

Laying The Foundation For A Better Future With DP Education



Education is an investment. They also say that a good education is a passport to the future. These quotes sound very much like mantric pronouncements from some of the great minds the world has produced. That is the philosophy Dhammika Perera embraces, the larger-than-life figure in Sri Lanka’s corporate space. As a significant shareholder in leading conglomerates, banking, and financial institutions, his vision for Sri Lanka is to see a country rich in human capital. His contribution to this vision is through DP Education. DP Education is a free online learning platform providing classroom-based video lessons of the local school curriculum from preschool to grade 13. It is an initiative to support students in their quest for a good education by adopting appealing yet straightforward teaching methods. For Sri Lanka to thrive as this decade unfolds and into the future, the opportunity lies in a good education, according to Dhammika Perera, who spoke with Business Today, outlining his

investment in the country’s education sphere. He reckons that besides education being a significant contributor to developing human capital, it increases GDP per capita and effectively improves the ability to face global challenges. DP Education is a philanthropic project initiated through Dhammika & Priscilla Perera Foundation, which also champions the upliftment of healthcare standards with continuous improvement for hospitals while providing patient care items.

By Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane. **Photography** Menaka Aravinda.

The purpose

Dhammika & Priscilla Perera Foundation was established in 2019 to develop educational opportunities and enhance the health sector in Sri Lanka for the benefit of the public by directly or indirectly engaging in programs designed and targeted towards the achievement of the same.

The co-founders, Dhammika Perera and his wife Priscilla, believed that every child desires to learn and deserves the chance to learn. The private Foundation receives its funding from Dhammika Perera and is a non-for-profit.

His vision for an educated population began as early as 2005. Providing a firm foundation in Mathematics for children in the villages was a deep thrust he envisaged to realize. However, in the era of the whiteboard, which had emerged strongly to replace the conventional classroom blackboard, the infant steps to introduce digital learning did not materialize as a radical departure from the norm.

The year 2016 turned out to be a year of new beginnings for Dhammika Perera. His wife, Priscilla, aware of his penchant to base his business decisions on a mathematical model, had encouraged him to promote Math education among all school children in Sri Lanka. The dire need to develop the country’s Math education is also the result of his occasional frustration with the failure of professionals qualified in Mathematics to understand the mathematical structures upon which they make decisions. The initial thrust in teaching Math was so successful that they extended it to teaching Science and English. Within two years, one million daily learners are accessing all DP Education platforms.

“We selected the model of a live classroom, with emphasis on a recording model

that would keep the students engaged. We took our recordings to three schools in Anuradhapura, Homagama, and Wellawatte. The students who watched the content were impressed with the teaching method we had introduced and said that ours was better than what they experienced in the classroom's physical space. Since we received enormously positive feedback on the model adopted, we launched DP Education on YouTube on October 18, 2019."

In essence, as the largest online school in Sri Lanka and as the first-of-its-kind platform globally, DP Education offers Math, Science, and English video lessons to students from Grades 1 to 13. In addition, the teaching content for Advanced Level subjects Biology, Chemistry, Physics, and Economics is available online. Soon online live paper discussions on 17 Advanced Level subjects will be made available.

Further, DP Education has online live classes daily from 8pm to 10pm for Ordinary Level students in Mathematics, Sinhala, History, Business Studies and Accounting, ICT, English, Science, and from 6pm to 7.30pm for students preparing to sit for the Grade Five scholarship examination in Mathematics, Sinhala, Environmental Studies, and past paper discussion. The best thing about the platform is that the students have free access to the government curriculum at their convenience and their own pace. Students have the flexibility to augment their knowledge in the above subjects outside of the conventional school classroom. In total, DP Education has a viewership of 54 million as of today. Further, to provide this facility for preschools, 1,000 preschools in Sri Lanka that had been in operation for at least five years were selected for infrastructure development. These include giving classroom tables and chairs, early development educational toys, washroom facilities, and boundary walls. The selected preschools constantly receive video content in kids coding, Mathematics, Science, English, nursery rhymes, and arts and crafts. Today, DP Education consists of DP Kids and the DP Coding School as well.

DP University offers 8,000 free online courses provided by 50 plus world-renowned international universities. In addition, learners can access more than 40-course categories such as Business Management, ICT, Accounting, and Finance. They are currently collaborating with the University of Moratuwa to produce 20,000 IT trainees annually, graduating through a six-month certificate and one-year diploma courses. Recording the content for those courses is in progress and will likely be launched in six months.

DP Foundation's current project investment by June 2022 will be around one billion rupees (approximately US$ five million), and DP Education as of today has produced

about 3,900 video lessons (all channels) in total and 7,000 hours of recording by the end of December.

Positive impact and the targets

Unlike in a physical setting, a virtual classroom has its limits. The best way to leverage the advantage of an online platform's ability to provide education right to the home was by circumventing the limitations of one-way communication. Therefore, the recording time for every lesson is extended from 40 minutes to 70 minutes, allowing students lengthier time to understand the content in the absence of the space to ask questions. The student also has the liberty to rewind and relearn a subject area that they might not have adequately understood on the first go. An evaluation of students' feedback communicates their take on the delivery of the lessons, which has always been positive, attributed to the simple teaching methods adopted to convey a study in an extended period. For decades, the disproportionate distribution of resources and facilities has disadvantaged students in Sri Lanka's schools from having equal access to good classroom education and good instructors. DP Education provides a similar standard for all the students in the country to learn in the cyberspace of a single classroom.

At the same time, DP Education exists to realize a greater ambition. A larger purpose drives it to impact the outcome of exam scores of Sri Lankan students. For instance, the national pass rate for Advanced Level Combined Mathematics was 60 percent, which in 2020 had increased to 70 percent. That increase was not solely due to the input from DP Education. Having set a benchmark, DP Education is driving all leading tuition teachers to adopt its methods and improve their teaching strategies, deriving positive results in the students' scores.

"I believe we have created a benchmark in education, which teachers have no choice but to follow. That means teachers out there have to make an effort to do better than DP Education for their students because we base our teaching platforms on world-class best practices in education. DP Education has also become the platform to train the trainers."

The goal is to increase the pass rate in Combined Mathematics to 80 percent. Likewise, the pass rate for physics is 58 percent, which Dhammika Perera hopes to increase to 80 percent, and similarly for chemistry. DP Education also provides students the opportunity for laboratory-based learning, as demonstrated in DP Education Science video lessons.

The process of recording and producing the content for laboratory-based practical lessons for Advanced Level subjects, which is a colossal undertaking owing to the comprehensive explanation it requires, is in progress and will be made available shortly. The DP Foundation is dead set on its commitment to buttress and supplement the students' education in Advanced Level subjects, especially in the Sciences, until the country reaches the desired targeted pass rate of 80 percent. Reaching that target sets the stage for an influx in individuals pursuing higher education, a mark that he envisages to increase in the years to come.

The challenge

The pandemic has resulted in children adapting to a new reality of accessing education via a smartphone, which has allowed them to leverage DP Education's online input. DP Education began before COVID – 19, but the pandemic has paved the way for online education to become a natural part of modern-day education standards, teaching, and learning methods.

However, on the flip side, only 50 percent (2.1 million) of the student population in Sri Lanka has access to a smartphone. That means another 50 percent of school going children have no access to online education. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, and after nearly two years, still, 50 percent of Sri Lankan students have no access to a smartphone to log into zoom or Microsoft teams to follow regular classroom work.

"I believe that although today we have only 25 percent of the student population accessing DP Education when schools reopen the balance, 75 percent of students will discover the existence of our platform from their classmates."

Setting the standards

Before launching, a study of similar platforms in the global education sphere ensued. Moreover, DP Kids has collaborated with Age of Learning Inc. USA, reputed for its global education initiatives and curriculums designed by early childhood education experts and professionals studying and analyzing child psychology and behavior to create content. Learners can view Sinhala and Tamil dubbed kids' education videos under ABCMouse.com, an initiative of Age of Learning Inc. Today, DP Education is touted as an exclusive learning platform globally, providing the local school curriculum in its entirety. This achievement stands apart compared to other learning platforms worldwide that provide additional support, such as tuition

for students but not the school curriculum.

The instructors teaching at DP Education are qualified graduates, and they are all government or semi government experienced school teachers from leading schools in Sri Lanka. The eligibility criterion for trainers is simple – teachers who produce students with high scores in national examinations fit the desired scale to share their successful learning methods with every student in Sri Lanka. Pigeon holing schools in Sri Lanka into national, provincial, and private schools that provide varying standards of teaching is a long-existing practice. DP Education negates all such barriers to provide equal access to all the students in the country to be privy to high standards of classroom teaching.



The emphasis on continuous improvement is a priority. The task rests with a panel of experts, who daily examine the prospect of improving the content, the delivery of the lessons, and the teaching model to enhance the production regularly. Quality is sacrosanct to Dhammika Perera, like all his business efforts, hence regular

evaluation by the team is an ongoing exercise. DP Education offers students three ways of accessing its services through the app, the websites and the YouTube channels. As such, they can appraise their response to the content and its delivery. For instance, the large number of comments received from students who access services on YouTube gives them the necessary feedback that sets the criteria for improvement.

Further, teachers in schools and tuition centers can use those platforms to instruct their students. The DP platform helps such teachers to provide additional support for lessons, which the students can access from home. At the same time, they can apply themselves to the exercise component in the classroom and learn the theory aspect from the online content.

The objective of DP Education is to provide access to education for all the students in the country. And in keeping with that philosophy, it has launched a project of delivering 1,500 digital classrooms to rural schools. Of the total, the installation of 81 digital classrooms is completed. The pandemic has slowed down the process somewhat. This initiative is supported further by providing daily online training for teachers and students of those rural schools. They enter a digitalized classroom setting with the knowledge of handling technology and hence will be able to navigate the process smoothly once schools reopen entirely shortly.

Future expansion

DP Education, according to Dhammika Perera, will be stamping its global footprint soon. As an entrepreneur with business interests in nearly ten countries, expansion beyond Sri Lanka would be a service to extend DP Education’s spread to reach the children in those countries. DP Education will be launched in India and the USA as a pilot project, again without a fee. However, the project is still in the process of identifying areas that may require fee levying based on whether it offers premium content in a particular segment or subject.

Humans as assets

It is a given fact that a country prospers when it has an educated population. Education is a sure way to ensure upward mobility in society. An upwardly mobile community will have access to better jobs and better pay, leading to improved living standards. His economic growth strategy and action plan, first published in September 2019 and subsequently updated in 2020, Dhammika Perera points out

that education contributes enormously to Sri Lanka becoming a developed nation by 2030. Education is vital to develop human capital, increase GDP per capita and effectively face global challenges. Higher education, he insists, is equally paramount for future prosperity. Higher education assures the relevance of knowledge, helps identify skill gaps, and builds the right skills to improve the nation's economic assets. With increasing per capita, the benefits would accrue to the businesses in the country.

"The math is simple. With increased wealth, people will spend more, whereby entrepreneurs and business people will also accumulate more wealth. A country can realize this vision only by providing every citizen access to quality education. In return, they will also have access to good employment opportunities resulting in the creation of wealth. A country prospers only when its people have money. Businesses will not thrive in a nation of poor people. Only with developed human capital will a country transition to a status of economic wellbeing and social advancement. Therefore, my investment in education is to ensure that Sri Lanka will have an educated population, enjoy equality and economic growth, leading to a prosperous country." Investing in providing children the experience of quality education is vital for the future scenario in work. Tomorrow's world of work will see diverse expectations that demand disruptive innovations, where new ones will replace traditional career models. Sri Lanka must be ready for this new development.

The prologue to the philanthropic endeavor

The mission to help the needy began three decades ago in 1987 when Dhammika Perera embarked on his journey as an entrepreneur. The development of the health sector was his main focus then. Initially, he extended help to those in need of urgent surgery. And so, through his initial philanthropic endeavors, 460 people had received assistance to undergo heart-related procedures. Today, the Foundation's focus on healthcare intervention has shifted. Rather than dispensing aid to people in health crises, they undertake to develop our healthcare system to serve the people with better facilities, technology, and advanced equipment. The Foundation conducts a bi-annual survey of all the hospitals in the country and their requirements.



Dhammika & Priscilla Perera Foundation has provided 1.5 percent of government hospital bed requirements. Especially during the pandemic, they had reached out to hospitals with ventilators, hospital beds, and other provisions and helped develop wards. Under DP Health, a YouTube channel that aims to raise awareness on best health practices, was launched in May 2021. Currently, videos for expectant women are available on the DP Health YouTube channel. Plans include the launch of a digital health hub in three years to help people navigate their way to hospitals.

Further, ICT being the future trajectory of the world, young children from preschool are receiving training to embrace this new drift through DP Coding School. The aim is to train 20,000 students in IT annually in collaboration with the University of Moratuwa. These are programs that institutions would offer for a fee, which the Foundation invests in to provide our children the same opportunity free of charge. “As I see it, investment in education and health is the best way for any country to ensure its people’s future prosperity and quality of life.”

Following C W W Kannangara’s pioneering effort to provide free education to all Sri Lankan children, DP Education is the 21st century’s first endeavor to pioneer an online free education platform espousing a single standard for all the Sri Lankan students, according to Dhammika Perera.

Today’s ‘free education for all’ slogan means that every child, even those living in the remotest corner of Sri Lanka, who would otherwise attend a school with the scarcest facilities and teaching, has equal access to the same level of classroom teaching through DP Education.