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Envisioning education systems for the future

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The following is a public lecture delivered at the Institution of Engineers last month.

Several years ago, an important series of events took place in this country in connection to EDUCATION. These events were to lay the foundation for a radical transformation of a system. The stimuli for this change of thought and direction were many.

There were many questions posed by parents, intellectuals, teachers and by the pupils themselves. These were questions that directly pointed the finger at a much maligned education system.

- Is it not possible to make our system more student friendly?
- Can it not be made more learner-oriented?
- Can there be less emphasis paid to exams?
- (Can we not restore the joy of going to school and the wonder of learning?

It seemed unfair.

An education system like ours, carefully conceptualized and nurtured by the giants in the field like Kannangara and J. E. Jayasooriya, being castigated in this manner.

But the truth - bitter as it was, had to be faced.

Over the decades our system had begun to churn out thousands of children who had turned out to be robots or 'intellectual zombies'. Some of them scored straight As at exams, but they couldn't think. They couldn't analyse. They couldn't create. They couldn't solve problems. They were only good at listening, cramming the facts, stuffing their tender brains with facts and more facts and finally regurgitating them at exams. They had no time for play or for extra curricular activities. They only had time for tuition classes. Indeed they were the characters in the play 'Vikurthi', by Somalatha Subasinghe.

Yes, the time had come to change. At least many people felt so.

'It is too late' - complained the more pessimistic. But still we knew that every new year a new group of 5 year olds enter the system. And certainly we owed it to them.

Thus began a chain of events during the latter part of the 1990s, when we began to talk about re-thinking education. We said that in re-thinking education, we must recognise that education is not confined to the class room or the

teacher or the school, or in the case of tertiary education, to the lecture hall or to the professors concerned. That would be like confining the health care of a population to hospitals. We argued that education is a much broader issue. We reiterated that education is about learning to learn, learning to care and learning to be a wholesome person in every sense of the word.

When setting in motion the chain of events which led to re-thinking education in the manner that I spoke of, there were two broad objectives in mind.

One was to equip students with the necessary knowledge and skills to suit the modern employment market and to fit in with the global changes that are taking place around us. Most of all we wanted children to be able to cope with the challenges of the 21st century.

Second, was to create a generation of young people who were compassionate and caring with tolerance of their fellow human beings and of course with a love for the country. Here the attempt was to change the attitudes and behaviour of the young student.

To begin this journey we set in motion many changes -

- i.e. - changing curricula and syllabuses
- changing methods of teaching
- changing text books and teaching materials
- changing infrastructure - example: primary class

But then we were not naive nor were we foolish.

Many of us realized that what we were beginning to do was to introduce a process of change that many people are averse to. Change means more work, more thinking, more creativity. Therefore introducing change means more problems.

I am sure you would agree with me that it would have been so much easier to lay back, be complacent and to congratulate ourselves. After all we have the highest literacy and numeracy amongst all the countries in the SMRC region. How often have I heard educationists and professionals say 'we are the best in South Asia'!

How true!

That way we need not have done anything different to what was in existence.

But then when I look around at so many countries around us, that had so much less than we had to start off with, and when I see what they have now achieved and what we have 'nt, I just despair. When I remember what Lee Kwan Yew and Mahathir Mohamade said about making

their education systems as good as ours - I cringe in shame.

To me it was a wake-up call. A universal and historical wake-up call, as to what we should have achieved and where we should have been and what we should start doing with no delay.

Re-thinking education therefore meant that we had to re-think our strategies and re-think our policies. To achieve the goals set by the Education Reforms, it meant that we had to expedite a huge sea change of events. The process was long and tedious and took more than 5 years for preparation and planning.

Today, several years down the road, how much did we succeed in bringing about change? Were we able to make people think different? Act different? Were we able to inject the necessary passion and the motivation required to create this difference we spoke of?

Before we get to that let me give you an outline on what we hoped to achieve at the end of the journey we began in 1997.

The Education Reforms aimed to create a new generation of young people equipped with many assets and therefore will be sought after by employers. The aim was to create a generation of students who were critical thinkers, who had analytical minds and who were able to solve problems. Young people who were be able to take up challenges confidently.

So the aim was to introduce child centered learning. To shift from the passive didactic teaching. We didn't want to continue with a situation where a child just parrots what the teacher teaches. We wanted the child to intelligently and actively partake in the learning exercise. So that he questions the teacher. So that he doesn't take anything for granted. ie. We wanted to produce children who engage themselves in active dialogue and debate, and who do not simply regurgitate facts committed to memory, at the examinations.

After all we were not training horses to run a race - were we?

The entire spectrum of Reforms in the primary, secondary and tertiary sectors brought in these changes through new curricula, new syllabuses, new teaching methods, new books and re-structured systems of examinations. But this involved many challenges.

Developing new teaching methods was one thing. But getting teachers to accept such teaching methods was another. Getting an ageing Examinations Dept. to restructure

their examinations, a system they were so used to, was unthinkable.

Let me just outline to you some of the ground realities we faced in trying to achieve all this.

The most important, when it comes to the Primary Reforms is that the child has to have some quality time allocated with the teacher. We needed a healthy classroom size for a teacher to be actively engaged in talking to the child. Not a teacher who has to grapple with a classroom packed with 50 or 55 children, tired and exasperated, struggling to be heard and trying engage every child in active and meaningful dialogue.

Today we know that no leading school has a classroom with less than 50.

How can we expect child centered learning in such an environment?

We were looking at changing the mind set of 4.3 million children through a change in the mind set of 191,000 teachers. So the focus of our attention had to be the teacher. I used to always refer to the teacher as the CHANGE AGENT, who was to be the most influential factor in deciding the child's future.

How often have we been influenced by our teachers? I remember the time we used to publish the new changes brought into the education system in the newspapers. A colleague of mine wrote a piece titled 'Teachers and Teaching'. He recalled how topics of conversation, even years after leaving school, revolved around their teachers. Not only did they recall the nick names of their teachers, but they also fondly remembered the good things they were taught and the bad things they were punished for. He said how he admired his old teachers and how much he adored them.

How true.

He echoed our sentiments of that time, in our quest to revigourate the teaching profession. He also echoed our sentiments in that, we wanted to bring the teaching profession back to its pristine glory. The profession of choice in the bygone days. Each technological advance that we have to work with today, has only re-designed the role teachers have to play in the learning process. In the good old days they were the reservoirs of knowledge and in many cases wisdom. Good teachers have taught us how to wade through reels of information.

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