

Note to the reader

This document has been written by a student for the NSW Higher School Certificate (HSC) in 2005 as her "Personal Interest Project" (PIP) – a requirement for the HSC.

Whilst PIMD volunteers were interviewed by the student to obtain factual information, the assignment is entirely her own work and her conclusions and opinions are her own. PIMD presents this paper as the views of an individual, not the organisation. It is nevertheless encouraging to see the depth of appreciation of inequality in our world by one so young.

Education: A powerful tool



How does the
educational
environment in
Australia compare and
contrast with that
in Sri Lanka?

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	5
CHAPTER ONE: EDUCATION OVERVIEW.....	7
CHAPTER TWO: INTRODUCTION TO PRIMARY A AND THE VILLAGE SCHOOL.....	8
CHAPTER THREE: SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND OF STRATHFIELD AND THE VILLAGE SCHOOL	11
CHAPTER FOUR: DEEPER EXPLORATION OF PRIMARY A AND THE VILLAGE SCHOOL.....	12
CHAPTER FIVE: FUTURE DIRECTION	23
CONCLUSION.....	24

Introduction

Education in Australia: I can almost guarantee that you have found problems with some schools. Don't worry, so have I. However, there is a continuing thought in the back of my mind empathising with third world countries. They have a bare minimum of resources for education and also experience discrimination and violations of human rights. That definitely tops the list for inequality. I really wonder how they feel. Well, that's exactly what I want to find out through my Personal Interest Project. I want to prove to myself that we are lucky here down under by focusing on the educational environment. I want to compare an affluent and prosperous primary school in Australia with a poor school in Sri Lanka.

Through studying Society and Culture I have learnt about societies in Japan, India and Indonesia, allowing me to become aware of the different ways people live in our modern world. I have really enjoyed investigating cultures different from my own. I am also really interested in studying developing countries in order to discover the problems they face. I wanted my cross-cultural aspect to focus on different locations, so I therefore chose a developing nation such as Sri Lanka and our own developed nation, Australia. This has inspired my topic question for the Personal Interest Project:

How does the educational environment in Australia compare and contrast with that in Sri Lanka?

By researching education in two very different countries, I am focussing on the area of 'Equality and Difference' – a depth study in the HSC course. I am exploring the commonalities and differences in societies and cultures, focusing on education in Australia and education in Sri Lanka. By using the methodology of case study I am focussing on two specific primary schools: Primary

A, Strathfield, Australia AND a village school in Jffna, Sri Lanka. I specifically chose a prosperous school and a deprived school to express my concern about the inequalities experienced in our contemporary world.

I am hoping that my journey to complete the Personal Interest Project will allow me to further develop into a socially and culturally literate person. I trust that it will inspire me to treat others with justice and equity in my micro world and give me motivation to take a stand on the prejudice and social differentiation in my macro world.

Chapter One: Education Overview

To explore the equalities and inequalities existing in our global environment I am focusing on education. The importance of education to societies is crucial. The future of Australia, with a world-class education system, depends on the education the students receive today. The newly industrialised nation of Sri Lanka, like Australia, requires its children to be educated so they can adapt to their constant changing environment. Furthermore, Sri Lanka uses education as a tool to fashion stability and peace. I will begin by providing an overview of education in my two focus countries: Australia and Sri Lanka, which have been investigated through the methodology of secondary research.

Education is compulsory for all Australians from 6 to 15 years old and is funded by the government. In Australia, 68% of students attend government schools, where they are provided with a secular education. Other students attend non-government or private schools, which are usually religious and charge tuition fees. Through education in Australia students obtain skills, values, knowledge and understanding necessary for employment, lifelong learning, participation in society and a sense of identity. The Australian Government also caters to the educational needs of those with a lower socio-economic status, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, by developing policies to improve their attendance and completion rates.

In Sri Lanka education is free from kindergarten to university, and is compulsory for children between 5 and 13 years. Education in Sri Lanka is mainly run by the government and it is funded by the state. There are approximately 9790 government schools compared to 78 private or independent schools.

Many problems face the Sri Lankan educational system today. Inequality is evident as there is currently about 14% of children from 5-14 who do not attend school. Due to the civil war the government has diverted money to defence. The many problems within the educational system have resulted in change, with reforms made to the educational system in 1998. However, there has been continuity in the low standards of education in the Tamil dominated North-East compared to the south due to the conflict.

Australia's world-class education system cannot be easily compared to Sri Lanka's newly reformed education system. From this general overview we immediately notice the inequalities that exist in our modern world in terms of education. Even within Australia and Sri Lanka there are disparities in the education received. However, to explore the two educational systems in more detail I decided to carry out a case study, which will be discussed in the upcoming chapters.

Chapter Two: Introduction to Primary A and the village school

Primary A is an independent Catholic primary school, located in Strathfield, Australia. The school caters for girls from Kindergarten to Year 5 and boys from Kindergarten to Year 4. Approximately 475 students attend this large primary school. There are three classes in each grade, with approximately 26 students in each class. Primary A is part of a college comprising a preschool, a deaf children's school, the primary school, a middle school and a high school.

The village school is a primary school located in the Jaffna District in the North-East of Sri Lanka. The year groups catered for are grades 1 to 5. Approximately 100 students attend the village school, but it is always changing. As people have moved back to the village and are rebuilding their houses, the number of children attending the school has been increasing. The students are equally distributed amongst year groups. However, grades 1 and 2 are combined. Because the school is so small it does not have a hierarchy, as there is only a principal and five teachers. One teacher has limited training and is acting as a volunteer.

The village school was a prosperous school before the conflict that began in the early 1980's. This was because many of the village people of Tamil ethnicity travelled south and found government jobs. These jobs were well paid, and therefore some money was sent back to assist the village. However, discrimination was spreading rapidly through the south against the Tamils, and many of the government jobs were lost due to this social differentiation. This not only affected the village, but the school suffered as well. The arrival of war and conflict brought devastating effects to the village, which was almost completely destroyed by bombing. War caused the village people to flee their homes, leaving everything behind. Many of the children and elderly lost their lives, and bombing destroyed the school. The schoolyard was also mined. It was about three years ago that the ceasefire and peace negotiations commenced, demonstrating cooperation between the Sinhalese and Tamils. The school has been rebuilt due to funding from the European Commission and UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), and the schoolyard has been de-mined.

The government is mainly responsible for funding equipment and facilities at the village school. The Old Boys Association in London has funded some resources, including a computer. In addition, PIMD (Partners in Micro-Development) is providing two computers, curriculum and teacher training for ESL (English as a Second Language) and Computer Literacy for grades 1 and 2. It is

evident that non-government institutions are playing a large role in the developmental process of the village school and its surrounding village community.

The role of Partners in Micro-Development Inc. (PIMD)

I am mentioning PIMD as they are playing a large part in the development process of the village school and through the school, the community also. My research on The village school is based on the information I received from PIMD and its volunteers.

PIMD are a “non-profit, non-denominational, and non-political volunteer based associated of individuals” undertaking development projects overseas and in Australia to allow communities to realise their full potential and become “socially and economically sustainable”. Its stated aim is “To achieve excellence, provide equity and equality through a modernised system of education which will create a generation of humane citizens equipped to face the challenges of the 21st century” .

The program that is currently in progress in the village communities, such as the one studied, is used to advance the students to the level of their peers across the nation, in an attempt to bring about equality.

Overview of chapter

This brief introduction to the schools demonstrates some of the inequalities and disparities in education in the contemporary world. It illustrates that the history of the village community studied has really affected the school’s situation. It is important that we understand the societies and

cultures in which these schools are embedded to realise their financial situation. In the following chapter I will focus on the economies of each society.

Chapter Three: Socio-economic background of Strathfield and the village school

The economic situation surrounding each school has a large influence on its situation. Primary A is located in Strathfield. Strathfield has a diverse and vibrant community, containing differing beliefs, values and traditions. The average income for people living in Strathfield is quite high, with 37.8% of the population earning about \$500 to \$1500 each week, demonstrating Strathfield is of high socioeconomic status.

Sri Lanka is a traditional and largely agrarian society, although recently the country has turned towards industrialisation and modernisation. There are many different ethnic groups in Sri Lanka, including Sinhalese, Tamil and Moors. The official languages of Sri Lanka are Sinhala and Tamil. Farming is the main source of income for the village, through the selling of rice, tobacco, vegetables, fruit and cattle. In the North-East, 60% of the population are at the poverty level, including the village under study, where the average income is AUS\$1 (SLR70) a day. This can be compared to the national average of 25% poverty level. Children may come to school hungry and malnourished. Doctors and health services in the area are non-existent. This suggests that the children's health is not monitored and there are no vaccinations or immunisations. People are still rebuilding after the war, and as the information above implies, they are barely surviving.

The surrounding economy of each school reflects its financial situation. Primary A is located in an area of high socioeconomic status, and hence, the school is very prosperous. The village school is located in a poor village; therefore the school is lacking in proper resources. To explore other aspects of each school I compared the schools in terms of their values, syllabus and facilities, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter Four: Deeper exploration of Primary A and The village school

This chapter will give an idea of the commonalities and differences between the two schools, providing a further indication of the equalities and inequalities experienced in the world. The features I'm discussing are values, the syllabuses and facilities. I decided to explore the values of the school because they are what define a school and affect the identity of the students that attend the school. I chose to investigate the syllabuses to demonstrate what is taught to the students. I chose facilities because I knew that Primary A was prosperous and the village school was deprived of facilities, which would allow me to show clearly the inequalities in education in our world.

Values

Primary A lays great emphasis on good education and equality. The values of the school play a part in the development of the children's identity as it develops their moral values. Primary A has a number of values:

- Equity of education

- Social justice
- Meeting the academic needs of the students
- Meeting the individual needs of the students
- Quality of education

I also wanted to know how well the students and teachers at the school displayed these values in their everyday lives. Because the school is based on Christian values, an environment with a strong religious dimension is promoted. This is achieved through whole school celebrations and class prayer time. The school also does its best to ensure a supportive and equal community, and therefore, daily activities focus on the growth of the individual and respect for one another. Primary A also has a commitment to the wider community through outreach programs. These programs allow the students to become aware of social justice issues from the perspective of their own Christian/Catholic faith. The emphasis on quality of education at Primary A is reflected in the latest technology and excellent facilities provided by the school.

The village school's values are based on the national policy and value system. The values include:

- Equity in education, which is demonstrated through free education allowing more people to attend school.
- Quality of education that has been seen through curriculum reforms.

In addition, schools are expected to promote the students' ethical, moral and spiritual values.

It is apparent that both Primary A and the village school try to promote equality and cooperation within the school environment. We can clearly see that Primary A tries to bring about the best possible environment for the children. However, in regards to the village school, we notice social differentiation and inequality vis-à-vis other schools. Because the village community is of low

socioeconomic status, it is difficult to provide the students with a good education, even though this is a value that is important to the school.

Syllabus

All of the NSW Key Learning Areas are taught at Primary A. The subjects are English; Mathematics; Science and Technology; Human Society and its Environment (HSIE); Personal Development, Health and Physical Education (PDHPE); Creative Arts; Italian; Religious Education; Music.

In English the students learn about and use written language. The English language plays a key role in the social, emotional and intellectual development of the students, hence contributing to their own identity.

Mathematics allows the students to gain the ability to solve non-routine problems. Mathematics provides a precise and concise way to communicate because its symbolic nature can be recognised across cultures, allowing for social differences to be overcome.

Science and Technology gives students the opportunity to learn about man-made and natural environments. Students gain an understanding of the world and the factors that influence it. Students can contribute to the social, economic and environmental interests of the wider world, and therefore make a positive contribution for the future.

In Human Society and its Environment (HSIE) students learn about the way people interact with each other and also, their interaction with social, cultural and physical environments. Students learn

about societies and cultures, and how they interact with the environment where they are situated. Students develop an identity on a personal, community, national and global scale.

Personal Development, Health and Physical Education (PDHPE) allows students to practise an active, healthy and pleasing lifestyle. At Primary A, students must participate in sport at the school such as athletics and gymnastics.

In Creative Arts students discover and become involved with the many different forms of art, including dance, drama, music and visual arts. Students also gain respect for the many social and cultural groups that make up Australia, including those with different religions, beliefs and disabilities.

Languages other than English (LOTE) are taught so students not only learn languages, but they also learn about different cultures through these languages. LOTE allows students to gain an appreciation of other cultures, which is important in the multicultural society in which we live. At Primary A, Italian is offered to students in years 3 to 5.

In Sri Lanka the National Curriculum is what schools are expected to follow in delivering education to their students. The subjects in the Primary Curriculum are Mother Tongue; Mathematics; Religion; and Environmental Related Activities (ERA). The curriculum provides a broad range of subjects.

Most of the village community is Tamil; therefore the mother tongue for this school is Tamil. Teaching the children the mother tongue is important because Tamil has a rich culture and literary heritage. The Jaffna town library previously housed a lot of the heritage of the Tamil people.

However, this was destroyed by bombing during the civil war. This has brought about a greater need for continuity of their culture, heritage and tradition.

ERA is “a reflection of their [Sri Lankans’] beliefs, culture and values”. The values are based on Sri Lanka’s religions; for example, Hinduism refers to the cow as a sacred animal. Cows are known to wander down the main streets of Colombo (the capital city), which is shown in photo (1). ERA is also “a vehicle for teaching English”. This is most likely because the environment is a global issue, and hence, a global language is most suited to communicate a global issue.



Photo (1):
A main street in
Colombo, Sri Lanka.

In Religion students learn “less about dogma and more about how to live together in harmony with each other”. Religion is “cultural”, meaning that it will always be an integral part of the children’s life. Religion is where the children learn about their own religion. The village community is almost, or even totally, completely Hindu, and hence the religion taught at the school is Hinduism.

Teaching the children mathematics is beneficial to the village community. The community gains income through trade, and hence, they require the skill to perform fast mental mathematical calculations. Mathematics also assists the children to get into high schools and universities. It is very competitive for the students to get into university, and mathematics is greatly valued.

The village school offers English as a Second Language (ESL) and Computer Literacy for children in grades 1 and 2 which are based from the PIMD curriculum. Sri Lanka is becoming immersed by modernisation and globalisation, and hence, Computer Literacy allows children to acquire skills to function in the modern world when they are older, and to communicate with the global economy. It will also allow them to use their skills as a means of accessing information (educational resources). Computer Literacy is also used to enhance other educational areas. For example, computers are used to “create a learning environment in English”.

ESL (English as a Second Language) is necessary as knowledge of English will help the children at the village school understand and participate in the changing global economic issues and international business development in their future. The ESL program designed by PIMD for grades 1 and 2 will change the way students learn English, and give the students at The village school a more functional program to learn English, as it is only taught as oral English in grades 1 and 2. The teaching of English is furthermore used to assist the village community. It is beneficial for this generation of children to be able to speak English because as the economic situation of the country develops, the English language will be required more often for business. The Sri Lankan government has really made a drive for the use of the English language, recognising the importance of English to the modern world. The English language is also important because many university courses are only available in this language. The students will then be able to complete their courses and bring the skills they have learnt back to the community, evidently showing the urge for continuity of the Tamil culture. Their schooling is giving them the skills to “relate with the outside world and yet stay in their village and maintain their village culture”.

The syllabuses at Primary A and the village school both have a relationship with the surrounding societies and cultures. The subjects at the village school are taught to help students function in their

community. What is taught now at the village school will allow the students to assist their community and hence bring about its development and well being in the future. The syllabus at Primary A allows the students to study the different cultures within Australia. The NSW syllabus tries to promote equality and value of the Australian society and environment. By making such a comparison between these two schools we can realise the differences in the subjects the children are taught, and hence, the differences in their educational experiences. The subjects that are taught have an effect on the identity of these students, the way they think and their future lives.

Facilities

Primary A caters for the academic and sporting needs of the students through the facilities they provide. The facilities create a better learning atmosphere for the students, and it allows the Key Learning Areas to be taught in a satisfactory manner.

Primary A has three computers in every classroom. The school also contains a computer lab with thirteen computers, and a library with twelve more computers. The computers allow the students to have hands on experience that enables the students to use technology, which is a major part of each syllabus outcome. Other classroom equipment includes tubs, a bookshelf, tables, chairs, sinks, a whiteboard and a blackboard. The students can also watch videos that are played directly through the classroom television from the library. In addition, the school has outdoor play equipment, including balls and skipping ropes that the students can access during lunchtime or their sports lessons.

Primary A has many other facilities that are used by the students. These include outside play areas, access to a swimming pool, a hall, a library, seated areas with shade, an Italian classroom, a music

room, toilets and bubblers. The playground is also quite large, comprising many areas including a field, basketball courts, concrete and asphalt surfaces, and a soft ground cover on which play equipment is situated. The library provides the main resources used for teachers and students. The library consists of general book areas; a pit area for general browsing where children can come before and during school to either read or play games; and an audio-visual room. Services offered by the library include photocopying, scanning and laminating.

The parents of the school influence the purchase of equipment and facilities. This is because they expect a lot because it is a private school. Parents have lobbied for air conditioning and a canteen because they expect the school to have such facilities. However, it is surprising that the parents have not worried about the state of the classrooms, whereas this can be thought as a major problem because it affects the learning environment of the students.

The village school has “very little” and is “very basic”. This is obviously because of the low socioeconomic status of the school’s surrounding area. The school is deprived of little things such as glue, blue tack and cardboard. It has desks and chairs, although the infants building (for grades 1 and 2) does not have this equipment. It does have paper; pencils; pens; blackboards and chalk; a toilet; and a tape recorder. It also has a well rather than running water. To obtain water the students and teachers need to go to the well to collect the water. The government is meant to supply books to the school, but in some cases this school never receives these books. Hence, the school will be missing a workbook that relates to a particular subject. This decreases the quality of education the children receive. The village school also does not have photocopiers, so they cannot reproduce what is in a book and hand it out to the students. Hence, the majority of the time the teacher is writing what is in a book onto the blackboard and the children are copying this down. Three computers have been given to the school, including educational software (for ESL). This shows that the school

is being affected by modernisation. The community has provided the school with a secure room to store the computers (because the school has no security) and a generator to allow the computers to run.

The village school is a small school consisting of two buildings. In the last five years, it has been rebuilt by UNHCR. The school now has ceilings and concrete floors. One of the buildings in the school is the infant's classroom which is quite small. A corner of the infant's classroom is shown in



Photo (4):
Infants
classroom at
The village

photo (4).

The other building is a long hall, with no walls separating the classrooms. That means that grades 3, 4 and 5 are all together in the same room, but these classes are not necessarily composite. By observing photo (5) closely we can see that the school is quite small. The building with the sign is the long hall that I just mentioned.

Photo 5: The Village School



Source: Vaughan, D.

The playground is relatively small because the area at the back of the school is still fenced off due to landmines from the recent conflict. Photo (6) shows part of the playground area.

Photo 6: Playground area at Alaveddy



In a way, although the village school is very deprived, they are "fortunate compared to other schools in the area". The majority of primary schools in Sri Lanka do not have computers, so for

this village school to contain such resources is highly unusual. The school will be able to reach out to the wider community by allowing other schools' students in neighbouring villages to use the computers. This shows that the school is trying to bring about equality by sharing resources.

There are many problems due to the lack of facilities and equipment at the village school, which prevent students from learning to their full potential. Fewer facilities could lead to dropout rates; therefore children are not giving anything back to their community because they are undereducated. Because of the lack of facilities, parents may decide not to send their children to school at all, which is a concern. The PIMD program is very important as it tries to encourage students to stay at school through the computers and ESL, bringing about an improvement in their education.

The above comparison of the two schools' facilities shows the inequalities in education. Primary A has outstanding facilities that provide its students with a first-class education. However, the village school has a bare minimum of resources. As a Sri Lankan school, it is really lucky to have three computers, and yet Primary A has three computers in every classroom. This one example shows the huge gap between schooling in two different countries, a clear illustration of the inequalities experienced in the world today.

Overview of chapter

This chapter has demonstrated that similarities do exist between both Primary A and the village school, especially in regards to values. Both schools try to promote equality in the educational environment, and they do this by integrating it into the syllabus. Due to the ongoing ethnic conflict in the north of Sri Lanka, it is necessary to integrate social harmony into the children's education so they can gather an idea of humane values, and therefore bring about peace. For Primary A, social

justice is integrated into the curriculum in as many subjects as possible, as it is a value of the school and should be instilled into the children to allow them to practise equality in their micro and macro worlds.

Unfortunately, the inequalities in our world are really evident in this chapter, in particular through the facilities. It is obvious that the surrounding environments of both schools have a direct influence on the school itself. The area surrounding Primary A is wealthy, and hence, the school is prosperous. The village school, on the other hand, is surrounded by a traditional, poverty-stricken society that is only beginning to change and modernise after the war. Hence, the school is poor and does not have up-to-date facilities.

I have now compared both schools, but it is always necessary to look at the future of these schools. Where will they be in years to come? Is the village school ever going to be as good as Primary A is today? My next chapter will look at and discuss the possible futures of both schools.

Chapter Five: Future Direction

The Australian Bureau of Statistics has recently released statistics implying that the birth rate in Australia is rising. Last year the number of babies per woman was 1.77, but it is predicted that in 2005 this figure will rise to 1.8. In addition, the percentage of students attending non-government schools is steadily increasing, rising from 22% in 1980 to 31% in 2000. These statistics show that more children are attending non-government schools. Overall, Primary A could possibly grow in student numbers. This may cause it to expand and grow into a larger school.

The birth rate in Sri Lanka is currently at about 1.56%. Births in the Jaffna District in 2002 totalled at 8744, a dramatic decrease from the 12515 births in 1993. Hence, we can presume that this decline in birth rates will continue into the future. This may have a direct effect on the village school. Fewer children could mean fewer schools required or downsizing of schools. Possibly the school may lose student numbers, but because it is a local school it is most unlikely that it will shut down. In addition, the number of people returning to the village after the war is increasing, which may increase student numbers. Also, because of the school's redevelopment, it is unlikely that people would lose interest in this school. The school may do well in the future, because it is already more advantaged than other schools in the area due to the support it receives from non-government organisations.

In regards to the war, there has been a three to four year ceasefire in the area. Hence, it is unlikely that the internal conflict will resume. This will create stability within the community, and allow it to develop and grow.

It is evident that both schools will grow and develop further in the future. Perhaps we can imagine a more noticeable development in the village school because there is much more room to improve.

Conclusion

Australia is our lucky country – we do not experience war and immense poverty. I look at our society and think “Are we selfish?” We are so immersed with our own lives that we take for granted small things that people in other parts of the world do not have. After studying education in Sri Lanka, and the disadvantages the students have to contend with, I cannot believe that some people

in Australia do not appreciate their education. They should be thankful that they do not have to experience the inadequate education that is provided in other countries.

My research allowed me to venture into the heart of a country foreign to me. I found Sri Lanka a fascinating country to study because it is so different to Australia. For example, despite recent conflict in the North East, the children of the village studied are able to receive an education. By learning about Sri Lanka I feel I have expanded my horizons, through gaining an understanding of how the school got into its economic situation, and why inequality does exist.

The knowledge I have gained from the completion of my PIP is immense. For example, it never occurred to me that the socioeconomic status of a school's surrounding area could affect its resources. Knowing that resources enhance education, we realise that the society in which the school is embedded has a direct influence on the education received. I feel that my PIP has also brought me to an understanding of the equalities and inequalities existing in our world. Through the differences in resources between two schools, I learnt about real inequalities. However, on a local scale I saw equality within the schools and their communities. The syllabuses, for example, promote equality and social justice. Both schools also cooperate and work with their surrounding communities. I believe the promotion of such values is necessary in a world marred by injustice and inequality, so children can bring these values into the macro world.