

Sri Lanka: Privatisation from within 'Free Education': Tuition Classes in Anuradhapura

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The school attendance of students facing national level examinations such as Ordinary and Advanced Level, drastically drops closer to the respective examinations according to the National Education Research and Evaluation Centre (NEREC) (2004), This seemingly counter-intuitive tendency is explained by tuition classes that have come to not only supplement, but also substitute for, school education. Given that their own teachers in this period are away from schools conducting tuition classes, students share the perception that attending school during this time is optional.

Even though in response, the government has imposed a mandatory 80% attendance requirement, it does not mean much in a context of negligible incomes for teachers that fail to encourage them to put more effort into what they do in the public education system. Moreover, according to the 2014 Committee on Education appointed by the Northern Provincial Council, teachers' performance in tuition classes is far superior to their school classroom performance (Northern Province Ministry of Education 2014: 78).

Though there has been, and continues to be, considerable resistance to the notion of privatising education in society, this attitude does not seem to extend to tuition classes. Here, my aim is to understand the reasons behind these different reactions to different forms of privatisation of education, with a special focus on tuition classes. To this end, I draw on participatory observations and qualitative discussions conducted with school teachers, students, parents, principals, and owners and teachers of private tuition academies over a period of four months between January and April 2023, in one village in the North-Central Province district of Anuradhapura. Additionally, a survey was administered to 30 school teachers consisting of 15 men and 15 women. Half of this sample was engaged in private tuition, while the other half was not. This quantitative sample was drawn from among teachers working in three government schools across the district of Anuradhapura, including the school where qualitative discussions were conducted.

Why do Tuition Classes Prevail?

A student on average spends five hours at school, which comes to 25 hours per week. Each day consists of eight slots of 40 minutes, during which different subjects are taught. However, this allocation of time is insufficient to prepare students for highly competitive national level examinations. It was this reasoning that initially set off the practice of additional classes being conducted after school hours, according to a few teachers and school principals interviewed. As the socio-economic landscape underwent changes, however, this initial motivation was replaced by monetary incentives.

It could be argued that the progressively lower allocation of funds for the education sector (both secondary and tertiary) by the government has also been responsible for this state of affairs.

The following graph is illustrative of this general trend:

Repeated and insistent calls primarily by the Federation of University Teachers' Associations (FUTA) for a 6% equivalent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for education continue to go unheeded. This translates into, among several other things, inadequate wages for school teachers, pushing them to explore other avenues for generating an income.

Though of course there is much to be changed in how education is currently conceived of and designed, it can hardly be questioned that unsatisfied economic needs are a root cause behind these developments. In fact, most tuition class teachers (who were also government school teachers) interviewed for this study shared that it is the weight of economic burdens that have made them providers of private tuition. Discussions revealed that repayment of loans taken for building a house or purchasing a vehicle topped the list of reasons. Other reasons cited include inadequate time allocation in school (13.4%), job satisfaction (6.6%), an effective means of disseminating knowledge (13.4%), and not getting to teach the subject they like in school (6.6%).

According to one teacher interviewed, "every government in Sri Lanka so far has only negotiated with those professions that have some sort of leverage. For instance, any government immediately responds if the doctors go on strike, but they don't have that kind of engagement with teachers. What we are paid is not even enough to feed our families, so we have to find other ways to survive." The teachers' struggle for better wages has been going on for about 25 years now, without any government heeding their repeated calls except for the meagre concessions granted following the 100-day teachers' strike in 2021 (Christopher 2021).

I was directly exposed to the acute pressure this situation unleashes on teachers during my time as a teacher in a rural school in Anuradhapura, to gain firsthand experience of the matter. During breaks, many teachers would share their frustrations around not having an adequate income, with some opining, "You shouldn't even consider teaching because of how little they pay."

Two of the three principals interviewed also held that they are in support of tuition classes. According to one: "Even daily wage labourers get paid more if they do more work. But that is not the case with teachers. Most teachers earn between LKR30,000-50,000 which is not at all adequate in today's economy. Anybody doing a job, dreams of building their own house, buying their own vehicle. It is the same with a teacher. But with what they get paid, none of that is possible. So, they have come up with their own solution for it. I think it is justifiable from the teacher's point of view."

Even many of those teachers who do not conduct tuition classes spoke in support of them, citing economic hardships. There is a gender dynamic here, whereby more male teachers seem to be conducting tuition classes than their female counterparts. Many respondents held that this is because they are the main breadwinners of their families, or at least are considered more responsible for the financial wellbeing of the family. It is typically the case that women, including in middle-class occupations, conform to gender roles and divisions of labour - where men focus on income and women are expected to prioritise household responsibilities - that dictate they supervise homework and studies of their children; cook and clean; and care for younger and older family members, among other things (Kodikara 2023).

Another issue is that most teachers who conduct tuition classes do not view them as a mode of private education. The school teachers who participated in the survey were asked whether they have been part of any trade union activities (such as demonstrations and strikes) against the privatisation of education. Almost the entire sample of 30 respondents (96.6%) answered in the affirmative. When asked about the reason behind the decision to participate in such activities, 70% of those who participated shared that they had a "genuine interest in the matter", as private schools and

universities can in future pave the way for complete privatisation of education.

The entire sample surveyed agreed that privatisation of education negatively impacts students from low-income households. Interestingly, however, more than 70% of this sample (that included teachers who conduct tuition classes, as well as those who do not) were of the view that tuition classes do not contribute to the privatisation of education in the same way that private schools and universities do. According to one teacher: "If you go to a private school or university, you cannot continue without paying. But in a tuition class, you can stop going if you cannot any longer pay, while still having access to the education given at school. So, it is not the same thing." Several others echoed this position with slight variations.

Among teachers who conduct tuition classes as a full-time occupation, 93% shared that they had no other option as there was no other job opportunity that opened. The remainder said it was their passion. 86% of teachers sampled were in support of tuition classes because of frustration with malpractices in government-sponsored schools such as teachers demanding that their students attend their own private tuition classes, penalising those who do not, and conducting fee-levying classes on the school premises itself and making it mandatory for all students to attend them.

All teachers in the survey and qualitative samples who conduct tuition classes, as well as other owners of 'tuition buildings' in fact suggested "doing away with all the pretence" and abolishing the school system entirely. According to one of them, "if the government calculated the monthly amount parents on average spend on tuition classes, and gives that on a monthly basis to each student through a coupon system, they can just use it for tuition directly. It would be a service for parents, students, teachers, and people like us also frankly." Another, in a separate interview, proposed a similar scheme opining that "the tax money of the people that's spent on sustaining the school system would be spared at least." According to the latter respondent, "a private system is where performance is recognised. If you do not perform, you will not survive. It is those who don't perform who are afraid of the word 'private', and are used to getting paid monthly for doing nothing."

Since tuition has proven to be such a lucrative source of income, many teachers have now opted to simply compile the documentary evidence required at school, without doing the substantive work it supposedly signifies: reporting and taking attendance, assigning interim assessments that barely receive their attention, and filling forms of student progress, when in reality there is not adequate time to give substantive feedback, are only some such examples. Participatory observations yielded that some teachers simply sign in and out of work, doing the bare minimum necessary, sometimes even reporting to work drunk. Others utilise their leave entitlements to conduct tuition classes outside. According to the survey conducted for this study, 46.7% of school teachers utilise their leave entitlements to conduct tuition classes.

A 'Necessary Evil': Parents' and Students' Perceptions of Tuition Classes

As Herath (2019) observes, as early as 1990, around 75% of students were estimated to be attending tuition classes. Among A/L Arts students, the percentage was 62; Commerce: 67; and Science: 92.

The graph below demonstrates the average monthly tuition related expenditure of households, as of 2021.

Interestingly among parents, mothers in all cases observed, were in support of tuition classes, commending them as necessary and helpful for the child's success in education. Fathers, on the other hand, were less than enthusiastic given the drain on the family purse. According to one: "This is very interesting. They [teachers] do a half job at school but still get paid through our tax money. Then because they do a half job, we have to send our kids for tuition. There also they snatch our

money through fees. What to do? We continue to pay because we want our child to have a good education.” Another father of a school-going child shared: “I work in the army and earn LKR60,000 per month. I have four children and they all attend tuition classes. Tuition fees alone cost around LKR20,000 a month. We have to send them for tuition only because school teachers don’t do their job well. They want to somehow make sure that the students come for their tuition class. The authorities ought to ban tuition classes.” According to the Institute of Policy Studies in 2021, “students who belonged to family income levels below LKR 30,000 spend approximately LKR 3,000- Rs. 7,000 per month while students whose family income was above LKR 200,000 spend approximately LKR 18,000- LKR 20,000 per month on private tuition depending on the grade of the student” (cited in Perera 2022).

Students themselves have come to view tuition classes as essential for success at examinations, and report they prefer the tuition classroom to the school classroom because even the same teachers perform better there. Even those who reported they cannot afford private tuition shared that they borrow notes from their friends who do attend tuition classes.

Several experiences from the field site corroborated these charges: “I used to attend Sir’s [referring to a school teacher] tuition class initially, but then had to stop because of financial difficulties. He would speak to me very kindly in school, but then suddenly stopped speaking to me at all when I gave up attending the tuition class. He also stopped correcting my homework.” Several other parents who were interviewed shared similar experiences, with some also holding principals partially responsible for perpetuating the situation by asking those who were not happy with the practice to leave the school if they so wished.

The situation is particularly prevalent in Advanced Level (AL) classes, where the intense competitiveness of the examination has pushed students to resort more and more to tuition. “The Institute of Policy Studies and UNESCO have found that 65% of urban Sri Lankan households in 2016 used private tutoring. In rural areas, this number is 61%. When it comes to seeking university admission, the situation is worse. In a survey by The Sunday Times of 75 state university students, 84.9% said they attended tuition classes during A/Levels” (Alphonsus 2023).

State’s aggravation of situation

The State plays a decisive role in aggravating this situation. The slash in funding allocations for education, which among other things eats into any possibility of salary increments for teachers to meet rising living costs, is a key reason behind the emergence of tuition classes. Deprived of a reasonable income, teachers are pushed to find alternative ways, which over time morphs into a business proper once the profit incentive takes over. In the absence of any measures to address the root cause, tighter regulations will only apply pressure on the teachers who are more victims than perpetrators in this equation.

The most important commitment of the State at this point should be to channel less resources for private education, which can be better used to sustain the public education system. The recent LKR500 million grant of startup capital and a land grant of 25 acres for the fee-levying Sri Lanka Institute of Information Technology (SLIIT) is a case in point. Even though this is an example from tertiary education, the point is relevant to secondary education as well: the resources at the disposal of the State, if channelled to the public education system, can go a long way in expanding the reach of free education as well as making its providers more satisfied financially. Further, a transparent tax regime that does not exempt the highest earning categories from their dues will also contribute to generating the funds required to sustain - and in fact enhance - public services including education. One cannot help but think of the 40-year tax holiday given to the companies investing in the Colombo Port City under the Port City Development Act.

The ultimate cost of tuition classes becoming ever more pervasive is that the inequalities usually caused by privatisation are created and promoted through the system of public education itself, which is increasingly becoming un-free. The very same actors, and sometimes the very same infrastructure, are deployed to promote private education precisely through the public education system, further marginalising those who cannot afford to pay for education, making it a commodity.

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