SRI LANKA'S AMBITIOUS ROAD TO RE-IMAGINING EDUCATION

By Kavindya Thennakoon

The Ministry of Education, Higher Education, and Vocational Education has made public a preliminary version of the proposed education reform plan for 2026 - 2029. The current public conversation has been dominated by claims that history and aesthetics have been removed from the curriculum. This focus, however, is evidence that we are still asking regressive questions relevant to a world of 30 years ago, rather than engaging with an education policy designed to cater to the world a current preschooler will inhabit in 20 years.

Before I dive into reforms, it's important to zoom out to see the broader structure of the reform plan. The reforms are guided by:

a) An overall objective of creating an individual ready for the 21st century and beyond

b) Who can contribute to the sustainable national development and peace

Here's a quick summary of the broader structure:

The reforms are built on five key pillars:

- Curriculum Development

- Human Resources Development

- Infrastructure and Administrative Reforms

- Assessment and Evaluation

- Public Awareness and Promotion

Here's a quick summary of the broader structure:

Educational Reform: Principles, Goals, and Pillars

Goals and Objectives 🎯
- Curriculum Relevance
- Learning Outcomes
- Science and Technology Enrolment
- Sustainable Development Goals
- 21st-Century Skills
- Equity and Inclusivity
- School-Community Relationships
- National Educational Goals
- Entrepreneurial Mindset

Educational Reform

Guiding Principles
- Free Education
- Relevance to Development
- Acceptability
- Sustainability
- Lifelong Learning

Key Pillars
- Curriculum Development
- Human Resource Development
- Infrastructure
- Assessments
- Public Awareness

Figure 1: Education Reform: Principles, Goals, and Pillars

The overarching goal is to shift from a traditional, exam-centric system to a more student-centric, modular approach that emphasizes active and continuous learning. This transformation aims to produce socially responsible and economically productive students through practical strategies. The implementation will be gradual, starting with grades 1 and 6 in 2026, with the first G.C.E. Ordinary Level examination under the new syllabus scheduled for 2029.

Political ideologies aside, the proposed education reform plan by the Ministry of Education, Higher Education, and Vocational Education is one of the most comprehensive and well-structured blueprints for educational transformation seen in the last decade.

A significant departure from previous policy documents, which often felt like a collection of disparate activities and projects, this plan reflects a long-term strategic vision. There is a difference when there is an educator who understands the importance of pedagogy (how we learn and teach) at the helm, and it shows. For the first time in recent memory, a Minister of Education is referencing and seemingly comprehending systemic approaches to rethinking not just what is taught, but how it is taught, assessed, and scaled.

The success of this ambitious plan, however, hinges on its implementation and addressing the existing quality crisis that affects a large proportion of well-meaning and hardworking educators who were trained for a world that has since passed.

Here's how I've broken my thinking. First, I will outline three reforms that inspire me, and then I will move into 3 areas that warrant a deeper public conversation:

1. Measure: Redesigning Assessments for Continuous Growth

A cornerstone of these reforms is a fundamental shift in how we approach assessments. Moving away from punitive, year-end memorization marathons, the new framework reimagines assessments as tools to understand student growth and identify learning gaps (a concept in curriculum design that is known as backward design) The emphasis is on formative assessments, which are designed to be supportive rather than punitive, providing a continuous feedback loop for both students and teachers.
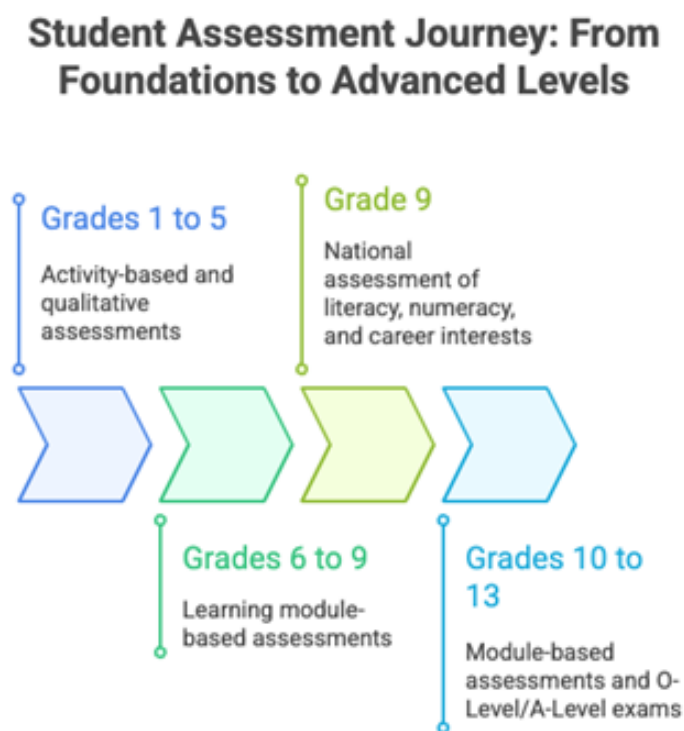
What does this look like for a student?

Student Assessment Journey: From Foundations to Advanced Levels

Grades 1 to 5
Activity-based and qualitative assessments

Grade 9
National assessment of literacy, numeracy, and career interests

Grades 6 to 9
Learning module-based assessments

Grades 10 to 13
Module-based assessments and O-Level/A-Level exams

Figure 2: Student Assessment Journey: From Foundations to Advanced Levels

I believe that we should a) improve and formalize the current foundational skills assessments we have in Grade 1 and 2 to become a school readiness assessment that is administered at the start of Grade 1 to identify opportunities for growth and support. b) The idea of psychometric / career interest assessment in 9th grade makes sense; however, this is far too late for a literacy and numeracy assessment since intervention becomes incredibly difficult.

2. Learn: Centering Pedagogy and Lifelong Learning

The proposed reforms champion a liberal arts approach, with a common core of compulsory subjects (now called modules) and a set of electives that students are free to choose from (within come parameters of course).

Our biggest win: integrating Early Childhood Education (ECE) into the national policy to enhance school readiness! If a child is not developmentally on track by the time they enter first grade, it's a difficult road to recovery. We all know that investing early in children yields the greatest returns. The famed Heckman Curve demonstrates that the highest economic and social benefits come from investing in ECE.
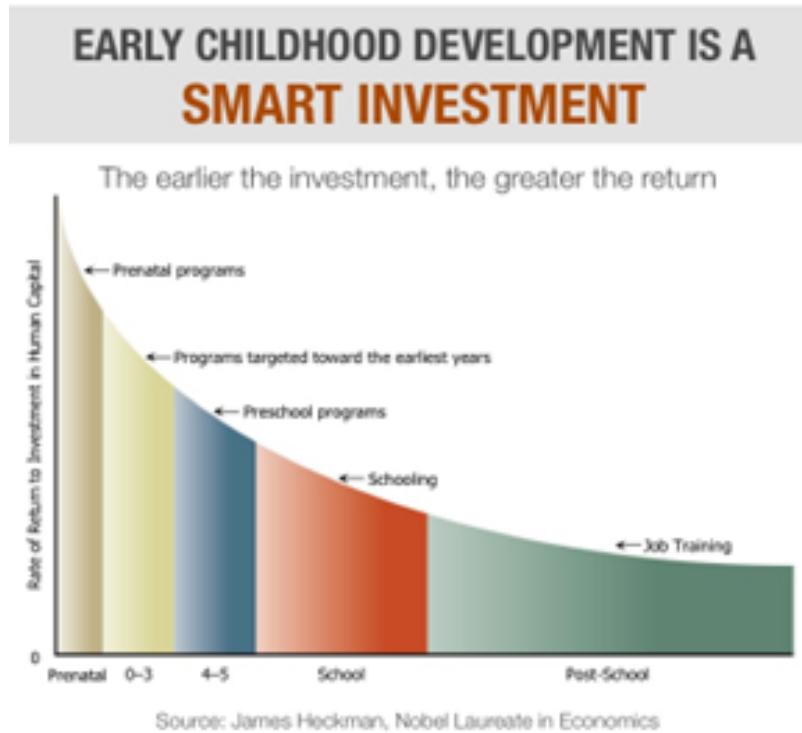

Figure 3: Heckman Curve

The curriculum then transitions to a more skills-based, choice-focused model that encourages exploration. This is actualized through a module-based system where a common core is supplemented by subjects based on student interest.

- From Grades 6 to 9, students will take 14 essential subjects, choose three further learning modules, and earn two credits in 'transversal skills'.

- For Grades 10 and 11 (O/Levels), the number of subjects is reduced from nine to seven.

Furthermore, class periods will be extended to 50 minutes, with an additional mid-day break. This seemingly small change necessitates a pedagogical shift from one-way, didactic lectures to more experiential learning, where knowledge sharing is followed by opportunities for application and reflection.

3. Data: Driving Personalized Learning
Data is power and personalization. We can't fix a learning problem if we are unable to understand what the problem is and why it's happening. Currently, much of our country's most valuable learning data is still left on paper.

The reforms call for a revamped National Education Management Information System (NEMIS) to create integrated student, teacher, and school profiles. While past attempts at creating such a system have been hampered by practical issues ranging from user interface problems to poor connectivity, the potential impact is immense.

Research globally has shown that when learning data is effectively placed in the hands of teachers, it dramatically improves teaching practices. With the recent advancements in AI, we now have accessible tools that can help a teacher analyze their class's performance on a math assessment, for instance, quickly identify students who need extra support, and personalize learning weekly.

Where are the areas of concern?

I would not be surprised by the pushback from tuition teacher consortia and teacher unions. Ultimately, teachers will be the make-or-break factor in ensuring the benefits of these reforms impact the child.

Issue 1: Teacher Upskilling, Compensation, and Well-being

While teachers in Sri Lanka have been constantly blamed and vilified—a backlash often coming from those who wouldn't survive two hours teaching in a government classroom—we have a glaring quality crisis in our teaching and teacher training professions. On the other hand, teaching is one of the most studied professions for workplace burnout and chronic stress. For these reforms to succeed, we need a happy, skilled, and well-compensated workforce of teachers.

These new modules, assessments, and pedagogical shifts need to be implemented by a cadre of 240,000 teachers. This presents several challenges. First, our teacher training colleges require a critical overhaul. Teacher trainers themselves need a more robust foundation in areas like learning sciences, developmental psychology, and modern training pedagogy, along with the resources to execute this vision. For example, debunked theories like 'Learning Styles' are still being included in teacher training.

Secondly, we have a broken system of Professional Development (PD) for in-service teachers. These sessions still often take the form of hundreds of teachers sitting for hours through long, drawn-out seminars with one-way content delivery and barely any measurable learning outcomes.

Thirdly, as the Prime Minister rightly points out, beyond a straightforward supply issue, we have a management issue: a stalled process for appointments, a broken transfer system, and the misallocation of teaching resources.

Case Study: We can look to our neighbors in India to see how they're gradually overhauling teacher training and professional development. They began with a mandatory 50-hour PD requirement, a structured set of learning themes for teachers to choose from, and platforms like NISHTHA (National Initiative for School Heads' and Teachers' Holistic Advancement), which leverage online modules to supplement in-person PD.

Issue 2: Increasing School Duration by 30 Minutes
This may seem like a simple shift, but it is a critical point that trade unions will likely focus on. The administration has an opportunity to be co-creative here. Increasing school time is an extensively studied and tested topic in education research. Here's what we know:

- Increasing total school time can lead to gains in academic achievement, on average, when paired with meaningful reforms in school engagement and curriculum.

- Research shows that when schools delay start times (to after 8:30 a.m.), there are overall improvements in student sleep quality and well-being.

The issue is that seven 50-minute sessions each day still represent a huge cognitive load for children. An often-understudied aspect in countries like ours is how climate change and rising temperatures cause excessive fatigue and create unconducive learning environments. These are practical issues that only someone who spends seven hours in a classroom can truly understand.

Issue 3: Infrastructure Requirements Versus 2% of GDP
This is an ambitious yet much-needed shift. However, it requires a large injection of resources, which our meager 2% allocation of GDP will not suffice. Don't get me wrong, I am a huge proponent of the liberal arts approach— training students how to learn as opposed to training them to memorize, providing a common core, and offering a platter of choices to foster curiosity, creativity, and exploration. I fear that our platter of modules is doing too much, too soon.

Module Overload: I feel that much of the public confusion is due to the sheer number of modules and combinations. For starters, ICT and Technology for Life should ideally be a single module, as should Business Studies and Business Statistics. Crafting a module, training the relevant teachers, and ensuring end-to-end implementation is not a simple curriculum change; these are resource-heavy processes if we are to do it right. Less is always more.

Duplication of Efforts in the Development and NGO Sector: The duplication of efforts, the sheer lack of quality, and the limited scaling potential of one-off education projects led by our development sector and non-profits are heartbreaking. We have an incredible opportunity to consolidate these efforts and tap into more creative sources of financing.

Case Study: Again, the way India approached its incredibly well-crafted ECE policy is a great example of bringing the private sector, development agencies, and non-profits together to achieve a well-planned set of outcomes. We have South Africa's "Data Driven Districts" initiative, which was a 10-year plan to build the data infrastructure of their public schools - entirely funded by a private philanthropic partnership. Sierra Leone is another example where the Ministry of Education leveraged many creative financing models for systems-level implementation as opposed to one-off projects.

Many of these thoughts today are a personal reflection on all that I have learned from the incredible teachers and administrators across Sri Lanka who have helped me understand our local education system in a more nuanced light.

In 2019, I published my honors thesis titled 'Reimagining Local Education Systems in Sri Lanka: Design Anthropology Lens.' My field work took me to the rural corners of Wanathawilluwa, Puttalam, where I followed three inspiring teachers who were transforming their classrooms against unimaginable odds. I hope that this new education policy creates a better tomorrow for them and their students.
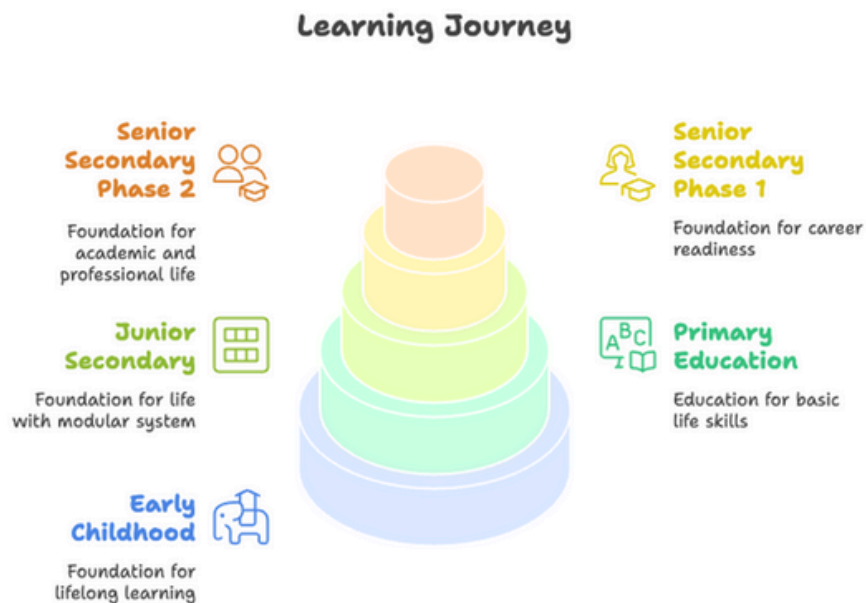
Learning Journey

Senior Secondary Phase 2
Foundation for academic and professional life

Senior Secondary Phase 1
Foundation for career readiness

Junior Secondary
Foundation for life with modular system

Primary Education
Education for basic life skills

Early Childhood
Foundation for lifelong learning

Figure 4: Learning Journey Illustration

Kavindya Thennakoon

Kavindya Thennakoon is a researcher and Knight Hennessey Fellow at the Stanford School of Education and the co-founder of Tilli; an award-winning education technology company that builds and measures 8 foundational skills from emotion awareness to critical thinking before a child enters 6th grade. Tilli has rapidly scaled globally through investment from the UNICEF Innovation Fund and has been used in over 30+ countries to transform early learning outcomes.

In Sri Lanka, Till is used in rural and semi-urban local schools in Kegalle, Batticaloa, Nuwara Eliya, and Badulla. In 2025, Tilli was recognized by the leading education think tank HolonIQ as one of the fastest-growing ed-tech startups in the world. Before founding Tilli, Kavindya worked for Google for Education, leading cutting-edge research into the adoption of Gen-AI for learning.