a day from Colombo to Galle for work, ‘Globalisation has produced a modern class whose members are enjoying a luxury life. They can spend a lot of money. On the other hand, most of the people in society are poor and unsatisfied with life. They don’t get proper food, which gives nourishment. Some children get fainted when they go to school. If asked whether they had breakfast they say they didn’t (even) have the dinner last night’ (Gamage 2002). Among the teachers, those with a single income are the most disadvantaged and struggling. The same teacher angrily pointed out the differences in salaries between the professionals and the teachers. In particular, he was critical of the salary differences between the graduate teachers and university lecturers. ‘Teachers are engaged in a constant struggle to match their identity/status which are derived from the Sinhala social organisation with material accompaniments considered as necessary by the society and its values’. On how the role of the teacher has been devalued, the deputy principal of a teacher training college stated, ‘Those in education had a good status, especially graduate teachers. Now it is the other way around’ (Gamage 2002).

In the words of a university academic ‘along with the open economy, the service sector develops, e.g. tourist hotels, supermarkets, communication centres, and international schools...traditions change with globalisation. People have transnational contacts and networks. English has become the link language’ (Gamage 2002). While hinting at socio-economic disparities, these contextual factors show the constraints under which children come to schools to learn. Pressures faced by children from disadvantaged economic and social backgrounds can be enormous, and can negatively impact on learning whereas those who are placed in a materially advantageous position can access the privately owned education institutions catering to the national and/or international systems of education.

Social context within which the learner lives may not be suitable for learning. Following words from a teacher who used to teach in a remote location are revealing:

I decided to come to my original village because the society in the settlement was unsuitable for us. We couldn’t move with that society. We belong to the society of educated people. Over there, we had to move with a lot of uneducated people. The latter’s lifestyle is to earn some money, eat, drink, and gamble. The methods that people over there invented for earning and spending money are the ones that don’t suit us. We had a problem in bringing up our child. Those who grow up in that society don’t learn.

Referring to the social context in the village of his birth where the teacher moved subsequently, he said:

It is difficult to get along with the village society. People have become mechanised like computers. Children are always either in the school or in the tuition class outside it. Cost of living is high and people have to do something to earn a living. After formal studies, one can’t get a job straight away. No help is available from the government either. In this situation, when the JVP invites them to join, they do so<sup>2</sup>.

Existence of private tutorials outside school hours supplements the school education. They address the weaknesses in school education system and claim to perform the job better, ie. Preparing school children for ordinary level and advanced level examinations conducted by the government. A university

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<sup>2</sup> JVP is a political party known as Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna or the People’s Liberation Front. Before it became a recognized mainstream party, it led two youth insurrections against the government in 1971 and 1989. Currently, it is a key power broker in national politics represented in the parliament.

lecturer who sends his child to a tutoring said, 'I thought for a while that I would not give private tuition to my child. But when looking at the kind of homework brought from the school, I wondered? As we both work, we don't have time to examine child's work carefully. Now we get four tutors for four subjects. We spend Rs. 3000-4000 on them. For one lesson, we pay Rs. 125-150. Until the child sits O/L examination, we have to do this. In the school, there is no individual attention. Weak children don't get attention. They are pushed down to the bottom...It is the dropouts who join the JVP in the South and the LTTE in the north and east' (Gamage 2002). These comments show the plight of school drop outs who seem to be joining anti-systemic political forces and the role of current public education system and its failures in this process.

Hierarchical teaching styles in schools as well as higher education institutions in Sri Lanka, as is the case in many other Asian countries, is another factor influencing the learning quality and outcomes. It is even visible in universities. According to one university lecturer, 'Teaching process is also very hierarchical. Students don't question the teachers. There is no dialogue or free flow of ideas. No reading habits. Lack of English knowledge is not the only reason. Students go through past papers and prepare for examinations. Someone has told him that there are students who get their degree without reading a book. Critical thinking is not facilitated or promoted. More than the facts, opinions dominate' (Gamage 2002). The question here is who is to benefit by not offering an education that is lacking in critical abilities and reflections?

The existence of what is considered as a radical political consciousness among students, primarily with direction by the JVP, is an important factor to examine in the current context. How far this is a result of the deterioration of formal school and university education, and the decreasing value of the educational qualifications obtained from the government education institutions needs to be examined. The author's view is that in the absence of an education where the knowledge and skills gained are valued by the professions and/or other public-private institutions with the capacity to obtain recognition and employment, or being unable to get into education institutions where the entry is by heavy national competition, it is inevitable that the young people embrace counter ideologies, discourses and sources of knowledge, which are different from the modernist discourses promoted by the state and affiliated institutions including academics, teachers and politicians.

Students in high schools are aware of the changes going on in society and their impact on education. After a talk on globalisation by the author, students in a public school in the South of the country asked following questions (1998):

- Can we enter a rapidly changing world with the educational system we have? Is our educational system capable of a rapid change to coincide with globalisation? Some said that the older generation dislike the fact that Sri Lanka is subject to globalisation.
- Why limit HSC to three subjects?
- Will our value system and culture be affected by globalisation? Their view was that in a rapidly changing world, the culture and ethics deteriorate rapidly.
- Why don't we get a suitable education system that is capable of building our personality?

Teachers in the public schools have reservations about the new developments. Teachers who were following the postgraduate diploma in education at a public university in Sri Lanka expressed critical views on the role of public and international schools (2002):

- They expressed the need for qualitative improvement in education rather than exam-oriented, quantitative improvement. In the international schools, there is constant improvement of the curriculum.
- Some considered international schools as a threat to national identity maintenance. They contribute to the deterioration of values. For example, they don't teach Sinhala language or Buddhism. Furthermore, they affect students from public schools when competing for employment. Employers prefer those from international schools as those from public schools get a second class education. This impacts on free education, and education for all concept.
- The international schools provide a contrast or a model for the government schools. 'The standard of education in international schools is better, they have better facilities, resources, instruments, teaching aids'. One teacher said that taking steps to improve English language teaching in rural schools is better than criticising international schools.
- Some pointed out the weaknesses of public education system. One teacher said, 'Even though common goals have been introduced into the public schools, they haven't been implemented, and it is sad to see this situation'. Another said, 'Because the education is exam-oriented, real goals are not achieved'.

These observations point out to differing valuations of the public education system in comparison to the private/international system. Deprivations and inequalities felt by those in the public education system and the questions about its relevance manifest clearly in the comments. Provision of education itself has fragmented or diversified. However, any conflicts due to the nature of the knowledge and skills received or not received seem to emerge not necessarily at the level of educational institutions but outside of them. This reflects the class based social system prevailing in Sri Lanka, and the ability of different groupings of youths in society to attend a system of education depending on their parental wealth, power and access. Those without such are destined to a state – run system irrespective of its many weaknesses – real or perceived. It is fair to say that those undertaking education through the international schools are able to connect with the global knowledge economy and related networks more so than others. Educational bifurcation with a focus on the global-regional context and national context in Sri Lanka by two different systems is simply the result of Sri Lanka adapting to the changing circumstances due to globalisation.

Unlike the assumptions of modernist social theories where the acquisition of knowledge and skills is considered value-neutral, the point of this paper is to highlight and promote a 'counter discourse and pedagogy' where teaching and learning are considered as a process with political meaning and implications. The latter needs to be advocated, used and implemented by the teachers and others in the teaching profession if social reform through public education is to be achieved.

In this context, how do we create learning situations that create inspiration, excitement, involvement, imagination, creativity, and critical reflection?

### **PART - III**

#### **Youths as Critical Thinkers: Postmodernism, Critical theory and Pedagogy in School Education**

In this section, I draw the ideas discussed thus far together and provide some directions for teachers, teacher educators and youths in schools to be critical thinkers. I am doing so in particular because of two reasons: (1) there is radical-critical thought and action in the Sri Lankan political arena but not necessarily in the public school education arena, (2) the public education system, its supporters and opponents are both using a modernist, free-education is right frame of thought. Those who are not

satisfied with the current nature of educational provision and the quality haven't been able to go beyond this mindset. The arguments they advance against private/international education are also firmly couched in the modernist frame of thought, e.g. there are no arguments about making the curriculum suitable for local histories, needs, etc. Instead, they rely more and more on the same old modernist education determined by the state bureaucrats. If it is challenged, they get upset but do not propose an alternative frame of thought such as the critical one.

Since the 1970s, critical theory has influenced educational theory. The assumptions of critical theory run counter to the orthodox Marxist and neo-Marxist interpretations of education, i.e. the reproduction of inequality (race, class, gender). Critical theory approach emphasises the need to adopt the language of social change and transformation, emancipatory practice.

Lovat outlines the main features of this approach (1992: 250-252):

- Critical theory approach can elaborate the influence of the dominant socio-political and economic ideologies upon the values, attitudes, content, and strategies being propagated in educational settings.
- It provides knowledge and strategies such as those within critical pedagogy, to allow for the development of contestation and resistance and the restructuring of social contexts and relationships to promote equity and justice.
- It insists that theory and practice are indivisible, and enables teachers to place their own practice and experience at the centre of their enquiry.
- Unlike other 'theories', critical theory deals directly with everyday 'problems' and situations, and seeks to resolve them by providing people with knowledge and power by which they can gain control over their own lives.
- (It) is a 'way of thinking' which incorporates an explicit, analytic approach to the study of curriculum, pedagogy, evaluation and language, to develop understanding that the taken-for-granted beliefs are not as 'natural'.
- It is committed to seeking understanding beyond the level of superficial objective appearances to expose the hidden social relationships, which lead to oppression and domination.
- It rejects positivism and says all facts are socially constructed, determined and interpreted, and therefore can be changed, through human interactions and institutions, e.g., in education achievement, progress, ability, performance indicators, quality, management, etc.
- Emancipation and empowerment are important terms and provide overall objectives of critical theory. Through exploring, and opening up for reflection, the relationships and nature of power, ideology and hegemony, critical theory can offer insight into how greater degree of freedom and autonomy could be implemented.

According to Giroux and Kanpol, Critical theory uses the language of critique and possibility. It advocates teacher educators and teachers to move beyond the boundaries that separate the personal from the political, theory from practice, and the private from the public sphere, and asserts the importance of identity as a social consideration that is forged in history (Giroux in Kanpol, 1999). Furthermore critical theory can be connected to a form of action that leads to social change. If theory distances writers and readers from social action, then what use is the practical import of critical pedagogy? (Kanpol, 1999: 187).

**What is critical pedagogy?** ‘Critical pedagogy is a broad and diverse field of theory and practice drawing on aspects of the modernist perspective of the later Frankfurt School, feminism, Freirean pedagogy, postcolonial discourse as well as postmodernism to construct a radical approach to education’ (Usher and Edwards, 1994: 214). In this regard, Giroux and others have put forward a number of useful explanatory concepts, e.g. border pedagogy.

These positions largely argue for education, and more specifically schooling, to provide a ‘voice’ for those excluded others oppressed in modern social formations. The oppressed, whatever the nature of their oppression - class, gender, ethnicity, colour, sexual preference, etc. - must, it is argued, be given the opportunity to participate fully and equally, the oppression they face being made explicit as a basis for moving to a more democratic social formation... The grand narrative of emancipation is..deepened within critical pedagogy to encompass the structures and experiences of oppression. In carrying out this role, educators become cultural workers and education a form of cultural politics...For critical pedagogues therefore, the principal issue is the introduction of heterogeneity and the recognition of difference into educational practices.

(Usher and Edwards, 1994: 214-215).

Further examination of the views by various authors reveal important dimensions of critical pedagogy. According to Kanpol,

- Critical pedagogy refers to the means and methods that test and hope to change the structures of schools that allow inequalities and social injustices.
- It is a cultural-political tool that takes seriously the notion of human differences, particularly as these differences related to race, class, and gender.
- It seeks to unoppress the oppressed and unite people in a shared language of critique, struggle, and hope to end various forms of human suffering.
- It considers the link between university professors and public school teachers as both vital and necessary for social change and transformation.
- It incorporates a moral vision of human justice and decency as its common vision. ....Critical pedagogy, then is indeed a moral, and even to some a spiritual, enterprise (Kanpol, 1999:27).
- ‘Critical pedagogy seeks to transform consciousness, to provide students with ways of knowing that enable them to know themselves better and live in the world, more fully’ (bell hooks, 115).
- It is democratic in its intent, but critical when democracy is thwarted...
- It is passionate about positioning teachers, students, and administrators in places where they can be the creators of their own meaning-making systems. These systems could undercut experiences of oppression, alienation and subordination and transform these encounters into joyful expressions of fair and just social relations’ (Kanpol, 1999: 185).
- It is critical of the pedagogy of transmission where knowledge is reduced to a culture of great books. Teaching and learning not seen as implementation and mastery. Argue for the parity of canonical and popular text (Aronowitz and Giroux, 1991: 37).

- It questions all social action and institutions, on whose interests are being served - as the world is a place where contradictions of power and privilege exist.
- It advocates that ‘As a pedagogical practice, the text has to be read not simply as a study in the production of ideology but as part of a wider circuit of power that calls into play broader institutional practices and social structures’ -(Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991: 28).
- It suggests that educators must examine the development of pedagogical discourses and practices that demonize Others who are different (through transforming them into absence or deviance) - (McLaren, 1992: 214).
- The invitation posed by critical pedagogy is to bend reality to the requirements of a just world, to decentre, deform, disorient, and ultimately transform modes of authority that domesticate the Other, that lay siege to the power of the margins’ (McLaren, 1994: 218)

Part of creating a critical pedagogy in teacher education is to move beyond mere critique or cynicism to a position where action can occur, where students can joyfully respond to structural constraints in a timely manner and in ways that create opportunities for democratic hope and critical citizenry. The move from cynicism to action, from critique to praxis, from passivity to activity, from reaction to proaction becomes a possibility only when teacher education students and faculty members realize the historically constructed contradiction between what we say we want as a governing philosophy and what we really do in our classrooms. We must own up to this contradiction. We must confess.

(Kanpol, 1999: 182-183).

Here comments by Giroux and McLaren in the context of schooling are also useful. Language of critique is important but we need to move beyond this to a critical pedagogy and ideology. We need to re-think democratic alternatives to the reproduction of status quo, e.g. schools as producers of obedient workers for the state (or the economy). We need to be critical and move beyond the discourses and social relations of domination. We need alternative approaches to organization, curriculum, and classroom social relations. ‘Radical imaginary represents a discourse that offers new possibilities for democratic social relations’ (Giroux and McLaren in Popkewitz, 1987: 268-269).

What lessons are there for teacher educators?

As Kanpol points out, ‘Presently, teacher education departments do extremely little to foster a liberative education for their students..teacher education does little more than provide the potential teacher with a set of strategies to conquer discipline problems and prepare lesson and unit plans with clearly defined behavioural objectives’. We have to be doing better than this. We need to change the technocratic mind-set, and methodologies-only teacher education beset upon students. The limitations of this are evident the moment a pre-service teacher is met with a population of students in which these so-called “methods” do not work (Kanpol, 1999: 181-182, 269).

Critical and radical theorists write in a difficult language but we have to understand that it is a language of hope that provide tools for countering other languages constructed by the disciplines, and academia.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The foregoing examination of the contemporary social theories, the debates and contestations among Sri Lanka’s academics and others are helpful for analysing and understanding the nature of issues

faced by the youths in Sri Lanka in the formal school sector, and the strategies needed to address these. We observed that the postmodernists and critical education theorists have not only explained social changes but also advance an ideology and strategies to address oppressive conditions and outcomes in education. Postmodernists emphasise cultural factors and processes rather than economic, e.g. changes in the production, circulation and consumption of culture. They examine the impact of media and cultural practices on identification, and learning.

Foucault's ideas about power-knowledge nexus, the modern forms of governance and how they re-position people into tighter forms of regulation and self-regulation are useful for us to reflect on the processes of teaching and learning in the school sector and understand the extent to which this is happening. We learn that education is not simply what goes on in schools but is an essential part of governmentality or crucial aspects of regulatory practices. Adopting **a critical view** about the nature of knowledge imparted in the schools is extremely important. Limiting youth issues to the 'economic integration discourse' or the employment issue alone is not wise. As Foucault suggests knowledge is not free from power and it is always found in relation to its uses - and to a form of power. What is the form of power that the schooling and the knowledge imparted via schools reinforce? What are the forms of power that determines the nature of knowledge and learning by youths in the schooling context? Are they to the benefit of the youths or someone else? If it is not in the interest of the youths, what strategies should be used to change the power relations in and out of the schools? What knowledge is desired by the youths? As Ball says if education renders some students as subjects of power and others powerful subjects (1990), how does this create inequality in society to the extent that many youths that are constituted as subjects of power start to rebel? Through the bifurcated school education system, i.e. public and international, it is possible to argue that some students are produced as subjects of power (most of those in public schools) and others as powerful subjects (those studying in international schools). How exactly this happens and the extent to which it happens can be further examined by focused research in various country contexts. From the preceding review of literature it is evident that there is a need to train 'educated subjects' seeking change to critically reflect on the nature of knowledge provided to them as well as how the knowledge is differently constructed via different sites rather than throwing themselves into a self-imposed powerless position. As Simola says, teachers should not be seen as a pawn in a game of power either.

For political and historical reasons, Sri Lanka's education system segregates various groups in society (rather than integrate) into categories such as minority vs majority, class, status, gender, and locality. As Udagama states, 'The education system, laid the foundations among other factors, for a divisive society and a nation at war. In a plurinational state, all cultures need to be represented in the education system. But our sectarian religious and language policies in education tend to keep our children in separate entities' (Udagama 1990: 13-14). Even the current reforms in the education field seem to be preserving the society's status quo in a fundamental way while attempting to address the issue of conflicts and inequalities in a rather peripheral or symbolic way? If it is not already made a requirement, learning about each other's cultures, histories and languages and validating these knowledges should be made mandatory. Contested nature of the histories should not be viewed as a reason for not learning interculturality. It is only those who have a vested interest in trying to maintain a hegemonic system and ownership claims who will argue otherwise. It is also not correct to argue that youths resort to violence because of the lack of suitable employment alone. There are a range of factors leading to this phenomenon including alienation, lack of recognition and acceptance, feeling of not belonging or powerlessness, and identity differences. Education can play a crucial role here. 'We have to think of educating the human person before we think of educating the civil servants, the medical doctors and now the business executives' (Udagama 1990: 15). We need to explore and implement ways of constructing 'multicultural subjects' via the schools who are able to empathise with their fellow citizens irrespective of class, ethnic, gender, cultural, political, and locality differences. School education can be transformed into a socially constructive, critically reflective and liberating experience for those seeking such outcomes.

It is not possible or wise to focus on the learning process by the youth without linking it with the teaching process. Teaching and learning are two sides of the same coin. Without effective teaching, the learning process can suffer. For example, if the teacher does not consider the situational contingencies of the learner in the teaching process, the learning can suffer to the detriment of the learner. Increasingly, there is emphasis on ‘student centred teaching’, ‘teaching to social context’, in the worldwide education literature. Garcia and Mifflin emphasise the need for a metamorphosis in schools:

Our next generation of young people, and ethnic and racial minority children in particular will continue to be vulnerable if our schools do not successfully complete the required metamorphosis. The future lies in understanding how a diverse population, with many individuals at risk for underachievement, can attain social, educational, and employment competence. As always, the new ideas, the energy, and the resources for our society’s future reside in our youth.

(Garcia 1999: 290).

It is necessary for those who miss out from the existing public education and their intellectual, political sympathisers to develop, advocate and adopt a socially critical discourse in order to articulate the aspirations of the young people whose interests are not served by the existing education arrangements, particularly in rural and semi urban areas. This should involve critically examining the historical and current understandings of free-public education, its relevance to the changed world within and outside Sri Lanka, the changes required in the construction and legitimation of knowledge and skills to be imparted via schools, and the identification and inclusion of alternative, indigenous knowledge systems in the education process. Education for a critical democratic citizenship in a pluralistic national community and state should form a key part of this exercise. Such an education should move beyond the conception of education that simply prepares young people to be functionaries of knowledge economy alone. Empowerment through education is only possible when these parameters are incorporated to the teaching-learning process.

Critical Pedagogy politicises teaching, enabling teachers to step back and ask questions of their practices, processes, content and context. Smyth (1987) suggests we should at least ask the following questions:

- Where do the ideas I embody in my teaching come from historically?
- How did I come to appropriate them?
- Why do I continue to endorse them now in my work?
- Whose interests do they serve?
- What power relationships are involved?
- How do these ideas influence my relationships with my students?

- In the light of what I have discovered, how might I work differently?

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