"*Kolambata Kiri, Apata Kekiri*"[1] : Neoliberalism and the 1981 Education Reforms

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Education remains a key ground in the ideological hegemony of neoliberalism. Although neoliberal policies targeted the field of education from the 1980s, such policies were met with mixed results. For example, David Harvey points to the way Margaret Thatcher failed to neoliberalize the higher education system in Britain, and that only in 2003 did "a Labour government, against widespread opposition, succeed in introducing a fee-paying structure into British higher education" (Harvey 2005, p. 61). When sweeping reforms that affect important welfare available to vulnerable parts of society are introduced, they are often met with resistance, leading to piecemeal reforms with distinct local variations. A useful case study of the above phenomenon is the attempt made by the United National Party (UNP) government in 1981 that attempted to introduce reforms to the education system in Sri Lanka through a White Paper proposed to the parliament. The proposals were subsequently withdrawn although many of them were implemented gradually later. The proposals emerged in a very particular context. A decade before, Sri Lankan youth of predominantly Sinhala-speaking areas led by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) staged a failed insurrection and, as I discuss in this article, it was seen as a response of a highly educated group of youths responding to the lack of commensurate employment available to them. Moreover, another reform in the selection criteria for universities called the Language Standardization Process, introduced in 1972, was met with resistance on the part of Tamil youths.[2] Educational access had clear political implications for any government in power. Furthermore, some of the reforms proposed in the White Paper were the target of the resistance of the 1987-89 JVP insurrection, with school children and university students across the country rallying against its key proposals (J. de Silva 1998a). The spirit of this resistance is encapsulated in the slogan used by schoolchildren at the time: "*Kolambata kiri, apata kekiri*" (Milk for Colombo, Melon for Us).[3] Pointing to the perceived differentiated treatment of rural and urban children, the slogan depicts the way education is a key ground for the working out of class antagonisms that are central to continuing political debates in the country. Given the current interest in educational policy and privatizing education, it would be analytically productive and historically relevant to revisit this moment.

In this brief analysis of the document titled 'The White Papers: Education Reform Proposals' of 1981, I make two key arguments: Firstly, I argue that the 'mismatch' between education and employment that is often blamed for the crisis in education is sustained by a deeper class antagonism that the reforms try to manage and redistribute. Secondly, I argue that the proposed reforms mobilize policy and ideology to strengthen the discourse that the 'crisis' in education and employment springs from youth 'dissatisfaction' — a discourse that turns a class-related crisis into one about expectations, affects, and personal failure. I draw on the ideas of Newton Gunasinghe and Jayadeva Uyangoda to delineate the way class intersects with education and employment to make my argument. Wendy Brown's argument that the political ethos of neo-liberalization relies on a discourse of responsibilization and devolution is employed as the theoretical tool to analyze the ideological thrust of the proposed reforms. Following Gunasinghe, I argue that the reforms manage and redistribute a real class antagonism that existed within the school system, tertiary education, and employment. Because I am examining the way the reforms attempted to manage class antagonisms, I have chosen to occlude the analysis of how the reforms reshaped other axes of power, particularly racial and gender identity for the

time being. The consideration of how these intersect with class would warrant a much longer study than the present article allows.

Background to the 1981 Proposed Education Reforms

Several analysts of the 1971 insurrection have pointed to the way it was a manifestation of the disillusionment of educated youths who were the beneficiaries of the Kannangara education reforms (Kearney 1975; Obeysekere 1974; Little and Hettige 2013) that introduced a national education system that was non-fee-levying. The reforms led to a leveling of education opportunities for children of all classes. Although there were still a few elite private schools in the country, the reforms led to a mass expansion of the national school system. In addition, the Kannangara reforms also turned the medium of instruction in schools and universities to vernacular languages, thereby expanding educational opportunities to children who did not come from English-speaking family backgrounds. Statistics from the decades between 1945-1970 show a promising picture of educational equality in the country. This picture of greater equality in education was, however, overshadowed by a deeper inequality within the education system: The vast majority of university entrants came from rural areas and were concentrated in the Arts stream. In contrast, those who entered the university to follow science, medicine, and related subjects came from 21 private, fee-levying schools and 152 government schools that had classes in the science stream (Kearney 1975, p. 734). Thus, the majority of university students were being trained in fields that had fewer career prospects and "the curricula leading to the greatest prospects of employment and the most rewarding and prestigious careers remained largely closed to them" (Kearney 1975, p. 735). This sinister shadow division within free education would have a lasting impact in the way educated youths will be divided along class and language lines. When the 1971 insurrection occurred, it is hardly surprising that it was seen as a response to the lack of opportunities for educated youth to find employment that would provide them with concrete upward mobility in society. Little et al (2013) for example, call the education system of Sri Lanka in the 1970s a "victim of its own success" (p. 36). Kearney (1975) is representative of this view when he argues that, "the pace of the educational expansion, coupled with sluggish economic growth, led to staggering levels of unemployment for educated youths and an abrupt shattering of the new expectations" (Kearney 1975, p. 728). This view had a lasting impact on the way education reform was perceived since the 1970s and the subsequent reforms in education.

When the 1971 insurrection occurred, an Education Review Committee appointed by the 1970s coalition government was considering reforms particularly in the examination system of the country:

> The education system was judged to be over-dependent upon examinations and diplomas, failing to develop skills necessary for economic development divorced from the world of work, and had pushed too many young people into a search for white-collar employment" (Little and Hettige 2013, p. 36).

Thus, this commission was the first to propose vocationalizing[4] the education system. But the insurrection brought to the fore other structural imbalances within the social system that impeded employment: "The JVP's opposition to current education policy was less to do with the type of education available to rural children and more to do with the continuing monopoly on high-status educational and occupational opportunity by the English-educated elite" (ibid). Following the insurrection, deeper reforms were introduced that called the GCE O/L and A/L examinations "pre-vocational studies" introducing science, mathematics, and social studies study programmes for all students "rather than only the minority who had followed them through the more specialized single subjects . . . "(ibid, p. 37). This trend towards vocationalizing the school curriculum became the central theme of the 1981 reforms a decade later.

A first experiment in vocationalizing and professionalizing education bears mention here because it highlights the difference between the way the vocationalizing of education was perceived in the 1970s and the 1980s. In an attempt to alleviate graduate unemployment, six 'job-oriented' courses were introduced to three universities in the mid-1970s (Sanyal et al 1983, p. 151-156). Apart from its ill-execution, and ultimate failure to produce the outcomes it originally promised, it is also worth noting that these degree courses were perceived as contributing to the development of the national economy rather than preparing students for private sector employment. They were, as Sanyal et al put it, driven by an "interest in making education meaningful for Sri Lanka's developmental needs" (ibid, p. 150). This rhetoric of national development stands in stark contrast to the subsequent idea that education should meet the employment needs of the private sector that would dominate discussions on education since the 1980s.

This early experiment and its failure illustrate that even up to the early 1980s, employment was considered the responsibility of the state, and there appeared to be an understanding that the private sector was disinclined to employ graduates (ibid, p. 191). Even as late as 1983, when the research by Sanyal was published, there was a tangible sense that graduates (particularly Arts graduates) are not a pool of candidates that would typically interest the private sector. With the 1981 reforms however, this dominant idea began to shift. The reform proposals underscore a greater sense that students should be educated to survive in the employment market through the refashioning of themselves to meet the needs of a highly selective private sector employment structure. The 1981 reforms, with its industry-oriented rhetoric, is an important early moment of this ideological shift that privileged the idea that personality development would lead to private sector employment, rather than the prior emphasis on state-led education and employment re-planning.

The UNP's election platform for the 1977 general election highlighted this individualist thrust of education. The election manifesto of the United National Party promised an education system that would ensure educational equality through the development of the education system in keeping with its promise to be both democratic and socialist (Party, "UNP's Specific Promises and Proposals"1982, p. 66). But overall, the party ran on a platform of individual development and rejected a "socialism that liquidates the individual effort and transfers the ownership and management of all productive activity to the Government and not to the people" (ibid, p. 67). In hindsight, the neoliberal tenor of this promise is unmistakable. The party promised an education system that would ensure parental participation in the educational process, promote individual 'personality' development, improve the quality of the teaching profession, extend educational facilities to rural schools, establish professional and vocational education, and restructure and expand university education (ibid, p. 67). Like previous discussions on educational reform, the 1981 reforms identified employability and over reliance on book knowledge as key problems of the education system. However, these proposals privileged the relevance to employer demands over national development. As a result, the 1981 reforms were anchored to the reorganization of the structure of the school system as well as its orientation. Therefore, there is a need for more analysis of how these proposals for educational reform reflected the specifically class character that lay at the heart of the larger crisis of education. It is to this that I now shift my attention.

Education Reforms and the 'Paradox of Success'

In his discussion of the Agrarian reforms of 1972, Newton Gunasinghe suggests that the rural petit bourgeoisie class was at the center of the political crisis that was manifested through the 1971 insurrection. His characterization of this class is informative for the way it reflects how the political hegemony as well as the class aspirations of the rural petit bourgeoisie were tied to education: "They acquired their specific class position through a process of *acquiring skills*, which made them into school teachers, ayurvedic physicians, and lower-level monks primarily belonging to non-aristocratic sects . . ." (1996, p. 59, my emphasis).

Gunasinghe calls this class that was, although rural, not "an agrarian class in essence" (ibid). Thus, the rural petit bourgeoisie is the class that is significantly invested in equal access to education and dehegemonizing the cultural and economic power of the urban, English-speaking "dependent bourgeoisie" (ibid). Any reform, therefore, would have to account for the aspirations of the rural petit bourgeoisie class, and address the cultural clash between these two classes.

Jayadeva Uyangoda too identifies the petit bourgeoisie as a class whose aspirations were energized by the educational opportunities offered by the free education system, without an attendant opportunity for actual upward social mobility (Uyangoda 2003, p. 48-49). He describes education as a "one-way ticket" (ibid, p. 49) that raises an educated youth above his/her immediate class position, but does not provide employment opportunities that would help sustain that new class position. He describes the system as a "blind alley" (ibid) encapsulated in the term "*pavathina kramaye veredda*" (ibid) i.e. the shortcomings of the existing system. Unlike Gunasinghe, however, Uyangoda does not restrict the problem to the youth of the rural petit bourgeoisie, but the petty bourgeoisie of both rural and urban origin. Moreover, for Uyangoda, the "incomplete emancipation" (p. 51) offered by free education reforms in the country are linked to the JVP's political rhetoric and rationale: "It is a particular state of mind – social despair and anger—generated by this logic of partial social emancipation, which the JVP represents in an idiom of anti-systemic aesthetics" (ibid). Unlike Gunasinghe, Uyangoda is attentive to the affective content and the rhetorical aesthetic of political discourse. I will return to this point in my discussion of the 1981 education reforms' tendency to attack this despair by offering another kind of political ethos. In any case, both Gunasinghe and Uyangoda clearly demonstrate that the political implications of education reforms are significant, since it could lead to important class

redistributions. Alternatively, their work also suggests that the hindering of such distribution can quickly lead to dissatisfaction with the entire social system. In other words, the Kannangara reforms embedded education within the composition and shifts of the class structure in Sri Lanka in an enduring paradox discussed above. In order to discuss how the reforms need to be framed within this class antagonism, I now turn to the ideology of neoliberalism, and how traces of it can be found in the way policy is articulated.

The Ethos of Neoliberal Thought

Wendy Brown (2016) has pointed to the way neoliberalism reproduces all subjects as human capital, turning everyone into a "speck of capital" (p. 3) investing in the self as a firm would invest in its business. The key processes she identifies as the neoliberal means of shifting social and political responsibility towards the individual are responsibilization and devolution. Responsibilization involves making individuals responsible for their social and economic improvement. Devolution involves shifting the responsibility of organizing social and economic life into smaller units, who often do not have real economic or political power to make any significant changes. Together, then, neoliberalism involves shifting the responsibility of social development towards individuals and smaller organizations/ groups onto whom power is devolved. She points to how social life is cast in a corporate language, often involving terms such as 'excellence' that firmly resituates public life within the ideological structure of the business world. This discourse of responsibilization and devolution is undergirded by the fragmentation of society and breaking up of any attempt to build the kind of solidarity that can lead to collective representation. Individuals are increasingly isolated within a system of thought that attributes failure to individual weaknesses and personal incapacity. The ideological power of this neoliberal ethos that shifts social responsibility and democratic sharing of power to individual capacity is key to understanding the way education is neoliberalized in the contemporary world.

The 1981 Educational Reform Proposals

The proposed 1981 education reforms identified four key problems in the education system: The disparity among government schools leading to intense competition between them; the over-competitive atmosphere within schools and the resulting exams-oriented nature of education underemphasizing extra-curricular activities; the over-reliance on written examinations; and the inefficiency within the teaching service (Ministry of Education 1981, p. i-ii). In order to address these problems the document proposed an elaborate restructuring of the school system, providing training to teachers and reforming the teacher transfer system, giving working professionals the opportunity to continue studies at the graduate and undergraduate levels while retaining the university entrance system; the formation of a tertiary education commission under whose purview non-university tertiary education, technical institutions, and professional education will be directed, particularly to form interconnections between professional education and link it to development; the formation of a national education board that will review educational policy, adopting security measures to prevent the failure of the implementation of the policy without proper public dialogue and adequate planning.

Although there are significant differences between the administrative structure of the university system and the school education system, the proposed reforms focused on the continuities between the two, particularly in the way it imagined the trajectory that different students will take based on their educational choices. However, the proposed reforms also identified problems that were specific to higher education such as the overreliance of undergraduates on notes due to the lack of appropriate reading material for students in local languages, and the failure of universities to fulfil the expectation that universities will produce a group of intellectuals who court excellence in education and research (Ministry of Education 1981, p. ii). These are of course very general problems lacking detail and specificity, especially when compared to the detailed analysis of the problems of the general education system. Nevertheless, it proposed several solutions to these problems: Creating an environment conducive to research and emphasizing postgraduate education to place the universities at the top of the education pyramid – this will include offering a "meaningful academic foundation" in the chosen study field; university student admission will be based on the number of intellectuals the country would need for each stream of study; the development of university teachers by addressing their needs, increasing salaries, facilitating exchange programmes with foreign universities and with high-level officers in private sector industries, commercial institutions, and research institutions; the reduction of waste by allocating funds to turn each university into specialized institutions in a particular area, the allocation of research grants, allocating building funds, and directing such funds towards postgraduate education; teaching Arts undergraduates one science subject to mitigate the division between arts subjects and science subjects

(ibid, p. 15). The most radical provision, at the tertiary level, was not the reform of the university system, but the establishment of a Commission on tertiary education for the direction, coordination, development, and financing of non-university higher education and technical and vocational education (ibid, p. 16).

Two early criticisms of the proposed White Paper point to the way the White Papers remained vague on crucial problems of the education system at the time. D. Arampatta (1982) criticized the White Paper for paying scant attention to the development of primary education. While the White Paper paid great and detailed attention to the restructuring of secondary education, it only discusses a general drift in curriculum development in the grades 1-5. The White Paper proposes to change the structure of the Grade 5 scholarship examination, but remains vague about what that actual change would be. As Arampatta points out, it fails to address both the problems of non-attendance and primary level dropouts (ibid, p. 105). The significance of this criticism lies in the following take on the White Paper: Despite its promise to "fruitfully bring about the proper growth of the child" (ibid), the White Paper fails to address the problem of equality and access at the most crucial level of primary education. The second criticism leveled at the proposed reforms by Sunil Bastian singled out the separation of unitary schools from the school system, thereby creating an exclusive enclave of access to privileged education. These, coupled with what he noted as the government's "policy of encouraging private institutions and the secondary and higher educational levels, also as a means of easing the burden on government in financing education" (Bastian 1982, p. 113), would lead to further class polarization within the educational system. These two criticisms are instructive because they highlight how the White Paper failed to address the real structure of inequality that existed within the education system. I argue that the proposals aimed to address these inequalities by bureaucratizing the problem i.e. attempting to solve the problem through restructuring administration and curriculum and by introducing an ethos of "self-reliance" (ibid). This rhetoric of self-reliance is part of a larger ethos of responsibilization discussed by Wendy Brown.

Responsibilization

A key platform of the 1981 reforms was the introduction of the cluster school system. It was hoped that the introduction of this system would redistribute, rather than restructure, available resources. The proposals appeared to signal a commitment to greater parental and other community participation within educational decisions. In practice however, what the system actually achieved was the transfer of responsibility of financing education from the government to other community participants, including parents and past pupils. While democratization of the decision-making process is indeed a progressive move, if this process is undergirded by the need to finance the school's functioning, it may tip the fragile balance of power between parents, teachers, and administrators that already exists in schools. Schools were expected to become independent and self-initiated, compelled to depend on a set of real resources and social capital that were already accumulated to advance in society. These had profound class influences. The Maha Vidyala and the Madya Maha Vidyala system was the most prominent mechanism available to non-elite classes to further themselves socially. While the greater beneficiaries of this system had been the rural petit bourgeoisie, they were by no means the only ones who benefitted from it. The Central School system was the backbone of the school system, and the new administrative structure significantly weakened their resources and prestige. Coupled with diminishing resources allocated for education, the impact of the restructuring of administration and resource allocation for rural schools was disastrous. The 'responsibilization' occurred at the school level and individual level, now forcing students and parents to find other, private means to gain access to education. The private tuition system that grew exponentially in the 1980s is a testament to this discourse of responsibilization. In redistributing the class inequality that already existed within the system through a managerial solution, rather than a structural change in the access points to education, particularly at the primary school level, the reform unsuccessfully attempted to manage an impending crisis.

Responsibilization also shifted crucial educational and vocational decisions to students. Students had to make a choice relatively early in their educational career as to whether they wanted to pursue an academic education or a vocational education. In a cultural context where the more socially prestigious jobs were tied to degrees and other academically oriented credentials, any student with the economic means to pursue an academic education would probably choose an academic career over a vocational career. The school curriculum was restructured to enable this choice. The reforms proposed the possibility for students to exit early from academic learning towards vocational and professional training if the student was not interested in higher education. The breaking off point would be Grade 8, at which point students could exit school education, choose a technical or vocational training stream, or decide to carry out higher education. This

proposed Grade 8 exit point would make the student 'responsible' for his or her economic success at a very early age, where s/he would have to decide his/her career path. The curriculum was diversified and other exit points to pursue vocational training were introduced into the education system: The student would have the 'choice' of not pursuing higher education if s/he did not have the inclination to do so, but could follow other streams of study that would enable them to gain employment. Like most discussions on choice that disregard the real social inequalities within which such choices are made, the proposals made no indication on how it would ensure that this choice is not one driven primarily by economic concerns. Thus, the progressive idea of diversifying curriculum and assessment was undercut by the proposal's inability to take into account the conditions under which career choices would be made, and the racial, gendered, class, and other social axes of power that need to be factored into that decision. By turning these inequalities into one about the right choice and individual decision, the reforms sought to redistribute the antagonisms that underpinned both the education system and the employment market.

Another important aspect of the proposals that warrants discussion is its focus on 'exposing' students to the industrial world so that they could make a 'responsible' choice about their future. The introduction of extra-curricular activities into assessment, establishing career guidance/counselling units in schools, etc. shifted the way the problem of employment and social relevance was perceived in previous reforms to the education system. As I discussed in the background to the reform, the 1972 reform, which also identified the need to professionalize education, focused on employment and relevance from a national development perspective. Interestingly, the focus of the 1981 reform is the 'industrial' world, and despite the rhetoric of 'individual and national economic development', there is little to indicate that the reforms would be accompanied by a similar reform to employment patterns and opportunities as well as selection criteria for jobs. Instead, the focus on vocationalization deemphasizes non-vocational subjects such as aesthetics, health, and civics, thereby economizing the goals of education without paying due attention to the larger social cost of such a decision. In yet another turn of neoliberal thinking, the reforms made it the responsibility of students to make individual and rational economic choices. This drive to responsibilization tied education back to a problem identified within the education system: Aspirations, but did not address or provide an answer to the disillusionment that emerges when these aspirations are frustrated. The discourse on vocationalizing education identified the problem in the education system and the employment market as a lack of the right kind of 'exposure' to the industrial world. This shifted the burden of formulating national educational policies that would address the problem to the students' inability to make the right career choices.

Devolution

Devolution was another feature of the White Paper that sought to devolve administrative power to clusters of schools. The key mechanism for this devolution of administrative power was the cluster school system that was identified as the antidote to the disparity between rich and poor schools.[5] The cluster school system was meant to devolve power to regionally organized school units responsible for securing state funds, managing them between smaller and larger schools, as well as canvassing funds from parents. The administrative rationale behind this devolution of power is that such units can and should be responsible for their own management. However, it is not clear what the disbursement of funds for these units was to be like and whether state funding for these schools will be expanded to meet the needs of all the schools in the cluster. What the White Paper suggests is that schools are expected to 'share' resources including textbooks, libraries, labs, etc. thereby effectively eliminating the need or the possibility of developing small schools into larger ones with greater facilities. Here, we see the principle of devolution suggested by Brown at work, since smaller units of administration are given the responsibility of managing an entire cluster of schools. Although the proposal is meant to eliminate the competition between schools for greater resources, the new system is a vertical integration that would make schools with varying levels of administrative power 'share' already limited resources. Even more than the actual implementation of this proposal, what is crucial is the way it turns a real crisis in education into a managerial and administrative problem, solvable through a surface-level administrative devolution of power to a body that does not have adequate resources to be responsible for its expected outcomes. The reforms sought to redistribute the class antagonisms that undergirded this disparity by devolving power to those who had few resources to solve the problem, rather than confronting the real inequalities between resource-rich schools and poorer schools.

The proposals also failed to recognize that curriculum and assessment reform, particularly shifting towards Continuous Assessment, would require large investments in the entire education system. It is hardly surprising

that the move to revise the curriculum and update the assessment system was viewed with suspicion because the proposals failed to outline how these revisions would be financed by the public school system. Continuous Assessments generally require careful planning and execution without which formative assessments can be as disastrous as bookish summative evaluations. While formative assessment is far more progressive and productive than standardized, summative testing of student knowledge with no regard for testing other skills, the proposal offered few details on how the new curriculum as well as assessment structures (which also included components such as extra-curricular activities) would be implemented in a fair and equitable manner. Here, the major shortcoming of the proposal was its inability to account for inequalities that already existed within the education system as well as the lack of training and motivation on the part of teachers and administrators to carry them through. Ultimately, the proposals betray their inability to carry through the radical potential that new and more democratic forms of curriculum development and assessment offered. The reforms merely redistributed the disparity between rich and poor schools by introducing formative assessments that tended to depend strongly on student and teacher motivation and access to resources that enable proper assessment. Without committing to the investment in education that can make such deep changes to the existing examination system meaningful, the reforms obliged teachers and students at the school level to deal with a system of assessment over which they had little control and demanded more resources than most schools and students individually could afford.

The devolution of power to smaller administrative units was accompanied by an effort to isolate the richest and poorest schools into stand-alone units and in the process, significantly weakened the Central College System. While the proposals promised to develop smaller schools independently, there was little evidence of a commitment to do so. Meanwhile larger schools with greater resources and high competition for admission were expected to be frozen at their 1980 capacity, with the view to divert state resources to other, less privileged schools. The next major reform to be proposed to the education system in 1997 recommended a return to the earlier Central College system by "ensuring that every division has access to high-quality secondary education" (Little and Hettige 2013, p. 40). The devolution of the centralized education system could not, as the 1981 proposals had promised, produce any tangible redistribution of resources to schools. Instead, the decade saw the growth of a private tuition and private International School system, in addition to the private schools that already existed, to meet the education demands that were met less and less by the public education system. The liberalization of the economy made it easier to introduce many different kinds of privately owned fee-levying schools in the country and generated a newly rich class that sought an education that would lead to lucrative employment for their children in urban centers. These different forms of educational structures pulling in different directions sharpened, rather than diminished, the inequality within education.

The White Paper also proposed affecting attitudinal change in parents and students that would lead to their greater participation in developing the entire school structure. The seemingly progressive devolving of school development which was couched in the language of social solidarity, in reality, transferred the burden of funding school development parents and other members of School Development Boards. The result was a greater fragmentation of school administration, which now had to find other other sources of funding for the entire school cluster. The school system became more isolated from greater society, and the White Paper proposed to bring about "attitude change{" in students and parents that stemmed from the recognition that the "resources in the entire school [rather than the individual school] belonged to everyone" (White Paper, p. 9). In short, the reforms hoped to turn school development and management into a matter of finding financial resources. In a context where greater social cohesion was already under attack through neoliberal ideas and the weakening of social security nets, this move had a disastrous impact on school development, especially in cases where parents could not afford the financial demands the school clusters made. This also led to the isolation of education and the school system from the other social structures with which it had previously had an integral relation such as religious institutions, youth organizations, and mass media. These structures had previously played an active role in the creation of knowledge outside of the formal education sector. In this respect, it is telling that the devolution of the administrative power of the school system recommended by the Report of the Presidential Commission on Youth in 1990 suggests reintegrating the school back into a community participatory structure, while the government continues to allocate resources and funds to the schools: "We feel that this sense of community is indispensable and that youth alienation is all too often accentuated by the reality that schools do not have the support and security of an extended community" (1990 Report, p. 39). The economization of social life and the recreation of the individual as a "speck of capital"

(Brown 2016, p. 3) as discussed above, goes against this community spirit and social cohesion based on various forms of social and political solidarities. But the model proposed by the 1990 Youth Commission is a strong response to the administrative restructuring of the school system proposed by the 1981 proposals. It points to the way mere surface level devolution of power that neither gives all parents and students an equal say over the education system, not holds the state unequivocally responsible for funding the school system, would merely redistribute, rather than address, the class antagonisms that underpin the education system.

Affect, Ideology and Class Antagonisms

As noted above in my discussion of Uyangoda's idea that education provided a "one-way ticket" to an "incomplete emancipation", the frustration of youth with what they perceived as an unjust social system posed a significant political challenge to the state. I argue that one way the 1981 reforms sought to address this problem was by refashioning life goals through a discourse of self-reliance and self-fashioning that would better qualify students to the demands of the 'industrial world'. The reforms proposed several interconnected changes to the curriculum and assessment that would foster a positive attitude towards work, life, and especially, the "industrial world" (Ministry of Education 1981, p. 3): The introduction of a new subject called Practical Skills that was to replace the Technical Skills subjects; the establishment of Student Counselling Units in schools, and factoring extra-curricular activities and other self-development activities into continuous assessment; and the development of an elaborate tertiary education system. English education was a part of these changes as well. Together, they reflect what Brown calls the "formulation of the subject as both member of a firm and as itself a firm" (Brown 2016, p. 3), recreating the self as an investment in a competitive market.

This shift towards the emphasis of skills over bookish knowledge had important implications for the class antagonisms that had fueled dissatisfaction with educational and vocational opportunities. These new skills placed students from privileged backgrounds at a distinct advantage since they were already exposed to such opportunities through a variety of sources. Democratizing access to such skills is indeed a commendable effort. But this also shifted the discourse on disillusionment and frustration with systemic shortcomings to a pervasive sense of personal failing. When transferred to a job market that already situated monolingual candidates at a distinct disadvantage, this new discourse of personal development and soft skills tended to create new inequalities within the education system. The animosity that had always existed towards the middle-class lifestyle and language habits of the privileged became increasingly sharpened among youths. The system now demanded that a student adopts an imitative identity that often clashed with the more myopic, rural cultural habits that most rural students acquired in their homes and villages. There is little evidence that the non-urban, non-elite schools were ever sufficiently equipped to meet this new demand. To return to Gunasinghe's language, this was yet another way in which the reforms attempted to "remould" (1996, p. 51) the class tensions that exist within the education system, this time by transforming social dissatisfaction into a discourse on personal failure.

Conclusion

Even though the 1981 Education proposals were not enacted in their entirety, in this short paper I have examined the way they tried to redistribute the real class antagonisms that existed within the education system. I have argued here that the 'mismatch' between education and employment that is so often identified as the key problem that affect the youth of the country is sustained by inequalities within the education system and that the 1981 reforms linked these to the new ethos of neoliberalism. I have also highlighted the way the language of vocationalizing, liberalizing, and democratizing the education system employed by the White Paper masks and avoids addressing the class inequalities that lie at the heart of these problems plaguing the system. However, I have not discussed other important axes of power, most importantly race and gender that have an even greater impact, in some cases, in sustaining the inequality of education. I do not wish to come across as overemphasizing class antagonism over other kinds of power hierarchies that exist within education, and therefore, I acknowledge these limitations here. The key purpose of this article is to see how policy, reform, and ideology intersected, and how neoliberal thought was grafted onto an already existing class antagonism within education. I have argued that the two-fold processes of responsibilization and devolution identified by Brown are two key forms of the neoliberal rationality that were gradually introduced into the field of education in Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan education system is at a crucial juncture with the possibility of a major administrative and political shift in the education system in the country. I wish to end by noting the long-term deleterious impact that the economization of education would have on the other important social goals of education such as

democratization and fostering a sense of deep social justice in children. The 1981 Reforms are a remarkable reminder of what is at stake in reform in a country that is beleaguered by inequality. We are today presented with the neoliberal doxa that there is no alternative to this model. For this, it is worth revisiting the White Paper of 1981, to learn to repeat history differently.

Notes

1 Slogan chanted during 1987-89 protests, often by schoolchildren.
2 For a discussion of the Language Standardization Process see C.R. de Silva (1998).
3 Malinda Senviratna (2002) recalls the slogan and the student movement's involvement in opposing the White Papers discussed here as follows: "It was in a climate where the opposition was virtually dead that the students fought against the White Paper on Education, presented in parliament by the then Minister of Education, Ranil Wickremesinghe. The students scored a victory of sorts, I suppose, for the UNP was forced to withdraw the document and resort to surreptitious means of implementing its proposals. And the whole process was captured best by the slogan that was seized by our youth in the late eighties, kolambata kiri apata kekiri. We all know how the best among our youth were sacrificed on the political altar".
4 The reorientation of the goals of education towards employment over other socio-political goals
5 For an early discussion of the Cluster school system see Samaranayake (1983).

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