

6th Emeritus Professor J.N.O. Fernando Memorial Oration

Education – Then and Now, Classical vs Modern

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I am grateful for the opportunity of having to deliver the oration on the occasion of the commemoration ceremony to mark the 6th Death anniversary of our beloved Emeritus Professor JNO Fernando, JNO for all us. It is indeed a great honour and perhaps, a form of recognition of my close association with Prof JNO.

Let me begin on a philosophical note and a quote from my most respected international personality, Prof Abdul Kalam, former President of India.

“Dream is not that which you see while sleeping, it is something that does not let you sleep”.

In quoting Prof. Abdul Kalam, may I mention that I tried to follow this quotation in preparing for this oration. I did dream about it, talking to myself and rehearsing in my own way.

At the outset, may I state that I am not trying in any way to compare the old with the new. Comparisons indeed may not be valid as the process of globalization and exponential growth in communication and information technology has brought in its wake an entirely new generation; many of them may not be able to comprehend how the old generation led their life; no electricity, no water supply, no cell phones (land phones were a rarity). Rather, my objective is to take you through the period 1960's – mid 1970's, over 50 years period and to give an insight into the education system then based on my own personal experience. Hence, I chose a very simple title for my oration in order to meet that objective and to drive home a message this afternoon.

I may seem boastful since I am sharing my experience then with all of you here today; please bear with me because it is not my intention. Rather, I hope I can give a simple message to the current generation who are blessed with many facilities that we did not have then. This period - mid 1960's and early 1970's was one that we will not forget easily. I feel that this oration would give all of you from the kuppi lamp era to reflect, reminisce and ponder. A cup of tea with the papers in one hand was a common feature, a form of informal learning / exchange of ideas under stress free conditions. In this context, I must say that I am happy to note that we did not have all the latest technology then; no TV, no cable network, photocopying facilities, smartphones etc. Many do not use the pen and paper when it comes to taking down missed notes; instead they get screenshots / photos. Use of modern technology is growing by the day and no doubt, members of the older generation, now find it difficult to keep pace with the rest. Obviously, we cannot live in the past; rather we need to adjust to suit the needs of the times.

Let me provoke some thoughts in this regard with the following slides (as presented in my PowerPoint presentation) referring to the past (then) and present (now). The humour is there and so is the message for you and me. Let me cite one example from the above slides with the following quotes: “Land phones united the family – then; mobile phones divided the family- now” is the message on one of the slides. I am sure many will agree with this message.

Primary Education at Beminiwatte Vidyalaya

I had my early schooling at Beminiwatte Vidyalaya off Mawanella in the early sixties up to grade 5. Apart from English, all other subjects were taught well, including Buddhism. I had no problems. In fact, if I remember correctly, I did well in Buddhism. We start the day by reciting Gatha. I remember what I recited then and in fact, it had a very soothing effect in commencing studies.

The standard of living may have been very low compared to that of today; the students came in very simple attire – sarong and shirt etc, barefooted in most cases; we wore a blue pair of shorts and rubber slippers, seemingly representing the “elite” or upper class. However, as far as I can recollect, discipline and education were of high standard. There was no question; pindrop silence prevailed when the Principal, in a coat and tweed sarong with a thick belt, stood in the middle school and observed what was happening in the lower and upper class rooms; of course, he carried the almighty cane inside the coat sleeves. I must also mention that I have hardly seen him using the cane, such was his command and authority and more importantly, management skills (I am sure he had no formal qualifications in this respect).

One of the problems now is the high cost of living; our earnings do not match up to the demands and contentment is very rare in this so-called “rat race”. I do not think I need to elaborate on this. Life was very simple then; we had ample time to join with our little friends to play, swim in the river by the side (Maha Oya), pluck mangoes, hunt for firewood etc. All this and more has had a profound effect on oneself; no formal education can give you that which is very much needed in real life. Looking back on the motto of this school – “කරතොන් භොදො”, and the depth of the embedded meaning in those two words, is striking; it is very much relevant now as it was then. Whoever coined those two words of wisdom more than half a century ago were visionaries of the past that we hardly come across today. I continue to remember these two words even after 50 odd years and do quote these words whenever I get an opportunity to do so. The meaning is profound. I do not think the outcome would be the same by a direct translation into English or Tamil. “භොදො” is literally related to the word “good”. However, on analysis, one could relate it to “පිරිසිදු මේතනාව” (purity of intention), ethics, honesty, integrity etc. I remember the statement “Integrity is to do the right thing when nobody is watching you” was prominently displayed in one of our newsletters several years ago.

Secondary Education at TCK

I was virtually put into the deep end then when I was placed in the English medium classes at Trinity College Kandy (TCK); I was totally at sea when the rest of the

class were conversing in English. It is a long and tough story but I somehow I managed to grasp the language (understand at least) within one year of classical teaching and learning. In fact, some of us were given Special English Prizes at the end of the first year at TCK.

Classical Teaching

Classical Teaching of a language involved reading, writing and spelling, where strict procedures were followed by a set of dedicated staff members, then.

It is my experience over the past 4-5 years, that the habit of reading books/papers (an important aspect to develop one's language skills) has gradually come down to a point so much so that hardly anyone does any reading now, that which those in the '60s and '70s did. When the question “who *read* the newspaper this morning?” is posed to the students in a class, virtually no hands are raised. On the contrary, in the same breath, when the question “who *does not* have a cell phone” is asked, once again, virtually no hands are raised, a good example of the status of the old (then) and present era (Now).

Thomas Edison (1847-1931)

The story of Thomas Edison is very well known and hence, I will not go into the details. I am citing only one example from the past to illustrate a point regarding education then.

He was a self-made inventor. In fact, he still remains one of the greatest inventors, very well-known because of his invention of the light bulb. However, there is an important message in terms of education then (almost two centuries ago). Let me quote from about Thomas Edison:

“A hyperactive child, prone to distraction, he was deemed “difficult” by his teacher. His mother quickly pulled him from school and taught him at home. At age 11, he showed a voracious appetite for knowledge, reading books on a wide range of subjects. In this wide-open curriculum Edison developed a process for self-education and learning independently that would serve him throughout his life.”
That was then.

Much emphasis is placed on formal education now and hence, there is no time for independent learning and thinking, two important traits for one's natural, in-born talents to blossom and mature. Let me also refer to one

of his farsighted thoughts on the future:

“I'd put my money on the sun and solar energy. What a source of power! I hope we don't have to wait until oil and coal run out before we tackle that.” - Thomas Edison

We are exploring solar power only now, something that was forecast then, 200 years ago.

Modern day

The advent of the latest technology has changed our lifestyle including education to a great extent. Look at some of the terminology in this era - upload, download, Twitter, Whatsapp, chat, Facebook, SMS, Zoom, Google and many more; it is mind boggling. I must admit that the younger generation would be more competent to talk about them than myself.

Before ending my oration, may I refer to the following quotes involving time.

- *“The bad news is TIME FLIES; the good news is you are the PILOT”*

Micheal Altshuler

- Some are old at 18; some are young at 90. Time is a concept that humans created.

The meaning and message in the above quotes are very clear; they are applicable at all times, THEN and NOW. Finally, in conclusion, may I refer to the two words “කරතොන් භෙදට” once again as my take home message to all of you.

Mr. M. R. M. Haniffa graduated from the University of Colombo, obtaining a BSc Special Degree in Chemistry with Second Class (Upper Division) Honors, and completed his Masters degree in Chemistry at the University of Hawaii at Manoa (USA). He has served as the Dean of the College of Chemical Sciences in 2015 and as a Past President of the Institute of Chemistry Ceylon (2016-2017). He is currently serving as a Senior Lecturer at the Department of Chemistry, Open University of Sri Lanka.

Cover Page

The cover image provides a glimpse of the distribution of resources which have the potential of powering chemical industries that are strategically important for the sustainable development of the Sri Lankan economy. Local industries centered on plantations and mineral resources can contribute immensely to the growth of a “Chemistry-Driven Economy”. This issue brings to light the impact these resources can have on the advancement of the national economy. This map was drawn by Dr. Inoka Peiris and Ms. Sonali Herath using ArcGIS software.