



COMMONWEALTH *of* LEARNING

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INAUGURAL SPEECH

SCHOOL EDUCATORS: THE ARCHITECTS OF NATION-BUILDING

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TRAINING PROGRAMME FOR SRI LANKAN EDUCATION ADMINISTRATORS

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Dear Professor Shashikala Wanjari, Vice Chancellor of the National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration (NIEPA) and colleagues, Mrs Ishanthie Jayawardena of Ministry of Education, Sri Lanka; the Education Administrators of each of the nine provinces of Sri Lanka, my own colleagues from CEMCA. It is my honour and privilege to extend my warm welcome to one and all, especially to all my colleagues from Sri Lanka.

School Educators: The Architects of Nation-Building

School educators are the foundational architects of nation-building, shaping a country's future from its most vital resource: children. While politicians, economists, and engineers often take the spotlight for a country's development, it is the teachers who lay the very foundation upon which a strong, prosperous, and enlightened nation is built. They are the architects of the future, shaping the minds and characters of the next generation of citizens, leaders, and innovators. Their influence extends far beyond the four walls of a classroom, permeating every aspect of a society's progress and well-being.

Molding the Character of Future Citizens

One of the most profound roles of an educator is to instill a strong moral and ethical compass in their students. Beyond academic subjects, teachers impart timeless values such as integrity, empathy, responsibility, and respect for diversity. They create a nurturing environment where students learn to distinguish between right and wrong, to be compassionate towards others, and to become conscientious citizens who contribute positively to society. For example, a history teacher who facilitates a debate on civil rights isn't just teaching facts; they are teaching students how to engage with different viewpoints respectfully. A science teacher overseeing a group project on local pollution is teaching collaboration and civic responsibility. A nation's strength is ultimately a reflection of the character of its people, and it is the teachers who are at the forefront of this crucial character-building process.

Fostering Critical Thinking and Innovation

In today's rapidly evolving world, the ability to think critically, solve complex problems, and innovate is paramount for a nation's success. School educators play a pivotal role in nurturing these skills. They move students beyond rote memorisation by designing science experiments that test hypotheses, leading debates on historical events with no easy answers, or assigning real-world

problems that require mathematical and creative solutions. By fostering a culture of curiosity and inquiry, teachers empower students to become lifelong learners and creative thinkers who can drive a nation's intellectual and technological advancement. A well-educated citizenry, equipped with critical thinking skills, is the engine of progress and innovation.

Cultivating Social Cohesion and National Unity

In diverse nations, educators act as crucial agents of social cohesion and national integration. Schools are often the first place where children from various cultural, religious, and socio-economic backgrounds interact. Teachers have the unique opportunity to foster an environment of mutual respect, understanding, and appreciation for this diversity. By teaching students about their shared history, values, and aspirations, educators help to build a strong sense of national identity that transcends divisive forces. Just as they build critical thinking skills in individuals, educators also construct the bridges that form a cohesive society. They lay the groundwork for a harmonious and inclusive society where every citizen feels a sense of belonging.

Driving Economic Development

Education is the bedrock of a nation's economic prosperity, and teachers are the key drivers of this engine. By imparting knowledge and skills, educators create a competent and skilled workforce that can meet the demands of a modern economy. They equip students with the tools they need to secure gainful employment, contribute to economic productivity, and drive innovation. A nation's human capital is its most valuable asset, and it is the teachers who are entrusted with the responsibility of developing this resource.

Paving the Way for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The role of educators extends beyond national borders and is fundamental to achieving the global vision outlined in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). While SDG 4 (Quality Education) is their most direct mandate, educators act as powerful catalysts for nearly all 17 goals. It is through quality education that a nation can break the cycle of poverty (SDG 1), promote good health and well-being (SDG 3), and achieve gender equality by empowering girls (SDG 5). Furthermore, through Education for Sustainable Development, teachers equip students with knowledge and values to become responsible stewards of the planet. They foster awareness about climate action (SDG 13),

responsible consumption (SDG 12), and the importance of clean water and sanitation (SDG 6). By promoting principles of human rights, tolerance, and justice in the classroom, educators lay the groundwork for peaceful and inclusive societies (SDG 16). In essence, teachers cultivate a generation with the mindset and skills necessary to build a sustainable and equitable world for all.

The NEP 2020 Vision: Empowering the Architects in India

This vital role of educators is powerfully affirmed and codified in India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. This landmark policy places the teacher at the very heart of the fundamental reforms in the education system. The NEP's vision is to move education away from content-heavy rote learning and towards developing the "creative potential" and "critical thinking" of each student—directly empowering teachers to be the facilitators of innovation as described above.

The policy explicitly tasks educators with instilling "ethical, rational, compassionate, and caring" qualities in students, reinforcing their role in character-building. It emphasises an inclusive, multidisciplinary approach to create a unified and equitable society. Crucially, the NEP 2020 doesn't just outline these expectations; it provides a roadmap to empower teachers through continuous professional development, greater autonomy in pedagogy, and merit-based career progression. In doing so, it seeks to restore the high status of the teaching profession, ensuring that the architects of our nation are themselves supported and valued.

Central to executing such a grand vision is the National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration (NIEPA) in New Delhi. As a premier organisation and deemed to be University, NIEPA functions as the apex body and think tank for the Ministry of Education. It plays an indispensable role by undertaking research, promoting innovation, and providing crucial capacity-building programmes for educational administrators and planners from across the country. By developing planning methodologies, strengthening management information systems, and offering professional guidance, NIEPA provides the critical administrative backbone needed to translate the ambitious goals of policies like the NEP 2020 into effective, actionable strategies on the ground.

A Comparative Lens: Sri Lanka's Commendable Investment in Educational Leadership

This focus on empowering educational leaders is not unique to India. Neighbouring Sri Lanka offers another compelling model, with a highly commendable and strategic approach to strengthening its educational administration. The Sri Lankan government demonstrates a clear understanding that effective school leadership is the cornerstone of successful reform. This is not merely a policy statement but is backed by comprehensive and systemic action. The curriculum is impressively holistic, focusing on core competencies essential for the 21st century, including financial management, human resources, and, most importantly, transformational leadership.

School Management and Supervision: The Sri Lankan Perspective

The investment in training these leaders finds its true purpose in Sri Lanka's strong emphasis on School-Based Management (SBM). This approach represents a strategic shift from centralised control to a decentralised model that empowers educators at the local level. Initiatives like the Programme for School Improvement (PSI) have transformed the role of the principal from a mere administrator into a community leader.

Under this model, school principals, along with senior teachers, work collaboratively through School Development Committees (SDCs) that also include parents and community members. This structure places the responsibility for planning, supervision, and quality improvement directly in the hands of the school community. This empowerment allows for more responsive and effective school management, tailored to local needs. For nation-building, this approach is critical.

The Catalytic Role of CEMCA in Empowering Educators

Further amplifying these national efforts is the catalytic role played by regional bodies like the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia (CEMCA). As a regional centre for the Commonwealth of Learning, CEMCA has been instrumental in equipping educators and administrators across Commonwealth Asia, with a significant and praiseworthy focus on Sri Lanka. By collaborating directly with the Ministry of Education, the National Institute of Education (NIE), and the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL), Tertiary and Vocational Education Commission (TVEC), the National Youth Services Council (NYSC), CEMCA acts as a force multiplier for professional development.

CEMCA's initiatives are diverse and impactful, ranging from capacity-building workshops on inclusive education for students with specific learning disabilities, to training on the development and use of Open Educational Resources (OER) and technology-enabled learning. By providing expertise, promoting innovative pedagogical practices, greater understanding on the use of Artificial Intelligence and supporting the integration of educational technology, CEMCA empowers Sri Lankan educators to meet contemporary challenges. This partnership strengthens the ability of school administrators to implement reforms effectively, enhances the quality of teaching, and ensures that Sri Lanka's educational advancements are aligned with global best practices, thereby accelerating its journey of nation-building.

Sri Lanka's Legacy of Educational Achievement

Sri Lanka's current focus on strengthening its educational leaders builds upon a remarkable legacy of achievement, pioneered by visionaries like Dr. C.W.W. Kannangara, the celebrated 'Father of Free Education', and his key political ally, H.W. Amarasuriya. Together, their efforts on the Executive Committee of Education were instrumental in establishing the visionary Free Education Policy, which was established even before independence and made education accessible from primary to the university level. This long-standing commitment has yielded impressive results: Sri Lanka consistently maintains one of the highest adult literacy rates in Asia (over 92%); has achieved near-universal primary school enrollment, and has been exceptionally successful in ensuring gender parity in education, with girls' participation often exceeding boys' at secondary and tertiary levels.

This historical commitment to education, championed by figures like Kannangara and H.W. Amarasuriya, has built a strong foundation of human capital. Today, this legacy is continued by leaders like the current Prime Minister and Minister of Education, Dr. Harini Amarasuriya. Her background as a distinguished academic and a vocal advocate for educational funding signifies a continued, modern commitment to the foundational principle that education is a primary driver of development and social equity.

Sri Lankan Educators and the Pursuit of Sustainable Development

The historical commitment to universal education in Sri Lanka naturally aligns with the global vision of the Sustainable Development Goals. Sri Lankan

educators are central to achieving SDG 4 (Quality Education) by ensuring that the country not only maintains its high access rates but also enhances the quality and relevance of learning. Their work in implementing curriculum reforms, adopting modern pedagogical skills, and creating inclusive classrooms directly contributes to this goal. The national investment in training for administrators is critical for ensuring these quality standards are met across the system.

Moreover, the role of Sri Lankan educators extends to other SDGs. Their long-standing success in promoting female education has made them powerful agents for SDG 5 (Gender Equality). By imparting skills and fostering critical thinking, they contribute to SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). As they teach the values of tolerance, human rights, and social cohesion in a diverse society, they are actively building the foundation for SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). In this context, Sri Lankan educators are not just building their own nation but are also key participants in a global mission for a sustainable future.

Building Bridges: Indo-Lanka Educational Collaboration

Given the shared goals and mutual respect between the two nations, there is immense potential for Sri Lankan educators to benefit from exposure to India's vast and diverse education system, particularly in light of its recent reforms. Forging stronger collaborative ties would be invaluable. The necessary exposure could be facilitated through this programme, facilitated by NIEPA and CEMCA, in the following:

- **Policy and Administrative Dialogues:** Focusing on the large-scale implementation of policies like NEP 2020. This would allow Sri Lankan administrators to gain insights into managing a multi-layered federal education system, tackling challenges of diversity and scale, and driving top-down reforms.
- **Teacher and Administrator Exchange Programmes:** Structured visits for Sri Lankan education administrators to Indian institutions would provide practical, on-the-ground experience. Observing the functioning of different school models and interacting with their Indian counterparts would offer invaluable lessons in pedagogy, school leadership, and community engagement.

- Collaboration on Digital Infrastructure: India has made significant strides in educational technology with platforms like DIKSHA. Exposure to the architecture, content creation, and teacher training models behind such digital public infrastructure could provide a blueprint for Sri Lanka as it enhances its own Ed-Tech capabilities.

Such a partnership would not be one-way. India, in turn, can learn immensely from Sri Lanka's decades of success in achieving high literacy, gender parity, and effective school-based management. This exchange would strengthen regional leadership in education and accelerate the journey of both nations toward building vibrant knowledge societies.

The potential coming together of CEMCA and NIEPA to equip Sri Lankan education administrators represents a particularly powerful synergy. Such a collaboration would blend NIEPA's deep expertise in national-level educational planning and large-scale policy implementation with CEMCA's proven track record in regional capacity-building
