

Let's restore the joy of learning!

By Nalaka Gunawardene

I shall never forget my first day in school – alas, for all the wrong reasons.

There I was, on that January morning in 1973: eager and curious, filled with anticipation to find out what school proper was like. Over three years of pre-schooling had prepared me socially and psychologically for the big day, but as it turned out, not well enough.

Although I was not a child prodigy, I could read and write basic Sinhala and English, and count up to at least hundred when I entered school. The credit for this went to Maria Montessori, Joyce Goonasekera and their disciples. Yet I entered a class of Grade One that included kids who had no literacy or numeracy skills whatsoever, and others who were struggling with their basic letters and numbers. The teacher was struggling too, with almost forty children packed into a small classroom that only had the basic furniture and a blackboard. A handful of slates (remember them?) were shared among all students, and one student went around distributing water to clean the slates.

No, this was not a resource-starved rural school, but a well established, decades-old suburban one. To me, the transition from a well-endowed pre-school to this government school was a study in contrasts. The moment of truth, for myself, was when I wanted to read page after page of the Sinhala text book. The teacher told me sternly that I should read just one page a day – even though each page had only two or three words!

I could barely suppress my frustration and disappointment. As soon as I returned home, I broke down and sobbed. My parents, being school teachers themselves, empathised. They encouraged me to read as much as I wanted at home, while allowing other kids to catch up in school. And that's exactly what I did for the rest of my 13-years of primary and secondary schooling.

I don't think my experience was uncommon. Let's face it: the whole concept of a school is flawed. Education may be a great leveller among human beings,

but schooling in most parts of the world operates at the lowest common denominator level. How can you group together 30 or 40 children at random, expose them to the same curriculum, imparted at the same pace, and expect all to thrive? Some will keep up; others will lag behind; and a few will be completely bored out of their minds – like I was. No wonder George Bernard Shaw once declared, “The only time I interrupted my education was in school.”

Yet there is not much that even the most dedicated teacher could do under such trying circumstances. Oddly enough, no one in healthcare would agree to prescribing the same medicine for patients with very different ailments, yet the one-size-fits-all approach is never questioned when it comes to education. Why?

I believe I was extraordinarily lucky. With one or two exceptions, I had teachers who gave me the maximum creative freedom that the rigid system allowed. So I put my ample spare time – within the classroom, and outside – into a variety of interesting pursuits. I read every bit of printed matter I could find. I produced both a weekly newspaper and a monthly magazine in my class, where I was the editor, reporter, feature writer, designer and printer all rolled into one. I participated in every known oratorical, essay writing and quiz competition, often winning prizes. I had published a book by the time I was 14, and was a regular contributor to a children’s national newspaper by 15. (The modest earnings from these pursuits enabled me to buy the books and magazines I wanted.) By the way, I had good grades too.

But even in the 1970s and 1980s that I was in school, I was already an endangered species, and 16 years later, my kind seems to have dwindled further. Meanwhile, the Great Sri Lankan Rat Race has intensified, with more children running it and even more parents and teachers driving them. There is little time for extra-curricular activities, no spare moments to reflect on any information that is being poured into the young minds day and night, and certainly no time to have any fun. As characters in Somalatha Subasinghe’s *Vikurthi* testified in one loud voice, there is only one slogan in our schools system: pass the damn exams or perish!

To me, *this is nothing less than mass-scale, institutionalised child abuse*. I am amazed that child rights activists have overlooked this aspect; even the few courageous people who dared to point out that child monk ordainment was a form of child abuse have missed out on this one. With all the good intentions in the world, our parents, teachers and the schools system are continuing this abuse that blights the lives of millions of young Sri Lankans.

If confirmation of this were needed, just ask any school-going child. The statistics also bear evidence of this: of every 100 who enter primary school, only three end up at a university. Yet our myopic system is so obsessed with that single goal, and does not care about what happens to the balance 97 per cent.

Students being coached for O' Levels and A' Levels and everything else are not very different from horses being trained for races. Mind you, the family honour and good fortune often rest on their winning the race by hook or crook! A grotesque fact in professional horse racing is that persistent losers are ruthlessly eliminated. Well, let's just be grateful that our trainers don't resort to such drastic action when a majority of their 'horses' fail to make the grade, or worse still, make the grade but don't get into our overcrowded universities! But they are abandoned and let loose into a society that quickly brands them as misfits: the unemployable unemployed.

One reason why this abuse has thrived is because no one listens to the most important voice in this debate: the average schoolgirl and schoolboy. The learner's perspective is completely missing in most educational policies or plans. There is so much emphasis on teaching, infrastructure, performance and resources. The handful of men and women who decide what should be taught in our schools hardly ever pause to think how their decisions affect the last link in the chain: the hapless, overburdened, over-driven student. Over 4 million of them.

Must things remain like this forever? Is there any hope that our much-tinkered (and much-maligned) education system could one day be more student friendly, more learning oriented and more responsive to the different needs of different students? Will those in charge of the system begin to treat students and teachers as something more than movable statistics? And most importantly, can we restore the joy of learning, the sense of wonder and fun of schooling?

These are the key questions I want to raise about the future of learning. I don't approach these issues from an academic perspective. In fact, I have a vested interest that I must declare: a young daughter who has just started in the kindergarten. I am anxious that, at the end of a dozen years of schooling, she is not transformed into an information-packed zombie with a closed mind. I want my child to have enough choice as to what she learns, how she learns,

and at which pace. I am interested in the future of learning because that will decide what kind of future my daughter will have.

The map of the future – some call it an ‘undiscovered country’ -- will have some technological landmarks and road signs, but technology will not solve our problems. Technology can certainly help improve learning, bringing more learning opportunities to more people as it has for centuries. The first great technological aid to education was the book – which removed the need for every learner to receive knowledge first hand from a human teacher in real time. The printing press dealt a further blow to the monopoly of knowledge by enabling easy duplication of books. That paved the way to the mightiest of all educational machines: the library. Today’s computers, CD-ROMs and the World Wide Web are mere extensions of this process, further expanding our choice of medium, source and types of information.

I sometimes wonder what it must have been like, in the old days when books were uncommon, and access to learning was limited. I do respect my teachers, but don’t think I’d want to become their household slave in exchange for knowledge and wisdom – as students in the east were once compelled to do. And we can imagine how some learned persons would have resented and resisted the emergence of books, printing and libraries, just as some people are criticising the Internet today. In both cases, it meant the end of monopolies or domination of knowledge by a handful of people. And if you think such people were found only in medieval times, think again: I can think of at least half a dozen Sri Lankan academics whose conduct reminds me of a rhyme used by generations of British students: “I’m the master of this college; what I don’t know isn’t knowledge.”

Don’t get me wrong: no amount of good books or libraries can substitute a good teacher. But each technological wave has redefined the role teachers play in the learning process. From being the sole repositories of information, knowledge – and, in exceptional cases, wisdom – teachers have become navigators of information and enablers of learning. And these functions are as important as the previous roles teachers have played.

Think of the best teachers you have had (or still have), and ask yourself if a computer could take his or her place. Here is a dictum that helps discern good teachers from the rest: any teacher who can be replaced by a machine – *should* be! Certainly, the ingenuity, intuition and creativity of my best teachers cannot be matched by the best products of artificial intelligence. At the same

time, I have had much more fun with some computer programs or websites than with the few unremarkable teachers I also had.

There is an old saying that the best educational set-up consists of a log with teacher at one end, and learner at the other. Unfortunately, our world is woefully short of teachers, and we are even running out of logs! Since good teachers are made and not born, cloning cannot provide us with a short-term solution. But we can turn to information and communications technologies to support and strengthen – not replace – teachers. As Sir Arthur C Clarke said two decades ago: “The teaching profession survived the invention of books and it should welcome electronic teaching aides. They will help remove the sheer drudgery, the tedious repetition, that is inevitable in so much basic education....By removing much of the tedium from the teacher’s work, and making learning more like play, computers will – paradoxically – *humanise* education.”

There is, however, a great danger that technological tools can distort priorities and lead decision-makers into believing that gadgets can fix all ills. I am not sure whether to laugh or cry when I hear the Isurupaya mandarins, and intellectuals who have been educated beyond their intelligence, talk loftily about providing computers and Internet to every school in Sri Lanka. Yes, we must bridge the Digital Divide – but a multimedia computer with Internet connectivity is of little use to a school with leaking roofs – or with no roof at all. (And when the handing over ceremony is over, the machine will probably be locked up in the principal’s room: such expensive machines are too precious to be used, you see!)

We must therefore take a few steps back from the digital hype and first address the ‘Analog Divide’ (to coin a phrase) that has for so long affected the less endowed schools. When a majority of schools are starved of teachers and books, priority investments should be in meeting these basic needs. Computers should be part of the solution, and not the *only* solution.

In drawing up my personal ‘wish list’ for the future of learning – for my daughter and all other children – I care less about filling the classrooms with analog or digital material, and more about achieving fundamental changes in approach and process. For a start:

- Let us switch from teaching to learning, and discard the perception of schools as exclusive centres of learning.

- Let parents become more closely engaged in their children's learning, not simply as providers of sustenance, but as partners in a learning process that involves both home and school.
- Let us increase the range of career choices that our children can aim at.
- Let there be less emphasis on cramming and passing exams, and more on developing skills, aptitudes, attitudes and values.

If you think these goals are either too ambitious or too idealistic, here are a few specific ones that I'd also like to see come true -- but doubt if our intellectuals and education officials will permit for a long time.

- Notwithstanding all the rhetoric about getting computers into schools, the ubiquitous calculator is still not allowed at term tests or public examinations (most other countries do). This is just one example of how retrogressive our system is.
- Reintroducing English as a medium of instruction has inspired much discussion, and we have seen bizarre arguments against it (raised mostly by hypocritical intellectuals whose own children, of course, study in English in international schools or at foreign universities). Has anyone asked students and parents what medium they prefer?
- Ideally, everybody should have equal access to education. But should we hold back each and every one of our school children until the last one has gained equal access to resources and facilities? Where do merit, perseverance and hard work figure in this equation? If in the name of equality we are crippling those who can run faster, is that not discrimination too?

If education is liberating, the greatest liberation would take place when our formal education system is freed from the crushing grip of officials at the Isurupaya Gulag. Education is far too important to be left in the (often suspect and incompetent) hands of these individuals. The centre can certainly define the vision, mission and broad framework, set standards and allocate resources. But if the country is serious about decentralisation and devolution, it must allow each school – the smallest unit in the system -- to decide what is best within a national framework and in consultation with students and parents. I don't expect such liberalisation to happen easily, for that will remove much of the authority and control from the few who enjoy it. We need to fight for this, outsmarting and outwitting the dinosaurs who should be driven to their well-deserved extinction.

In the end, learning is a cumulative process that weaves myriads of inputs, inspirations and choices. Opening and nurturing young minds is both a highly rewarding exercise and an act of great responsibility. But we will miss out a lot if the gravity of this task removes fun from the whole process. Our challenge is not only to make learning more holistic and balanced, but a whole lot more fun for all concerned.

Every morning when I send my daughter off to school, I remind her that school is a fun place. I want my little girl to experience the same joys of learning, the sense of wonder and fun of schooling that I once had. And I am willing to work hard for it, and even fight for it.



Nalaka Gunawardene became a journalist and science writer despite the best attempts by Sri Lanka's formal education system to turn him first into a scientist, and then into a lawyer. He considers himself lucky that his formal education lasted only 13 years, and that he had teachers who allowed him sufficient creative freedom.

He is now a benign subversive masquerading as a communications expert.

When not pretending to be a UN consultant or documentary film producer, he is sharing the joys of learning with his 6-year-old daughter, Dhara. He can be reached at <alien@nalaka.org>

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