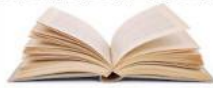


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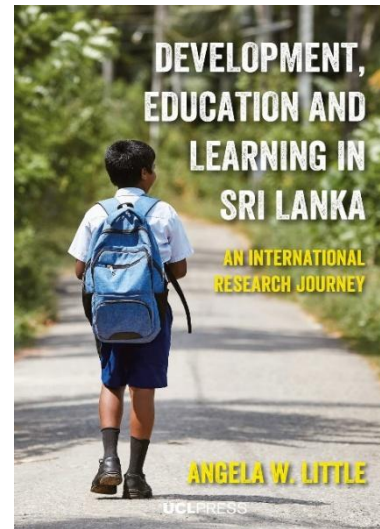
Little, A. W. (2024). *Development, education and learning in Sri Lanka: An international research journey*. UCL Press.

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Angela W. Little's *Development, Education and Learning in Sri Lanka*¹ offers a compelling synthesis of five decades of comparative research linking education, policy, and development. Drawing on archival sources, longitudinal fieldwork, and collaborations with Sri Lankan scholars, Little traces how global paradigms—from human capital and dependency theory to Education for All and the Sustainable Development Goals—interacted with the island's unique educational “exceptionalisms.” Combining macro-policy analysis with classroom-level insights, the book illuminates how learning, not mere schooling, must lie at the heart of development. Balancing historical depth and analytic rigor, it repositions Sri Lanka as both an influence on and a product of global educational discourse. This reflective and empirically grounded work stands as a landmark contribution to comparative education and development studies.



This work is an intellectual memoir, a policy ethnography, and a longitudinal case study rolled into one. Drawing on nearly five decades of sustained collaboration with Sri Lankan scholars, policymakers, and communities, Little crafts a rare intellectual map of how global education and development discourses—modernization, human capital, dependency, basic needs, Education for All (EFA), and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—have converged, conflicted, and transformed within a single national setting. The book's strength lies not merely in its historical depth but in its moral clarity: it seeks to restore *learning*—and not just schooling—to the center of educational development. As Little asserts, “sustainable development is as much about sustainable learning as it is about environment, society and economy” (p. 310).

¹ This open access book is available free of cost from the University College of London Press at <https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10192181/1/Development-Education-and-Learning-in-Sri-Lanka.pdf>

From its opening pages, the author situates her personal journey within a broader intellectual and political trajectory. The introduction is almost ethnographic in tone, revealing how a volunteer teacher from the Isle of Man entered the world of comparative education and, through her research in Sri Lanka from 1975 to 2020, traced the shifting architecture of education policy and practice. The framing questions give the book coherence and a refreshing reflexivity: Which ideas in Sri Lanka were shaped by international development discourse, which global ideas were inspired by Sri Lankan experience, and to what extent were imported concepts tested empirically? (see pp. 2-3). Little rescues comparative education from abstract universalism and grounds it in lived, political realities.

The 16 chapters, organized into five sections, follow the evolution of the international development–education nexus across 80 years. Part I, *Mapping the Journey*, establishes Sri Lanka’s “seven exceptionalisms” in education—high literacy, gender parity, mother-tongue instruction, fee-free schooling, a small private sector, open access, and low expenditure (pp. 13–15). These paradoxes—progressive outcomes from low investment—anchor the book’s central analytical tension: how can a system achieve near-universal literacy yet reproduce inequality? Through careful documentation, Little shows that Sri Lanka’s achievements were not technocratic miracles but rather the outcome of populist egalitarianism embedded in the island’s post-independence welfare state. Her description of early “welfarist” education policies and the egalitarian vision of Dr C. W. W. Kannangara (p. 22) exemplify how decolonization linked literacy with democracy and social justice.

In Part II, *Modernisation, Human Capital and Dependency*, Little revisits the ideological battlegrounds of the 1970s and 1980s. She scrutinizes the “school examination reforms of the 1970s” (p. 77), situating them between human-capital optimism and dependency-theory critique. Her collaboration with Keith M. Lewin (see Lewin & Little, 1984) yielded the enduring concept of the “diploma disease,” which she revisits here as both diagnosis and warning. As she notes, credentialism in Sri Lanka “transformed education into a positional good” (p. 125), producing educated unemployment and fueling youth unrest. The book’s empirical strength shines through in this section. Drawing on statistical evidence, policy archives, and interviews, Little demonstrates how an oversupply of qualified labor collided with a sluggish economy, revealing the limits of human-capital determinism. Her critique anticipates contemporary concerns about degree inflation and the commodification of credentials across South Asia.

Part III, *Basic Needs and Education for All*, represents perhaps the most policy-rich segment of the book. Here, Little examines the 1997 Education Reforms and the politics of implementation. Her conclusion that “political will remains the single most decisive factor in educational reform” (p. 165) resonates far beyond Sri Lanka. The detailed narrative of “behind-the-scenes planning” (p. 183) demystifies the technical façade of education reform by exposing its bureaucratic and ideological underpinnings. This section also shows how Sri Lanka’s welfare-state ethos prefigured global EFA discourses. As the author observes, by the 1980s, “Sri Lanka’s performance in literacy and enrolment was

being cited as a model for the Basic Needs approach” (p. 143). In this sense, the book reverses the direction of policy influence: Sri Lanka was not merely an adopter of international frameworks but a contributor to them. This inversion challenges the unidirectional “policy borrowing” model still prevalent in comparative education.

Part IV, *Globalisation, Education and Social Disparities*, situates the island’s education within the shifting tides of global capitalism. The chapter on the “export-led plantation economy and educational opportunity: 1840–2020” (p. 209) is a *tour de force*, linking colonial plantation economies with contemporary social stratification. Little’s argument that “the revenues plantations generated financed education for those beyond them” (p. 212) provides a sharp historical corrective to celebratory narratives of welfare development. Similarly, her comparative analysis of “late twentieth-century globalisation” (p. 231) places Sri Lanka alongside the “High-Performing Asian Economies” (HPAEs), underscoring how divergent political economies produced contrasting education outcomes. While countries like South Korea and Malaysia transformed education into engines of industrialization, Sri Lanka’s education system remained oriented toward public employment and certification, not productivity. This nuanced comparison avoids both self-congratulation and despair, balancing critique with empathy.

Part V, *Sustainable Development and Learning*, brings the argument full circle. Through three micro-studies—on English teaching, multi-level learning, and formative assessment—Little re-centers the learner. Her study of English-medium instruction is especially revealing. While English proficiency is a ticket to global mobility, she warns against treating it as a new gatekeeper that reproduces class hierarchies (see p. 281). In the chapter on multi-level teaching, she documents teachers’ adaptive strategies in mixed-ability classrooms, defining “zones of inclusion and exclusion from learning” (p. 293). The chapter on “assessment for sustainable learning” (p. 309) is both philosophical and practical, calling for a shift from examinations that sort students to assessments that support learning. These insights culminate in the book’s final reflection that “learning must lie at the heart of development policy” (p. 327), an expression that summarizes half a century of research and perhaps the author’s pedagogical creed.

The book exemplifies longitudinal mixed-methods scholarship. Little triangulates policy analysis, archival research, classroom observation, and collaboration with Sri Lankan institutions such as the National Institute of Education and the National Education Commission. Her attention to “behind-the-scenes” dynamics (p. 183) and use of both macro- and micro-levels of analysis give the work unusual texture. Few comparative education studies manage to sustain this blend of theoretical framing and field-grounded empiricism over decades. The narrative’s temporal reach—from colonial schooling to the SDGs—invites the reader to appreciate education as a living historical process rather than a sequence of reforms.

Critically, the book is not without limitations. First, its structure—woven from newly written and republished papers—occasionally produces uneven

spacing. Some early chapters read as dense historical summaries, while later ones employ contemporary policy idioms. The stylistic discontinuity, however, is redeemed by the clarity of argument. Second, while the author touches on gender, ethnicity, and class, a deeper intersectional analysis—especially of caste and disability—remains latent. Given Sri Lanka’s complex post-war context, these dimensions deserve fuller attention. Third, the narrative closes in 2020, just before the COVID-19 pandemic and economic crisis, whose educational consequences (digital divides, teacher migration, and school closures) could have extended the discussion of “sustainable learning.” Nonetheless, these are minor reservations in an otherwise monumental contribution.

Comparatively, Little’s analysis aligns with and extends the contemporary rethinking of development education. For instance, Sen’s (1999) *Development as Freedom* reframed human development around capability rather than income; Little’s book operationalizes that principle through schooling and assessment practices that foster agency. Similarly, Tikly and Barrett (2013) argued for an “education quality for all” framework that balances global and local priorities; Little provides the empirical grounding such frameworks require. Her work also echoes the policy analyses of Marinescu (2022), Bray and Thomas (1995), who emphasized the historical specificity and need of small-island education systems. In this sense, *Development, Education and Learning in Sri Lanka* stands at the confluence of comparative education, history, and policy studies, offering both conceptual innovation and documentary richness.

Stylistically, the prose is lucid, restrained, and reflective, befitting a scholar who has lived the evolution of her field. The author’s modest first-person narrative humanizes what could otherwise be a technocratic account. Her acknowledgment that “no part of this book has been created through Artificial Intelligence software” (p. xii) may seem incidental but subtly reaffirms her commitment to humanistic inquiry and the ethics of authorship. The text’s visual elements—tables, historical data, and conceptual diagrams—enhance readability without overwhelming the argument. Table 1.1 (on p. 25), charting literacy and school growth from 1950 to 2021, is itself a compressed history of welfare modernity.

Beyond Sri Lanka, the book’s significance is threefold. First, it demonstrates how small nations can influence global educational thought—Sri Lanka’s early achievements inspired the Basic Needs and EFA movements, showing that peripheral contexts can generate paradigms, not merely consume them. Second, it models how comparative research can be both empirically rigorous and morally engaged, eschewing the “methodological nationalism” that often confines education analysis. Third, it provides a template for reconstructing long-term education histories in other post-colonial settings, combining documentary evidence with ethnographic sensitivity.

For policymakers, the lessons are urgent. Sri Lanka’s current *National Education Policy Framework (2020–2030)* echoes many of Little’s prescriptions—strengthening teacher professionalism, reforming assessment, and addressing regional disparities. Yet the book reminds us that policy continuity and political will remain fragile. For researchers, the volume underscores the necessity of

temporal depth: development is not an event but a relationship between memory and aspiration. For teachers and students, it offers a moral message: the ultimate goal of education is not just employability but also emancipation.

Development, Education and Learning in Sri Lanka is both culmination and commencement: the culmination of Angela W. Little's lifelong inquiry into the entanglement of education and development, and the commencement of new questions about what "learning" means in a post-growth, crisis-ridden world. It stands as a testament to the power of sustained scholarly engagement across cultures and generations. Future researchers will find in it a model of historically grounded, ethically attentive comparative education; policymakers will find a mirror reflecting both achievements and unfinished work. Above all, readers will encounter a book that, in restoring learning to the center of development, restores humanity to education itself.

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About the Reviewer

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About the Book's Author

Angela W. Little is Professor Emerita at the Institute of Education, University of London. An influential scholar in the field of comparative and international education, her work has shaped understanding of primary education policy and practice in developing countries. She has focused on seven interrelated areas: Education for All and the Millennium Development Goals, multigrade teaching, globalization and education, qualifications and motivation, and education in Sri Lanka, China, and other developing nations. Before joining the Institute of Education in 1987, she was a Fellow at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex. She also holds honorary positions at Zhejiang University, Flinders University, and East China Normal University. A prolific author and editor, she has written numerous books, journal articles, and reports, and co-directed influential educational documentaries such as *The Diploma Disease* (1982) and *The Qualification Chase* (1996).



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