

Education The Great Equaliser



The importance of education and educational reforms has been his passion. Through personal experience he has understood the benefits of education and how it transforms one's life for the better. Eran Wickramaratne the CEO of NDB Bank sat down to speak with Business Today on his thoughts and suggestions to redefine the educational system in Sri Lanka, especially in this post war era.

Interviewed by Keith Bernard | Compiled by Ayesha Inoon | Photography by Menaka Aravinda

As a CEO of a leading bank with fulltime responsibilities, what stimulates your interest towards education and education reforms?

There are a variety of factors. One thing is my personal journey in life. I was the

first in my family to go to university. Not only did that change me, it also changed an entire generation. Many of my nieces and nephews have had a higher education.

I've seen disparities in society, particularly poverty and one way of alleviating poverty is to give people an education. Education is the great equaliser. I strongly feel that society should be more equal and I see education as a vehicle in actually achieving that.

Have you felt passionately about the need for raising the educational standards in Sri Lanka from your early youth or is it something that captured your interest later?

It was a developing interest – I was not particularly studious in school. I took part in many extra-curricular activities, both sports and non-sports activities. During my A/L's I was called by the principal of the school and told that the leading Sri Lankan conglomerate had two vacancies for boys from this school, and he thought that I would be suitable. I told him, "Sir, I'm not interested." He was stunned, and even more so, when I told him I wanted to go to university.

Therefore, it has been a developing interest; as I have grown older I now feel more than ever that it is important.

What do you see as the greatest shortcomings, if at all, in our education system? What do you think should be the priorities for primary and secondary education in Sri Lanka?

Firstly, my comments on education are not narrowed to a critique of the existing system. I'm a beneficiary of the system. My comments are in the context of how we can improve the system, how we can expand it and provide greater opportunities for a larger number of people.

If you start with the school education system, we have about 97% of children enrolling at Grade One, which is very good – now we should get it to 100%. We have about 90% of them completing Grade Nine, which is a cause for worry. It should also be close to 100%. This means that there are students who drop out of school and join the labour force without receiving a primary education.

The country has 9,700 government schools out of which about 35% don't have

electricity and about 45% don't have a library. However government expenditure on nearly 80% of those schools is recurrent expenditure. It largely goes towards paying the salaries of the teachers of the school and there is very little left to spend on laboratories, Information Communications Technology, buildings.

The problem that we have is not providing primary and secondary education; it's providing quality education. Thus, it is the quality that we need to improve.

I believe that a child or a student is the greatest asset that a family or a nation can have. Therefore, we need to equip that person, not just for our family or our country. We are a small country with 20 million people and we need to look at human resources and we need to equip them for the world. We need to give them an education that will make them think globally and also prepare them to exploit or benefit from global markets.

We Need To Give Children Just Not Academic Information – It Should Be Geared To Improving Their Analytical Skills. It's Not Just Studying And Answering Questions But Learning How To Ask The Questions.

So, in primary education and secondary education how do you improve the quality?

For one, you need to have language education. The child's mind is a very fertile place and a child would develop better and faster if the child is learning a foreign language. Therefore, I think that particularly for Sri Lankans – this is a small country, small market – every Sri Lankan student must be equipped with a global language. It really doesn't matter which foreign language, because when you learn a language it opens your mind to the literature and culture of the country, the way of thinking and the lifestyle.

The other thing that we need to do in our primary and secondary education is to look at the curriculum. We need to give children not just academic information – it should be geared to improving their analytical ability. It's not just studying and answering questions but learning how to ask the questions.

Do you think the education system in Sri Lanka is in level with the global developments and standards, and if we're lagging, how far are we lagging?

That's an interesting question. If you take the 1930's and the 1940's and you

compared Sri Lanka to South East Asia, particularly to Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and Hong Kong, we were far ahead. Today it will be fair to say that we lag.

There are two reasons for this. One is that in those countries the economies grew much faster. Therefore the economic growth created a demand for good relevant higher education in particular, with the secondary education system also aligned to have the required standard.

In Sri Lanka we lagged in terms of economic growth, and because of this the demand was much less for education.

The other reason is that the State has become the supplier of education. My view is that the State responsibility is actually creating opportunities for education – not necessarily supplying education. Naturally, if you have a monopoly supplier and you have no competition – you don't have the private sector, civil society, that in itself is not going to create the competitive push for a quality education.

There has been an explosion of primary and secondary educational centres springing up as International Schools in the metropolitan regions. Do you think such schools should be subject to some oversight or regulation, or just left alone to operate as commercial pursuits?

Firstly, it is a good development that we have these so-called international schools. In reality, most of these schools are not international schools; they are private education through the back door.

The allocation for educational expenses is only about 2.3% of the GDP. For a country comparable to ours, which is moving into a middle-income country, it should be closer to 4.3%. Since there are limited schools of quality that are State schools, parents are left with a very poor choice. Therefore these private international schools have mushroomed.

There are more than a 250,000 students in these schools across the country and they are mostly providing a good service. Clearly, the service is not uniform. There are the good schools and the bad. It should come under the purview of the Education Ministry. We should look at it as a partnership between the Government, the private sector and the schools. Instead of giving them step-motherly treatment, let's try to improve them by regulation and accreditation. The

children in these schools are also our children.

Our Focus Should Be On Reducing The Economically Backward Regions By Strengthening Them Through Our Economic And Social Policies, Education And So On. You Should Not Be Discriminating Among Students, By Having A University Bar At Different Levels For Different Kind Of Students.

In your view is there justification for discriminating between students on the basis of economically backward regions?

I would really ask the question rather than answer it – to enter the medical faculty, if you are coming from Colombo District, you need a Z score of 2. If you're coming from Kilinochchi, you need 0.53. To enter the Engineering faculty, from Colombo you need a score of 2, from Monaragala you need 1. Is it fair by the student?

There are backward regions and 30 to 40 years ago we accepted this principle. Our focus should be on reducing the economically backward regions by strengthening them through our economic and social policies, education and so on. You should not be discriminating among students, by having a university entrance bar at different levels for different kinds of students. It could be subjective and it could lead to injustices, in that students will represent themselves from so-called backward regions.

We are now looking beyond a post-military conflict era. We need to create a fair society. Students should be able to compete equally.

However, students from backward regions may not have the same opportunities or level of education as those in advanced regions. Although they may have the same IQ, they may not be able to harness their best potential due to this lack of opportunities. How do you address this issue?

We need to distinguish between the rights of the individual and basically looking at the regions which are in a sense, artificially drawn. I accept the argument of there being economically backward areas. But the solutions for that are different. You don't adjust that by adjusting the university education system or the university education quota. There are many ways of taking care of that.

One as I said, is to be very focused on allocating resources to those areas. You can even start providing opportunities in schools in the better areas – we are providing that for instance, in the Grade Five examination, where students can come into better schools, etc. The issue there is really not the issue of a lack of space in the existing schools, but the lack of options. The existing better schools are already over crowded. Partially the reason for that is that the State sees itself as the only provider of education.

I would argue that for the limited places in university, there should be absolutely no discrimination on the basis of economy, ethnicity, religion or gender.

Take for example medicine. You're not going to ensure that you have good doctors, by just looking at the A Level results. With a profession like that, you are looking for those who can deal with issues of life and death. You are looking at their intellectual capacity, social stability and emotional stability. To lower the barrier in that profession is a highly dangerous argument.

We should be trying to raise people to the standards. I would hasten to add that, the future we are looking for, is today.

As a country we usually take pride in our high literacy rate index. How relevant is the literacy rate in marketing a country?

Literacy needs to be defined. Often, this so-called literacy means that you can write your name. We pride ourselves that we have a very high literacy rate just because we can write the name. Literacy to be meaningful has to be functional literacy.

Twenty to thirty years ago people talked about literacy and it was a big plus. Investors are not looking at it like that today. Investors are looking at much finer details. They're looking at their specific industries and if we have the required skill sets for their industries. That may vary from industry to industry.

When I served on the BOI board one of the things I recognised was that if you are going to do BPO, we have to see where our edge is. It was in the fact that we had excess accountants, lawyers and such other skills. Then we came to the conclusion that if we are doing BPO we should do high-end BPO rather than low-end BPO. We pride ourselves that we have English-speaking people, but I learned that after getting the first big BPO there was a shortage of people to work in it.

Clearly, though the language is spoken, there is a shortage of people who speak the language fluently.

If we're marketing 'Sri Lanka Inc' then we need to look at those details.

Why do you think a large proportion of graduates produced by our universities find it difficult to find suitable employment? Why in your view does the private sector not absorb as many local graduates as the State sector does?

It's a shame that only 3% of all who qualify for higher education go to university in this country. Then out of that, we're saying that a lot of them don't get employment. It's really a double calamity.

Some studies have shown varied reasons, including that the attitudes needed for employment have not been inculcated, the language requirement and the organisational skills required are absent.

We need to have a recognition of that. If they're going into business and commerce or international trading they need to know an international language - generally that would be English. The language and the organisational skills need to be taught as well as good communication, problem solving and conflict resolution.

The requirements of the economy are not so much for Arts graduates. There are a disproportionate number of graduates coming from the Arts and Social Sciences faculties. A growing economy like ours needs technical graduates; it needs more from scientific fields.

There's more than one reason why the private sector is not absorbing as much as they should. Some feel that education is for the sake of education - that's dangerous, because while, at the philosophical level, I don't disagree with them, that decision should not be made by professors, and educationists alone - it should be made by the students and their parents. Most people are looking for an education that is going to get them employment and a good income. We need to start looking at how we can actually rearrange things to equip students for employment.

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As you said, it's a pity that only 3% students get in to the local university. Companies require certain skills and capabilities. If only this number of local graduates is available, who actually fills in this capacity?

It is a chicken and egg situation. There are many graduates – one set is coming out of the Sri Lankan universities, there's another set of graduates who are coming out of private universities from overseas and also those doing examinations locally that are accredited overseas.

Those graduates are also taking up positions in the private sector. At the end of the day I think all these are our children, our students. Who supplied them the education is irrelevant. It is the education that matters. It is the skill that matters, the attitude. We don't want any one group to be left behind. That is why we have to rearrange and redesign.

Should the Government have a monopoly on awarding degree level education? Do you think private universities or private education institutions with affiliations to internationally recognised universities should be encouraged towards increasing the supply of high quality graduates?

I don't think that the Government should have a monopoly on education or awarding of degrees. Countries like India are really ahead of us because they have increased the supply of education.

The business, political and professional elite are at a great expense, sending their children abroad to obtain an education. The other groups are getting left behind. This is really an unfair situation. What we should be allowing is to set up private institutes of higher education in this country.

The barriers to entry into higher education are administrative barriers, legal barriers, and lack of economic incentives. If the barriers are removed and incentives are given, those institutions will basically take root here.

What do you see as priorities for a post military conflict society?

The first priority is to take care of the internally displaced people. We must

resettle them as quickly as practically possible in their original habitat. It is a priority for us to take care of military families who greatly suffered during the conflict. These are the immediate priorities.

The Government should declare a period of national introspection and reconciliation so that the wounds of the nation could begin to heal. The Government should take a lead role alongside religious leaders and civil society organizations. Confessions, sharing and caring, even though painful at times will bring our society together.

Looking beyond that there's a need to look at the causes of why we had a military conflict in this country. It has manifested itself over the decades economically, socially, politically and militarily. We are now behind the most brutal military confrontation. We need to deal with the roots of the conflict. In my mind it requires creating a political arrangement where people have an opportunity to create their own future. The Government must set a timeframe and say that within this we're going to put forward a political, constitutional arrangement in place.

Delays are denials in the minds of the minorities because they have seen that happen for too long. Therefore it is important to set up this timeframe. All the political interest groups in the country must work together to put that in place. We need to create an economic environment, which has macro economic stability, consistent policy framework and economic incentives so that we will be able to attract local and foreign investment, which will create jobs and wealth in the country. I would say that within that framework, for me, redesigning the educational system in the country to help students to think globally and prepare themselves to exploit global markets is absolutely important.

Do you think a more sophisticated and highly educated human capital could offer a sustainable competitive advantage to Sri Lanka?

Yes, I believe so. We are a small country and we can really equip our people with skills. We have to depend on value addition. Therefore, the competitive advantage is always staying ahead in the education side. It can be done. The amount of money that Sri Lankan parents spend to educate their children overseas according to one study is more than the Government is spending on the complete university system in this country. We could save some of that money - instead of

educating one abroad we could educate ten here.

The real long-term benefit of that could only be realised if we can protect and retain that resource in this country. How do we prevent an exodus of brainpower as in the past?

We should focus on the Sri Lankan and educating him. The fact whether he is directly contributing to this country or if he is working somewhere else and contributing to the global economy, is secondary, because even he, would be remitting his excess savings as an investment into this country. Let's include the Sri Lankan expatriate as a part of the prosperous future Sri Lanka.

There are Sri Lankans living in other parts of the world who have savings and investments, who have skills that are needed for the development of this country, who will gladly return. The President has given an invitation for them to come back. I hope they will accept it. Some of them will be looking to see the signs of political stability in this country before they actually make the decision to return.

What is your vision of the new Sri Lanka?

I have a dream for a peaceful and prosperous country. Where every citizen is treated equally before the law, where the governed and those who govern can sit at the same table. A country where people will not be judged by their ethnicity but by the content of their character. A country where we could look back and say poverty is history and we are marching towards prosperity. My vision of a new Sri Lanka is a place where there is opportunity and equality for all. I would stress on those factors as most important. Because I believe that if you put the fundamental things right, the other things naturally fall into place.