Schools Beyond Walls: A Stepping-Stone to Learning Societies

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It is time that educators and society in India woke up. It is time for a transition out of Government-funded sick education factories, the monster-size concrete jungles that devour more than 80% of the outlay. It is time for the re-awakening of culture and tradition, for the recognition of the power of communication and technology, for a rediscovery of spirituality, and for an active, thinking society. It is time for a complete revolution in education.

This revolution depends on learning societies, which are defined by the responsibility they take for their own learning and which no longer leave the conceptualization of and decision-making for this most central aspect of human life to elites located far away from the pangs, agonies, aspirations and joys of local communities. Such learning societies actively participate in designing learning situations for their children to meet and anticipate the demands of the future. They understand that 'learning is situated' and therefore attempt to situate the curriculum to respond to each individual learner's profile of thinking and to the contexts in which diverse forms of knowledge are constructed (Gardner, 1999). Learning societies draw from local communities' vast repertoire of culture-lore[1] to do this, but simultaneously think and learn globally, so as not to re-invent wheels in isolation. The building of learning societies call for great imagination and leadership by educators and other stakeholders.

As a Principal in Bangalore, I have tried to operationalize a concept of "School Beyond Walls", which I believe offers one experiment in the process of breaking the monotony and monopoly of schooling and developing a dynamic learning society in India. "School Beyond Walls" fundamentally pushes our thinking about the relationships and environments for learning, by recognizing that genuine learning cannot be 'taught' and that little more than rote memorization is currently taking place in schools. It counters with the view that learning is an intuitive, person-specific process, which best takes place in real-life situations. Teachers learn along with children; both continuously construct, refine and reconstruct their knowledge through each experience. Apprenticeship learning opportunities are thus facilitated, as imaginative and accomplished community members are called upon to share their talents with children. Children learn the LANGUAGE of each domain of work. This language portrays the principles, practices, collective wisdom, and understanding that are highly essential to be creative and innovative in that field. These activities are only possible in real life situations, but can be facilitated by the school. By serving as the field for these real-world learning experiences, the local community thus becomes a part of the school.

"School Beyond Walls" also allows for learning opportunities in a global context. It incorporates the concept of a virtual school, where children have the spaces to learn from individuals all over the world. With mediation by peers, teachers and other members of the local community, children can use their experiences of the global, of diverse cultures

and traditions, to further enrich learning about their own spiritual and cultural knowledge. In this way, "School Beyond Walls" develops both the wings and the roots of each child.

ROLES OF MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCES AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY IN SCHOOL BEYOND WALLS

To achieve the above, "School Beyond Walls" innovatively utilizes two interrelated frameworks/tools: Multiple Intelligences (MI) (Gardner, 1983) and Information Technology. I have found that MI has two related impacts that aid in transforming schools. For one, it enables a better understanding of each individual child's unique talents and provides each child with more confidence in his/her learning process. When a child is offered a variety of learning experiences and has the opportunity to negotiate different levels of challenges in an unthreatening environment, he or she finds that certain areas are more inviting for him/her to engage in. That is, in that particular area(s), the child appears to learn instinctively or naturally, is willing to work hard and challenge him or herself, seeks out self- or independent-learning spaces, develops originality and creativity, and grows by leaps and bounds. In this way, MI allows children to discover/uncover their own talents and to nurture them in meaningful ways.

On another level, MI helps to transform the roles that teachers and administrators must play. From the MI framework, teachers learn that education must be person-oriented, and administrators learn that schools must be philosophy-oriented. They abandon their urge for mechanization, uniformity, and replication, and strive to facilitate learning that takes into account each child's uniqueness. Like the *gurus* of the indigenous *gurukul* system, teachers in School Beyond Walls recognize that each child requires his or her own personalized curriculum and that the possibilities for innovation are enormous. Simultaneously, Heads of Institutions and other administrators step down from their hierarchical position of authority and create coalitions with parents, teachers, children, and community members to prepare MI-related, diverse learning activities and opportunities. In the process, teachers and administrators also discover themselves, their own uniqueness and creativity in teaching-learning processes. In my experience, for example, I have found that MI nourishes very committed teamwork and interdependency (Covey, 1989). Teachers and administrators have abandoned their 'helpless-follower' mode of thinking and are trying to take leadership in developing the School Beyond Walls. Our effort will reach the next level when we fully introduce MI-based methods of assessment.

Information Technology (IT) is the second crucial tool that must be utilized in transforming schools into Schools Beyond Walls. In villages, local knowledge, often constructed over a very long period of time, is still passed on through daily practices, rituals, conversations, and communions. Information on Wall Street or Silicon Valley, on the other hand, is produced at a distance, at lightening speeds, but has the capacity to tremendously affect millions of lives through little more than push-button devices. In a School Beyond Walls, children, teachers, administrators, and other members of the community must acknowledge both the power and purpose of all types of knowledge and information, in order to learn how to utilize them in ways that facilitate better living for all. Indeed, without such conscious and continuous thinking about IT and about how to

sift through and comprehend the deluge of information available, it is quite easy to get wrapped up in the shiny package of IT and lose sight of its potentially negative impacts. Therefore, the challenge becomes how to take advantage of the IT availability in a place like Bangalore - where Internet is already a common word and which has the potential to provide the conceptual lead in how to use IT for deep learning - without becoming totally overwhelmed and controlled by it.

In our School Beyond Walls, for example, we start with imaginative CD-ROM work to encourage independent self-paced and sequenced learning. Children then have the opportunity to put up and manage their own web pages. Not only does this give them the scope to interact with peers and mentors all over the world, but web posting and publishing also provide the perpetual audience and positive encouragement necessary for talent development. Indeed, in complete congruence with the Schools Beyond Walls concept, IT allows children, prompted by their own interests and talents, to discover new areas outside of the given syllabus. IT is also a great boon to teachers, who can easily exchange and publish their own innovations, experiences and research. We have started a web-based "Gift-Ed" journal, where our children and teachers will collaborate with other children and teachers all over the world on a variety of projects and share their own experiences in this process. Thus, IT, if used discerningly, can provide a source of great learning in connection with real-life processes and environments.

CRITICAL CHALLENGES
However, I must acknowledge the challenges to using MI and IT on a grand-scale in the Indian context. For example, MI is difficult to 'spread' in India for several reasons:
1. Most schools are busy trying to complete a syllabus and prepare for examinations, which allows no space for different frameworks of learning or understanding the world.
2. Schools have become complacent because of their monopoly in the field of education; they lack the urge and the climate to incorporate new research or ideas in their operations.
3. Most teachers and administrators dread changes, for they lack dynamism and refuse to take responsibility to make those changes a reality.
4. Many teachers in India want an easy ride, free lunches and lots of rest, whereas MI requires tremendous initiative and a willingness to work hard.
5. Administrators and Head of Institutions do not want to collaborate with others, yet they themselves are not cutting-edge research- or experience-oriented.
6. Teachers and administrators do not require any re-certification, so after joining a school, they do not work on improving themselves or their colleagues.
7. Systemic support is nil. Government departments, in fact, put up brakes instead of encouraging experimentation.

MI thus demands committed and caring teachers and administrators, who are willing to create smaller and child-oriented School Beyond Walls. Yet today's education department is unimaginative, slow to change and, to a large extent, paralyzed. They are unwilling to release their egos, in order to learn from one another, and unwilling to work hard to facilitate a variety of learning opportunities and activities. MI also requires

detailed planning, new and diverse interactions with the community at all levels, and continuous research on the part of all parties. It is not something that can be managed or conceptualized from the top-down; rather, how a MI framework operates in each School Beyond Walls will have to be determined by the stakeholders of that school itself.

Similarly, IT is difficult to implement on a large-scale. For one, it is impossible for any national-level research institution to design a curriculum that could keep pace with the changes taking place in the field of IT, be they software, hardware or the kinds of services required. This means that each individual school has to anticipate changes in the IT field and plan its strategies according to its continuously redefined learning needs and aspirations. Again, hard work, reflection, dialogue, and research are necessary.

Essentially, children will have to become an integral part of the knowledge generation process. Allowing children to do so would require giving up authority and control, another commitment that many teachers and administrators are unwilling to make. Moreover, teachers will no longer be able to act as masters of knowledge, for with IT readily available, it is clear that they will not be able to know everything. Rather, they will have to develop into masters of facilitation, cultivating in children the same quality of facilitation, of sifting the relevant from the irrelevant, the futuristic from the flash in the pan. Finally, as it stands today, the IT industry is severely weak in terms of software applications that cultivate creativity and collaboration. And, unfortunately, the understanding of pedagogy needed for using the limited applications that do exist is even weaker.

Despite these challenges, the Bangalore School Beyond Walls stands out as a success due to two important factors:
1. Our approach to children, as creating knowledge instead of just consuming knowledge (Renzulli, 1990) through Creative Incentive and Productive Environment (CIPE) Projects, encourages parents to get involved in what engages the imagination and MI way of thinking of children. Thus, parents realize the importance and the challenges of a Creativitists' Approach to education and lend support to the process.
2. We believe in the Interdependency Model[2], where a team of parents, teachers and the Head of the Institution come together in a transparent way. The teachers and the Head of the Institution are open to criticism, which is more than compensated by the enthusiasm, involvement and support of parents who look forward to how School Beyond Walls creates a little genius out of every child. Our community works on facilitating learning as a very mature team.

THE SEEDS OF CHANGE
The School Beyond Walls framework provides one stepping-stone to building learning societies for the 21st century. They encourage everyone to earmark a part of their time to share their 'wisdom' and acumen with the growing generation, to assume responsibility that one and all should realize. Clearly, such activities and sensitivity makes the idea of a universal curriculum, especially within a country as diverse as India, very difficult and completely irrelevant. Instead, the learner will decide what he or she wants to learn and even how these learning interests will be met, resulting in a made-to-order, sophisticated

education. The school community will transform itself as well. Teachers will begin to take action to facilitate each individual's unique learning aspirations, and administrations will prepare to support teachers to meet the learners' multiple intelligence and technology needs. Various Schools Beyond Walls will network and collaborate with each other to establish Research & Development programs, and to share and utilize resources, particularly crucial, complex sources of authentic knowledge and funding.

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M. Srinivasan <gear@vsnl.com> is deeply committed to evolving a model of education that helps every child discover his/her true potential. Right now, he is working on giving a shape to a (flexible Residential) School Beyond Walls Model at the GEAR innovative International School in Bangalore. Srini's learning interests include MI, Brain Functions, Local Culture and Traditions, and IT as tools for Giftedness and Talents Development.

[1] Like folklore, culture-lore refers to the cultural frameworks, stories, songs and practices, passed from one generation to the next.

2 According to Stephen Covey (1989), a team works at three different levels. **Level 1: Totally Dependent** - The team members depend on instructions and guidance for everything. Most of our new teachers and parents are like this. **Level 2: Totally Independent Level -** After a while they feel they know everything and start working totally 'isolated' from one another. Confidence level may be high but productivity is not. **Level 3: Totally Interdependent Level -** At this level of functioning every one depends on the other to get the best of that person; there is no suspicion of upstaging or competition. Everybody knows how to react to criticism positively and the whole team works as a matured and happy team. Our team of parents, teachers and the management is like the highest level of a team. When you function at this level some parents do create headaches because they finally have a chance to discuss the many things on their mind, which may neither have matured or be very sensible, but the majority of parents appreciate this transparency and contribute to the building up of a very committed team!