

# Can aspiration kill local community? Challenges for young people and career practitioners in Sri Lanka

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**Raising** aspiration is a primary focus of careers work. However, in some circumstances enhanced aspirations may create tensions in situations of limited accessible opportunity. Additionally focusing on the autonomy of the individual and their choice can impact more broadly on the local community. This article will explore the importance of locating career guidance in context, specifically in reference to some of the issues facing career practitioners working in Sri Lanka. These practitioners seek to inspire young people to a range of careers whilst remaining conscious of the individual and local impacts that may result. It will consider the concept of 'foundation' which encompasses the physical, social, religious and spiritual, cultural and political environment and the role this might play in providing a holistic model for career guidance.



## Introduction

Career Guidance can be seen as a 'public good' which supports the achievement of labour market, education and social policy goals (Watts and Sultana, 2004) by enabling individuals to take control of their education and employment. However, it is possible to question whether career guidance is always a public good? Are there situations in which career guidance provided to support social mobility, raise aspiration and encourage enhanced education levels can have a negative impact not by design but by default? Career guidance is often constructed as a liberal, non-directive process which values the rights of the individual when making decisions concerning their career choices and their lives (Watts, 1996). However, there are questions as to whether this conception of career guidance is

essentially a Western one which might need to be reframed for other cultures.

This paper examines some of the ethical issues, which can impact on careers practitioners working in developing economies, in this case Sri Lanka where insecure job prospects and unstable futures for traditional agrarian industries may constrict opportunity without curtailing aspiration. It explores some of the tensions that may exist for practitioners when trying to balance the needs of the individual against the wider needs of local and national society. It considers the need for models of career guidance that are localised and culturally specific. The paper is based on discussions with Sri Lankan practitioners during a training programme that was delivered as part of a wider education project.<sup>1</sup>

## Career guidance services in Sri Lanka

Career guidance and counselling programmes have been part of national education policy reforms in Sri Lanka since the mid 1990's (Balasuriya and Hughes, 2003). The overall aim of these have been to address the disparity between labour market needs and the outputs from education and training systems. The ongoing commitment to supporting the establishment of an effective school to work system is acknowledged in a number of Sri Lankan reports and policy documents including the: Sri Lanka Country Assistance

<sup>1</sup> The author was part of a team of consultants working on the Knowledge for Education Society project in Sri Lanka in 2011 supporting the development of career guidance provision in schools.

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Program Evaluation: Education (ADB, 2007); National Policy Framework on Higher Education and Technical and Vocational Education (NEC, 2009); and the National Policy on Career Guidance in Schools (NEC, 2010). The research for this article was undertaken as part of The Education for Knowledge Society Project (Package 2). This was a multi-strand education project aimed at addressing the skills gap between education and the labour market which included career guidance as a major strand of the development work.

In Sri Lanka responsibility for career guidance and counselling is devolved to different government ministries and departments. These result in differentiated approaches to the delivery of careers work within the country as follows.

- Ministry of Education provides career guidance through career guidance teachers in schools and career guidance officers located in Zonal Teacher Centres.
- Ministry of Youth Affairs and Skills Development provides career guidance officers who are deployed through the National Apprenticeship and Industrial Training Authority (NAITA), the Department for Technical Education and Training (DTET) and the Vocational Training Authority (VTA).
- Ministry of Higher Education oversees University Careers Services which provide careers support for graduates.
- Ministry of Productivity Promotion provides career guidance, employability programmes and vacancy information through the Department of Manpower and Employment.

In addition to these state funded providers career guidance is also available through a range of specialist projects funded by organisations such as the International Labour Organisation (ILO), National Youth Services Council, Ceylon Chamber of Commerce and Young Entrepreneurs Sri Lanka.

This presents a fragmented landscape, whereby young people in particular, can access career guidance through a number of different avenues, but each has a specific remit. In addition to this, the lack of national

coordination can result in a lack of consistency, quality and expertise as all ministries employ their own approach to recruitment, training and development. There has to date, been limited standardisation and this potentially creates a lack of coherence for the end user as there is no identified benchmark as to minimum levels of training and qualifications for practitioners.

## The Sri Lankan youth labour market

In 2010 The World Bank produced *The challenge of youth employment in Sri Lanka* report which highlighted that although Sri Lanka had a well educated population, young people struggled to get good jobs (Gunatilka et al., 2010). The report describes 'good jobs' as those that are secure, well paid and offer high social status.

Over 66% of the employed workforce in Sri Lanka are employed within the 'informal labour market' (Gunatilka and Vadopivec, 2010). Defining 'informal work' is somewhat complex; the definition presented by Hussmanns (2001) considers the informal sector as enterprises that are not registered under specific forms of national legislation such as tax, social security or professional association regulations. Often this includes those who are self-employed, work in domestic work or work for micro-employers with less than five employees. The informal sector therefore represents the antithesis of the 'good job' where workers experience security in terms of work benefits and career prospects. Over one third of the informal workforce in Sri Lanka are young people (Gunatilka and Vadopivec, 2010).

This duality of the labour market in Sri Lanka has been highly influenced by employment protection legislation (The Termination of Employment of Workmen Act, 1971). Gunatilka and Vadopivec, (2010) argue that Sri Lanka has one of the most expensive and restrictive severance packages in the world, whereby employers incur large firing costs and experience complex dismissal procedures. This results in limited staff turnover and a strong informal labour market which potentially impacts on the speed in which employers create jobs especially in times of economic insecurity.

There are many and varied reasons contributing to the poor employability of young people in Sri Lanka (Balasuriya and Hughes, 2002; Kularatne, 2010; Gunatilka et al., 2010). Kularatne (2010) identifies a strong desire amongst educated young people to work in the public sector with only 19% of those interviewed willing to consider the private sector as an employer. Kularatne's participants also sought high prestige jobs and an above average salary of over 30,000 rupees a month when the median monthly household income was just over 24,000 rupees (Office for Census and Statistics, 2011). Gunatilka et al. (2010) suggest three contributors to high levels of unemployment amongst young people; (i) skills mismatch, (ii) queuing for better opportunities and (iii) slow job creation.

Geography is a major issue within the Sri Lankan labour market as unemployment is not consistent across the island. Some provinces particularly the Southern and Eastern have significantly higher unemployment rates when compared with the Western province, which is the location of the capital and produces 50% of the country's GDP (Chandraisiri, 2010). There is also a significant variation in access to training opportunities, which somewhat correlates with the provincial unemployment rates. There is for example a concentration of training programmes in Western Province, which also boasts the lowest youth unemployment rate (Chandraisiri, 2010).

Unemployment has been a major contributor to the instability of the country both in terms of the realisation of financial investments but also as a catalyst for social unrest. The contribution of youth unemployment to the civil war has been documented by Amarasuriya, Gündüz and Mayer (2009) as has the lack of opportunities for minority groups within the secure public sector labour market. The twenty-five year conflict was in part attributed to the exclusion of the Tamil community from public sector employment opportunities (Gunewardena, 2010).

Unemployment in Sri Lanka, although dropping nationally, is increasing for young people aged 15-24 at 19.4% overall (24.7% for young women) (ILO, 2013). The ILO (2010) argues that young people in South Asia need to be able to develop the right skills sets to enable them to compete in a rapidly

changing employment market. In Sri Lanka young people experience significant barriers in terms of an insecure job market, slow job creation, unrealistic career aspirations, migration opportunities and a lack of vocational qualifications and skills. Some of the issues are systemic such as the mismatch between education and the labour market, others however can be addressed with support in navigating the transition between education and the labour market.

## The (policy) need for career guidance in Sri Lanka

Given this complex and challenging youth labour market there is a belief that much more can be done within the education system to better prepare young people to manage the transitions at the end of statutory schooling. It is felt that many young people and their parents are too focused on academic opportunities. Consequently a high percentage of young people are disappointed with only 16% being eligible for admission (figure for 2009) and only 4% actually entering traditional degree programmes in Sri Lanka. This then requires students to seek university places overseas (Sri Lanka Sunday Times, 2009) and adds an additional level of elitism to university education in Sri Lanka. Young people with higher education fare little better than their low skilled counterparts in the job market and often experience higher levels of unemployment than those with fewer qualifications (ILO, 2013).

There is an imbalance between the demands by young people for higher levels of education and qualification and the opportunities available in the labour market. This often results in overseas migration (Arunatilake and Jayawardena, 2010). Balasuriya and Hughes, (2003) identify a key need to change attitudes and perceptions of vocational education and training in particular as young people and their parents are often reluctant to consider this as a preferred choice. Allied with this is the need to more effectively promote parity between vocational and academic qualifications and progression opportunities at tertiary level for those from a vocational and training background.

Kularatne's (2010) research presents a challenging picture for policy makers where young people's

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expectations of work often lack realism. Many young people aim for their ideal work scenario with little comprehension of the need for compromise. Much of this is due to a lack of awareness on their part of what opportunities are realistically open to them. Parents who lack the knowledge and skills to effectively guide their children to make realistic and attainable careers choices reinforce this leading to many valid career opportunities being dismissed through ignorance. Careers guidance has been positioned to challenge these entrenched views and to try and establish a more seamless approach to labour market alignment (Balasuriya and Hughes, 2003). However, questions remain as to how effectively a Western concept of career guidance is pertinent within a Sri Lankan context.

## Career guidance in context

Career guidance for young people remains a relatively recent activity in Sri Lanka. For practitioners the challenges lie in how to support young people to explore their career options when the choices may be limited. The options for many, particularly for those who are poorly skilled and come from disadvantaged backgrounds are to move to cities to work in the insecure informal sector. The alternative is overseas migration to the Middle East on fixed-term contracts often for 3-5 years. Overseas migration is dominated by low skilled females with 49% employed as housemaids (Abeyasekera, 2010).

The provision of career guidance therefore is a complex activity which needs to be cognisant of the systemic issues such as unemployment and inequality while also supporting young people to aspire to achieve their potential. The local context is important as practitioners need to understand the factors and influences that contribute to the totality of the individual. Law's (2009) work on community interaction theory can be usefully employed here as it highlights the way in which career management is influenced by those whose opinions are most valued and explores the interaction between what Law refers to as 'big-picture social issues' and individual inner life.

Locating careers guidance within the context that the young person inhabits requires practitioners to engage

with the influences that may impact on the choices of the young person. Practitioners in Sri Lanka termed this as the 'foundation'. They saw this as a multilayered concept within which a range of economic, political, environmental, geographical, cultural and spiritual factors needed to be considered. These 'foundation' factors combined to shape the individuals' worldview. The practitioner needed to be able to decipher this 'foundation' to understand the individual's specific context and what the primary influences may be. If an individual has few political affiliations, social connections or low economic status for example, then job opportunities in the public sector might prove a challenge.

The geographical location has a significant impact as this may impact on the type of vocational training which may be available and on opportunities in terms of dominant industries are prevalent, for example around the coast fishing has been a dominant industry while in the midlands and south the tea plantations have provided the primary employment, predominantly for women. In the more northern areas rubber and paddy offer local communities their main income. Consideration and exploration of these elements support the delivery of guidance in a way that is meaningful and personal to the individual.

Raising young people's awareness of career and learning opportunities outside of the locale was perceived by some careers practitioners as potentially detrimental to both the individual and the local community. The rationale for this concerned large scale migration resulting in limited labour to meet the local requirements, and the insecurity of the informal labour market elsewhere. Additionally those young people who will only seek secure public sector positions will often queue and wait for opportunities to become available rather than explore other opportunities in the private sector (Gunatilka, 2010). The ethical dilemma for a practitioner therefore was twofold; raising and supporting aspiration but acknowledging the limitations of the opportunities that may exist and the potential impact on traditional and local community.

Within some of the rural settings many of the job opportunities will be low skilled physical work, which may have limited attraction for young people. Yet they

are synonymous with the local identity whether it is tea, rice, rubber, fishing or other indigenous trades. When these are compared with opportunities in the large cities or overseas which may pay higher wages, local opportunities may lack appeal and lead to migration which can have a detrimental result on local and traditional livelihoods. This has been particularly an issue in some regions that have experienced rural-urban migration, often as a way of supplementing family income (Ratnam, 2011).

There is also the struggle to challenge entrenched individual and family beliefs about what is a 'good job' and to reframe new opportunities such as vocational education as an option. Sri Lanka has invested extensively in developing vocational qualifications and training at all level including the University of Vocational Technology (UNIVOTEC). Vocational qualifications and skills development however, have yet to become the dominant, or industry preferred, method for skill acquisition (NEC, 2009). Vocational opportunities need to be more widely promoted if young people are going to have access to new and evolving opportunities as they develop. Vocational education could therefore provide help to address the mismatch in the job market between what education produces and what employers want. Careers practitioners therefore have a key role in helping to shape these messages, with vocational education potentially offering wider access to career options. However, there is still work to be done in providing equality of access to training opportunities across the island.

Ratnam (2011) considers the role of guidance in helping the client to explore the nature of their motivations and in challenging existing notions of mainstream corporate careers and the quest for modernity. She suggests that career guidance can help to question these views, through challenging inequality and oppression. She argues that individuals should be supported to embrace traditional career choices and see them as modern careers through developments in technology and investment in vocational education and training. This suggests that there does not need to be an either or choice in terms of moving to a city/overseas or staying local. Vocational education and training opportunities can both enhance skills levels in a way that is more meaningful for employers, support

the development and modernisation of local industry and provide equal access to young people at all educational levels. Career guidance can have a key role in helping to achieve these objectives.

## Conclusions

Career guidance has an important role in helping to shape the future for the youth of Sri Lanka. It can support young people to navigate their way between statutory schooling and work and contribute to ensuring that young people have the skills and knowledge that will make them employable, through a greater engagement with vocational education and training. The concept of 'foundation' can help to locate these discussions by providing a focus which allows the individual and the wider community issues to be considered. This may help young people to think more broadly about the choices and the barriers they face. A broader engagement with vocational education and the private sector may go some way to creating a better labour market fit and a more equitable society, but this needs to be addressed through acknowledgement of the needs of the local and national community. However, to successfully achieve this will require some re-education of both young people and their parents to enable them to retain aspiration, but aspiration that is realistically informed.



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