# Chapter 13

# EFFORTS TOWARD DECENTRALIZATION: IDEOLOGY VS. REALITY—THE SRI LANKAN CASE

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last four decades, the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka has shown a keen interest in decentralizing its educational administration. On a number of occasions the government restructured and reorganized its educational administrative machinery. Through the creation of intermediate layers between the central ministry and the schools, the country attempted to maximize efficiency, but the effects were marginal. The government's stated intention to improve the education system through greater participation by local communities has rarely been met. The multiplication of bureaucratic layers resulted in more complex procedures and confusion about administrative responsibilities. The lack of a strong "work ethic" in newly established layers hindered rather than supported school improvement. Though administrative authority was transferred from the center to the periphery, practice in schools remained almost largely unchanged.

The Sri Lankan government made some key moves in attempt to decentralize authority over the schools: establishing regional and provincial offices of education; diversifying the curriculum by adding pre-vocational subjects; introducing cluster schools; and introducing school development boards. These efforts were noteworthy, but they did not produce their desired outcomes. Ambiguity in objectives, frequent changes in policies and programs, cultural and social constraints, and a lack of resources have all impeded reform. The present period marks a new era in the Sri Lankan education system, as a comprehensive package of both organizational and curricular reforms are being implemented. The concept currently attracting the most attention from advocates of educational decentralization is how more autonomy can be transferred to the schools. Although attempts to decentralize the school system have not been impressive thus far, if the government can learn from its past failures and take steps to address the issues that have hindered the shift toward local autonomy, Sri Lanka may eventually succeed in implementing functional decentralization.

## 2. THE BEGINNINGS

Sri Lanka has a recorded history that stretches from 600 B.C. to the present day. Archeological evidence suggests that there were large centers of learning associated with the Buddhist monasteries from 3rd century B.C. (Harris, 1983, p. 70). The political structures in early Sri Lanka were not highly centralized. The school system



*Christopher Bjork (ed.), Educational Decentralization,* 211–222.

was more or less "consumer oriented" during that period. Education was primarily imparted in village or temple schools. The teachers (or "guru"), guided by the needs of the community, determined the curriculum. External support for education came only through royal patronage.

A succession of outside powers ruled Sri Lanka, beginning in the 16th century. The Portuguese arrived in 1505, and were replaced by the Dutch in 1656. The British conquered the island in 1796 and ruled until the country gained independence in 1948. With the commencement of western rule in 1505 until independence, education policies were geared to meet the political, economic, and social needs of the colonial rulers. During the Portuguese era the church controlled the education system, with the state playing an indirect role. Centralizing trends in administration began during the Dutch period. The "Scholrachal Commission" specified that schools should be governed centrally, with teachers and pupils strictly following curricula determined by central authorities. When the British took over from the Dutch, they were initially hesitant to get involved in educational pursuits, as their primary concerns were economic. But they played a more active role in educational affairs after seeing the advantages of controlling the schools. Under the British, educational administration became highly centralized, with the colonial rulers making all decisions regarding the schools. Legislation adopted in 1906 and 1907 discouraged local citizens from participating in government; local authorities were prevented from actively participating in educational affairs. The introduction of Educational Ordinance No. 1 of 1920, which gave legal status to the Department of Education (Jayasuriya, 1971, p. 417), heightened the central government's influence over the school system.

The most revolutionary educational reforms in Sri Lanka's history were introduced in 1945. That year a system of free education (from kindergarten through university) was introduced, and the mother tongue was established as the medium of instruction in all primary classrooms. Dr. C. W. W. Kannangara, Sri Lanka's first Minister of Education, was the driving force behind those policies. Kannangara wanted to remove the privileges and prejudices of education through equalization of educational opportunities for all children. This resulted in a large expansion of the school-going population. The local elite, who took over power from the British in 1948, did not introduce radical changes that would encourage local participation. Thus, the centralized tradition continued for some time.

## 3. FURTHER MOVES TOWARD DECENTRALIZATION

As the volume of work increased and the problems facing education officials became more complex, the administrative machinery that was in place proved inadequate. In the late 1950s, several attempts were made to formulate a decentralized administrative structure that better suited society at the time, but these efforts were not very successful. The first significant recommendation for decentralization occurred in April 1961, when the following recommendation was delivered at a national education conference:

> Decentralization is one of the important means of securing efficiency and speed in handling the day-to-day work of administration. Decentralization connotes delegation of authority to Regional

> office and lessening of concentration of power at the Head Office . . . Inadequate delegation of authority and its unnecessary concentration in the Head office have been mainly responsible for administrative decisions being considerably delayed and work unnecessarily duplicated. Technically qualified personnel have been tied down to routine work in the head office and to some extent in the provincial offices.
>
> (Ministry of Education and Cultural Affairs, 1961: Report of the Education Conference held at Bandarawela, 1961: 1–2)

This report provoked a swift response. In October 1961, the government created 10 educational regions and 13 educational districts. The head office retained the power to deal with questions of policy in all administrative matters. The district and regional offices were made responsible for accounting, finance, and administration. As a result of those changes, the education system did a better job of satisfying local needs than had been the case in the past. However, these reforms represented a delegation of tasks rather than a genuine effort to devolve power. In 1966, when educational planners realized that the impact of the above decentralization was limited, a deliberate effort was made to implement a more comprehensive decentralization scheme: "A strong and well-organized administrative set-up, with well-defined lines of authorities as well as checks and balances among different authorities, reinforced by adequate provision of the consultation of public opinion, is of vital importance to an efficient system of administration" (Ministry of Education and Cultural Affairs, 1966: The Proposal for Reforms in General and Technical Education, 1966, p. 5).

The number of education regions was increased to 15, and each region was placed under a regional director of education with full autonomy. This individual was responsible for training and promoting teachers, and for the general administration of the region—without input from the center. Changes were made at the national level as well. The Director of Education, who headed the Department of Education, was designated Director-General of Education, and his post was combined with that of the permanent Secretary to the Ministry of Education (Ariyadasa, 1976, p. 4). The decentralization of the administration carried out in 1961 and in 1966, and the changes that followed, gave the ministry a new organizational infrastructure.

## 4. THE 1972 CURRICULUM REFORMS

In 1972 curriculum reforms that capitalized on local expertise were enacted. Subjects such as cultural heritage and pre-vocational studies were introduced to encourage schools to become more closely connected to local communities. Education officials believed that subjects such as these would transform both the structure of learning and the attitude of teachers. This provided an opportunity to diversify the curriculum in a predominantly rural country with great geographical variation. Though these changes represented landmarks in curricular reform, they eventually had to be abandoned due to resource constraints, environmental constrains, and public opinion (Diyasena, 1976; Jayaweera, 1988). The public believed that pre-vocational courses reinforced existing socio-economic disparities.

## 5. REFORMS OF 1981 AND SCHOOL CLUSTERS

Another set of ambitious reforms was adopted in 1981. At that time, the regional departments of education and the district offices were reorganized and restructured to reduce "system overload" at the regional level. These changes allowed the regional director to concentrate on development orientation. Another initiative proposed that the existing circuit system be replaced by the cluster system. A group of schools within a defined geographical area would be grouped into a "cluster" for the purpose of better organization, management, and development. Policy planners believed that creating such clusters would reduce disparities between schools and achieve greater efficiency; local management would enable better utilization of both community and state resources. The leader of each cluster, the principal of the core-school, was given the power to set goals for and manage the unit. School clusters were vested with great authority regarding the management of local education activities:

> Each cluster will function as an administrative entity to meet the educational needs of the area it serves. Pupil admissions, requisitions of supplies, capital expenditure, and allocation of teachers will be on the basis that each cluster is one organizational unit. Thus, the smallest unit for planning the development and organization of the school system will henceforth be the school cluster.
>
> (Ministry of Education, 1981)

It was envisioned that a school cluster would be comprised of a number of primary and secondary schools. The total enrollment of a cluster would total between 3,000 and 5,000 students (Samaranayake, 1985, p. 26).

The objectives of the cluster system can be summarized as follows:

- To achieve qualitative development in education through intensive and systematic supervision, evaluation, and follow-up action of the school within the cluster;
- To up-grade the neglected, underdeveloped, and remote schools by making them participate in cluster activities;
- To enable schools to be managed by a body of more competent personnel;
- To minimize/eliminate duplication in the provision and use of facilities and to achieve optimum utilization of scarce resources, both human and physical, within school clusters;
- To obtain the maximum participation of the community and ensure the maximum contribution of the public to the upgrading of the educational facilities of their school complex area.

Though there were several clusters that achieved the expected objectives, most did not. Many administrative problems arose when the circuits were replaced by the clusters. The core-school heads were often unable to fulfill their responsibilities, which were previously carried out by the Circuit Education Officers. Some core schools lacked adequate facilities. The basic aim of the cluster—sharing resources and supporting weaker schools—was not often realized. Studies of the cluster system pointed out several other weaknesses:

- Unqualified or inexperienced personnel working as cluster principals
- A decrease in the frequency of school supervision visits
- Lack of improvement in supervising techniques

*Table 13.1: Variation in the Number of Schools Among Clusters*

| Number of schools in the cluster | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Number of clusters with that number of schools | 2 | 1 | 5 | 3 | 5 | 4 | 8 | 9 | 9 | 4 | 1 | 2 | 1 |

- Distances between schools in a single cluster were often so great that they could not be administered as a single unit
- Concentration of resources in the core schools
- An imbalance in the distribution of schools among clusters (i.e., some clusters had more than 12 or even 16 schools whereas some had less than 4 schools; see Table 13.1)
- Great disparities in the number of pupils assigned to different clusters (i.e., the number of pupils per cluster was expected to be between 3,000 to 5,000, but some clusters had more than 7,000 or even 8,000 while some others had less than 1,000) (see Table 13.2).

## 6. REFORMS OF 1984

After the 1981 reforms were not matched by appropriate organizational structures and management implementation strategies, government officials indicated that further decentralization was necessary. The center was expected to establish an effective and efficient management system that would provide the necessary support for implementing a meaningful program for educational development by the year 1984. A report published by the Ministry of Education offered a long list of improvements in education management that needed to be implemented (Ministry of Education, 1984).[1] An intermediate, multicluster layer operating between the office of the Regional Director of Education (RDE) and school clusters was established. The name of the new layer was the Division Education Office (DEO). The DEO was established to deconcentrate development work that had been taxing the RDE office, coordinate and supervise work in the RDE office, and improve the services provided to schools located outside the clusters, and reduce financial and time demands placed on school supervisors.

The 1984 reforms encouraged a shift in the role of the principal from a first line manager of the ministry to an educational manager accountable for educational development activities in the school. Principals were given authority over school finances, and held responsible for the preparation, implementation, and management of the annual school plan. In addition, they were expected to oversee the curriculum, supervise and evaluate teachers, and serve as liaisons to parents and students. Newly

*Table 13.2: Variation in the Number of Pupils Among Clusters*

| Number of pupils | Above 8,000 | 7,000–8,000 | 6,000–7,000 | 5,000–6,000 | 4,000–5,000 | 3,000–4,000 | 2,000–3,000 | 1,000–2,000 | 0–1,000 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Number of clusters with that number of pupils | 01 | 01 | 03 | 05 | 03 | 12 | 12 | 11 | 03 |

adopted policy went so far as to specify that principals should spend a minimum of 12 hours each week supervising teachers (Ministry of Education, 1984, p. 8–9).

The management reforms of 1984 attempted to build a planning and management culture at the school level. However, due to multifarious factors, the proposed structural changes did not always improve administrative efficiency. In many instances, work efforts were duplicated at different levels of the hierarchy; schools were sometimes provided inconsistent direction by the layers above (Cabral, 1989; Manoharan, 1988; Perera, 1987). The new decentralization package required additional administrators with expertise in management areas such as planning, finance, and curriculum supervision. Extra supporting staff, buildings, furniture, and vehicles were also needed (Kulasena, 1989; Perera, 1989). If the reforms were to meet their goals, relevant documents needed to reach personnel at different administrative levels on time and in an easily comprehensible form (Staff College, 1986; Perera, 1989). The boundaries between the ministry, districts, and divisions had to be defined more explicitly. Conflict and confusion could have been minimized if the government had more clearly articulated what responsibilities needed to be decentralized, to what degree, and how.

Most reforms remained at the suggestion level, as the proposals were not followed up with relevant circulars:

> Though the reforms proposed a fair amount of responsibilities to be handed over to the principal, it did not happen (Perera, 1989, p. 9). Even in the case of teacher transfers, they were consulted only in some cases. The authority and responsibility that the management reforms proposed were not vested with the principals. On the one level the ministry had not followed up its policy by amending the necessary circulars, regulations etc., while on the other, principals have not risen to the occasion to exercise power and authority that should be their due.
>
> (Perera and Palihakkara, 1997, p. 267)

Principals often failed to adequately delegate functions and responsibilities to their deputies. Individuals holding middle management positions, who were not formally appointed to those posts, lacked authority; many felt they were being called to perform additional tasks without additional remuneration. This scenario indicates that it is essential under a scheme of decentralization to promote teachers based on a proper scheme of evaluation.

## 7. DEVOLUTION OF POWER TO THE PROVINCIAL COUNCILS IN 1987

In 1987, provincial councils and ministries were established to give more autonomy to the provinces in managing their affairs. The positions of Provincial Director of Education and Provincial Secretary of Education were created. The Provincial Directors were given the responsibility of planning, implementing, managing, and directing the education programs in the provinces. Oversight of school facilities became a provincial function. The national ministry managed most affairs in the national schools, including the construction and maintenance of education buildings, libraries, playgrounds, furniture, teaching aids, and audio–visual materials; in other schools, the same functions were handled by the provincial ministries. Divisional

Education Offices were created to facilitate the process of devolving authority to the periphery (Perera, 1997, p. 12). The authorities realized that the divisional offices were located too far from the provincial offices. They were also of the view that the divisional offices could not cope with the multiplicity of their functions. Hence, a number of divisions were groups together to create a "zone." The Zonal Director became responsible for the implementation of quality improvement programs.

The above moves created several difficulties for education administrators. The Zonal Director was subject to dual control by the provincial education ministry and the provincial education department. Failure to clearly define the roles of key administrators, such as the provincial secretary and the provincial director (National Education Commission Reprots, 1992, p. 108), also caused complications. Silva et al. (1993) note that the provincial ministry and provincial department simultaneously initiated transfers of the some of the same teachers. Power struggles between the central ministry and provincial ministries also occurred. For example, central officials began to give many of the larger schools "national school" status to bring them under control. "In fact one province filed a case against the central ministry for establishing national schools in their province . . . The provincial ministries sometimes complained that the national minister/ministry interfered in their work." (Perera and Palihakkara, 1997, p. 270)

## 8. SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT BOARDS

School Development Boards were established in February 1992 by Gazette extraordinary. The main purpose of the boards was to enlist community and parental support so as to improve the operational efficiency of schools. According to official guidelines, the boards were supposed to carry out the following tasks:

- Assess the current needs of the school and recommend relevant improvements to the academic curricula and modes of teaching
- Promote cultural, religious, and moral activities in the school
- Assist in the development and maintenance of school infrastructure
- Foster and strengthen the welfare activities of the school community and preserve its identity and traditions
- Interact productively with the media so as to engender a cohesive relationship between the school, the community, and religious institutions
- Assist in the development of the personalities of the pupils in the school

In actuality, most school boards focused their efforts on generating resources—in most cases they acted as fund raising bodies. The boards were criticized for using undemocratic methods to select members, being dominated by elites who did not represent the communities they were supposed to serve, failing to facilitate a shift in power to the local people, and failing to provide information to stakeholders. As a result of such harsh criticism, the School Development Boards were abolished in 1995, only 3 years after they were created.

## 9. DRAWBACKS AND LIMITATIONS IN DECENTRALIZATION EFFORTS FROM 1960 TO 2000

Though the government of Sri Lanka took several noteworthy steps toward the decentralization of educational administration with a view of upgrading operational

efficiency, the effects were marginal. The process of decentralization was mainly concerned with establishing layers between the central ministry and the school with the view of bringing management closer to the schools. Though the geographical units of administration shifted from central to middle levels, practices in the schools remained virtually unchanged. One major drawback was that ambiguities in objectives existed at different levels, such as the recommendation level, policy level, and the operational level. This seems to have occurred due to misconceptions about the goals of decentralization. Educational decentralization can succeed only if there is systematic and careful preparation. "Decentralization is not a decision. It is a process over years" (Dalin et al., 1994, p. 260). In Sri Lanka, stakeholders were not adequately prepared for the programs introduced to encourage local control of the schools.

Another impediment to change was that the objectives behind decentralization policies also changed from time to time. One could argue that some reforms were based on the concepts of devolution, participatory democracy, and the empowerment of local levels. Other reforms arose from the liberal democratic notion that the education system should function as a market economy, with the government and the local people sharing the costs of schooling. The latter vision of decentralization was supported by two arguments. First, expansion of the education system resulted in increased demand for resources. The government, already relying on an inadequate pool of resources, could not meet that demand on its own. Second, because the private sector also benefits from the provision of public education, it should help cover the costs of schooling.

During the reigns of Sri Lankan kings the ordinary people were merely doers and not decision-makers. This tradition was strengthened by colonialism, and continued even after independence. Even when the government attempts to delegate power to the people, they often reject those opportunities. This social and cultural phenomenon has slowed the process of decentralization in Sri Lanka. Another factor that hindered reform efforts was lack of resources. Though new roles and functions were introduced, personnel were not prepared to take on new responsibilities. Physical resources—buildings, furniture, materials, and vehicles—were also scarce. Frequent changes in decentralization programs may also have prevented them from evolving and standing the test of time. The decentralization process carried out in the last four decades has not increased participation in the decision-making process by principals, teachers, parents, or members of the community. Decentralization has been viewed from a structural perspective rather than a functional one. Government officials need to ensure that people working at all levels of the system are prepared more thoroughly before schools can accept more autonomy. Only under those conditions could more of the functions carried out at upper levels of the bureaucracy be transferred to the school level.

## 10. THE PRESENT MOVE TOWARD SCHOOL AUTONOMY: PROGRAM ON SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

One can see many arguments for a decentralized form of educational government. Sri Lanka's rigid bureaucracy has often led to frustration, hostility, lack of enthusiasm, and suppression of creativity. Overseeing an education system is not a mechanical activity. The Sri Lankan government recently acknowledged the value

of providing schools with greater autonomy. In 1996, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) stated that the "process of decentralization must go right down to the level of the school." (MEHE, 1996, p. 14). It stressed the need to give greater responsibility to the schools and communities. A key mechanism the Sri Lankan government has been relying on to achieve this goal has been a new initiative called the Program on School Improvement (PSI). The following excerpt from a report published by the National Education Commission outlines the government's vision of the way in which schools be given more autonomy:

> School Based Management has been accepted as an effective tool in the management of schools. It should specifically state the power, authority and responsibilities of the principal and the Senior Management group of the school. There shall be a Council of Management for each school comprising the Principal, representatives of the staff, parents, past pupils and well-wishers and a departmental nominee to assist the Principal in the formulation of policy and preparation of development plans and monitoring the implementation thereof.
>
> (National Education Commission Report 1997, p. 25)

The emergence of this initiative in Sri Lanka has to be viewed: firstly, within the overall package of reforms that have been introduced into the Sri Lankan education system; secondly, within the broader context of socio-economic and political changes that are taking place in the country: and thirdly, within the context of the international SBM movement. As I mention above, efficiency and productivity have become overriding priorities for many Sri Lankan institutions, and schools are no exception. Restructuring the education system to improve public spending by monitoring outputs against inputs has become vital. Government officials believe that the authority to make decisions has to be devolved so that services can be made more responsive to those who use them. Until recently, the centralized national curriculum and national assessment system prevented the education system from responding to individual and local needs. Government leaders are convinced that planning needs to take place at the organizational level will improve the quality of instruction.

Several arguments have been used to promote school autonomy in Sri Lanka. First, the schools are submerged in a sea of macro programs and tend to blindly follow the script sent from the center. Although housed on school campuses, principals remain representatives of upper layers of the hierarchy. Secondly, the majority of schools have not identified the reservoir of potential energy, both human and physical, and hence these resources go underutilized. They hardly attempt to develop their infrastructure or generate new resources. Thirdly, only a handful of schools attempt to link themselves with outside institutions to improve the quality of curricula. Schools need to take the initiative to provide more interesting and relevant curricula. Fourthly, there is a need to involve the school in school planning and resource management. Lastly, teacher development programs currently focus on the skills of individual teachers rather than school-wide programs and practices. Through school-based staff development programs, congruence between staff development and school needs can be achieved.

The main objective of PSI is to improve the performance of schools. The underlying assumption is that autonomous schools can offer a clear vision for the future and release the energies of their employees by empowering them to take professional responsibility for raising educational standards. Characteristics of this initiative include the following:

- Allowing schools to determine their own approach to the teaching/learning process.
- Allocating schools the resources and capacities to plan, in partnership with their local communities, for the future.
- Creating representative school councils that work with the principal to establish school development plans that reflect local priorities.
- Formally including the members of a school staff in the management process.
- Recognizing that schools have the capacity to effectively deliver the curriculum according to local needs, within the national curriculum framework.
- Linking school-based performance appraisal systems with school-based staff development programs.

One aspect of PSI that has raised questions in Sri Lanka concerns the expanded authority of the principal. "SBM has presented principals and senior management teams with enormous challenges" (Evans and Hood, 1997, p. 14). Individuals appointed to these positions may be either unfit for the new role or may misuse their increased powers. Such doubts have been raised even two decades ago. The *Report Towards Relevance in Education* acknowledged that, "It will no doubt be pointed out that some principals do not have the professional or personal qualities for the exercise of such liberty. If so, we are entitled to ask how they came to be appointed to their posts. The obvious [solution] is to replace such Heads, to give them appropriate training, and in the future to appoint as principals only those who are qualified for the job" (Ministry of Education, 1982, p. 40). Because PSI provides principals with greater responsibility and authority, the selection of principals is crucial. The continuity of school administrators also needs to be guaranteed. A principal must be given at least 5–8 years to facilitate a school's long-term development. With more power devolved to the school, the principal's capacity to handle the newly acquired authority and to prudently achieve the objectives of the school through PSI, becomes critical. Procedures relied on to recruit principals need to be improved. The guidelines currently used to select new principals require revision. Some administrators accustomed to top–down management feel more comfortable when they do not bear responsibility for decisions made at their schools.

In order to successfully implement PSI in Sri Lanka, significant changes need to be instituted in other locations as well. The mass media needs to effectively disseminate information about the benefits of PSI so that stakeholders will respond positively to proposed changes. Parents have to be made aware that under PSI schools will make decisions based on the preferences of students and parents.

## 11. CONCLUSION

After committing to decentralize the education system, the Sri Lankan government decided to introduce the Program on School Improvement. Efficiency and productivity became overriding priorities for Sri Lankan institutions, and schools

were no exception. Restructuring the education system to improve public spending by monitoring inputs and outputs has become vital. Devolving decision-making authority was regarded as a means of improving the quality of services provided in the schools. The centralized system that was in place in Sri Lanka for decades prevented the education system from responding to individual and local needs. Only if authority is delegated to the school/organization level, will the quality of decisions related to curriculum development, in-school supervision, student counseling, staff development, and assessment improve.

Though several noteworthy steps toward the decentralization of educational administration with a view of upgrading operational efficiency were taken, the effects have been marginal. The geographic units of administration may have shifted from central to middle levels, but patterns of activity in the schools have remained virtually unchanged. The decentralization process has not increased the participation of principals, teachers, parents, or members of the community in decision-making processes. The rigid government bureaucracy has often led to frustration, hostility, decline in enthusiasm, and suppression of creativity. The provision and administration of education are not mechanical activities. Genuine renewal cannot be achieved unless those in the school make a conscious effort to diagnose their organization and initiate essential organizational changes.

In the past, the Sri Lankan public has often vehemently opposed educational reforms upon introduction, but later come to appreciate these same programs. Much work needs to be done to gain public acceptance of the new paradigm shift in school management currently being promoted, and to ensure that educational reforms lead to a devolution of authority, rather than mere deconcentration or delegation.

## NOTE

1. Among the changes recommended in that report were the following: improved management capabilities at school, regional, and ministry levels; more effective supervision systems; career development programs that focused on the improvement of individuals and organizations; the development of a clear strategy for improving management; and the participation of client groups in educational programs at the operational level (Ministry of Education, 1984, p. 7).

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