Reimagining local education systems in Sri Lanka through Design Anthropology

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Reimagining local education systems in Sri Lanka through Design Anthropology

Kavindya Thennakoon

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the
Prerequisite for Honors
in Anthropology
under the advisement of Professor. Justin Armstrong

May 2019

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*Wanathawiilluwa - A short documentary focused on the three local educators*
Acknowledgements

To my thesis advisor, Professor Justin Armstrong for helping me discover my love for anthropology and storytelling during my first year at Wellesley. Without his writing class I would have never felt confident writing in a language that was not my own. For his patience, humor and advice. More importantly, thank you for helping me escape the ugly capitalist claws of the economics department! To Professor Susan Ellison, for her candid conversations, care and her love for both her students and Foucault and for helping us see what activist, applied anthropology looks like in real life.

My wonderful community of incredible teachers from Wanathawilluwa - you are the heart and soul of this project. Lahiru, Maduranga Sir and Miss Himali - thank you for welcoming me into your classrooms, homes and communities and for letting me tell your stories. I hope I have done justice to your unwavering resilience, powerful spirit and the sacrifices you have made for your classrooms and students.

Nisali and Yureshya, my wonderful research partners for their hard work, sleepless nights and admirable dedication to this project without whom the design session would have remained just a two page document. Isura for his generous advice, help and motivation throughout my field work. Theja, Kalani and my wonderful Without Borders family for helping me translate research to action. Havannah, Sarah, Caroline and Alex thank you for the early morning breakfasts in Pom and the late nights in Shafer. For the memes, laughs, love and food - I am truly grateful. Antonia DeMeeo ‘89 for bringing me here to Wellesley.

My Lokuamma - Manjula, who passed away before I was able to finish this piece of work. You helped me see the power that a teacher possessed to transform lives. My Amma - Champa Thennakoon for her unconditional love and bravery and for helping me realize that education can change absolutely everything and for raising me through unimaginable odds. My Thathi - Upali Thennakoon, your spirit and life will always remind me to speak truth to power no matter the consequences. This is for you.
Five days before the completion of this thesis, on the 21st of April 2019, Sri Lanka faced a series of violent terrorist attacks that took away nearly 300 innocent lives while injuring nearly 500 people. Terrorism has no name, religion or color however, classrooms across the world have an unimaginable power to shift the narrative. May this body of work be a dedication to the beautiful lives that we lost and a reminder that educators across the world have the power to ensure that this pain never repeats.
Chapter 1
Local Education System in Sri Lanka - A Primer

Historical Context: The *piriven* system and the colonial impact

In this chapter, I aim to provide a historical context into the local education system in Sri Lanka to highlight the transition from an approach focused on spiritual exploration, theology and philosophy based in *piriven* (Buddhist temples) to a rote learning culture, and the influence of the British imperial apparatus within this transition. To better contextualize this research project, I am only focusing on government-run and privately owned schools that offer primary and secondary education to students from the ages of six through eighteen. While the chapter will briefly touch on pre-schools and higher education institutions this is not the primary focus of my research.

Indigenous forms of institutionalized primary and secondary education in Sri Lanka emerged around 100 CE within what were known as *piriven*. However the tradition of ‘learning’ has its roots in around the third century when Buddhism was first introduced to Sri Lanka. The word *pirivena* is derived from the Pali word *parivana* which means living quarters of Buddhist monks. A *pirivena* was a Buddhist temple or monastery that was focused on teaching the Buddhist philosophy while also including instruction on linguistics, philosophy, Pali language, astrology, geography, and history. The *pirivena* system was later supplemented by village schools which then transformed into the primary and secondary education system as we see it today.¹ This system as it was before colonial invasion in 1505 would have been similar to a liberal arts education model seen in the United States today. In terms of the student body, while the majority were Buddhist monks or novices waiting for their ordination, laymen were also

allowed to access a pirivena education. However, the student populace was predominantly male and catered more to the landowning families that lived in the vicinity of the temple.

While Sri Lanka was colonized by both the Portuguese and the Dutch, the British asserted most influence within the local education system. As a policy the British minimized their expenditure on education within their colonies depending on the extent of taxes generated, this meant that for the British colonial machine education was more of a byproduct that aided their larger objective of economic development and subsequently exploitation, within the colonies. For the most part education was left to the Catholic missionaries to run and control. While the piriven system of education was more geared towards subjects such as linguistics, religion, literary appreciation, and philosophy, the colonial British approach to education was focused on the propagation of the Christian faith and later the creation of a skilled workforce proficient in English. The control by Christian missions meant that curriculums and content were far from being localized, for instance instead of drawing from local history, folklore and culture, it incorporated western classics, English kings, heroes and vernacular. In contrast to the Piriven system that focused on rational thinking, theology, Buddhist philosophy and arts, the British system focused on 'memory work'\(^2\) These conflicting approaches to education were mainly grounded in the fact that missionaries had a prime ambition of gaining converts as opposed imparting knowledge or learning.

An argument still popularized by locals is the 'divide and conquer' approach of the British in antagonizing the Sinhalese majority against the Tamil minority and the role that education played within this. In 1813 when American missions arrived in what was then known as Ceylon the backlash from the British administration caused them to move north to the Jaffna peninsula with a predominantly Tamil population and set up a thriving school system in the area based on

\(^2\) Ibid. 157
both the English and Tamil languages. The flourishing school system in the North meant that gradually Tamils and Burghers were able to occupy positions of power within the colonial administration due to their proficiency in the English language, as opposed to the Sinhalese. However this added qualification was bolstered by the British preference for minorities as a tactic of consolidating power and allegiance. Gradually due to this need for English proficiency, local schools especially those catering to the emerging middle class of the early 20th century began to model themselves after the British Grammar and Public schools by adopting aspects such as the division of the school into houses along with activities like cricket, cadeting and scouting. There was an emphasis on examinations administered by universities like Oxford and Cambridge which then regulated the content within curriculums in local schools. The British examinations gained prominence as these seemed *legitimate* in the eyes of colonial employers. The promise these examinations presented for upward social mobility meant that middle classes within colonized societies happily obliged.

These notions of external vetting and authorization still impact what is considered valid, valuable and legitimate within previously colonized nations like Sri Lanka both within the education sector and beyond. Examinations inherently measure one’s ability to retain and regurgitate information within a limited time period under stressful conditions. To date the examination apparatus remains strong and undefeated. In Sri Lanka the life trajectories of students are determined by three examinations; the grade five scholarship examination that brings the promise of a *better* school in the town for students who attend their village school, followed by the Ordinary Level (OL) and Advanced Level (AL) examinations. In 2018 the Minister of Education brought forth an amendment that made the grade five scholarship exams optional.³

During my field work I had the chance to interact with a few fifth graders who were returning home after a tuition class that was preparing them for the scholarship exam. Tuition is the local term used for extra help classes that are held after school usually conducted by school teachers. I met some students who had started preparations for this scholarship examination in first grade. All the students I spoke to attended their village school - the Kahanawita Kanishta Vidyalaya. The school is situated about half an hour from the nearest town. When I asked the students if they had heard of the recent announcement that made the examination optional, they replied that they were all aware. I followed up their response in an attempt to understand what motivated or pressured them to opt in. For all of them, their hope was that they would score enough marks to be able to get admission to the school in the town. Several parents of these fifth graders had come along with their children for the tuition class. From the conversations I had, it was evident that the grade 5 scholarship examination was a more intense competition between the mothers than among the students themselves.

After the scholarship exam students either start sixth grade in their regular school or if they score above the cut-off mark, they would start off at a school in the town or in the capital city. The next two defining moments in school come with the OL examination that students sit for when they are in tenth grade and the AL examination that they sit for when they are in thirteenth grade. The OL exam usually is another path to securing a position in a better school in the town or in the capital city of Colombo.

The AL examination is seen as the make or break point of a child’s life. Madushan’s* story in facing life after his ALs encapsulates the stories of countless others who put immense work, resources and faith into this process as means of escaping vicious cycles of poverty. I met Madushan, 22 in the village of Kahanawita. He also attended the Kahanawita school until his OLs and was a talented student who was also the head prefect of the school. His mother is a
manual laborer at the Municipal Council and his father is a thotami - a market porter. According to Madushan his father was out of the picture and lives with other thotamis in the city and has a severe drinking problem. When I met Madushan in December 2018 he had just received his AL results. This was his second time sitting for the exam in the science stream, unfortunately this year too he did not secure sufficient grades to get admission into a local university. Madushan’s case isn’t an anomaly, for many working class families admission into a local university through the AL exam is a guaranteed route to securing a government job and climbing up the social ladder.

“Now the people in the village will be waiting to ask me what the results were. You know them no miss, they’re waiting to see what has happened and then laugh at me behind my back,” said Madushan when I enquired as to how he was feeling. When I asked Madushan what his plan was, he replied that he was planning to try again for the third time with the hopes of getting into dental school. Many others in the village have a very positive outlook of Madushan. Shanthi* whose two daughters get tuition from Madushan for their OL exams mentioned how “everyone in the village respects Madushan. He dresses well and he is different. My husband made him a table to work on for free for helping the girls with their OLs. Their house doesn’t even have a door.”

Madushan is well aware of the perception that others in the village have of him, but he is nervous about the responses he will get given his AL results. As somebody who was raised in this village myself it was interesting for me to see how one’s AL results were creating a rupture in well established lines of social hierarchy and caste in allowing individuals from working class families like Madushan to be perceived differently to how his mother or father is regarded in the village.
Localization

Around 1911, there was a sharp divide between two conflicting schools of thought with regards to the place that vernacular languages (Sinhala and Tamil) should occupy in the school system. On one hand there was the argument that vernacular languages were a hindrance to learning English, the belief of many like Rev. Father C.H Lytton, the rector of St Joseph’s, a prominent Catholic boys school, that still maintains this identity to date. On the other end of the spectrum educators like the Alec Fraser (who led Trinity College in Kandy, another boy’s school that still remains the leading catholic institution in the district) and public figures like Sir Ponnambalam Arunachalam who held a prominent position within the freedom struggle were of the belief that the education system in Sri Lanka needed to incorporate local knowledge, problems and languages. Fraser was of the view that ‘real thought is created best in boys by the application of ideas to their known environment and conditions.’

Sir Arunachalam’s take on this issue provides a clearer view into the British colonial motives that shaped education systems. He believed that secondary schooling at the time was able to prepare Ceylonese ‘men’ for legal, medical, clerical and lower division civil service jobs but never adequately trained them for higher divisions within the Civil Service or for other decision making positions within the government. He called for an education system that prepared locals for the independent governance of their own state free from colonial rule. However the colonial apparatus was able to profit from the support of the emerging middle class that were highly motivated by the prospects of upward social mobility that the current examination focused English school system provided.

The work of both Dr Ken Robinson and Dr Sugatra Mitra, that were widely popularized via their TED Talks illustrate the colonial impacts within contemporary education system and

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how the goals of literacy, numeracy and the ability to commit large volumes of information to memory are inherently rooted in British colonial pursuits.

Governance Structure

Sri Lanka faced a dramatic change within their public administration system in 1987 with the signing of the *Indo-Lanka Accord* and the adoption of the infamous thirteenth amendment which led to the devolution of power from the central government to the nine provincial councils that governed over the nine provinces of the country. The devolution of power meant that provinces now had the legislative authority to pass statues over matters such as healthcare, rural development, infrastructure and education. To briefly illustrate the governance structure within the education system - The Ministry of Education sits at the top of the administrative hierarchy. The adoption of the thirteenth amendment meant that there is now both a minister and a state minister for education. Right below the ministry were the provincial councils. Each provincial council had its own minister, secretary and director overseeing the affairs related to education within their respective province. Within each province there were several zonal education offices, usually around 10-15 zones per province. Each zone was presided over by a zonal director for education who was responsible for all matters relevant to the school's within his zone. The zonal director was the closest administrative point of contact for local teachers and principals.
Chapter 2
Design (Re)thinking: research, conversation and community action.

This chapter outlines the methodology of the research project to build a case for why design anthropology provides a pragmatic toolkit to both rethink participant-observation and to also devise new forms of curated conversations towards a discipline of applied public anthropology. Here, I unpack design anthropology as a practice and examine how it helps to merge design and anthropology through collaborative ethnography. Otto and Smith in their chapter ‘Design Anthropology: A distinct style of knowing’ define this merger of anthropology and design as being grounded in ethnography and within participant-observation in particular.⁵

‘Design’ - one of the most ambiguous terms in use today emerged in rather varied forms through the invention of the movable mechanized type in Europe and China during the mid 1400s which gave rise to early forms of typography and graphic design in the form of mise-en-page. The next most influential emergence of design came through the Industrial Revolution where it was used to conceptualize effective manufacturing processes that would allow for low cost mass production and increased worker productivity. The design practices that followed were inherently functionalist and utilitarian which crafted everyday objects and spaces around its purpose and use. Movements like the Bauhaus in Germany during the 1920s dramatically altered the world of design to become what it is today. The movement attempted to merge functionalist design with the principles of art and aesthetics, to think beyond mass consumption in crafting a new modernist wave of urban spaces and minimalist living. Ultimately the dot.com era’s focus on design came about especially in the Silicon Valley with the sole aim of ‘designing’ tech products that altered the day to day lives of its consumers. Design manifested itself in the third industrial revolution through forms of user experience and user

interface design where the objective was to create seamless digital experiences that ultimately led to different forms of dependence on, and addiction to the platforms used. Design today is increasingly being considered as a cross cutting theme to be used and considered across diverse industries. It is inherently product focused, solutions driven and future oriented. Design is focused on the process, but its success is measured by the impact that its products and solutions drive in the everyday lives of their users.

On the other hand, anthropology as a discipline is focused on observing, recording and interpreting various cultural and social processes that occur within the lived reality of a given community or social phenomena. Usually the end product of an anthropological endeavour is an ethnography that might take the form of a book, journal, blog, film or even a mixed medium installation. I argue that the merger between design and anthropology provides a framework for applied anthropology that combines anthropology’s focus on observation, cultural interpretation, meaning making and the production of, what Clifford Geertz has referred to as ‘thick description’ with design’s emphasis on collaborative interventions that bring about new ways of thinking, doing and being that ultimately effect change. Particularly useful to my project, Otto and Smith highlight two defining objectives of design anthropology; first, design anthropology is future oriented and solutions driven with the aim of bringing together diverse communities for collaborative future making. Secondly, this newly emergent sub-field allows anthropology to go beyond the mere documentation of its observations and reflections to co-producing a contextual body of knowledge that will lay the foundation for a reimagination of the future.

The research methods for this project are grounded in these two principles with the intent of devising a mix of different ethnographic tools to dissect, critique, reflect on and reimagine the local education landscape in Sri Lanka. The research project has two key

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components; a design session which was curated in the form of a five hour workshop that
brought together a diverse group of stakeholders, with an interest in education reform or who
had worked in the local education space in Sri Lanka. The second component focused on using
participant-observation to follow three local school teachers in a fishing community called
Wanathawilluwa in the Puttalam district to gain an intimate view into the day to day experiences,
aspirations, goals and dilemmas of teachers both within the classroom and beyond (Chapter 3).

This chapter focuses on outlining the overall structure of the design session by
examining how the participants were brought together, analyzing the conversations and findings
during the session and understanding how a workshop style approach is a viable tool in merging
the disciplines of design and anthropology towards a shared goal of community mobilization and
social change. The idea for a design session began when I reached out to my personal
networks in Sri Lanka via a post on Facebook with the intention of scheduling conversations
with individuals working within the education sector. The post gained close to 60+ shares, a total
of 143 comments and led to around six to ten emails per day from researchers, local school
teachers, disillusioned parents, activists, undergraduates who were frustrated with how the local
school system had prepared them poorly for the ‘world of work’ and even the dean of the
Colombo Open University. (Appendix 1) The responses I received made it evident that there
was a growing community of individuals from diverse backgrounds, localities and life
experiences with a shared passion for education reform.

My aim was to devise a mechanism to bring this diverse group of individuals together
into a common space to exchange ideas, spark conversations and to ultimately understand how
they envisioned what ‘change’ looked like within the local education sector. The intentionality
behind choosing a design session approach was grounded in the idea of altering the power
dynamics between the ethnographer and interlocutor. A design session meant that I as the
ethnographer was not merely observing and recording, but that the participants themselves were given the space, tools and freedom to observe and reflect upon themselves within the context of their own experiences within the classroom, their frustrations with, and aspirations for the current education space and their vision for the future.

I brought in two local undergraduates (studying law and psychology) to co-create the session with me. The structure of the design session was based on two guiding principles that emerged at the intersection of design and anthropology. First, we needed to create a collaborative space for brainstorming, ideation and critical reflection between individuals from across disciplines by foregrounding the concept of ‘creativity under constraint’ to spark a nuanced conversation around education that took a critical look at the larger system in which we operated in. Here, we paid special attention to issues of colonial influence, governance structures, class, gender and disparate living conditions among teachers, students, local administrators versus decisions makers and donors. While anthropological fieldwork calls for a more free flowing form of ethnographic engagement through participant observation, that allows conversations to meander and the field site to guide us, I argue that structure and constraint allow workshop styles such as these to deviate from diffuse forms of discourse that we see in development conferences and panel discussions. These unstructured conversations (often moderated) usually lead to minimal follow up dialogue, concrete action, or a critical questioning of the various power structures at play within the context of the issue. In ‘Cultural production, Creativity and Constraints’ Brian Moeran, a business anthropologist argued that creative work is essentially a performance that is both enabled and inhibited by constraints.\(^7\) These constraints that we find within creative processes are referred to by Moeran as a liminal space (Turner)

\(^7\) Moeran, Brian. Cultural Production, Creativity and Constraints. 2009
where a community of creatives propagate ‘a climate of approval’ that ultimately allows for an alternative outlook into a common problem.

The second aim of this approach was to adopt an *interventionist, hands-on approach* to field work that readily adopted a social change and justice focused mission. The intention here was to push back against the use of ethnography as a method of parachuting into a community for the aim of data gathering and the pursuit of intellectual curiosity, and to instead reframe ethnography as a tool for community organizing and mobilizing.

The design session was divided into five components (Appendix 2) The first portion focused on introducing the research project and explaining our rationale for ‘reimagining education.’ Here we discussed the reasoning behind the use of the word ‘reimagination’ as an attempt to go back to our roots, to think and understand the world around us as a seven year old would, breaking away from established norms of what is considered possible, needed or appropriate within the realm of local education. The concept of ‘reimagination’ within the context of education was popularized among groups outside academia, by a TED Talk series titled ‘Reimagining School’ that featured educators like Sir Ken Robinson talking about creativity in schools, Salman Khan speaking of Khan Academy and the work he does in reinventing education through videos and Bunker Roy and Shukla Bose talking about re-envisioning local education for extreme affordability⁸. Science Fiction and afrofuturism in particular are been increasingly viewed as a powerful tools for reimagining our social realities around race, class and gender. Author Monica Byrne speaks of how science fiction as a genre can become a tool in helping us think beyond our conditioned ways of rationalizing the world around us, breaking away from the structures, systems and hierarchies that prevent us from imagining alternative ways of rethinking our everyday.

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⁸ [https://www.ted.com/playlists/24/re_imagining_school](https://www.ted.com/playlists/24/re_imagining_school)
The first component of the design session was followed by three elevator pitches from local education focused ventures. The premise behind this was to use local examples to help ground ‘reimagination’ as a process that can lead to the creation of tangible products, processes and projects. The third portion focused on taking the audience through a quick design thinking process to introduce what we referred to as ‘our 4 guiding values for the day’: human-centered, collaborative, experimental and optimistic. The fourth portion of the session took the form of two design challenges, where the aforementioned constraints were introduced in terms of context, time and deliverables. The use of a structured challenge that directed the group’s thinking seemed rather counterintuitive to a design session that focused on ‘reimagination’ as a key objective however, the framing of the design challenges will help explain how a balance was struck. (Appendix 3)

The first design challenge used empathy maps as a tool to challenge the audience to think about the viewpoint of a thirteen year old in the year 2030. (Appendix 4) The audience was asked to imagine what a thirteen year old will see, hear, experience, feel and touch during a 7.00 am to 5.00 pm weekday. What opportunities are they exploiting? What challenges are they battling? What are their pains, frustrations and gains in a given day? The participants were then asked to illustrate this through a medium and format of their choice. The second challenge focused on unpacking what we meant by the term ‘education system.’ To give the teams a head start in visualizing the word ‘system’ we used ‘curriculums-spaces-processes-tools’ as a framework to dissect the various working parts of a system. The audience was asked to draw from their empathy map to see how they could ‘flip an existing curriculum, space, process or person’ in a way that catered to their imagined child from 2030. The fifth and final component focused on inspiration and reflection. The audience was asked to introduce their peers to one thing they’ve read, listened to, created, seen, done or experienced that would help them
reimagine education. This was followed by a reflection section that was visualized into an infographic realtime.

The day of…

Nearly two weeks were spent on the preparations leading to the design session from scouting for locations and picking the best short-eats to the team sessions where we iterated on the structure of the sessions, the powerpoint slides and struggled with finding ways of engaging our expanding guest list. We comprised of a team of four by the day of workshop, including myself, Yureshya (law student) Nisali (psychology student) and a new addition, Isura. What I slowly began to understand as preparations for the design session went on and participants gradually started to confirm attendance and the event was creating some buzz around education circles in the capital city of Colombo was that age was a key indicator of knowledge, competence and authority. While my email communications with participants went smoothly, I soon realized that my age and appearance would pose an issue on the day of the session when I would meet some of these participants in person for the first time. In Sri Lanka age is often considered to be the definitive measure of maturity and experience and I definitely did not fit into this archetype. Hence, we decided to bring in a well known educator from an established education-focused social enterprise on board as a co-facilitator. Isura and I had a conversation prior and understood that we both shared a set of common values with regards to the local education space. His presence as a seasoned practitioner within the larger development space in Sri Lanka meant that we were able to benefit from the sense of legitimacy that accompanied him.

The planning process of the session also helped me understand the existence of an informal inner circle or as Turner would frame it, a *communitas* of individuals who worked within
the nonprofit sector.\textsuperscript{9,10} This inner circle comprised mainly of researchers, activists, journalists and those who worked for larger development agencies like the United Nations or The British Council. Many of these individuals were from English speaking, upper middle class backgrounds living in the capital city. Interestingly, while I had also worked with the United Nations for nearly two years and was closely attached to a local education based non-profit I did not feel as if I had access to this inner circle that would often be seen in panel discussions and conferences held in the city. Leading to the session I was curious to see how, and if these relationships would manifest during the session.

A few days prior to the session we sent an email to the thirty-five confirmed participants with an information pack consisting of the session rundown and a concept note outlining the research project. (Appendix 5) We started around 9.00 am with individuals slowly trickling in. Usually Sri Lanka runs on ‘island time’, meaning that to arrive thirty minutes late is completely normal and acceptable. Since we had a diverse attendance list of people who were clearly a part of the \textit{inner circle} (that was referenced above) and others who were outside, a conscious effort was taken to create a space of familiarity. All the participants were welcomed and introduced to each other as they entered the venue, which sparked pockets of informal conversation. My initial fears of being judged by my external identity as a young woman in her early twenties immediately resurfaced as a veteran teacher trainer who saw me for first time exclaimed ‘Wait. Are you Kavindya. Oh my god you are so small!’ which was received with some subtle laughter from the participants who were in the room at the time.

\textsuperscript{9} Communitas: Turner’s concept, denoting intense feelings of social togetherness and belonging, often in connection with rituals. In communitas, people stand together “outside” society, and society is strengthened by this.

Isura’s presence clearly helped some of the inner-circle participants to situate us. They might have placed us outside their inner circle however, the use of jargon like ‘design thinking’ and ‘anthropology’ seemed to make the project seem novel and harmless while remaining beyond the familiarity of their inner circle. To paint a clearer picture of our demographic, let me outline a few of the groups and individuals who were present. From what I would classify as the inner-circle we had the principal and a teacher from a school called Petite Fleur (a local private school following an interesting alternative to the mainstream schooling system), an engineer who was a thought leader in the STEM education space, a few local activists from a non profit focused on sex education, a university lecturer, the manager of the teacher training programs for British Council and three lead researchers from two prominent local think tanks and the Harvard Education School. The more unconventional participants who did not seem to have any prior connections to the others present, were three architecture students, three journalists, a high court judge, several undergraduates from local universities, the founder of an edu-tech startup, an accountant, a local school teacher from the Dehiathakandiya National School (who was the only participant outside of the capital city) and an artist who was homeschooling her children.

After the participants had assembled themselves we started off by introducing the design session, the research project and the reasoning behind the need to reimagine. Next we moved straight to an ice breaker of human bingo facilitated by Yureshya and Nisali. There were laughs all around as everyone was asked to stand up and mingle with others as they tried to find peers who matched the different categories like ‘born in October’, ‘have a shoe size of 7’ or ‘was wearing red.’ One of the key takeaways was the usefulness of play and childish competition in helping a group comprising of a diverse age range and life experiences to connect with each other and familiarize themselves with the space. By the end of the ice breaker we had close to
forty participants in the room, exceeding our initial confirmation list. After the group settled in the mood felt much lighter and as a facilitator I felt more at ease and in control of the space.

Then we went over ‘our 4 guiding values for the day’ and opened up the floor for three elevator pitches. Our first was from an edu-tech startup in Sri Lanka called eLearning.lk11 who were pioneering a movement to produce online courses in two local languages and the founder spoke of how he envisioned a future where schools became obsolete. Next was a pitch from Sarvodaya Fusion by Isura himself.12 Fusion is one of the longest running social enterprises in Sri Lanka operating with the mission of taking digital literacy to every young person in the island. Isura had a rather different take on the issue of local education and unemployment where he highlighted that employers had a surplus of jobs that they were struggling to fill, due to the lack of applicants with in-demand, applicable skills like problem solving and critical thinking. The final pitch was by Grassrooted, a non-profit focused on taking sex education to local schools.13

This form of idea sharing on local examples of successful cases studies seemed to get a positive response from the audience, so we decided to create space over the span of the day for a few more two-minute pitches from others who felt inspired to pitch an idea or concept. This move to create more space for the participants to pitch their own thoughts and ideas changed the dynamic of the audience, by both allowing those we recognized as been in the inner-circle to have the opportunity to talk about their past experiences, the work they do and the insights they have gathered over the years and to also allow those who were new to the space to pitch their innovative concepts and thoughts. In some sense this allowed both groups to gain a sense of authority in a space where the ice breaker did not give an opportunity to talk about each other’s organizational titles and previous experiences. Planning the ice breaker in this way was a

11 eLearning.lk- ttps://elearning.lk/
12 Sarvodaya Fusion - https://fusion.lk/
13 Grassrooted - http://www.grassrooted.net/
conscious decision made during the design process of the session to create a level playing field for everyone to feel comfortable in sharing their perspectives irrespective of age, job title or past experiences. However, this meant that many audience members were unable to read the room and place fellow participants within their respective mental brackets.

The participants were already divided into three groups prior to the session to ensure a mix of disciplines, ages and areas of expertise. The elevator pitches were followed by the two design challenges. For each of the design challenges I will highlight below the key themes that emerged from the three groups based on the sensory parameters that were given to them and trace through certain conversations between the participants that stood out during the presentation portion when each of the teams presented their insights and answered two points of information from their peers.

The key aim of the first design challenge; the empathy mapping exercise was to provide the teams with a set of concrete parameters that would allow them to engage in an in-depth exploration of the ordinary day to day life of a thirteen year old from 2030. Our challenge was to envision how a thirteen year old from 2030 will spend a weekday from 7.00 am - 5.00 pm by looking at various touch points outlined on an empathy map. Some of the teams first delved into creating a persona around the character they were empathizing with, in terms of gender, locality and socioeconomic status. All the teams followed the empathy map model and while 2030 was a mere eleven years away, what was imagined was a period of hyper-connectivity and normalization of technologies like artificial Intelligence. The empathy map comprised of three different indicators - a) feel; what are the feelings and emotions that your subject will come across in a given day? b) do and think; what are the actions and thought processes that your subject will go through? c) see and hear; what are the different sensory reactions that your

14 https://www.nngroup.com/articles/empathy-mapping/
subject will go through in terms of seeing, hearing and touching? In the following paragraphs I attempt to condense the key conversations and themes that emerged within these three parameters.

*Feel* - There was a dilemma between two conflicting conceptions on whether 2030 will allow a thirteen year old to be constantly connected to their networks, or if it would bring about a sense of isolation? They questioned if this sense of connectivity led to a surge in anxiety and depression caused by a feeling of having been left behind during a time of rapid change and progress while simultaneously being inundated with choice. The group that stressed on the mental health aspects was led by a prominent psychologist and mental health educator hence, his insights greatly influenced the direction of the group’s dialogue. Another conflict arose between the ideas of collectivism versus individualism and to what extent one would overpower the other, given the forces of competition, rapid change and progress. Choice was another prominent theme that emerged where one group commented on how their thirteen year old would probably have green hair and dress in whatever way they liked.

*Do and Think* - many of the groups discussed virtual, visual and gamified approaches to learning and others questioned if schools will be relevant in 2030. This was a surprise given the rapid rate of change that some of the individuals predicted over just a decade. Exams presented another topic of debate where many of the undergraduates and more radical proponents of homeschooling and fast-track education (such as the engineer present in the audience who argued that a usual four year mechatronics degree could be delivered within nine months) were of the view that exams were null and void and instead emphasized on more values based, qualitative forms of evaluation. Others like the university lecturer and teachers who were on the administration end of the issue were of the opinion that some form of measurement was crucial. This led to a discussion led by the Neera*; an artist who was homeschooling her kids after being
homeschooled herself, about how the future need was for the basic mastery of a certain skill-set that would allow one to outsource the tasks that they were unwilling or unable to do.

See and hear - The group with one of the architecture students spoke of how in 2030 a typical thirteen year old might see the boundaries between home and school blur, where they might opt into other more communal living arrangements. They imagined a 2030 where there were no mobile phones but spaces filled with screens. What was gleaned from their explanation was a visual space inspired by the futuristic cinematics of science fiction movies. The Q/A portion of the presentation brought in a level of engagement and enthusiasm that I would have never been able to envision during the initial stages of the project design. What was evident was that many of the participants in the audience were in search of an avenue to voice their concerns, ideas and perceptions and as illustrated by the differing perspectives that emerged several of them held very strong opinions on why and how the local education space should be reformed.

One of the key dilemmas that this challenge posed was in bringing the team back to thinking about the ordinary day to day experiences of a thirteen year old. For instance when one of the teams spoke of how there will be constant connectivity, I challenged them to further peel through these layers by asking questions like: what do they see first thing in the morning? Do they use a phone alarm to wake up? Are they constantly using their phone? If so what are the applications they are using; for how long and why? While these probing ‘why’ questions led to some unpacking of the layers to get to the everyday micro realities, many of the teams zoomed back out to discussing macro level themes.

After a short snack break and conversation we moved onto our second and final design challenge for the day. The challenge, titled ‘Redesigning Systems’, was focused on bringing key insights that the teams had gathered from the empathy mapping challenge to think about how
the ‘education system’ can be flipped to better cater to the experiences, goals, aspirations and lived realities of a child living in 2030. (Appendix 6) One of the key aims of this challenge was to understand how the different participants articulated and visualized the ‘education system.’ In many of my past conversations with educators, school principles, government officials, parents and even students, many voice a shared feeling of frustration with the ‘system.’ While I had never probed into what this notion of the ‘system’ meant or what it looked like in the past, I was curious how different groups within the education space understood and approached this overarching dilemma of the ‘system.’

As inspiration we used the systems mapping tool created by the IDEO and Riverdale as a part of their ‘Design Thinking for Educators’ toolkit. The toolkit illustrates four points of intervention when it comes to driving change in education: curriculum, spaces, processes, and tools and systems. In order to fit this model into our context, the team and I decided to replace the word ‘systems’ with ‘people.’ The participants were introduced to this framework as a possible way of breaking down how they would like to intervene and what aspect of the larger education landscape they would like to transform in making local education more relevant to future students.

As the participants gathered in their groups the facilitators and I floated between the three teams to ask more targeted questions whenever the word ‘system’ emerged to encourage the teams to think more visually about what the system looked like to them. The groups that contained the architecture students immediately picked up on spaces and explored ways through which educational spaces could be redesigned to be more in touch with nature and the environment. The conversation moved away from talking about schools and classrooms to a broader discussion of how educational spaces should be multi-purpose, democratic, safe and

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student-centric. There was an emphasis on e-resources and environmentally friendly features such as chairs doubling as whiteboards. It was interesting to see how many of these visualizations of the ‘classroom’ of the future related more to the kind of learning spaces that were seen in Sri Lanka before the colonial era where students gathered in circles outside the village temple usually under the shade of a luscious canopy while practising their writing on a boxed frame covered in sand called a *welipeela*. However, the student they were designing for, based on the observations from the previous empathy mapping challenge, was living in a world of hyper-connectivity. This contrast in going back to historical forms of community-based learning while thinking of a child from a technologically advanced future was intriguing to note.

The teams that focused on *processes and tools* stressed on two main elements - the need for self organized learning where the teacher assumed the role of a facilitator and the need to restructure teacher training programs into a more collaborative knowledge sharing exercise. Discussions around teacher training led to several other conversations around how state actors within the education space functioned and the inherently skewed dynamics that existed between teachers and trainers. Minendri*, an assistant lecturer in English Literature at the University of Colombo shared her experiences in dealing with teacher training programs that she conducted and how there was a lack of communication and cooperation between the Ministry of Education and the National Institute of Education (NIE); the two main state agencies incharge of teacher training. She explained how there were instances when the two institutions would hold competing training sessions covering the same content and how teachers were conflicted on attending one over the other. When I asked her if this was the same case in terms of how curriculums were crafted she clarified that it was not and that based on her experiences she had seen ‘many different panels’ comprising of individuals from different sectors coming together to offer advice and provide critical input. Hansel* from Grassrooted voiced his frustration in how
this lack of coordination was also seen within examinations, where the examinations board usually had minimal communication with the Ministry of Education and the NIE who were in charge of the curriculum creation and teacher training aspects respectively. The latter two agencies rarely communicated with each other, which led to a mismatch in the curriculum that the teachers were supposed to deliver versus what they were being trained to do.

The highlight of this segment of the design session was the argument (or rather heated conversation) that ensued between Damith*, a local English teacher from Dehiaththakandiya; a rural village in the North Western province where some households are still off the grid, and Sumedha* a representative from the British Council who oversaw many of its programs around local schools and teacher trainings. The conversations began when Sumedha who was an active participant throughout the session began to speak about the role of teachers within the education system. ‘No matter how much training we (British Council) do for them on innovative training methods and new ways of teaching they rarely utilize these practices in the classroom. Some teachers still do not make a lesson plan before going into the classroom. Then how can they plan ahead and use their time effectively?’ she questioned. As the only teacher in the audience from outside the city, Damith rose to respond just as I had predicted.

Damith and I met back in 2016 through a teacher training program that was conducted for his peers at the Dehiattakandiya National School and it was evident that he had many thoughts on Sumedha’s take on this issue, as I had been observing his reactions through the course of her comments. Damith elaborated on how teachers ‘only had forty-five minutes for each period’ and how lesson plans do not work in this context when it can take about ten to fifteen minutes to get the class settled. Hene, the realities in a classroom never allow for a pre-planned agenda as suggested by teacher trainers from institutions like British Council. ‘It is easy for you to come and do a one-day session or a program for a few hours but the realities
are very different for us.’ He further elaborated on how the teachers are paid disproportionately less compared to the work they do, hours spent and the transportation costs some of them have to incur. He also spoke of how he was recently transferred from his school in Dehiattakandiya to a school in the suburbs of Colombo, and how the current operation of the transfer system meant that many teachers were working in environments where they were unhappy because they were far away from the families and communities. This exchange resonated with many individuals in the audience and several came back to it during the reflection portion of the session to highlight how we often engage in high level thinking and strategizing while sitting in the comfort of the capital city while perspectives and stories from local educators like Damith help to illuminate the local realities that are complicated and conflicted.

The group that focused on curriculums spoke of the ineffectiveness of exam focused approaches and how the three main local exams: the grade five scholarship exam, the Ordinary Level exams (OL) and the Advanced Level exams (AL) defined the entirety of a student’s experiences within the local education system. The dilemma for the group was in then figuring out how student success and performance could be measured in order to disburse the limited number of state university slots that every student sitting for these exams were vying for. The groups that looked at the people component of the system asked questions about how we could possibly map out what the system looked like in order to truly understand it. While the system was often spoken of in terms of the state and its institutions, the group ultimately moved onto discussing how the system might not only include state actors but also stakeholders like parents and principals. This reflection pointed to how we generally visualize the system to be the government or another state actor affiliated with it, which adds to the ambiguity around the system since we instantly visualize institutions in opposition to people. A few probing questions from the facilitators led the teams to trace through different hierarchies and administrative lines.
For instance the teams explored how zonal education offices (the first touch point between the ministry of education and local schools) were ultimately individuals with their own set of experiences, biases, prejudices, aspirations and visions for the future. Here, the same idea is applied to all institutions from the provincial education officer at a village level to the minister of education right at the top. Some individuals in the team picked up on how it was critical to find champions within the system. Isura chimed in on this matter by bringing in his advocacy experience working with the state sector on how it was most effective to find champions at a middle managerial level who were essentially the ‘translators’ between those at high level decision making positions and the implementers on ground (i.e: zonal education officer). The design challenge concluded after all the teams presented their key takeaways and the discussion moved into a more a freeform conversation.

Finally we moved onto the final two segments of the session; the inspiration map and reflections. We were pressed for time since the conversation around systems was rich and passionate and we allocated more time for it than planned. For the inspiration map portion of the workshop we asked the participants to write down one thing that they have read, listened to, created, seen, done or experienced that helped them reimagine education or approach it in a different light. The reasoning behind this segment was to map out the different sources of inspiration that propelled everyone’s interest in education and to then connect the dots between both diverse and conflicting perspectives. However, the group was more focused on the conversation that had started with the last session so, we jumped straight into reflections.

Through the reflections we asked each participant three questions; one thing that inspired them today, one thing that frustrated them, and what they envisioned this conversation to become in February 2019. The first two questions helped us to gather feedback as facilitators and the last question was intended to see whether or not the group was interested in taking this
concept forward and if yes, how they envisioned it happening. By putting a time span on it (February 2019) the participants were encouraged to think realistically about their vision for the group given their interests, availability and commitments. As the session began, I took a flip chart paper that was visible to the room to visualize all the ideas that were been raised. As I was taking notes, I realized that it was motivating for the participants to see that their suggestions were being recorded and displayed for the others to see. The process of recording might have given the sense that these ideas might hopefully translate into action instead of been lost to thin air, as is usually the case during reflections. The session led to more concrete and well thought out responses while many participants revisited previous remarks by pointing at the mindmap notes. (Appendix 7)

Two key responses emerged with regards to envisioning the future of the group. First, was the interest in meeting regularly, ideally once in two months. Second, was the need to opt for a cluster based approach where individuals divided themselves up based on their interests; short term focused on running similar design sessions and fostering partnerships with other like-minded organizations and advocates, the medium term cluster focused on curriculum reform, while the long term cluster focused on policy advocacy. Since I left Sri Lanka, the group organized one larger gathering and two other cluster meetings over a span of two months where I saw leaders emerging within each group who steered and tweaked the vision of their own cohort. Along the way some individuals opted out of taking leadership roles while others who were not in our initial cohort joined in. While remaining outside the field site, I struggled to strike a balance between my positionality as an ethnographer and my role as an educator and activist. I was keen to allow the teams to determine the direction of the movement and to make it their own but I also saw myself making suggestions and influencing some of the decisions that were made.
The next chapter attempts to zoom out of the specificities of the design session to take a look at the structure of the design session as a methodology. The chapter will explore the merger between design and anthropology and what each has to offer for the other. Through this analysis I argue for the use of curated design sessions as a form of ethnographic research which allows for a form of applied design anthropology.
A Principal's Story  
*From the NGO world to a local school*

I first met Kumari* on a scorching Wednesday afternoon in March 2018. I was travelling with a group of donors and trainers on a field visit meeting principals and teachers from thirteen schools in Wanathawilluwa. She fit perfectly into the quintessential image you had of a local school teacher from Sri Lanka - a finely pressed, neatly pleated blue sari and hair tightly combed back into a single plait. There was something about her that made you think she had a neatly kept office with color coded files and books organized in height order. As soon as our vehicle took the turn into the school grounds of the Mailankulama School, I noticed the parched playground giving rise to waves of dust that got right in your eye. Despite the lack of rain the school was lined with multiple canopies rustling against the western winds. Miss Kumari* was introduced to us as “principal madam’ of the school by a young teacher who kept us company until she arrived. We were running on a tight schedule since we had to make sure we got to all the schools before 1.30 pm when schools closed. So, when she arrived we jumped right into the conversation. The donor who already knew Miss Kumari was keen to know how they could assist the school in the near future. She spoke about the water issues, the difficulties that teachers faced in getting back home due to elephants who would roam along the never-ending dusty roads that linked the village to the main road.

After a brief chat about the work my colleagues and I did around sex education and self defence, Miss Kumari was very keen to invite us again to run a session for the primary school kids on topics like ‘good touch and bad touch’ and self defence. She was very proactive in terms of setting dates and deadlines. A week later, we were back. Our team joined a few of her primary school teachers to run a session for their fifth graders. She belonged to a growing population of local teachers and principals who believed that students should be given more
applicable knowledge and training on sexual and reproductive health. A rather sensitive topic within conservative communities like Mailankulama.

I continued to run into Miss Kumari over multiple other occasions, when I visited the area for various events and teacher trainings. When I went back in December 2018 for field work purposes, I was not too sure if any of the principals or teachers will be available since it was the school holidays. When I called her over the week she mentioned how they were actually having a Shramadhana among the students and teachers to clean and re-paint the school in preparation for the new year and that it would be ideal for me to come by.

We arrived in the school around 12 noon, a little later than expected after a six hour journey from Colombo. After exchanging pleasantries and catching up on new developments around the school, she invited us into her office room - a dimly lit large room shared by both the principal and the vice principal. Behind her was a blue wooden notice board where the mission and vision of the school were displayed - ‘producing a student group with competencies and good personality through quality education for the society’

‘How can I help you with your project?’ she asked. I explained what I was studying in school, the thesis and about the design session we had conducted the week before. I shared how I was trying to understand classroom realities through the perspectives of teachers and students. I felt that she would be more comfortable with a sit down interview style chat while leaving the school tour to Nuwan* a maths teacher from her school, who I was planning to interview. I assured her that it would be like a conversation and that I will ask her questions and that she can just talk to me. I placed the camera lens in line with my face, so that she did not feel nervous about switching between the camera lens and myself.

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16 Shramadhana: A word of sinhalese origin that denotes voluntary community service. Usually this is when a group of community members come together for a communal endeavour like cleaning up, rebuilding a community building or helping a fellow villager with a family funeral or religious event.
Before starting she quickly asked me if the recordings will be made public, because government workers had to get permission from the provincial education office if they were giving statements to the media. I explained to her that this will be only shown in my college and the link will not be on Youtube or other social media channels. Since it would be difficult to send a video of a large file size via Whatsapp, I promised to bring the film with me when I return to Sri Lanka in June. This put her at ease - ‘you know how these things work,’ she said.

To get the conversation started I asked her about how she became a teacher and if this was something she always wanted to do. It immediately got her started as she reminised her school days, the influences she had and what led her to becoming a teacher. ‘I went to the village school and did art subjects for my Advanced Levels (AL) Then I was able to get into the Sri Jayawardhanapura University where I did my first degree and then I worked for a NGO for nine years. I actually started there as a program assistant. Then I moved to the zonal education office through the teaching exam.’ The representative from the donor organization who coordinated with Miss Kumari, had very high regard for her and I realized that this might partly be due to the experiences she brings having worked for a NGO and thus the ability to understand the internal workings and perspectives of donors.

‘I had a teacher in school called Kirimatiyawa sir, looking at the way he did his job, I knew I wanted to be a teacher,’ she said when I asked her if she ever imagined herself as a teacher when she was young. ‘Did it turn out to be different to what you had in mind?’, I asked. The question led Miss.Kumari to give me a detailed history about the restructuring of the local administrative structure pertaining to education. She switched to her teaching mode as she took me through the history of the teacher training landscape in Sri Lanka and what changes were brought about. A seasoned storyteller, she phased her words and took her time as she helped
me draw a mental picture of what schools might have looked like, back in the day when she was a student.

‘Back in my time, we did not have this provincial council system, so we got teachers from all across the country. We did not have facilities like they have now but we had teachers for every subject and they taught us extremely well. But after this provincial system, we only get teachers from around the province. So in our case the Kurunegala district has more resources than our district, so most teachers come from this area, but when they are assigned schools like ours, it is too rural for them so they wait to finish their five year term and leave as soon as possible.’ This directly contrasted with what I had heard from the likes of Mr Darshana (a local school teacher) from the design session. He believed that teachers having to relocate to distant areas was a stressful situation but Miss. Kumari thought this approach was the best in terms of attracting new talent into villages like hers. Another point that I pondered on after her remarks were the rather disparate ways in which we understood and demarcated our sense of community. In my case, I did not quite comprehend that a teacher from one district moving to another within the same province, usually a one or two hour bus ride away would not feel a sense of belonging and feel the need to return to their own district. Thinking back to Sameera’s story who teaches in the school where he studied, and others in similar situations, it was evident that teachers felt that their job as a teacher was more meaningful and rewarding when they served their own village or district around people they had grown up around.

Thinking back to the heated discussion during the design session between the representative from The British Council and Mr. Darshana, on whether or not the problem within the education system lies with teachers and their teaching methods, I asked Miss. Kumari for her thoughts. ‘I think there is an allocation issue with the zonal education office. They give two or three maths teachers to the school in the town, while rural schools like ours get none. Our
teachers work very hard but there is not enough encouragement from the parents of the students. So it is harder for them.’ I asked her what she thought about the teacher training aspect.

‘It was in 1985 that they started the National Colleges of Education (NCE), long ago their training was really good, I remember the first batch of teachers from there who taught us and I remember how even when they took a piece of chalk to write on the blackboard, there was something about it.. I don’t know we felt something.. It was so organized and nice. They would make teaching aids for every concept. They used different methods - dancing, dramas, stories and poems but now teachers who come from the NCE are no different to the teachers from the village here with no training at all,’ she explained.

We moved on to talking about the disparities between schools. She spoke about the most well funded boy’s school in Colombo - Royal College. ‘They have about a 100 syllabus related activities, we do not have the resources to do even do one or two.’ I asked her why this was the case. ‘People in colombo who take decisions do not understand the realities at a ground level. All the best resources are in schools in the town and no one thinks about rural schools like ours.’ I revisited the conversations about the crippling hierarchies and how top-down approaches to curriculum design and education policy were missing out on grassroots realities. Often times I would rethink if this narrative of top-down approaches was one that was created and propagated by theoretical critiques of traditional development models and if those at the lower end of the decision making line resonated with this interpretation. Local educators like Miss. Kumari; who were occupying an administrative position within the school structure, saw the disparities in resource allocation and the realities faced by schools like hers as a direct result of these top-down approaches to decision making that were not community owned and run.
As it was already past lunchtime and since we had another interview left to do, I asked my last question from Miss.Kumari. You can take your time to think about this, I told her - ‘Imagine you become the Minister of Education in Sri Lanka but only for five days and you are allowed to implement one action-item. What will you do?’ She laughs but jumps right into her answer. ‘If I had that kind of power, the first thing I would do is to make all these schools equal. I will give all the resources that schools in the town have to schools in the village’ and she laughed.
Chapter 3
Collaborative design sessions as a mode of ethnography

Malinowski is credited as being one of early adopters of ethnography as a method of anthropological enquiry, through his early explorations of death rituals and after-life among the Trobriand Islanders in his essay *Baloma; The Spirits of the Dead in the Trobriand Islands*\(^\text{17}\). Alvarez Roldan, in comparing Malinowski’s field notes with his final essay, examines how his approach to ethnography was grounded in the merger of two processes: field work and analysis and writing. The latter process was guided by the former. This approach to anthropological writing grounded in the careful analysis of field observations was a distinct shift from anthropological writings that were previously based on travelers accounts and diaries to an approach that was grounded in field work through participant-observation. Malinowski also presented a diversion in discussing the process of doing fieldwork along with his observations to reveal his methodology. This helped his audience better understand how he came to know what he wrote about.

Later Geertz, in his piece *Thick Description* referred to the role of ethnography as an attempt to read culture and its symbolic manifestations as a text, and that the role of the ethnographer through participant-observation was to unravel and make sense of this web of meaning-making in which individuals and communities engaged.\(^\text{18}\) The next major influence on ethnography came through the writings of James Clifford and George Marcus in *Writing Culture* and later through Clifford’s *Ethnography through Thick and Thin* that called for more collaborative forms of ethnography that attempted to reanalyze the relationship between the


ethnographer, the subject and audience. My goal in tracing through these three pivotal moments in the shaping of ethnography is to create a foundation on which design anthropology can be contrasted and compared to how ethnography was and is understood and practiced. In essence, design anthropology merges the fields of design and anthropological inquiry. Ton Otto and Rachel Smith argue that design anthropology presents a distinct style of knowing and doing anthropology by providing a unique set of intentionally interventionist approaches to ethnography. One could say that design ethnography expanded on Malinowski’s desire to not only discuss the observation, but the process of participant-observation itself. In my ethnographic project I attempt to use this new form of ethnographic inquiry to bring together a group of individuals who were either in the education sector or had an interest in it, to become co-creators in a process of reimagining what the future of the local education space could look like by reflecting on and critiquing their own interpretations of the education space around them and their experiences of it and their vision for its future.

The core of design is focused on collaborative problem solving for the future - which helped conceptualize a design session that looked into the future while also observing, analyzing and critiquing the present. I argue that the use of collaborative design sessions allows our subjects to become co-creators in accessing and using some of the tools that we use as design ethnographers such as empathy mapping to interpret their own experiences and those of others. In some sense, a design session helps to shift the power dynamics seen between the observer and the observed within a traditional ethnographic setting to now position both these groups as ethnographers observing each other.

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Kyle Kilbourn in *Tools and Movements of Engagement: Design Anthropology* highlights how design anthropology presents a unique *style of knowing.*\(^{21}\) Within the context of local education systems this presents an opportunity to help legitimize the knowledge of local educators such as teachers, school principals, local activists and homeschooling parents by creating space for an interdisciplinary approach in bringing these diverse sources of expertise to the table. Traditionally policymaking at a ministerial level has often preferred high ranking officials within either the local university system or the public administration system to have direct control and influence over state level education strategy, curriculum creation, changes to transfer processes of teachers and other aspects of the education apparatus. These key decision makers either have been in academia or a public administration position for an extended period of time. Within education, age usually becomes a key symbolic marker of both experience and legitimacy. This means that the day to day lives of these aforementioned decision makers are far removed from the everyday realities within schools and classrooms that ultimately undergo the impact of their decisions.

What was evident through the design session was how design anthropological tools and ways of knowing allowed for the translation of knowledge between different life experiences, localities and disciplines. Kilbourn’s classification of design anthropological tools provides an ideal framework through which we can understand the reason why this approach is able to satisfy a range of different prerequisites to collaborative problem solving and a collective reimagining of our shared future. He describes four different types of design anthropological tools. The first, *perceptual synthesis,* includes visual and embodied frameworks for interpretation that deviate from more textual forms of transcribing social realities. Within the design session we envisioned both our challenges to be visual, to facilitate this we created a

stationary station with different art supplies and magazines for visual inspiration and showed the participants some photographs of the end-products that two other groups of students had produced when this same design challenge was presented to them. Interestingly, all the groups adopted a mind mapping approach that ultimately became text heavy.

When looking back at my field observations, I was intrigued by how differently diverse groups approached this challenge and how the framing of the activity prompted rather different outputs. At a similar design session I conducted prior to my field work I worked with a group of young girls. The cohort was similarly divided into two teams and presented a challenge similar to ‘redesigning systems’, however in this context we focused on just educational spaces and asked the teams to design their ideal classroom for us and we challenged them to design this space in such a way that it inspired them to express their ideas within their space and to also allow students to work together in teams. We did not provide any images or leads for inspiration as we wanted them to begin with a blank slate. The two exhibits that the groups created took our team of facilitators by surprise. One team designed a classroom that was shaped like a large cylinder where the walls displayed an underwater scene.

During their team pitches, one participant explained their classroom: ‘for example the theme in the class will change. If they are talking about the solar system, it will look like the universe and students will be able to see how the earth looks like while sitting in Pluto’. While having minimal access to technology, or even basic internet services, what the team was conceptualizing was a VR classroom. A few weeks later we took the same cohort to a VR space in Colombo for them to experience the technology firsthand. Through this comparison I argue that a similar design challenge can be interpreted differently, and that we are conditioned to restrict our ways of interpreting the world around us and reimagining what it could be in ways that could be presented textually. This is ultimately rooted in how we privilege certain mediums
and bodies of knowledge over others. For instance, a written text automatically comes with a stamp of approval and validity whereas the same information presented in a more visual or performative format would rarely be perceived in a similar manner. What design anthropology does through perceptual synthesis is to provide a set of actionable tools that can be used within everyday processes of ideation and brainstorming to bring these diverse bodies of knowledge together.

The second category of tools that Kilbourn refers to is experience juxtaposing where various forms of play and exploration are used to articulate potential experiences, while ensuring that it is grounded in reality. Experience juxtaposing speaks to an issue that was highlighted prior with regards to how key decision makers are far removed from been able to understand and empathize with the experiences of local educators and students on ground. Within our design session the empathy mapping exercise could be categorized as an experience juxtaposing tool. This approach helps ground abstract concepts, big picture thinking and high level discussions that are the hallmark of consultations and panel discussions within lived reality thus creating a space for the experiences of those local actors closest to classrooms to be heard, valued and acted upon.

The third is potential relationing which is described as performative ways of exploring how ideas for the future will play out in real life and analyzing the interconnectedness of experiences, theory and empirical material within collaborative problem solving processes. This was not a well represented category within the design session while the ‘redesigning systems’ attempted to bring forward the individual that the participants identified during the empathy mapping so that they have a viable end user in mind as they go about re-designing curriculums, spaces and people. I outlined the three categories of design anthropological tools that Kilbourn referred to as means of establishing design sessions as a viable form of community
engagement, ideation and prototyping in addition to more traditional forms of consultative sessions like panel discussions. Secondly it also presents a new form of interventionist ethnography where design anthropological tools could be used for more applied forms of anthropology where communities are equipped with tools to be able to critically analyze and interpret their own life experiences and those of others through an anthropological lens.

Design sessions propose a unique opportunity in allowing participants to progress through a three step process; reflecting back, dissecting the present and imagining the future. In doing so it provides a modular framework that could be used to structure creative problem solving processes across disciplines and industries. Looking back involves a reflection on past experiences, anecdotes and observations to understand how a certain issue or social phenomena has evolved over time while also meditating on our own positionality within, and reaction to these cycles of change. Dissecting the present is grounded in empathizing for others involved in or impacted by the problem in order to dig deeper into the micro-realities of how the issue at hand impacts our lived realities or those of others for which we are problem solving. Tools like storytelling help with this stage by allowing us to translate across disciplines, localities and differing modes of expertise to ultimately find a common language for conversation. The final stage is focused on reimagining; where the participants are able to utilize their insights from the reflection and empathy stages to reimagine a collective future.

The next chapter focused on visual ethnography explores how visual mediums like photography, documentary film and digital storytelling could be used as a tool to better inform this three step process. To analyze case studies that show us examples of how visual ethnography can help both designers and collaborators engaged in a design session to gain a more in-depth, sensory perspective into the social issues and communities they are solving for and to also provide a tool for synthesising experiences, observations and visions for the future.
Chapter 4
Visual ethnography as a precursor and synthesis tool for Design Anthropology

The second portion of my research project focused on following two local school teachers and one school principal as they toured me through their classrooms, homes and communities. These narratives have been formed into a digital story to accompany this thesis. My aim for this chapter is twofold. First, I reflect on the process of filming and listening to the experiences of these local educators by focusing on my initial motivations around choosing film as a medium, my positionality and the gaze of the camera. Next, I discuss visual ethnography as both a precursor and a synthesis tool in the practice of design anthropology.

During my field work, I spent a weekend filming in Wanathawilluwa, a fishing community in the district of Puttalam comprising of about 18,000 people. The community is an excellent example of Sri Lanka’s ethnic diversity. From the names of roads, to the mix of places of worship, the community boasts of a diverse mix of Sinhalese, Tamils and Moors. A large proportion of the community is engaged in either agriculture or fishing with many women moving to the Middle East for domestic work opportunities. During the thirty year civil war, numerous villages in Wanathawilluwa were adversely impacted and many had an influx of internally displaced persons, mostly Tamils fleeing their homes in the North. When talking to villagers, it becomes clear that Wanathawilluwa was originally home to a larger population of Tamils before they were driven North due to increasing tensions between the Sinhalese majority and Tamil minority. In some sense the ‘refugees’ were merely communities reclaiming their ancestral land. Besides this complicated history, the community also battles with a complex set of issues both related to socioeconomic disparities and adverse environmental conditions that impact their everyday.
Within the local government administrative structure Wanathawilluwa is considered the largest of sixteen other divisional secretariats (DS) that came under the purview of the Puttalam district. In terms of the local education structure, the first point of contact (state authority) for a teacher or principal in the village is the Puttalam zonal education office which oversees close to 205 schools within these sixteen DS offices. The main reason for picking this village in particular was because I had an established relationship with both the Wanathawilluwa DS office and the three local educators who agreed to share their stories with me. In 2018, an education group I was working with was approached with a proposal from an Australian mining company called Iluka, which had just begun operations in the area. Their proposal was to design a teacher training program to connect thirteen local schools from the area with new teachers recruited from within the community. To provide some context around my relationships with each of the protagonists; I had been working with all three of them for nearly a year as a part of this program. Kumari* is the principal of a school called Mailankulama and was one of the initial partners to support the project. Nuwan* who is also a teacher from the same school joined our teacher training programs over the year. The third; Sameera* was not a teacher by profession when we met him, but he went through the application process and joined our first cohort of new recruits.

I began filming during a rather tense time between the donor and the local teachers within the program. I believe some context into the situation will be useful in better understanding both the documentary film and the complicated happenings outside the frame. November 2018 was when Iluka (the donor) was planning to evaluate the success of the project and to decide on its continuation or termination. However, it was already December and we had heard nothing from the company. Thirty eight teachers who were being paid their salaries by the company as a component of their CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) project were facing an
uncertain future. To be closely involved with this negotiation process while filming was a particularly difficult one. I witnessed first hand the disparate power dynamics that were at play between corporate donors and the beneficiaries of their CSR schemes; the blatant disregard for the repercussions of their actions on the day to day lives of individuals, the white savior dilemma of the two Australian managers of the company who assumed they were 'doing more than their fair share' of social good and the way CSR projects were used to provide essential services to communities in order to create exploitive relationships of dependence and reciprocity.

During my last phone conversation with Dhaanish Hanifa, the project manager from lluka who was overseeing the project he asked me in a rather condescending manner, 'have you ever done projects before? There is a timeline. They start and they end.' His concluding remarks encapsulated rather succinctly the skewed intentions with which large corporations approached community development projects of this nature. In some sense the top-down dichotomies that I saw within the state sector, as discussed in the previous chapter, were applicable within these disparate power relations as well; where corporations like lluka lacked an intimate understanding of the day to day realities faced by the communities they impacted and the way in which their administrative structures like timelines, budget structures and approval processes were directly impacting the livelihoods of individuals and the sustenance of their families. Visual ethnography provides a unique opportunity within spaces such as these to translate local realities and to provide cultural context for communities and social issues in ways that are more effective than traditional modes of written communication.

*Navajo Film Themselves* presented one of the first forms of collaborative visual ethnographic projects where Sol Worth, John Adair and Richard Chalfen taught a group of Navajo students documentary filmmaking. While the project had many initial objectives, it

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22 “Navajo Film Themselves Giving Background to the 1966 Film Series.” Navajo Film Themselves, www.penn.museum/sites/navajofilmthemselves/.
attempted to devise an innovative research method while attempting to understand if the way
the Navajo filmed, edited and made creative choices around their film could help others outside
their culture get a better perspective into their day to day lives. While my digital story is in no
way collaborative or close to the format of the Navajo project, the text provides a comprehensive
starting point to discuss visual ethnography as a medium that overcomes the limitations of
written form by allowing outsiders to get a better window into seeing the lived realities that are
beyond theirs, and also for insiders to be able to observe and reflect on themselves.

Worth and Adair reference Malinowski’s goal for ethnographers as ‘realizing his (the
native’s) vision of his world’ and how visual modes of communication present a new way of
expression and communication to help people orient themselves and make sense of reality. In
this sense Worth and Adair question if film can be considered a language in itself, not just in a
linguistic sense but as a mode of conceptualization similar to surrealism and abstractionism. 23
This framework then poses the question if more traditional forms of written communication and
presentation distort realities and repackage experiences in a way that fits the medium. Ideally a
collaborative visual project spanning a longer time frame would allow for the collection of a rich
set of day to day experiences, dilemmas, musings and social interactions through the vantage
point of a local school teacher. While I filmed and edited the entirety of the digital story while
having full control over every creative choice that was made in terms of camera angles, focus
and what was prioritized and excluded, shifting this authority and power to the teachers or even
students themselves would have allowed for a more authentic, raw and untainted window into
the lives and thought processes of students and teachers within and beyond the classroom.

23 Worth, Sol, and John Adair. Through Navajo Eyes: an Exploration in Film Communication and
Positionality of the ethnographer and the camera

Salzman explains reflexivity as the ‘constant awareness, assessment, and reassessment by the researcher of the researcher’s own contribution, influence, shaping of intersubjective research and the consequent research findings’²⁴ ‘Never in Anger: Portrait of an Eskimo Family’ by Jean L. Briggs speaks to a dilemma that I have often encountered with regards to balance and the extent to which my positionality, biases and the perceptions that my interlocutors have of me should be revisited and prioritized over my observations and reflections on the social interactions that I was witnessing.²⁵ The interactions between a researcher and their interlocutors is in itself a space for the performance of one’s identity and the creation of newer forms of presenting oneself; both for the researcher and their interlocutors. The presence of a video camera further contributed to this desire to perform and present. With all three respondents, what I saw was a gradual easing towards the presence of the camera. For instance Sameera*, who was naturally a very outgoing and jovial individual was eager to show his home, family and fishing port in addition to a tour of his school while Kumari* was more comfortable in sitting at her table and answering any questions I had to the camera. Due to the logistical constraints around the project I gave all three respondents a few different options (seated interview style, community tour around the school, shadowing them for a day) on how we could go about with the filming process to give them the space to make suggestions and to select a style that they were comfortable with.

The following quote from Salzman in reference to Rosaldo’s ethnography *Grief and a Headhunter’s Rage* - ‘claims of objectivity and truth are really just claims of power’ was particularly poignant through the process of translating these interactions onto paper in a way that accounted for the influence of my positionality and previous experiences with my

With regards to power imbalances, I was constantly revisiting my place of extreme privilege within the research setting - I was a Western-educated woman from a middle-class background coming from the ‘big city’ with a camera and tripod. In addition to these social markers, my previous interactions with all my respondents were in the capacity of their trainer. These were clear indicators that automatically placed me in a place of authority, power and knowledge in the eyes of my respondents. My position within this community as a volunteer trainer and a negotiator on behalf of the local school teachers also contributed to an uneven power dynamic where my respondents felt the need to reciprocate the training or ‘help’ I had offered over the year. This meant that all my requests for interview times or school visits were immediately welcomed with an emphatic ‘yes!’ I was cognizant of my privilleges moving into the research and looking back, I selfishly saw this relationship I had with the teachers as an opportunity to gain an in-depth understanding that peeled through all the surface layers of how I had previously understood classroom experiences of teachers.

Rosaldo in reference to his ethnography speaks of positionality in terms of his personal experience in how his views on rage of bereavement leading the Ilongots of the Philippines to headhunt, changed after he faced the devastating loss of his own wife; anthropologist Michelle Rosaldo. He speaks of how the position of the researcher both structural and experiential changes their perception - how age, gender, neo-colonial influence and being an outsider impacts the way the ethnographer learns and how he conceptualizes certain insights. Given that I was attempting to make the ‘familiar unfamiliar’ I struggled with how I had worked with these three individuals before and had various conversations with them about the local education system and my frustrations with it. At times I felt that many of the responses I was gathering directly bounced off previous conversations and I was skeptical of the extent to which

their responses were influenced by certain strong sentiments I had previously shared with them. However, in balancing the dichotomy of being both an insider and outsider, what helped was the personal investment in the social issues that both the ethnographer and interlocutors were focusing on. In some sense filming the familiar allowed me to avoid the exotification of what I was seeing within and beyond the classrooms. This allowed for a stronger social justice focus throughout the project instead of a mere fuelling of the curiosity to study the lives and habits of The Other. On the flip side my positionality as an insider also meant that I might have let certain interactions, comments, thoughts and mannerisms slide past me as they seemed rather triate or ordinary to warrant further comment or exploration.

I conclude this reflection with the following question by George Elliot, ‘Who can represent himself just as he is, even in his own reflections?’ Salzman’s assertion that attempts to explain reflexivity through established identity markers like gender, class, religion or race are both misleading and ineffective is true, however this leaves us with the question of how ethnographers can devise other creative ways of acknowledging ones positionality and designing more participatory models for ethnographic research.

**Visual ethnography as a precursor to design**

The filming portion of the project followed the design session. While this allowed me to tease out certain key themes and assumptions from the design session to compare with what I was observing in the schools and through the conversations I was having with the teachers, I felt that the opportunity to show some of the visual content and conversations would have provided a useful starting point for the design session; one that was grounded in a sensory experience of the realities that the participants were attempting to understand and solve for.
Bas Raijmakers, the co-founder of STBY; a design research agency argues for the use of design documentaries; a unique format for documentary filmmaking that allows for documentaries to become a tool within a design research process that ultimately informs service redesign.\textsuperscript{28} Raijmakers argues that for film to effectively inform a design research process, it needs to break away from the ‘fly-on-the-wall’ types of objective filmmaking that adopted neutrality in a futile attempt to record reality as it is. What design processes need are visual ethnographies that go beyond using film as a mere note-taking tool, to embody observation, intervention and compilation; the criteria that constitutes a design documentary. Raijmakers uses the example of a project his team was involved with in helping a design team from Philips create health monitoring devices for heart patients. The design team initially used a set of archetypal personas of three fictional characters generated by amalgamating findings from thirty user interviews. After partnering with the design agency, the team was shown three design documentaries focused on three heart patients going about their day to day lives, talking to the camera through monologues and reflecting on their habits and activities. The design team had three distinct reactions to this new visual tool - a newfound curiosity to dig deeper into the everyday lives of heart patients like what they go through when they suddenly feel unwell after a casual dinner, an interest in narrating their own personal experiences or stories they had heard of similar incidents and an appreciation for being able to know their users as people and not just representatives of a set of needs and requirements.\textsuperscript{29}

This form of reflexive filmmaking had its origins in the 	extit{cinema-verite} genre which was largely propelled by the ethnographic film; Chronique d’un Été (Chronicle of a Summer) directed


\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.
by anthropologist Jean Rouch and sociologist Edgar Morin.\textsuperscript{30} The film sets out to observe a ‘tribe of people in Paris’ and comprises of monologues, interviews and discussions exploring complex social, political and psychological influences and histories that shape the lives of its protagonists and the communities they come from.\textsuperscript{31} Chronique d’un Été is excessively self-reflexive in revealing the cinematic apparatus; the process, camera, creative choices, the ethnographers and what happens when the camera is visible. This is essentially what Geertz spoke of when arguing for ethnographers to adopt an approach of ‘thick description’ within ethnography - embracing the complex, confusing, contradictory multiplicities of the everyday.

Sara Pink in her piece ‘Digital-visual-sensory, design anthropology: Ethnography, imagination and interventions’ argues that the merger between design and visual anthropology allows for a future-oriented, applied form of ethnographic practice - visual design ethnography.\textsuperscript{32} She uses her work around recording people’s homes and community gardens in the UK as they give her tours along with a commentary about their lived spaces, habits, choices and desires, to show how visual ethnography allows for a comparison between different temporalities in terms of how people understand their everyday; the past, the present and the imagined future. Merging this form of immersion in the mundane everyday of individuals and communities with design, allows for an engagement with the future that is endowed with rich insights that might be missed by more surface level research interventions like surveys and interviews. In the words of Pink this allows for an anthropology that ‘seeks to intervene in, rather than simply comment on, the world.’

Secondly, Pink also makes the claim that applied visual anthropology is usually focused on some form of awareness building in terms of generating a critical commentary around a certain social issue, practice or development. This means that the project ends with the end product which is usually a film, photo essay or digital experience however, by repositioning visual ethnography as a precursor to a design ethnographic project we integrate the end product within a process of change-making. In terms of my project, this is how I would ideally envision the digital story to be placed; as a tool to raise empathetic awareness around classroom realities that would inform design processes leading to policy or on-ground interventions and, as I would discuss shortly; a tool to synthesize findings.

**Visual ethnography as a synthesis tool for design processes**

*Laundry Lives* is a documentary directed by Sarah Pink and Nadia Astari that presents ethnographic research around everyday life and sustainability in Indonesia. The documentary that is also presented in the form of an interactive website provides an ideal example of how visual ethnography could be used as a synthesis tool to collate the findings, observations and insights gathered from a design anthropological process. *Laundry Lives* uses a blended approach that brings together visual, sensory and design ethnography to produce a body of public facing, applied anthropology.

In most consultative and research processes focused on policy making, development projects, community organizing or organization/service restructuring, design anthropological tools could be an effective mode of dissecting the problem, empathizing with the communities we are solving for, ideating and prototyping however, one of the dilemmas faced by facilitators is in figuring out how the findings and the design process itself could be documented and

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synthesized in a manner that is accessible and appropriate for a diverse audience. I argue that visual ethnography through mediums like documentary filmmaking, photo-essays, zines and interactive digital experiences provide an ideal synthesis tool to collate the findings of design processes to cater to an external audience.

What visual ethnography provides are several sensory touch points that allow the audience; donors, policy makers, government officials or even the general public to have an embodied reaction to the information they are consuming and the social issue or community that it focuses on. What this leads to is empathetic decision-making and action; a response that is difficult to achieve through traditional modes of written policy briefs, wordy presentations and cumbersome data points. Visual ethnography helps situate these findings, insights and data points within the lived realities of individuals and communities that they are about. Pink and Astari argue that film allows for their participants to utilize their entire selves in explaining, showing and demonstrating. In the context of Laundry Lives, by using a visual medium the ethnographers were able to uncover fascinating behavioral, social, economic, personal, technological and cultural influences in how their five protagonists went about and made sense of the rather mundane activity of doing laundry.

Within the realm of reimagination, visual ethnography provides a set of mediums that allow for a more visual and tactile representation of the imagined futures that are created by a design process. Samuel Collins in ‘All Tomorrow's Cultures: Anthropological Engagements with the Futures’ speaks of cultural futures and how anthropology allows for a imagination of alternative cultures and ways of being.\textsuperscript{34} Collins in his work makes links between Science Fiction and anthropology, referring to the use of Sci-Fi texts within anthropology classes during the 1950s and 1960s to explain concepts like cultural relativism. Around the 1980s, a group of West

Coast anthropologists were integrating future studies with anthropology in courses like Jim Funaro’s ‘Cultures of the Imagination’ (COTI) which was designed to *demonstrate anthropological theories and methods through simulated, futuristic encounters between humans and aliens*. Given how well anthropology is placed in dissecting the cultural past and present to ultimately design an alternative cultural future; visual ethnography allows for this imagination to inform policy, action and social imagination beyond remaining a mere fictional dystopia.

Within the local education space and in the context of my project in particular, a visual ethnographic approach allowed for an exploration of the everyday of three local educators as they showed me their homes, classrooms and communities. The interactions I had with Sameera* were particularly relevant to seeing, feeling and empathising with the everydayness of his life as a local school teacher, a fisherman and the myriad other roles he played as a son, uncle, community leader and mentor. The process of filming while touring his classroom, school, home and fishing joint gave Sameera the space to reminisce, reflect, show and verbalize otherwise mundane thoughts, actions, processes, habits and conversations that curated his everyday life as a teacher and influenced how he made sense of learning, teaching, the school environment, the community and his positionality within and beyond the classroom.

Some of narratives between the three educators contradicted each other whilst being from the same locality and at times certain thoughts voiced by the protagonists were in direct contrast to certain opinions they had expressed earlier or during past conversations that I have had with them. It is this ability to document and synthesize these ambiguities and complexities that makes visual ethnography particularly ideal for a design process focused on redesigning local education systems. Reflecting on the design session there was a tendency to develop a convenient singular persona of what a student might be like or what a teacher might experience within a classroom and it is this approach of assuming a homogeneous persona of a teacher or
a student that has led to crippling one-size-fits-all policies that have ultimately contributed to crippling inequalities between urban versus rural schools that Kumari spoke of extensively.

The constant process of recording and memorialization while Sameera spoke and walked me through the different spaces and people in his life, meant that what he was telling me was made permanent in some way and nothing was missed or forgotten; an aspect of the camera that can not be gained through a one on one conversation. While rewatching the content I realized this element was evident to Sameera as well - for instance there were several moments when he started directly addressing his audience and individuals he assumed would have access to this content. ‘I am telling this not because you are recording me or to the camera, but I want people like Mr. Dhannish and organizations like Iluka to come and see what is happening in our schools and classrooms. They can’t stay in Colombo and understand what we go through.’
Sameera: *From a crab fishery to the classroom*

I met in Sameera* in March 2018 during an interview process for local community teachers. During the interview he spoke about how he did not come from a teaching background; he was in the middle east for an extended period of time working in hotels and restaurants. ‘I can cook any type of dish, miss’ he told me. After returning back to Sri Lanka he went back to the fishing trade; a family occupation that his father is still involved in. When I asked him why he was interested in becoming a local school teacher, he spoke of how he was passionate about teaching and giving back to his community and to hopefully get the chance to teach in the school where he completed his secondary education. While he answered all our prompts well, one response took me by surprise. One of the case study prompts was focused on seeing how the teacher will respond to a teacher where they had to take disciplinary action, to which he responded - ‘I think there are some occasions where you have to take serious action. If everything fails we have to at least hit them and get them on the correct path. That is how our teacher corrected us.’ While the Australian donors were reluctant to proceed with his candidacy, many of us advocated for him. A fisherman by occupation, Sameera performed much better than many well seasoned teachers who sat for the exam and we were excited to bring his energy and fresh perspectives into the cohort. It was interesting to note how certain topics like corporal punishment are an immediate red flag for western audiences and yet, in communities like Wanathawilluwa physical punishment like kneeling in the hot sun and caning are still spoken about openly within schools, while there are conversations slowly moving into rural schools that stigmatize such measures. Till date Sameera has had great reviews from all his students and was never noted for using any form of corporal punishment. His response during the interview if taken within the local context would be considered as an assertion of his dedication to ensure the well-being and future success of his students as opposed to
perpetuating any harm. More often the politically correct western lens fails to account for these local vernaculars.

Over the months that followed I worked with Sameera and his cohort on various teacher training programs. During our first five day orientation, I was able to get to know Sameera at a more personal level. He was fun, loud and took everything very lightly, always ready to crack a joke and get everyone involved. He was loved by all his peers and created a welcoming environment for everyone around him. As per his wishes, we were able to assign him to his old school. What was evident was the sense of ownership and purpose it gave people like Sameera to be able to return back and serve their community; which was often not possible within the current transfer system for local school teachers.

When I was in the initial phases of conceptualizing the project, I reached out to Sameera with the idea of a short documentary and some context around my thesis project. My intent was to focus the story on Sameera’s journey to becoming a local teacher as I was intrigued in how someone from such a strikingly different industry could seamlessly blend into the classroom. He got on board immediately and suggested a few other teachers that we could interview, which then opened up the possibility of focusing on a few other local educators to capture more diverse experiences.

In December 2018, when I returned to Wanathawilluwa for filming I was seeing Sameera and his fellow community teachers after about five months. He met us at the junction in his bike and led our vehicle to the community hall where we were supposed to have a meeting with a few of the local teachers who were a part of our program. Sameera was always the organizer for these meetups; calling everyone up, securing a location and making sure all the later-comers were constantly coerced to get there on time. Meeting our trainees after an extended time away was truly emotional. Two of our newly weds were pregnant, a few others were getting ready for
their weddings and one of our teachers who was pregnant during our last teacher training had given birth and had brought their new born along. We caught up, discussed logistical issues and took a bunch of photos before we parted ways. By the end of the meeting Sameera had already arranged a tuk-tuk for us to get to his home, where I started filming.

Sameera lives with his parents and his sister’s family. Besides the fishing business they also run a small grocery store in their front yard. They had one customer over the evening I spent with them and it did not look like a shope with regular business. Since we were there on New Year’s eve, Sameera’s mother and sister were busy wrapping gifts to be given to the fisherman and their families who worked for his father. Sameera’s father who we met later was a well respected veteran fisherman in the community. He now owned boats of his own and employed others to go to sea on his behalf. Sameera’s family were catholic, as was common among many fishing communities who had a designated saint for the locality responsible for ensuring their safety while at sea.

Sameera’s two year old niece was very fascinated with all the cameras and gadgets, so a significant portion of the time was spent in keeping her occupied. His sister (the mother of the two year old) had just turned 23, an year older than I was. Early marriage was quite common in the community. Sameera’s family was very proud of his new job as a teacher and felt that it was a step forward from their traditional occupation. ‘My family always told me repeatedly to become a teacher, I actually first studied to become a catholic priest but as the only son in my family, I was unable to do that’ he said. Teaching while been a poorly paid occupation in Sri Lanka still has an immeasurable amount of social capital attached to it in terms of community recognition and respect. ‘I feel that the respect we had as a family as doubled.. even tripled since I took up this teaching position. Now when I see my students even in the town they ask me - sir, where are you going? Have you eaten’
‘I first applied to be a teacher through the arts stream but I did not have enough marks. My parents were very sad about this’ he added on. Sameera’s initial attempts to secure a teaching position highlights the fate of many aspiring teachers who are merely judged by their Advanced Level examination scores which means that many like Sameera who are engaging, energetic and with a natural flare for bringing a group of people together get left behind. ‘Everything can not be measured from an exam. Sometimes there are students who miss college entrance by just one mark but they have a lot of potential. In most cases it is a child’s situation and the lack of external support that influences their marks’ he reiterated. This tied back to many of the work Sameera was doing within his classroom to help several of his students to satisfy their basic needs like having shoes and a proper school uniform to wear to school. (quote from school)

After chatting with his family and being treated to tea and cake and pacifying Sameera’s mother who was upset that she did not get the chance to prepare lunch for us, we moved to an interview format where Sameera sat in front of the camera and I conversed with him. The prompts put him at ease and he immediately took the lead in continuing the conversation forward. After trying different routes he finally moved to the middle east with the help of a relative there. ‘I had done a management course but the job I got was in the kitchen. Life abroad is not as nice as it looks. I had to learn everything in a week else I was threatened with being demoted to a cleaning job’ Sameera reminisced. In some sense, Sameera’s success as a teacher in looking out for his students and ensuring that basic needs are fulfilled before focusing on the syllabus and grades could be attributed to these experiences beyond the classroom.

Sameera then walked me through how his day is spent in the classroom. ‘We can make a lesson plan at home for 45 minutes but when we go into the classroom we realize every child is very different to the other. Sometimes it takes me about 10 minutes just to get one child to
settle on.’ Referring to a training on Design Thinking, Sameera spoke of how it provided him a useful framework in tweaking the lesson plan to suit the dynamics of the class and to find ways of getting through the assigned content despite the time constraints. Sameera also attributed his success in the classroom to the fact that he was assigned to his own school which came him the opportunity to give back. On the flip side he expressed his distress with regards to the current transfer system for teachers and how many others did not have the luxury that he enjoyed of just travelling 1 km to get to school. ‘There is a program of giving teachers ‘dushkara’ (rural) There are teachers who come to our school from faraway areas like Colombo and Kandy. How can we expect them to perform well with a peaceful mindset when they’re constantly thinking about issues with their family, finding accommodation and the stress of leaving their children behind?’

I asked him where he thinks the problem lies within the broken education system? ‘I blame the government in power. The system. They print a massive book and tell us that the question you will get for the exam will come from this book. They send us the books from Colombo but it is the zonal office that makes the exams. There are many times when the exam paper is completely different to the content in the book.’ This was an observation that several participants from the design session aired in how the different state institutions incharge of curriculum development, examinations and teacher training rarely communicated with each other.

In explaining the disparities between those at the top and bottom of the hierarchy, Sameera used an interesting colloquial analogy; ‘there is no point in standing by the fringes of the paddy field while instructing those in the field on what to do, you need to get into the paddy field if you are to really understand what is going on in order to get things done. There is no point in state officials warming their seats. They should come to our schools. What usually
happens is that they send their subordinates on field visits and they never turn up but just give a call to the principal to see how things are. This is how the wrong information goes to the top. This observation gives a glimpse into how local teachers like Sameera see and interact with the local state apparatus within the education sector. Field visits become mere tokenism and prevent local authorities from engaging in any form of meaningful understanding of the happenings within a classroom; the constraints, opportunities and experiences of both teachers and students. ‘There is no point in talking to anyone else but teachers and students. If officials do that then we will be able to solve many of the problems that we are facing today.’
Chapter 5
Reimagining the System

This chapter draws on three theoretical frameworks to compare different approaches to understanding education as a system; a system of bureaucratic processes and people engaged in mean-making, cultural reproduction and the agenda-setting. In doing so, I attempt to critically reflect on its role within larger forms of colonial, imperialistic, economic and cultural powers. First, I draw on both the Correspondence Principle, a notion popularized by Marxist sociologists Sam Bowles and Herbet Gintis and Louis Althusser’s reflections on the Ideological State Apparatus to understand how formal education plays a role in propagating and sustaining capitalist structures of power. Following this discussion on power, I move onto an unpacking of Foucauldian ideas of governmentality to trace the ways through which the educational apparatus is effectively placed as a disciplining tool to produce governable subjects who fit seamlessly into a market society. Here, I argue that education policy in itself has been used as a new tool of imperialism by transnational development agencies like the United Nations, the IMF and the World Bank to coerce former colonized states, commonly referred to as the ‘developing world’, to fit their national policies and processes to fit into inherently Western interpretations of economic growth, access to decent jobs, gender equality and quantitative metrics of literacy. Finally, I discuss how design anthropology presents a unique opportunity to map out the complicated workings of local education systems to ultimately imagine ‘alternative cultures’ and ways of being and doing within the sphere of learning and exploration.
Correspondence Principle (A Marxist take)

Marxists sociologists Sam Bowles and Herbet Gintis (1976) argue that the main function of education in capitalist societies is the reproduction of labor power. In what is described as the correspondence principle they argue that within capitalist societies schools are structured to mimic social relations and reward systems within corporations and thereby function as a tool of control and social conditioning used by the bourgeoisie to create a subservient working class. Here, the bourgeoisie require a dedicated workforce that is able to follow instructions with minimal dissent and critique. Bowles and Gintis argue that this form of subservience is achieved through what is known as a ‘hidden curriculum’ which is the training that students receive through the experience of attending school beyond the formal curriculum. The norms and values students learn in school intersect with the norms and values that their future employers desire to seamlessly carry on systemic exploitation. A study that was conducted as a part of this project with 237 seniors from a New York high school found that higher grades in examinations corresponded more with personality traits than academic ability. Low grades were usually associated with character traits such as creativity, aggressiveness, and independence versus perseverance, consistency, and punctuality showing a similarity with what was valued versus dismissed within capitalist notions of an ideal employee.

There were three themes that emerged from both the design session and my conservations while filming that established a direct relation between what was seen within the local education system in Sri Lanka and the correspondence principle. (Appendix 9) First was hierarchy - students who were the lowest strata within the education hierarchy had no say over what they learned, how they were taught or their overall classroom experiences. Surprisingly neither did the teachers - as both Kumari and Sameera highlighted there was a strong

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disconnect between local school teachers and the zonal education office let alone the Ministry of Education. Bowles and Gintis correlate this disconnect to how corporate hierarchies are designed. Second were external rewards systems - examinations meant that students were motivated by grades and external quantitative validations of their academic abilities as opposed to the 'joys of learning.' A similar metric was applied to teachers where their progress was measured by the pass rates of their students and quantitative rating charts that were marked by their principals. Bowles and Gintis equate this to how capitalist societies motivated workers through wages instead of been incentivized by the actual day to day work that was done.

The third correlation was the fragmentation of academic subjects that were taught in school and how it related to specialization within a production line. When looking at how subject selection occurs within local schools this fragmentation is evident. The fifth grade scholarship exam (which was recently made optional) tests students specifically on math and language skills (Sinhala and Tamil). Through sixth to eighth grade students have to sit through a set of mandatory subjects like mathematics, religion, history, science and technology, health and physical education, social studies and a few other optional courses in life competencies and aesthetics. While there is a diverse array of subjects, competency is still tested through examinations. After completing their OL exams in eleventh grade students are faced with the difficult choice of picking one of the following tracks; science, commerce, arts or technology. This choice ultimately defines their career trajectory. Each of these subjects are also hierarchically placed and assigned their respective social value. Science tops the list of desired streams for the 'gifted, smart kids' who will ultimately become doctors or engineers. The lowest on the list is the arts stream. This positioning directly mimics the presumed earning capacities for different professions.
It appears that these three themes (hierarchy, external rewards and fragmentation) are becoming increasingly irrelevant to education systems in the world as we see it today, as Generation Y and Z are gradually beginning to redefine terms like work, success and quality of life. Yet, colonial influences mean that these approaches to education and correlations are still largely prevalent within local education systems in countries like Sri Lanka that have strong remnants of a colonial system of education. Examinations still dictate what is valued in terms of skill sets and academic competency. School structures still have no space to accommodate skills, interests and intelligences that cannot be quantitatively graded through a written examination. The ‘hidden curriculum’ determines the classroom experiences of students where critical thinking, questioning and experimentation are equated to disobedience similar to how dissent is sanctioned within capitalist power structures. Bowles & Gintis provides a possible framework to understand what we mean by the ‘system of education’ through a lens of labor relations and capitalist value creation. Through this comparison between local education systems and capitalist structures of labor, I move into discussing Louis Althusser’s theory of the Ideological State Apparatus to understand the role of ideological power within this relationship.

**Schools as an Ideological State Apparatus**

French philosopher Louis Althusser builds off Marxist understandings of ideology to argue that ideology is more material and embodied than ‘imaginary.’³⁶ He distinguishes between the ‘ideological state apparatus’ and the ‘repressive state apparatus’ to show two different approaches devised by bourgeoisie institutions to propagate capitalist relations of production. For Althusser, while the repressive state apparatus includes the government, police, army, courts, and prisons that function through violence, the ideological apparatus includes religious establishments, family, trade unions, information, culture, and schools that function through the

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use of ideology. For Althusser, schools or the ‘scholastic apparatus’ is by far the most dominant, it takes in children when they are in their most vulnerable form and feeds them with certain types of know-how and values that prepare them for future positions within class societies.

In this model, the first to fall out of the scholastic apparatus are workers or peasants, the next to fall out enter managerial, supervisory roles (the petty bourgeois), and finally those who make it right to the end, either enter academia or become agents of exploitation or repression. The values and training allow each group to feed into and sustain the dominant ideology - obedience, morality, professionalism and an apolitical consciousness for those entering the labor force and the ability to give orders and extract obedience for those becoming agents of exploitation and repression. Althusser speaks of the unreasonably lengthy periods of time that children and young adults spend within schools that make it an effective machine to perform this process of social conditioning; ‘No other Ideological State Apparatus, however, has a captive audience of all the children of the capitalist social formation at its beck and call (and - this is the least it can do - at no cost to them) for as many years as the schools do, eight hours a day, six days out of seven.’ While this was a reflection of society as Althusser saw it in 1968, his argument that the schools replaced the goals and ideals of the church is still applicable within the Sri Lankan context. While pre-colonial forms of education (piriven education - Chapter 1) based in Buddhist temples were more focused on an exploration of theology, religion, language, literature, and philosophy the emergence of strong nationalist sentiments around a ‘Sinhala-Buddhist’ identity during the 1950s meant that schools began to embrace a goal of furthering the ‘sinhalese culture.’ The latter is a term often used by school principals and administrators when addressing school gatherings and other public events as a tool to reiterate the importance of schools within the larger social fabric. Unsurprisingly the ‘culture’ that schools attempt to protect and preserve by imparting it on its student body is focused on the Sinhala
Buddhist majority and is devoid of the ethnic and religious diversity that the country possesses. In this light, we can argue how the local education system feeds into the state apparatus by helping it further its nationalist populist agenda of a unified Sinhala-Buddhist identity that appeals to the voter base of the ruling elite.

**Education as a tool of Governmentality and New Imperialism**

Foucauldian theorizations of ‘governmentality’ have often been used to situate postcolonial critiques of education systems to illustrate how schools and other formal structures of education are tools for ‘disciplining’ citizens to become ‘governable’ subjects. Foucault approached governmentality as the ‘conduct of conduct’ or the ‘the government of one’s self and of others.’ He further elaborated on the interdependence between power and knowledge where ‘knowledge is always an exercise of power and power always a function of knowledge.’ In this way, schools provide an ideal space to discuss how both governmentality and the interdependence of knowledge and power intersect.

In the case of governmentality, as explored previously via the Marxist critique of formal education, schools are well placed to become institutions of surveillance based disciplining similar to prisons, hospitals and militaries. With the control of time through regimented timetables, control of movement through the enforcement of line formations when moving around the school and classrooms, control of space in how seating in a classroom is arranged as a grid and how the school buildings surround a playground in the center with windows or corridors giving visual access into the open space in the center; mimicking Bentham’s Panopticon (albeit the absence of the watchtower) - schools regulate the everyday of children.

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and adolescents for a period of nearly twelve to thirteen years. Long enough to convert these practices and values into forms of self-regulated habits and norms.

In revisiting this analogy of schools as prisons or panopticons; I reflect back on my experiences as an ‘inmate’ within a local school in Sri Lanka (Appendix 10) The school I attended in Colombo was similarly structured with buildings constructed around a central open play area. Windows in each of the classrooms and the landings of the stairwells opened into the open play space. The play area was one of the only unregulated spaces where we were allowed to breakaway from the supervision of a teacher, however, in most cases, when a student was chastised or disciplined for either a violation of the uniform code, a petty playground feud or if one was found talking to someone of the opposite of sex for a longer duration than warranted - these accusations were usually evidenced by a teacher or a disciplinarian discreetly watching us in the playground perform the said act of ‘misbehavior.’ Gradually as we became seniors, we found other more discreet, underground spaces to violate the student code of conduct in both an act of self-regulation and rebellion.

In the case of knowledge and power, schools provide appropriate conditions for the dissemination and legitimization of ‘discourses’ that allow the ruling ideology to maintain control over its subjects. The inclusion of certain truths, ways of thinking, writing, speaking and approaches to understanding the realities around us within local curriculum while excluding others, allows for certain forms of knowledge to be given a stamp of authority as the expected, legitimate form of knowing. For instance in Sri Lanka, sex education (or rather a diluted version of it) is included in the ‘Health Science’ curriculum. The content speaks of masturbation as an illness, excludes any references to gender fluidity or sexual pleasure, and merely packages sex as an act of procreation. An activity in the recommended state authored textbook for Health Science asks students to classify feminine versus masculine qualities into a table divided into
two columns marked ‘girl’ and ‘boy’ and the exercise ends there with absolutely no discussion on the social construction of gender. Through the categorization of subjects, textbooks and curricula, schools help determine acceptable ways of articulating and making sense of our realities. I argue that while schools are part of the ‘Ideological State Apparatus’ as defined by Althusser, their power within this realm is merely to disseminate and legitimize already established ‘discourses’ and forms of knowledge and knowing, that are created and passed down by state institutions, under the influence of other agencies of social control like multilateral donors, clergy (the Buddhist temples in the case of Sri Lanka), the corporate sector and media. In this sense schools are a passive, powereless cog within the process of discourse creation.

On the other hand, education policy in itself also becomes a form of ‘discourse.’ In his book Foucault, Power and Education Stephen Ball refers to neo-liberal education policy as a discourse justified through already established ‘regimes of truth’ such as marketisation, performativity and standards and how ultimately these regimes are used by institutions and individuals to consolidate power to govern both themselves and others. However for Leon Tikly who is one of the few scholars to apply Foucauldian thinking to education policy within postcolonial settings, argues that education policy is another form of a political program used to exercise power that is consistent with the ‘underlying rationality of government.’ This exploration of education policy through the notions of governmentality and discourse provides an ideal link to explore Tikly’s argument for the emergence of a ‘new imperialism.’

Tikly argues for the emergence of a wave of new imperialism. While neo-colonialism was focused on market liberalization policies for previously colonized nations to make them more desirable for Western products and processes, new imperialism uses development as a tool for

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continuing colonial pursuits, governed by transnational bodies like the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), World Trade Organization (WTO), United Nations and the World Bank. In this sense, new imperialism has exceeded the nation-state boundaries of colonialism. Within the context of education, similar to how schools legitimize certain narratives over others, new imperialism creates a novel set frameworks around goals, targets and parameters through which the colonized world should approach education policy. Education policy through a development lens is established as a tool to achieve economic growth, poverty reduction and gender inequality.

For instance if we look at the Millennium Development Goals adopted in 2015, MDG 2 is focused on ‘achieving universal primary education.’ This target is measured against two quantitative indicators - literacy and primary school enrollment rates. Discussions around the target were framed in the language of ‘poverty reduction’ and ‘economic growth’ while the United Nations proudly boasts of an increase in enrollment in primary education from 83% in 2000 to 91% in 2015 and a hike in literacy among young people from 83% (1990) to 91% (2015) the metrics severely obscure the discrepancies of how ‘literacy’ is measured and understood within local census reports. For instance, in Sri Lanka, I vividly remember the 2012 census and how the two data collection officers who visited my home ticked the ‘literacy box’ after asking both me and my mother to write our signatures. In most regions the ability to read and write, let alone write one’s signature, rarely provides one with an exit from exploitive cycles of poverty.

While the MDGs were severely criticized as having been a set of targets developed within the air conditioned halls of New York and Geneva with minimal engagement with local governments, development actors and communities, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that succeeded the MDGs in 2015 have not proven to be rather different in the aspect of

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41 https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/sdgoview/mdg_goals/mdg2.html
local ownership. SDG 4 focused on education has shifted its language and focus from *access* to education (MDGs) to the assurance of a *quality* education. The vaguely structured targets are still placed within a market-driven approach to education with employability, economic growth and ‘decent jobs’ at the fore.

As Tikly argues, new imperialistic processes use more subtle forms of domination that differ from other direct forms of colonial violence and coercion. These subtle measures take the form of influence on national agendas, financial dependency on donors and the creation of a language around how development should be articulated and achieved. Similar to Foucauldian discourses the terms of this shared language are often determined by the ‘developed world’ (previous colonial powers) and transnational donors like the IMF or the World Bank. For instance the SDGs have extensively influenced local policy-making by requiring state agencies to set up accountability and reporting mechanisms to report back on their progress with regards to SDG targets. Besides state processes, SDGs also force local NGOs, community organizers and activists to ensure that their initiatives fit into at least one or more of the SDGs inorder to access funding, legitimacy and other resources. For instance during my field work in Sri Lanka I was invited to a roundtable consultation organized by an independent network focused on local SDG accountability mechanisms, looking at SDG 4 among others. During my preliminary conversations with the core team and in skimming through their documentation, it was evident that they were attempting to tokenistically gather statistics related to the targets from government and NGO websites with minimal communication with local teachers, administrators or students and little to no field work around schools.

Within education and beyond, Tikly notes how prior to the 1970s ‘development policy’ allowed for a discussion of the ‘underdeveloped’ world (now ‘developing’) without any reference to colonial histories of exploitation by focusing on growth and aid through technocratic and
quantitative terms like accountability, transparency, modernization and Gross National Product (GNP). While the neo-liberal project failed at achieving both its targets of poverty alleviation and growth (instead exacerbated existing inequalities) what the acknowledgment of this shortfall by World Bank economists like Joseph Stiglitz missed was how these inherently Euro-centric approaches were not applicable to the diverse local contexts, cultures, priorities, value systems and collective ways of life that they was attempting to influence.

The World Bank has been Sri Lanka’s largest foreign development donor (referred to as ‘partner’ on the World Bank website) since the mid-1980s. When analyzing the goals, priorities and language used in the 2017 documentation of the US$ 100 million General Education Modernization project; one of the largest investments within the education sector in Sri Lanka, it is evident that the market driven, neo-liberal approaches have remained largely unchanged. Interestingly the terminology has shifted from literacy and school enrollment rates to metrics on learning outcomes. Three other policy recommendations made direct links back to my earlier discussions on disciplining and surveillance of citizens, technocratic language and new imperialist processes. The first was for the education system to be better oriented to the production of socio-emotional skills, such as problem solving, resilience, achievement motivation, control, team work, confidence, initiative and ethics (PRACTICE) The first shows how the World Bank has already pre-determined the components of social-emotional well-being albeit the inclusion of topics like empathy, negotiation or conflict resolution, and added an acronym while allocating close to USD 35 million for the implementation of PRACTICE.

Second was the establishment of School Inspectorates (SI) where ‘inspectors’ independently evaluate and scrutinize the effectiveness of schools. The proposal claims that low performing schools will benefit from more frequent inspections. The terminology used within the policy document inherently calls for a monitoring of teachers and school principals under the

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pretext that the problem lies with the incompetency or dishonesty of local educators and how external vetting would hold them accountable for becoming more efficient. The language of surveillance immediately ties back to notions of colonial control, corporate surveillance to ensure productivity and the use of development aid in creating exploitive dependencies. The third aspect was the reiteration of terms like 'a well functioning liberal democracy', modernization and internalization that evidenced the neo-liberal aims of the program in producing efficient, productive citizens with economic and social capital.42 While the implementation portions of the project profile43 is entirely focused on state level actors, there was no information with regards to the gathering of local inputs or the inclusion of local educators, students or administrators within the conceptualization of the project.

The relevance of design anthropology in tackling neo-liberal power structures

Stephen J.Ball while reflecting on Foucauldian influences on education policy speaks of how the aim post-colonial social critiques is not ‘about Foucault but doing Foucault’44 However I argue that while engagement with theorists such as Foucault, Althusser and Marx give us valuable starting points to begin our critique of local education systems, what we need are more localized frameworks to start envisioning alternative futures in education. Critiques of existing social phenomena in ways that question capitalist structures of power and colonial approaches to understanding the world around us, have often been labelled as too leftist, radical, communist and as the work of armchair activists ‘who get nothing done.’ More often than not the ruling elite accuse these critical deconstructive ways of thinking as preventing the poor, the marginalized

42 Project Information Document/Integrated Safeguards Data Sheet (PID/ISDS) Concept Stage | Date Prepared/Updated:20-Jun-2017
and the disenfranchised from accessing their bread and butter. How can design anthropology help merge these theoretical frameworks for dissecting power structures with action.

Design anthropology provides a toolkit to reimagine these alternative futures by breaking away from ingrained structures of knowledge production, cultural meaning and everyday ways of being. Design anthropology then opens up the possibility of connecting these ‘new ways of knowing’ to social change in a variety of applied fields from public health interventions and urban planning to conservation and education reform. While the design session that was conducted included a session on unpacking and mapping the local education system, it did not focus on exploring ways of repackaging the different forms of social critique outlined in this chapter to understand the impacts on, and the influences of the ‘system’ as we experience it in our everyday lives. A session focused on the above would have provided invaluable insights into how social theory and research could be localized and made both interesting, relevant and accessible to a diverse audience.

Design anthropology also provides a space to bring ordinary individuals together as collaborators and partners in processes that allow them to redesign their own lived realities, services and institutions. These community owned approaches to design allow for the inclusion of multiple cultures, ideologies and ways of knowing that will ultimately lead to social interventions, services, public institutions and development projects that embrace multiplicity. Within education reform this shift would mean disrupting both colonial and neo-liberal ways of interpreting, theorizing and making sense of the various aspects of education like classroom spaces, schools, success, quality, learning and teaching. A departure from a singular focus on quantifiable targets and quality metrics to a rethinking of curriculum and pedagogy offers a dynamic and fluid approach to education.
My aim in tracing through these various theoretical frameworks around systems and structures of power is to assemble a set of starting points to allow for a critical unpacking of ‘the system’ within a given discussion focused on education reform (or rather transformation) This was the motivation behind incorporating a ‘systems mapping’ exercise within the design session (Chapter 2) however, the dilemma was in how theoretical frameworks like the correspondence principle or the work of Althusser could be effectively packaged and presented to a group who were struggling to make sense of other more urgent financial and infrastructural inadequacies.
Conclusion

The aim of this research project was to understand how design anthropology could play a role in reimagining the local education system in Sri Lanka. My key premise moving into this project was the need for a participatory, community owned approach to engaging a diverse group of individuals within a collective process of reimagination. We have seen how traditional modes of engagement like consultations, focus group discussions and surveys have had its limitations in terms of merging deep community insights with on-ground action. Through my field work I attempted to test several design anthropological tools to think of alternative ways of crafting more meaningful forms of community engagement around education policy and reform.

My analysis started off with a primer into the local education system in Sri Lanka (Chapter 1) where I looked at the colonial influences on how the Sri Lankan education system and its goals, values and processes are structured today. I contrasted this with pre-colonial forms of piriven focused education that adopted an approach to learning that was grounded in exploration and spirituality. Next I focused on a detailed overview on the design session that was conducted as a part of my fieldwork to reflect on the different design tools that were used, the group dynamics and the key insights that were gathered.

The design session helped create a modular framework that could be used to structure creative problem solving processes across disciplines and industries. A simple three step process that could be used as a guiding principle for communities attempting to create their own - 1) reflecting back, 2) dissecting the present and 3) imagining the future. This framework embodies the unique proposition that design anthropology offers in merging the deep ethnographic insights into the lived realities of individuals and communities, with design’s focus on problem solving for the future. The cohort of local educators, researchers, teachers and education enthusiasts who were brought together as a part of the design session have already
run a follow up design session that they organized and facilitated themselves. They have set up a Whatsapp group that is active and buzzing with daily conversations on various education related themes, resources, TED talks and research articles. One cluster is brainstorming a series of video stories to showcase successful local initiatives that have been able to ‘reimagine education.’ Since the design session, journalists who were apart of the cohort have gone onto producing opinion pieces on education reform touching on themes like reimagination, lifelong learning and homeschooling. Roar - Sri Lanka’s premier digital media platform ran a popular series of articles titled ‘Beyond The Blackboard’ - initiated by a journalist from the platform, after attending the design session. The series also featured two of our participants - Le Petite Fleur (alternative education school) and Neera* (an artist who was homeschooling her kids)

Through the visual ethnographic component of the project, I argue for a deviation from traditional mediums of synthesizing knowledge towards more visual and sensory modes that allow for a empathetic, embodied interaction between the audience and the information they’re consuming. This is especially useful in rethinking local education systems where visual ethnographies could help bridge the gap between policy makers and bureaucrats versus the lived realities of local educators and students that their interventions impact. Essentially visual and sensory mediums allow us to legitimize alternative ways of knowing thus allowing a diverse set of communities and perspectives to have an equal seat at the table.

My concluding chapter explores Marxist and post-colonial critiques of education in understanding the education apparatus as a ‘system’ of processes and people that perpetuate neo-liberal, capitalist structures of exploitative power. In conclusion, I argue that design anthropology presents us with a unique toolkit in collaborating across diverse groups and stakeholders to collectively dissect the ‘system’ as we experience it in our everyday and to then
utilize these insights for a radical imagination of a localized, community owned, alternative future of education.
Bibliography


12. “Navajo Film Themselves Giving Background to the 1966 Film Series.” Navajo Film Themselves, www.penn.museum/sites/navajofilmthemselves/.


Appendix

Appendix 1
The Facebook post for advertising the design session along with screenshots of a few comments.

Kavindya Thennakoon
November 25, 2018 · 3

I will be in Sri Lanka from the 8th Dec - 2nd of Jan talking to teachers, students, policy makers and educators through a series of design sessions on re-imagining our local education system.

Our aim is to brainstorm and ideate around the future of education - how can we re-imagine our classrooms? Why is there a gap between our education system and the emerging world? Where do the issues lie?

I am looking for:
- teachers, school principals, educators and students
- journalists, photographers and fellow researchers interested in collaborating (there is also a documentary portion to the project)
- anyone passionate about education reform

We'd love to hear from you! (kthennak@wellesley.edu)

End product: We're looking at an interactive / digital media focused approach to presenting this research to both the Ministry and the wider community and to ultimately create a collaborative body of growing research around education in #Ika

This is literally a dream project of mine that is finally coming to life through the generous support of the Wellesley College Knapp Center for Social Sciences. Please do spread the word and any leads at all are greatly appreciated.

Re-imagining Education

we're on the lookout for teachers, school principals, students and educators interested in joining a series of design sessions to figure out how we can re-imagine + transform the local education space in Sri Lanka.

Get in touch: kthennak@wellesley.edu

195
143 Comments 41 Shares
Tilak Dissanayake Very interested in participating as an industry person who is the customer for the output of the education system, "graduates" with workplace relevant knowhow and can do attitudes.

Kavindya Thennakoon Absolutely! I've learnt immensely from our recent email exchange. Looking forward to meeting you and tweaking this better.

Tilak Dissanayake Kavindya Thennakoon I was just scratching the surface with my email. There are many fundamental issues to be addressed when re-imagining education since it is most likely that people will have many careers during their lifetime rather than being a lawyer, engineer, accountant, doctor etc. for life..

Uchita de Zoysa I will try to come Kavindya Thennakoon

Kavindya Thennakoon That will be awesome. Will send you an invite.

Uchita de Zoysa Currently I am conducting the SDG4 education spotlight review for Sri Lanka. a consultation is also in the cards soon, would like to hear what you guys have to offer. also would like to include you in the SDG4 review

Eyas Fazul

November 27, 2018

I would like to invite all the great edutech startups to this session to share your knowledge and experiences in reimagining education and help build a better education system.

Show Attachment

Asema Wijesinghe and 3 others

Like · Share

Selyn Peiris

November 27, 2018

Here's thinking into the future. Initiatives from Sri Lanka's progressive citizens! #riseupsi

Show Attachment

You, Ahalya Leklala, Kalpanee Gunawardana and 7 others

Love · Comment · Share

Sandra Wanduragala Very interested.
Appendix 2

The structure of the design session that was conducted as a part of the research project. A copy of this was emailed to all the participants prior to the session.

### Design Session | Reimagining Education

**Date:** 16th December 2018  
**Duration:** 10.00 am – 2.00 pm  
**Facilitators:** Kavindya and Isura

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Theme [Objectives + Activity + Outcome]</th>
<th>Resources / Facilitators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9.50 am - 10.00 am</td>
<td><strong>Registration</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 10.00 am - 10.05 am | **Introduction to the Session**  
Why a design session? Why re-imagine education?  
Our mindset for the day.  
What do we envision this to become moving forward? |                          |
| 10.05 am - 10.20 am | **Breaking the Ice**                                                         | Yureshya + Nisali        |
| 10.30 am - 10.35 am | **Design Mindest 101**                                                       |                          |

**What is Design Thinking?**

[Diagram: Design Thinking flowchart showing steps such as understand, ideate, prototype, and test]

End of page 84
### 2 Minute Elevator Pitches

**Organization 1: Sarvodaya Fusion**  
**Organization 2: Grassrooted /Bakamoono (Pending)**

#### Pitch Your Concept

A compelling and inspiring story will help convince others to support your concept. Build your pitch to motivate others to help bring the idea to life.

- **Know your audience**
  - Think about who you are trying to get excited about your idea. Put yourself in the shoes of the audience: what will get them interested in your idea? What will they remember best?
  - For example:
    - How important is the problem to you? How does the solution help?
    - How does this solution fit into their daily lives or into existing problems?
    - How does this solution help?
  - **Highlight the problem**
    - Create a narrative that drives your message.
    - Start with the audience.
    - Example: "What if students could learn anywhere, anytime?"

#### Builds narrative

Tell a short, compelling story, focusing on the core idea and how it impacts the audience. Create a narrative that engages the audience and makes them feel connected to the solution.

- **Communicate the value**
  - Explain how your idea will benefit the audience.
  - Example: "How can this solution help students achieve their goals?"
  - **Exchange contributions**
    - Invite others to join the conversation or help build on the concept.

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### 10.45 am - 11.30 am

**Empathy Mapping**  
**Journey of a student in 2030**  
**Magazines / Bricolage**

### 11.30 am - 11.40 am

**Inspiration:**  
**School in a Cloud**

### 11.40 am - 12.25 pm

**Design Challenge**  
**Rethinking + redesigning a class timetable + space + tools / processes**  
**Rapid ideation**
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 12.25 pm - 12.35 pm | **Elevator Pitches**  
Organization 1: Ideator  
Organization 2: [Open slot for someone in the audience to pitch an idea] |
| 12.35 pm - 1.20 pm | **Inspiration Map**  
1 thing I've read / saw / did / experienced that would help YOU reimagine education |
| 1.20 pm - 2.00 pm | **Reflection**  
- 1 thing that inspired me today  
- 1 thing that frustrated me today  
- What I envision this conversation to become in February 2019  
Collaborative piece |
Appendix 3
A screenshot from the slides that was used during the session.

the design mindset
our 4 guiding values for today

Human-Centered
Deep empathy and understanding of the needs and motivations of people - in this case: the students, teachers, parents, staff and administrators who make up your everyday world.

Collaborative
Several great minds are always stronger when solving a challenge than just one. Capitalize on the diversity of views and perspectives.

Experimental
Give yourself the creative confidence to take risks, stretch limits and to create more radical change. Given the range of needs your students have, your work will never be finished or "solved." So iterate -> test.

Optimistic
Our fundamental belief is that we all can create change - no matter how big a problem, how little time or how small a budget. So let's reframe every constraint as an opportunity.
Appendix 4
Design challenge 1: Empathy Mapping

Design Challenge: Empathy Map

Think about a 13-year-old in the year 2030.
What do they see, hear, experience, feel and touch? What opportunities are they exploiting and what challenges are they battling? Let’s imagine their reality, empathize with their experiences and map their journey from 7:00 am - 5:00 pm on a weekday.
Appendix 5
The concept note that was sent to various interested parties and confirmed participants prior to the design session.

Re-imagining Education
Design Sessions

The Idea
We often talk about the failing education system and look to our local classrooms to mostly every issue we encounter in our communities. We’re a group of educators conducting a series of design sessions across Sri Lanka to bring together local teachers, educators, students, parents, policy makers, school administrators, ministry officials and ordinary citizens with a passion for education reform to “reimagine our local education system.”

Colombo Design Session
Date: 16th December, 2018 (Sunday)
Venue: Bay 6, TRACE Expert City, Mandana Road, Colombo 01
Time: 10am - 2pm (Refreshments provided)

Methods and Questions
Design Thinking and Anthropology: Our approach is grounded in using tools from both these disciplines to actively listen to stakeholders, brainstorm ideas, ideate solutions and ultimately take effective action around reimagining education.

We believe that many of us within the education space in Sri Lanka have been working in our own silos and the best ideas come through empathy, collaboration and grassroots action.

Questions for exploration:
A. What is the education of the future?
   a. What does a classroom and a school mean to you?
   b. Do you think 15 years from now classrooms will still exist?
B. What does the word ‘education’ mean to you?
C. How can we better understand the perspectives, lived experiences and day to day lives of students, teachers and school administrators?
D. What is the bureaucracy within the education system like?
   a. Ministry - Provincial - District / Zonal offices
   b. Where are the gaps
E. Examinations?
F. How can we redesign our classrooms?
G. Education for classrooms that are off the grid?
H. Syllabuses, learning materials and action plans?
   a. Who sets the agenda?
   b. Are the syllabuses overly test and outdated? Or does the issue lie elsewhere?
I. What power do we have? What is the most effective impactful action that we can drive?

Getting Involved
We want to make this a collaborative process so do get in touch with other interesting questions you want to explore or a design session you’d like to host in your community.

We look forward to seeing you at our next design session.

Get in touch, we’d love to hear from you: Kaythula.8@gmail.com | +947712622551
Appendix 6
Design challenge 2: Redesigning Systems

Design Challenge: Empathy Map

Bringing the insights from our empathy map, let’s think about how we can flip an existing curriculum, space, process/tool or system in a way that caters to the experiences, goals, aspirations and lived realities of a child from 2030.

Inspiration: Think about a traditional 8-1 timetable in a local school with 8 periods and a lunch break. Think about how we can take this ‘process’ and flip it to suit the child of 2030. Will timetables even be needed? If not how can learning be structured or delivered?
If yes, then how can we rethink how time is allocated, what is prioritized and how a child spends this time duration.
Appendix 7
The mindmap that was drawn during the reflections.