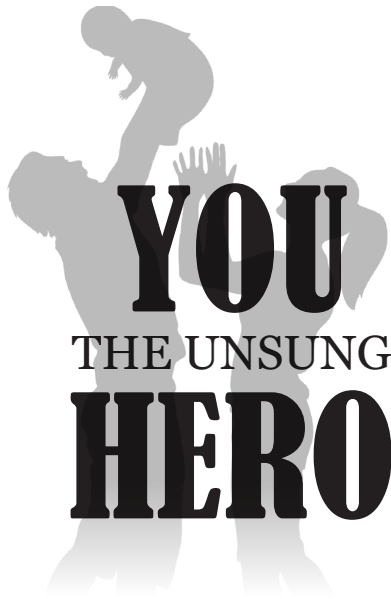




# YOU, The Unsung HERO

KNOW ALL ABOUT PARENTING  
THAT MATTERS IN K-12

G.S. MADHAV RAO | SANDEEP SRIVASTAVA  
SALONI SRIVASTAVA



Nextgen Books Pvt. Ltd. for CIPHER Alchemy

[www.cipheralchemy.org](http://www.cipheralchemy.org)

# YOU THE UNSUNG HERO

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*“Thomas Gradgrind now presented Thomas Gradgrind to the little pitchers before him, who were to be filled so full of facts ... He seemed a galvanizing apparatus, too, charged with a grim mechanical substitute for the tender young imaginations that were to be stormed away.”*

From “Hard Times – For These Times”, a novel by Charles Dickens (1854).

Pertinently, it was written just as the current format of K-12 was taking root. How different is this reality for the school education of our children, in 2021?

*To the rise of the knowledge families in the fast crystallising knowledge society!*

*Enabling parents is the first, biggest, and catalytic education reform.*

# CONTENTS

<b>FOREWORD</b> .....	9
-----------------------	---

## **PREFACE**

---

What is ‘The Unsung Hero’ about .....	13
---------------------------------------	----

## **PROLOGUE**

---

Is the school truly preparing your child for the future? .....	17
Childhood is not child’s play .....	20
Why do children ‘fail’*? .....	21
Why do parents matter so much? .....	24
Why do parents today matter like never before? .....	26
How does every parent matters? .....	28
What do parents gain from parenting? .....	32
How is each parent unique? .....	34
What transformation is needed in parent education? .....	36
21 <sup>st</sup> century schools and the authors! .....	38
Case studies – How unique can each parent be? .....	44
How did our parenting journey take us to home-schooling? .....	46

## **EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM**

---

Influential education theories .....	50
Common theoretical frameworks .....	51

Constructivism .....	59
Eminent educators .....	62
Quality of education – the real form .....	71
Quality of education – the formal form .....	73
The current school education system .....	82
Origin of the current school system .....	86
Current schools are factory-like institutions .....	90
While social context has changed, schools have not .....	92
The design flaw in schools .....	100
A GOOD school .....	109
Parents can insulate their children .....	112
Schools and student-centric education .....	114
Established student-centric approaches .....	119
Parents need to change the home system as well .....	125
Extended circle of influence .....	143
Relevance of post-school academic tuitions .....	147
Managing and leveraging homework .....	149
Parents with children in boarding schools .....	153
Financing education .....	155
What to appreciate children for? .....	158

## **LEARNING JOURNEY**

---

Stages of growth for humans .....	162
The importance of ‘childhood’ – The stage unique to humans .....	164
Emotional and social development in the early years .....	167
Implications of the stages of growth for parents .....	169
Know the children .....	171
The surprise of ‘home-schooling’ – our notes on children .....	172
Pillars of individual learning .....	178
Reading .....	179
Language .....	192

Learning .....	204
Memory .....	211

## **TEACHING AND LEARNING SUBJECTS**

---

Math .....	220
Knowledge called science .....	225
Biology .....	229
Physics and chemistry .....	234
Math verses science .....	236
Social sciences .....	238
Harnessing assessments .....	241

## **OVERALL DEVELOPMENT**

---

Life skills .....	246
Values .....	248
Music .....	252
Dance .....	259
Physical education .....	264
Art and design .....	270

## **INTERNET FOR CHILDREN**

---

The ubiquitous internet - what is it? .....	278
Technology for children .....	280
Technology, not just coding .....	282
Cyberbullying .....	285
Impact of cyberbullying .....	288
Protection from cyberbullying at home .....	291
Career Choices .....	294

## **RECIPE FOR A GOOD SCHOOL**

---

GOOD Principals .....	298
GOOD TEACHER .....	302



GOOD PARENT .....306

**ASSESSING SCHOOLS**

---

Auditing schools .....312  
Questionnaire for school administrators .....323  
Questions for school principals, headmistresses .....324  
Questionnaire for teachers .....326

**CONTEMPORARY THEMES**

---

ICT in education .....336  
The socialisation of children .....340  
A clarion call to higher education .....346  
The future of school education .....351  
Alternate is the new mainstream .....358

**EXAMPLES OF SUCCESSFUL PARENTING**

---

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827) .....362  
Abraham Lincoln (1809–1865) .....363  
Helen Adams Keller (1880–1968) .....365  
Sir Chandrasekhara Venkata Raman (1888–1970) .....366  
Steve Jobs (1955–2011) .....368

**EPILOGUE** .....371

**INDEX** .....379

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENT** .....381

**REFERENCES** .....383





### **Childhood is not child's play**

“Every moment is important!” is the captivating essence of parenting.

UNICEF adroitly captures the vastness of the task of parenting, especially the initial few years: *“The first years of life have a profound effect on a child's future – on her brain development, her health, her happiness, her ability to learn in school, her well-being and her aspirations (even the amount of money she can earn as an adult).”* Adding that, *“in this formative stage of life, a baby's brain can form more than 1 million new brain connections every single second; a pace that is never repeated again!”* Therefore, according to UNICEF, *“the right food, stimulation and care – or eat, play, love – are essential to a baby's brain development in the first 1,000 days of life.”*

However, is this news for any parent? Certainly not. In fact, all parents also know that the next 1,000 days, and the 1,000 days after that, and more, are all important for a parent in new and different ways. In fact, parenting does not get any less challenging as children grow older; bringing up children is a 24x7, multi-faceted, and mind-space-anchored demand.

Shaping and realising childhood imperatives and opportunities (years up to college education in this context) is not child's play. On the contrary, raising a happy family – happy children, happy parents, and other happy adults in the household – is the most demanding and fulfilling, role in our lives.

More need not be said to parents on the commitment that parenting is.

*“Someone is sitting in the shade today because someone planted a tree a long time ago.”*

Warren Buffet

In a lighter vein, think of old age!

### **Why do children ‘fail’\*?**

Haven’t we all wondered at some point about who is majorly responsible for our children’s failure or success? Is it the school or the parents? What is the secret of happy, healthy, and ‘successful children’?

All babies are born equal, irrespective of race or class. Provided with basic necessary nutrition and health, all children develop at approximately the same rate. Genes account for as little as 10% of children’s development, and their environment accounts for the remaining 90%. It becomes evident that variations in children’s ‘life outcomes’ must mean that there is variation in the environment. The key factors contributing to this environment in the early years are parents and schools.

Since schools are social institutions specialized in caring for children’s education and learning needs, we tend to over analyse their actions – and not incorrectly so. Principals, teachers, and school facilities are instrumental in shaping a child’s future, but the current educational system is plagued with visible shortcomings – focus on rote memorization, assessment of content rather than skills and reasoning. Despite the education system’s many imperfections, – ‘non-learner teachers’, weak language and math achievements, and poor-quality of overall development resources and benchmarks, we see children succeeding.

This does suggest that in addition to genes and schooling, there is still a far more vital variable at play here. Parents define their children’s entire environment directly or indirectly – they pick the neighbourhood their children grow up in, they cook what they think is the best food for their children, they train their children for the habits of body and mind that’s their own best, and they even select the school their children attend.

There is more – not only do they control their children’s immediate environment, they also have a very strong influence over the kind of environment their children encounter at school; the practices that parents reinforce, by design or by default, get better integrated at school.

### **Why do parents matter so much?**

This is the most important question and a very interesting one too.

Children learn much more from what they see their parents do (or not do) than what parents say or discuss. The extent to which children take after their parents' behaviour can never be fathomed. The first 1,000 days, the pre-school days, are all covered in parents' imprints. These imprints are so deep that they last a lifetime; the sense of emotional security, richness of language/vocabulary, and some habits of the mind and body are quite firmly established during these days.

Parents are the gatekeepers to everything the children will experience for a long time (preschool to middle school is the longest educational phase until under-graduation). When parents select the school for their children, they automatically select which sets of experiences and knowledge/skills will be included or excluded.

Parents determine their children's interactions with extended family, friends, neighbours, and the community at the park and play areas (the people they interact with, the games they play, the amount they play). Parents also set the context for the interactions, roles, and resources for all the family members. The unique and significant educational experiences for living, citizenship, and work ethics are a part of this context.

Parents matter a lot in their own right, too, as they are motivational drivers and are the direct source of diligence, honesty, and inspiration for pursuing whatever the children decide on at any given point in time.

The five defining 'cultures' that only parents can create are listed here:

- Reading every day at home; investing in creating a multi-genre book collection (bought or borrowed)
- Conversing on all kinds of subjects/topics/news/interests; making conversations that strengthen logical, inferential, emotional, social, cultural, political, etc. strands by design
- Maintaining a joyful environment for learning; becoming co-learners with their children in the learning of all 'subjects' – like

### **Why do parents today matter like never before?**

As our world dramatically changes, so must parenting! The role of parents has become even more central to children's education due to the rapidly emerging knowledge society.

As the education system moves from 'knowing things' to '(only) knowing how to know things', being a learner is the new educational goal. But 'learning to learn' is a challenge that is equally daunting for teachers and parents. Today's parents and teachers didn't get 'schooled', or 'colleged' to be learners, and no formal training can equip one to develop them into learners. Being a learner is an attitude towards knowledge, skills, and beliefs; it takes years of 'growing up' that way.

Being a learner is about being 'non-reflexive', being present in the moments at all times – exploring, observing, experiencing, experimenting, and constructing knowledge. However, school education still carries forward the 'empty vessel, outside-in' approach where the goal is to keep filling every student's 'stock of knowledge', without connecting, experiencing, or theorising.

A learner now ought to be able to create more and more 'personal knowledge', which is not necessarily unique knowledge, but the knowledge created in an 'inside-out' manner. Personal thoughts are the source of new knowledge and are tested in the 'real world' for veracity and accuracy. The education system cannot supply 'learner-teachers' in the next two decades – we still do not have schools where children learn how to know anything. Thus the severe dearth of new-age teachers is a global affliction.

There is another challenge – supporting anyone to become a learner (as being a learner cannot be taught – a clear contradiction) requires personal interactions and observations as well as dedicated time and attention. Schools cannot ensure this unless the class size is well under 10 students and the same teacher 'supports' all the academic subjects (since the ability to learn is a state of mind and cannot be compartmentalized into subject domains). This is too much to ask of any school system anywhere in the world. Schools

### **How does every parent matter?**

Surprising as it may be, many of the important educational developments of children are such that the determinants of their parents' 'life and professional conditions', for instance, their education, profession, economic or social status, and cultural environment, don't matter. Therefore, every parent matters.

Each parent, without exception, has a deep, definite, and diverse impact during the pre-school years on his or her children's development, including quality of social exchanges at home and with others, cognitive engagement in routine things, etc. The physical safety, good mental health, and emotional security of children are ensured by every parent well into their young adulthood.

Proficiency in the language of academics is highly correlated with the quality of conversations at home; schools have no time for substantive conversations (listening to lectures, questions, and answers, doubt clarifications, expressing opinions do not help in enhancing language abilities). Interestingly, the quality of conversations in the primary years is less about the content and a lot more about learning the 'rules and habits' of (engaging) conversations, such as learning to listen, asking effective questions, responding to the point, managing egos, gathering new knowledge from conversations, watching out for linguistic gains, etc. All parents can help their children improve their conversation skills while simultaneously improving their communication skills.

'Parental commitment' and 'parenting style' outclass all other aspects of parental involvement. All parents can be mentored on becoming more committed to their children and can later evolve their own productive 'style' best suited to their background. These two parenting qualities explain why parents across ethnic divisions positively affect their children's educational outcomes despite having widely differing approaches.

The impact of parenting is not a prisoner of the parents' economic, social or cultural context and is more tightly tied to the inherent quality of the parents' behavioural component. Examples of good,



## Reading

*“The man who does not read has no advantage over the man who cannot read.”*

*Mark Twain*

At the outset, it must be acknowledged that we do not really know much about reading other than the fact that it is a deeply neurological process, making great demands on the brain. Transformations due to extensive reading have been observed in the parts of the brain that support the emergence of reading skill(s); reading is also linked to the physical development of the brain.

Broadly, the brain functions involved in reading are –

1. The visual aspect of recognizing shapes, symbols, and pictures.
2. The phonological (sound) understanding and relating it to written words.

Neuroscience has just begun to understand what happens when we read by monitoring the areas of the brain stimulated while reading. There are, in fact, several strands at the neurological level that we know little about – the exact role of memory in reading, how emotions play up when we read, whether reasoning and problem-solving skills come into play when we read, etc.

At the same time, we take reading for granted. We do not think about it as involving complex brain activity. It is only when we must teach someone else to read that we realize its complexity. Reading is among the most sophisticated and demanding tasks that our brain indulges in.

The one thing we do know about reading is that it is the ‘most recent mode of acquiring knowledge’, just around 2,500 years old. The three other modes of acquiring knowledge are listening, seeing, and doing. All forms of life – from the simplest single-celled animals to the biggest mammals – learn using either a subset or all three modes. Nevertheless, there is little appreciation for reading as the primary mode of learning.

A comparative table of reading vis-à-vis doing, seeing, and listening as a learning mode along several dimensions is given below. A scale of 1 to 5 is used, with '1' signifying 'least fit' and '5' denoting 'best fit'.

Dimensions		Reading	Doing	Seeing	Listening
<b>Interactivity</b>	Generating vivid imagination	4*	5	2	3
<b>Variety</b>	Range of available content	5	1	3	3
<b>Cost per unit of learning (lowest cost = '5')</b>	Cost of accessing the content	4	1	2	2
<b>Control over time</b>	Flexibility of time and pace of learning	5	2	1	1
<b>Benefit per unit time</b>	Achievement of learning objective per unit time	4	4	4	3
<b>Depth</b>	Ease of availability of higher-level content in the subject being explored	5	2	2	2
<b>Access</b>	Ease of availability	4	1	3	3
<b>Language development</b>	Helpfulness in increasing language competency	5	1	2	2
<b>Cross-disciplinary</b>	Association with subjects other than the one being investigated	4	4	2	3
<b>Total points (9 dimensions)</b>	A possible total of 45 points	40	21	21	21

\*Reading could be 5 but is conservatively placed at 4.

etc. Similarly, red as a colour in pictures is relatively restrictive compared to the use of red in a language (it is just red). In the English language, red is richly used as 'red tape', 'red carpet', 'red card', 'to be in the red', 'red-letter day', etc.

It is also pertinent to briefly touch upon the science of poor intellectual development resulting from the rote method. When we memorise something without understanding it – the rote way to 'learn' something – we are committing images of the text to memory rather than the symbols of the language. The potential manipulations and the amount of context in pictures are poorer than in the case of language symbols. Unsurprisingly, intellectual development is far lower in rote-based memory.

For example, the most worrisome reflection of rote learning is the 'complete amnesia' of the content learnt a year back in the previous grade. There is no development of concepts, logical association of concepts, a linguistic association of names of phenomena, a marriage of concepts and experiences, or the ability to paraphrase known texts.

Most of us take language simply as a means of communication. Communication is a complex combination of feelings, imagery, nonverbal cues, values, philosophical ideas, etc. As discussed earlier, language is indeed a very expansive ability. Naturally, it plays a critical formative role in children's development. It acts as a subtle yet strong force, shaping children's interests, perception of the world, capabilities, and even values and attitudes.

Good language skills are critical for overall development and not just for good speaking skills.

### **How did we learn our mother tongue?**

Almost magically – just by listening to our family members and neighbours talking to us and each other. No special effort is needed to learn one's mother tongue – on the one hand, merely hearing a language constantly is important, but on the other hand, opportunities to express oneself and the quality of feedback available on every expression is also necessary. The following are the

is to walk inside a classroom and check the ‘neatness, correctness and similarity’ of the classwork content in the students’ note books. The greater the similarity in work among students, the poorer the quality of learning of individual students.

5. *Being good in isolated topics/concepts* – This is not necessarily a sign of good learning because learning is an ability/process and cannot really be achieved in silos. For example, one is not likely to be good in trigonometry unless one is good in geometry. Likewise, one cannot be good in physics unless one is good in certain sections of math. We will next explore how learning is not about developing an ever-growing stock of knowledge.

Based on this discussion, we can define what learning is –

1. *A qualitative increase in the capacity to learn ‘new things’* – It is about ‘learning how to learn’. For example, having good knowledge of units of measurement in math is reflected in the ability to do quick and correct conversions of one unit into another in physics.
2. *Being ‘alive’ at all times* – Actively using prior knowledge/experiences in a situation. There is a continuous construction and deconstruction of knowledge, and learning lies in the continuous application of knowledge. For example, a learner has a far lesser chance of slipping on a similar surface twice (because that would be making the ‘same mistake’ twice and ‘not learning from a mistake’).
3. *A 24 x 7 process* – A learner is always learning and from every situation – formal as well as informal. For example, a learner learns science outside the class while observing, experiencing, experimenting, and reasoning in everyday situations.
4. *A system* – This is reflected in changes in knowledge, skills, and attitudes, as well as in-creasing ‘cross-connections’ across domains of memory (like multi-disciplinary linkages, multi-sensory integration). For example, a good music learner will be skilled in creating ‘correct’ music (melodious and rhythmic) and think about creating/ensuring the right mood and environment to present it.

‘activities’ part may be stored where there is more on the activities of other processes).

If the information in the two paragraphs create visual imageries for the reader, then the visuals will also get stored somewhere as ‘part’ of the texts, where similar imageries are stored. For example, if the reading of the two paragraphs creates, for example, the imagery of a telephonic exchange, then the imagery, along with the title ‘Memory as a process’, may also get stored in the part of the brain that handles images.

Similarly, if the two paragraphs struck an emotional chord within you, a part of the text will get stored at an entirely different place in the brain with similar emotional information. If the content of the two paragraphs made you experience a ‘Eureka moment’, a link to the two paragraphs will be stored in the part of the memory where other ‘Eureka moments’ are stored, and the next time you have a similar ‘Eureka moment’ you will automatically recollect these two paragraphs. Similarly, the retrieval of the two paragraphs would also be in a ‘non-chunk’ mode – the information in the two paragraphs will be collected from different parts of the brain and then collated into something like the two paragraphs of text, the image of the telephonic exchange and the lovely ‘Eureka’ feeling.

Interestingly, the more the two paragraphs are ‘deconstructed’ into small and diverse units in the process of being storage-ready, the better the retrieval will be because there would be as many different threads just waiting to be pulled to trigger the recall of the two paragraphs.

Indeed, memory is an extremely active and complex process of information management in which ‘chunks’ of information are cut, stored, joined and retrieved. In this process, several other ‘unwritten’ attributes (such as images, emotional connect) are also assigned to the information being managed.

Memory is a critical mental process without which we would behave exactly like a programmed machine. We would only be capable of simple reflexes, actions, and stereotypical behaviours. Without memory, we cannot modify our behaviour or learn!

textbooks, new supplementary readings, new experiences, experiments, etc., set in every child's immediate context and include parents and the local community (who must also academically grow with their children).

Technology focused on developing AR/VR (Augmented Reality/Virtual Reality) lessons, gaming, and other immersive experiences for powering access to resources and the broader world information and society are secondary needs and just desirable. Such resources are anyway more appropriate for (senior) secondary students.

Not to mention that we do not want AR, VR, and gaming to do anything with language, art, music, play, sports, math, history, political science, geography, and most of the sciences (i.e., school science) except for intricate multi-dimensional knowledge such as climate change and unique environmental complexes. It is distressing to see the high hopes school leadership and technology giants have pinned on AR, VR, gaming, etc., as game changers in school education.

Looking at remote teaching, here are the top ten goals for technology applications in improving the process of education –

1. Giving up the 'pedagogic approach' in 'out of sight' situations where only the 'andragogic approach' will work (as discussed in the section 'Know our Children').

Thus, we need minimal live teaching, teachers' videos to be considered a resource – not the resource, encouraging lateral exchanges among students as the backbone of learning.

2. Seamless integration of 'in class' and 'out of class' resources, practices, processes. 'In class' and 'out of class' experiences should not get out of sync with one another. For instance, pre-teaching assessment, pre-reading, post-teaching assessment, and immediate remedial inputs based on a post teaching evaluation must precede online teaching.
3. Ensuring the anonymity of the learners to encourage all students to participate – that is, dynamically randomising the online identities of and for the learners. In contrast, real identities remain visible to teachers.

4. Encouraging all learners to (anonymously) participate by stopping the two-way voices *modus operandi* and accepting participation through written texts instead.
5. Ensure all learners' participation – a one-click monitoring tool with teachers to know how many learners responded to each task, private messaging with all the defaulting ones, etc.
6. Creating a new teaching ethos using practices that push EVERY learner to respond to every interactive task and put to rest the intimidation students feel alongside their more 'talented' counterparts, especially when the 'talented' students hijack teaching-learning experiences.
7. Providing private and instant feedback to learners if the teachers want (without the teachers having to put much effort into it).
8. Creating a record of every student's interaction for a period, topic, chapter, etc., accessible to teachers, students, and parents.
9. Using the internet as a medium of learner-generated demand for knowledge and fact-checking written text. Providing students the ability to access the community, teachers, parent pool, and other volunteer support (which may also include senior students) will ensure three levels of interactions – section-level, grade-level, parent-level (and, ideally, volunteer-level and community-level as well).
10. Giving learner devices that will capture their writing, math solutions, diagrams, drawings, etc., in their handwriting and digitally light and bandwidth-friendly ways.

This discussion is just to enlighten parents to speak up and commit to ensuring the successful education of their children while engaging with schools in discussions on the appropriate use of ICT. Governments, school leaders, teachers, technology companies, and educators have failed to arrive at a consensus on the goals of ICT in education. It is up to educated parents to make ICT deliver its potential by personalising the entire educational context for every student and organically connecting schools, parents, communities, and organisations.

## **The socialisation of children**

### **What is socialisation?**

Socialisation refers to the process of informing and influencing the behaviour, choices, values, and aspirations that children exhibit as they grow up in society. Socialisation enables children to become aware of, appreciate and learn the values and beliefs, good and bad, impulse and conscience, expectations and role obligations, and norms of social transactions in a particular cultural group or society.

Experiencing, validating, updating through transactions daily is at the core of socialisation.

Socialisation is driven through interactions in the family, peer groups and mentoring agencies at school, and other social entities of extended family and social events. Socialisation, irrespective of which agencies bring it about, teaches them to discern between impulse and the rigour of control and conscience. It brings about an understanding of different roles that they would play as members of society, from being a child to being a value-adding worker and being a spouse or partner of another individual. It is the core of preparing children to become contributing and influencing members of society by transferring norms, values, beliefs, and behaviour to the future adult members of society.

It could be easy to see that the family and the school are central to the socialisation of children. Both institutions play their role, and the eminence of one or the other does not perhaps lend easily to generalisations. While that may be, it remains beyond debate that children need extensive and copious avenues to learn about norms of behaviour, contextual to society, and opportunities to give and receive stimuli to develop their discerning senses. To that extent, socialisation as a core plays among children and their upbringing couldn't be under doubt.

The socialisation of children is a very critical element of education!



### **Why is socialisation becoming a challenge?**

Ironically, it is becoming a challenge for both families and schools. The more important reasons for socialisation becoming an educational challenge for societies across the world are –

1. There is no agreement among local communities, families and institutions, such as schools, on the specifics of the values and beliefs, impulse and conscience as well as role obligations, which are held dear by all.
2. The high degree of latitude in social norms and deference due to the norms implies parents and teachers individually display a high degree of tolerance to deviance (despite whatever we may agree on collectively).
3. Parenting is generally ‘softer’ than what may be desirable for ensuring a climate of cherished socialisation.
4. The virtualisation of everything social is an unmitigated spoiler; in the process, all ‘pedagogical approaches’ are defeated.
5. The core significance of socialisation is perhaps not vividly apparent to stakeholders. The fact that there is a science and body of knowledge available is mostly lost on most.

### **What must parents do to ensure happy socialisation?**

1. Articulate and evolve explicit and implicit dimensions and details of the aspirational socialisation within the family.
2. Get your children’s school to publish the school’s own ‘success card’ on agreed socialisation dimensions.
3. Emotionally invest in seeking neighbourhood and extended family contexts that support the desired socialisation.
4. Get the academic pressure off in the family with early success in reading and math; an academically successful childhood is a great substrate for everything else.
5. Especially watch out for bullying – physical, emotional, social, and virtual; handling bullies is complex but very important.

### **Socialisation of home-schooled children – bursting the myths**

A very common socialisation-related issue faced by home educators is overprotecting their children from the real world. If this is true, at least one researcher (Bliss, 1989) does not consider this a serious problem. She argued that, “*Protection during early, developmental years for purposes of nurturing and growth is evident in many arenas: plant, animal, and aquatic. Why should it be considered wrong or bad in the most vital arena, human development?*”

The authors have personal experience with raising their children in a home-schooled environment. Despite one of them being relatively introverted, they have seen their child grow up into a vivacious person with an assertive bend. What mattered was that they were able to successfully impress upon their child the assertive behaviour – a key target behaviour. Assertiveness is a purely personal attribute and needs a rather formal context, awareness, and training; schools offer aggressive or passive behaviour – the more default positions. Eventually, being assertive is about speaking one’s mind, listening to others to offer options, offering modifications to the offers of others, and agreeing on a common understanding.

The billion-dollar question (everyone on earth seems to have the same first and the last important question on ‘home-schooling’) – “But what about socialisation?” The stereotypical home-schooled children are often portrayed as being shy, passive, and lethargic because of their isolation from the normal socialisation found in formal schooling. Each home-schooled youngster is assumed to be weaker in interpersonal skills and social development measures compared to the conventionally-schooled children.

Several studies on home-schooled children in the USA and many compare the developmental differences between home-schooled and conventionally-schooled children. We briefly quote from a couple of these study reports.

Stough (1992), looking particularly at socialisation, compared 30 home-schooling families and 32 conventionally schooling families and families with children 7–14 years of age. According to the

findings, children who were schooled at home “gained the necessary skills, knowledge, and attitudes needed to function in society...at a rate similar to that of conventionally schooled children.” The researcher found no difference in the self-concept of children in the two groups. Stough maintains that “insofar as self-concept is a reflector of socialisation, it would appear that few home-schooled children are socially deprived, but that there may be sufficient evidence to indicate that some home-schooled children have a higher self-concept than conventionally schooled children.”

This echoes the findings of Taylor (1987). Using one of the best validated self-concept scales available, Taylor’s random sampling of home-schooled children (45,000) found that half of these children scored at or above the 91st percentile – 47% higher than the average conventionally-schooled child. He concludes: “‘Since self-concept is considered to be a basic dynamic of positive sociability, this answers the often-heard skepticism suggesting that homeschoolers are inferior in socialisation.’”

From the findings of these two studies, it would appear that the concerns expressed by teachers, administrators, and legislators about socialisation and homeschooling might be unfounded. Indeed, Bliss (1989) contends that in the formal educational system’s setting, children first experience negative socialisation, conformity, and peer pressure. According to her, “*This is a setting of large groups, segmented by age, with a variation of authority figures... the individual, with their developmental needs, becomes overpowered by the expectations and demand of others – equal in age and equally developmentally needy.*”

Webb (1989), one of the few researchers who has examined aspects of the adult lives of wholly or partly home-educated people, found that all who had attempted higher education were successful and that their socialisation was often better than that of their schooled peers.

Dr. Larry Edward Shyers looked at how home-schooled children treat other children. Shyers found no significant difference between his two groups in scores on the Children’s Assertive Behaviour

Scale. But direct observation by trained observers as measured by the Child Observation Checklist's Direct Observation Form using a "blind" procedure, found that home-schooled children had significantly fewer behaviour problems than traditionally schooled children when playing in mixed groups of children from both kinds of schooling backgrounds. This observational study was reported in some detail in the 1992 Associated Press article. Shyers concluded that the hypothesis that contact with adults, rather than contact with other children, is most important in developing social skills in children is supported by this data.

Dr. Shyers also measured the self-esteem of the home-schooled group of 70 children in his study and compared that with the traditionally schooled group of 70 children between ages eight and ten. No difference was found between the two groups on the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale, a widely-used measure of self-esteem. However, measuring "self-esteem" at that age may not be a great idea.

By the way, Shyers's thesis has a thorough bibliography and is a very good review of the prior literature. Readers interested in finding out more about home-school socialisation would do well to consult Shyers's sources.

In 2003, the Home School Legal Defense Association commissioned the largest research survey to date of adults who were home educated. Conducted by Dr. Brian Ray of the National Home Education Research Institute, the study surveyed over 7,300 home-schooled adults. Over 5,000 of them had been home-educated for at least seven years, and the statistics in this synopsis are based on their responses. The results confirm what homeschoolers have thought for years: "No problem here."

In any case, be it home-schooled or formally schooled, socialisation happens in families, primarily in the early months of a newborn's life, and moves naturally with infants and young people when they start exploring, playing, and discovering the world outside, particularly people. Socialisation continues throughout the

life. People learn expected behaviours, interactive strategies, and the skill to listen and learn.

Socialisation is not inborn; it is learnt! It helps the children to grow into social beings, which by nature humans are! Hence, it is important for parents not to cripple social development by rigidly controlling and limiting opportunities, guiding the child in making choices, and ensuring learning takes different roles with varying social structures.

A major objective of socialisation in the school setting is to make a child socially competent. A child must develop skills that allow him or her to function socially, emotionally, and intellectually within the school environment.

Social interactions teach resilience, skills in conflict resolution, and respect for diversity. Needless to say, children learn to be part of the team through role-play and structured small group interactions! Surprisingly, most children learn ethical behaviour, gain confidence and courage and use them to influence peers positively and manage bullies. Structured interactions help in listening and language development.

Therefore, it is important both for parents and schools to provide opportunities and encourage children to acquire social courtesies and learn about accepted perspectives and “styles” of expression. Social competence adds value to a child’s aspiration of quality life!

### **A clarion call to higher education**

We now know a significant lot about securing the best global school education for our children, with or without schools. Yet, every school must transform, play its part in what is in their DNA, and support global-scale socio-economic transformations as we are ushered into the knowledge age.

Interestingly, the pace, scope, and quality of school reformation will remain incremental unless and until higher education goes back to the drawing board. No less than a revolution in higher education can set the school system on the right path. This may seem like giving up hope of new-age school education, but that is what it is.

Indeed, the most crippling affliction of the school education system is its complete subordinate position to higher education and that the higher education could not care less about its debilitating effect on school education's organic existence and vibrancy. Unfortunately, this understanding of their relationship is one of those unuttered realities that have faith-like sanctions.

### **School goals – conspicuous by their absence**

School education goals have always staunchly reflected their social roots, schools being a critical social infrastructure. Naturally, when the current school education format started to mass-scale in the 19th century, it set sights on powering the industrial revolution (a humanity-level transformation).

It is no surprise that schools are unique organisations – their goals are telescopically viewed. School goals magnify and present things far beyond the school's scope and sphere of influence. If it sounds unreal, here is a mission statement of a randomly picked 'good school'

*“To provide a learner-centric education for children so they can achieve their full potential in the respective fields of education they pursue and build a better world.”*

### **School years – light only at the end of the tunnel**

Pertinently, this distant-goal affliction manifests in at least five undesirable ways in school education –

1. (Parents of) Children in pre-primary see through the school years into higher education (most Indian parents know their 4-year-old has to grow to be a computer engineer, doctor, lawyer, MBA, or economist) – as if school years are just pre-designed career prep schools for children.
2. Pre-primary, primary, and middle schools have nominal educational milestones– it is all about achievement in secondary school.
3. Childhood itself is just ‘waiting to be adult’; school years are just a mandatory passing phase in many societies worldwide.
4. Parents and governments are pushing schools to focus on overall development because employers are focusing on ‘soft skills’ (at the cost of academic quality, only so much is possible in a day’s timetable and with limited resources).
5. The worst is the lack of clarity and commitment of the school education system to ‘year-on-year value addition’ in the development of the students; schools are designed for ‘K- 12’ outcomes, not grade-wise development milestones! Even parents and governments don’t seek grade-wise achievement assurance from schools; secondary school outcomes are what schools are for.

Consequently, in most schools, the processes and resources are by default dictated by the highly empirical educational framework and evidence rather than a theoretically well-founded or deductive educational framework. The school education system is disappointingly low-tech.

This is not to say that we know all about how we learn or parents do their part of the deal in educating children, but schools must own up and become serious in their approach to education in practice.

### **School education revolution in waiting – microscopic view of goals**

If only schools could be re-designed for sound and sharp yearly developmental milestones to be achieved for every student, then every family would have happy children. We just need schools to be schools. Not ‘waiting lounges’ for the flight to higher education.

Ironically, if only schools could be 14 years of development, higher education won’t be necessary for most students.

### **Higher education – let the truth be told**

The higher education system has hugely benefited by how schools are goaled, auto-fuelling an ever-growing demand for its services! But higher education has not tried to improve the school education system. After all, higher education is the seat of research and continuous development.

In fact, higher education has exacted a heavy price from school education for its own sake! Higher education deliberately and consistently kept nibbling at alternatives to higher education, such as much valuable and regarded formal apprentice systems, to build professional competencies. Till date, finance offers very powerful apprentice and open-certification routes to the most attractive career opportunities, but such other higher education routes are stifled.

It is time that we cut the umbilical cord between school education and higher education. It is the chord that lets higher education feed off the school education system.

### **Higher education – a crisis of their own creation**

Higher education is not preparing students to be job-ready, and it is not a guaranteeing return on educational investments. A Harvard Business Review article indicates that around 40% of 25 to 34-year-olds in OECD countries and nearly 50% of 25 to 34-year-olds in America are not outrightly job-ready. College graduates are not as employable as demanded by employers.



Higher education may be the most critical case study of the classical ‘innovator’s dilemma’ – not disrupting its current services and business models to be relevant to students, organisations, and society-at-large in these times of ubiquitous disruption. Who would have believed that campus life and ‘taught degrees’ would still be relevant in the late 2020s? Worse still, even during the pandemic, ‘online education’ has been priced at the same tuition-fee levels as on-campus education. Such is the price for not having ‘learnt to learn’ in school.

### **What should parents do?**

We can only do two things.

*First*, we must raise our voices on the urgency of higher education reform with a new conviction; schools will not change unless higher education is transformed. And schools must change NOW. Higher education takes the initiative to effect transformation in schools.

For the record, the reforms in higher education that we may seek are simple, and just one reform will trigger an avalanche – opening the ‘semester exams’ of all higher education institutions to ‘private students’ (with whatever broad criteria for eligibility). No student should be denied educational qualification for not being part of the ‘lecture theatres, or peer group on campus’.

And to be fair to universities/colleges, the award of the degrees to the deserving private students must record the fact of them being ‘not regular students.’ Choice must be with the students – to learn onsite or offsite. Higher education must truly serve the cause of institutional existence.

*Second*, we can definitely focus on school years as an end in themselves and not worry about our children's higher education. In fact, we must focus on defining and securing goals for each grade and each ‘subject.’ To be true, we must focus on the joy and learning of the child everyday.

Show higher education its place – make it entirely a post-school exploration – and you will experience the joy of parenting and the

most amazing educational progress of your children that is beyond dreams. Stay focused on every moment in the now.

If it helps, also believe that higher education will be liberalised sooner than later. You do not want to regret not anchoring yourself off the higher education bandwagon in time.

### **The future of school education**

Schools are here to stay! They have served us well and will do so in the knowledge society too. Yes, this transition from industrial-era schools to knowledge-era schools is hard, but not unexpected. Schools will be in step with the times. Higher education revolution will do the trick (higher education has to transform for its own reasons). Schools will almost mutate to versions we would not even call schools in today's times. In the 2030s, the last school on earth would be offering the same quality of education as the 'best' everywhere else, and that is more important of the two mutative manifestations – 'reach of quality' and the 'what is quality'.

### **The global pandemic**

The pandemic has put the pedal to the metal. There is no point in discussing the lost two decades – 2000–2020 – of the potential transformation of the school education system. Ranking and ratings aside, national school systems in the developed world have also struggled to register minor quality gains.

The pandemic hurtfully magnified all the secrets of the school education system; the change is finally set to roll now. For instance, within a few weeks of the wave of online teaching, the stress caused by the school education system is out in the open. Online teaching, which can hardly be called education, has significantly disrupted families' routines and added new social dimensions to cope with for all members.

A few drivers of transformational change in school education are decisively evident to all stakeholders (uniformly across the globe) –

1. Teaching does not work well at home. Blended learning is not about teachers also 'teaching at home; learning is a highly personal and social experience. Teachers and teaching cannot be a mode of education outside classrooms – there are several concomitants means in a classroom situation.
2. Schools worldwide, the priciest ones included, have chosen to use free tech platforms for teaching. These platforms only

multiply the lacunae of classroom teaching. For instance, a few talented children will hijack the class by repeatedly being the first to offer the one 'correct answer'. This may make other children wish to walk away from their computers for the entire period. Of course, forcing children to sit in physical classrooms under similar conditions of 'teaching to a few' is worse in itself, but that is how schools have always been.

3. Teacher's video (live or otherwise) is just one input to learn. Teaching and learning are very contextual, and for a child, the resources at home are far more enriched than in the classrooms. The online platform is an amazing opportunity to share pre-teaching and post-teaching texts, assessments, activities, feedback, and in-session individual feedback on class participation. Post teaching auto-generated assessment of teaching effectiveness is an equally important and unique opportunity in online teaching.
4. Parents must be acknowledged and supported as co-teachers. A role that is already being played by parents, but by default and without any support from schools, teachers, and governments. The current set of books, worksheets, teacher's 'lectures', manipulatives, etc. are not parent-friendly; we need a new genre of books written for parents, manipulatives that are easily found at home, new-genre of formatives that parents can evaluate and remedy if required, etc.
5. Online 'teaching' time must be community time. Most schools and teachers completely missed the socio- emotional dimensions of schools and classrooms; online teaching remained focused on 'syllabus completion'.
6. Flipped learning is the mode, not blended learning – Home must be the seat of another learning opportunity and context, independent of school education; after all, family, neighbourhood, and community are the real seat of learning. The role of classrooms and homes may be inverted – reading, discussion, and preliminary experiences must be achieved at

home and ‘revision’, remedial, advanced exercises, etc., to be a part of classroom experiences.

7. Online teaching and learning are here to stay. When children learn at home, access to the school community, processes, resources, and teacher’s attention is valuable; it should be available 365 days, including every school day and holiday, in a way that is best convenient to all stakeholders.
8. What is most important is trust and respect between the parents and school – Schools must recognize the symbiotic relationship between themselves and parents and derive the benefit in bringing school transformation on a faster track.

We must re-emphasise the gross inappropriateness of textbooks and exercises as learning aids for students, and supporting parents’ resources is starkly evident. The current textbooks are only right for rote content, methods, and curated experiments – but this is no news for school leaders and administrators. They all know the near-impossibility of the task of getting a Grade X science teacher to effectively teach Grade VI science (using the Grade VI science textbook) within a couple of academic sessions (if at all). Yet, the same textbooks are presented to students and parents to help themselves. Indeed, school education textbooks should not be used for a day more.

In essence, it is staring us in the face, ‘teacher and teaching quality’ fall way short of children’s ‘level’. Within weeks of online teaching, children resisted online lessons; given a choice, many of them would not wish to be in their classrooms. In this context, the socialisation logic is overstated as the reason for children loving schools. For sensitively-parented children, socialisation in schools is often too much of a contrast and highly stressful.

These lessons from the pandemic-led online teaching also take us to the doorsteps of the solution to the most vexed transformational school initiative – shift from teacher-centric education to student-centric education. As of date, student-centricity and agency in school education are far from ideal!

Parent-centric education is the missing link in securing student agency. It is the mandatory intermediate step in the transition from teacher-centric to student-centric schools. Schools cannot transform unless parents are equipped to step in as co-teachers. Parent-centricity has to be a formal step, the next step in the transition.

On the contrary, the school education system is only belittling the role of parents (by design or by default); there is no effort towards significantly empowering them. What makes parent-centric education the all-important critical success factor is that parents will have to continue their hands-on support to children at home. In the same way, teachers will have to do at school in a student-centric education system.

Obviously, institutionally empowering parents is nearly impossible for a system that is massively lagging behind in training its teachers. We need a tool for empowerment that is simple, smart, and catalytic; just one support to parents that have a high probability of eventual success. In our experiences with schools, ‘Family edition’ of textbooks has worked wonders. School textbooks need a new version – written for the parents; texts and resources that parents can read and get the ‘whole story’, rooted in everyday living and using everyday things as manipulatives and for experiments. We have had significant success with our ‘Family edition’ textbooks in mathematics.

### **What will student-centric schools look like?**

Our name for comprehensively student-centric schools is ‘Living schools’. One remarkable distinction of children’s minds and worldview is the absence of definitive compartments of all sorts. Expectedly, living schools are boundary-less in multiple ways – no classroom boundaries for access to teachers, the company of section-mates, flipped learning; no grade boundaries for level of subjects, access to subjects, peer partnership; no school boundaries for access to resources, the definition of learning spaces and access to mentors, etc. Living schools handhold every student to follow

their developmental goals, including becoming entrepreneurs, professionals (such as musicians, designers, tutors, certain kinds of community workers) and employees.

Living schools are born out of a fine-tuned family-school-community-organisations continuum. Relevantly, effective flipped learning is a pre-requisite for a school to develop as a Living school; successful implementation and sustenance of parent-centric education is the pre-requisite for flipped learning.

As for the evolutionary journey of a school to be a Living school, the following two milestones are sine qua non –

1. *Becoming Effective schools* – Achieving academic success for all students (schools were created as society's academic education arm. Thus, academic success is what makes them 'effective')
2. *Becoming Successful schools* – Achieving whole-person development for all students (a new imperative for schools, away from their academic-rooted origin); being an effective school is a pre-requisite to being a successful school.

A successful school will have to galvanise its local community as well as global community and organisations (the world is connected), to open up as Living schools.

Of course, no school is, as yet, an effective school. In 175 years of K-12, no school has achieved academic success for all its students.

Not empowering and enlisting parents in school education is the primary reason for this gross under-achievement of schools.

Academic success in school is every child's birthright! There is no 'rocket science' involved in school academics or in organising quality teaching. Schools aren't harnessing all the resources to ensure quality.

Living schools will emerge in the widest hues, and that is indeed the best news! There is no template for Living schools. Such schools will always be responding, evolving, and ensuring that every student is as good as the one who's best in academics and has skills of all kinds!

### **One last defence of schools**

A school of 2000 students on roll may only be compared in management complexity to a business organisation with over 10,000 employees! More likely, even that may not be a fair comparison. A school of 2000 students would have around 1,500 families leading to nearly 3,000 individual parents, thus, a total of over 5000 people, including staff.

However, a business organisation has the tremendous advantage of having the right and means of ensuring that all the 10,000 employees are closely aligned to the business goals, policies, processes, culture, and practices. A school of 2000 students has to live with 5000 independent individuals (no two spouses think and believe similarly on education), there is no question of alignment of the kind in businesses.

Many of us know the complexity of managing a 10,000 + strong organisation. Managing a school is indeed very intricate, elaborate, and complicated.

Expectedly, the only way schools can manage this complexity is extreme uniformity in how teachers, students, parents, and staff act and behave, standard operating procedure for everything, a high degree of facelessness. For example, the best teacher in a school would not be granted special privileges in designing lesson plans, assessments, evaluation, and reporting.

To top it all, school leadership is unlike business leadership, not formally trained in management principles, cultural transformation, business process reengineering, change management, or technology application design. Frankly, transforming schools is fraught with a high risk of failure and chaos. Indeed, we need to quickly develop a formal science of school management and transformation.

### **A reminder to parents**

The stress of support to children would be NIL if you just “meet the children where they are”, at all times. Don’t become their teacher – they are always ahead of the students, teaching in a hurry and



not being attentive to the students' learning. Your children are the learners, and you are their co-learner; you have no business pulling them by getting ahead of them. They will surprise you with faster and faster learning as they get better at learning to learn; that's the nature of learning. The pace and scope of learning are always theirs; wait to be surprised.

### **Alternative is the new mainstream**

The K-12 model of institutionalised education of children is the most impactful idea humanity has embraced in modern history. It is the world's first truly universal product – differences in the K-12 system across countries exist (significantly in curricula, assessments, teacher behaviours, and even desired outcomes), but they can all be genuinely categorised as marginal. We do not know any system better than the institution standardised and popularised by the US around mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. K-12's penetration is a milestone that no corporate has ever even dreamt of attempting; never has anyone imagined a product equally meaningful for all of humanity.

The K-12 model homogenised the educational development of children and realised the industrial revolution across the world. The homogenisation of the educational model did have one major unqualified benefit – a rapid rise in the number of educated people if we take 'schooling = education'. But is there ever any unmitigated bliss? Families, communities, and nations have now left it to the schools to raise their children to be worthy humans ('= education'). No wonder our challenges are mounting with respect to the inability of schools to adapt to the changes and possible challenges that come with time.

K-12 is a uniquely self-perpetuating institution, a peerless 'distinction' – the most well-schooled families also need schools for educating their children. For example, a child who is a fifth-generation learner (whose grandparent's grandparents were also formally schooled) would also need school books, teachers, and school assessments to be educated. Worse, a Grade X science teacher would have a hard time teaching Grade VI science, a school headmaster cannot even train Grade I math teachers in teaching math, and a Grade VI science teacher cannot teach Grade III math. The fact is, teachers teach the textbooks, not the subjects. At the end of it all, it's as if school years are wiped off from all our memories.

K-12 is the best packaged product ever; we keep trying to fix it but never think of replacing it for all its glaring deficits. After all,

it has worked for us – the ‘educated us’, a minority of humanity. In the process, the K-12 system has globally failed the big majority of children who enter its portals. Over-emphasis on examination systems and the absence of any other assessment parameter has led to dubbing the ‘failed’ children as ‘slow learners’, ‘poor’, and what not. Fortunately (and expectedly), some of them keep turning out to be the biggest game-changers for humanity.

The current K-12, the mainstream, has positioned itself next only to God. It can do no wrong. Teachers, headmasters, administrators, books, assessments, etc., are never at fault – the onus of education squarely lies on the children and their families, always! This has remained a game of blame and bluff for 200 years, but it doesn’t hold water – research provides enough evidence to prove that ineffective teachers (and pedagogy) are more responsible for not having been able to reach every student and for their lack of skill and mastery of the content. K-12 is the only social institution that is beyond any kind of social scrutiny, and it is also an exceptionally poor showcase of the application of ICTs.

Unsurprisingly, the alternatives to mainstream K-12 started to emerge in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Some of the pioneers of alternative schools are: Summerhill school, UK; Waldorf schools; Mirambika, India; Green School, Bali; and Reggio Emilia, Italy. Of course, burgeoning homeschooling is now one of the more common alternatives. However, the institutionalisation of these alternatives is almost non-existent. There are just a handful of formal alternative schools globally. Unfortunately, these standalone models could not scale up as their alumni hadn’t proved to be remarkable influencers for others to emulate the experiments. Of course, alternative models can only come through transformational vision and innovation, not as a reaction to the flaws in the current K-12 system.

## **Pandemic and K-12**

The global pandemic has paused and derailed the mainstream K-12 system. The most natural response to the situation is the mainstreaming of the ‘alternate’ rather than the resurrection of the current mainstream.

That the ‘alternate is the new mainstream’ is inevitable because –

1. Every child must succeed in K-12 education, which is impossible in the current K-12. Knowledge society demands much higher academic development for ALL, unlike in the industrial society.
2. Essentially (good) quality K-12 is all that’s required – higher education and lifelong learning don’t need ‘classroom/academic campuses’; apprenticeship is back in vogue.
3. Rich multi-disciplinary education is the essence; new possibilities are all on the boundaries of domains of knowledge. K-12 has comprehensively failed in securing breadth as well as the depth of knowledge and skills.
4. Each child is unique – 14-year, age-bound, grade-wise textbook-focused K-12 is antithesis to everything we know about humans; new gradeless ‘textbooks’ are set to revolutionise K-12 education; performance data should guide the student towards the learning path, rather than to punish them.
5. Parents need education, not children – there is NOTHING in K-10 content that EVERY parent can’t transact with equal aplomb; K-12 biggest failure is in ensuring that the best (formally) educated parents are no good for their children (generations, after generations).