

**ADDRESS BY THE CHIEF GUEST**  
**MRS NIRMALI WICKREMESINGHE – PRINCIPAL, LADIES' COLLEGE, COLOMBO**  
**3RD JULY 2009**

Manager of S. Thomas' Preparatory School Gurutalawa Mr. Lincoln Fernando, Headmaster Revd. Marc Billimoria, Ladies, Gentleman and children. Thank you for inviting me to be the Chief Guest at this most important event of your school calendar. The Headmaster, when he introduced me to you spoke of my long career in teaching in the Government, Private and International Schools of Sri Lanka and abroad.

Yes, I am now in my thirty fifth year of teaching. I started my teaching career in Sinhala Maha Vidyalaya at Trincomalee two weeks after sitting for my final examination at the University. I was plunged into take an extremely demanding challenge, which was, to teach A/Level Chemistry, Botany and Zoology to students in a class in which one of the boys was older than I at the time. 35 years ago there were no Science graduates in the area and no tuition and the total responsibility of the examination fell on my young shoulders. Many of those students entered University and are holding high posts today. When my husband was transferred to Katunayake, I then moved onto Harischandra Maha Vidyalaya in Negombo. Many memories flood my mind of long treks on the beach to homes of students who were children of the fishing community there. After a very fulfilling seven years during which I taught Chemistry and Zoology and saw many students entering the Medical and Science faculties of the country, I moved to St John's College, Nugegoda originally an Anglican School. For the first time I was teaching boys only and that was new to me. I retired from Government service and joined my husband working in the Republic of Seychelles. On the first day I found myself teaching Chemistry, Biology and now English to an interesting set of students. Some of them were fair and had curly hair and slit eyes. Some were very dark with African features and straight hair. Some looked very European while others looked totally African. They really were an interesting mix and teaching them was also a whole new experience. After returning to Sri Lanka while working part time in several institutions including Ladies' College the then Bishop of Colombo asked me to go to Bishop's College as Vice Principal. For the first time I was in a school where there were girls only and it was also the first time that I took on the role of an administrator cum teacher. I learnt many lessons at Bishop's College. After five years, I went onto the British School where I taught Biology in addition to planning and implementing a teacher training programme. In 2003 I came into Ladies' College as Principal. I have enjoyed every moment of my 34 years in the teaching profession. It is not the most lucrative or prestigious of professions, but if I live my life again I would do it all over again. I hope that every teacher here feels the same.

From the East coast to the West coast of Sri Lanka and beyond, amidst all these changes one thing has remained constant and that is the remarkable similarity in the core of the child wherever it may be. What

has struck me most when working with children over and over, again and again, year after year is the fact that they are so alike and yet so unique. Children, I want you to remember my words. There is only one of you in this world today, and there will be only one of you forever and forever. Parents and teachers too must remember this. "Every child is a special child". There is only one in a single mould throughout posterity and therefore each and every child must be handled with care. A rare artifact, a beautiful painting, an exquisite piece of jewellery, an ancient fossil are carefully preserved and protected. How much more care then should we take of a child who is unique and ever so precious.

Today we live in a world which recognizes the multiple intelligences of humankind. In a world where we have moved from merely testing the verbal linguistic and logical mathematical intelligences of a person into systems that understand the other intelligences. Much emphasis is now being laid on the Intra Personal and Inter Personal intelligences which are essential for life. The bodily kinaesthetic, visual spatial and musical intelligences are now recognized and incorporated into all curricula. The recognition of diverse abilities enables each person to identify and develop their individual potential to the greatest possible heights. Consequently self esteem and self worth is enhanced. Nobody should ever feel foolish or worthless.

Correspondingly teaching methodology has evolved through the years. Teachers are being trained to understand that

"when you teach Latin to John you have not only to know Latin, but you have to also know John"

If this is possible then the teachers will try to practise the golden rule of  
"if a child can't learn the way you teach, teach the way a child can learn".

To do this lessons have to be planned focussed on the 3 main learning styles of students, namely the auditory, visual and kinaesthetic. Increasingly teachers and children are understanding that education demands that we at all times remember the axiom

Tell me – I will forget

Show me – I may remember

Involve me – I will remember

For effective learning to take root and flower a disciplined environment is imperative. When a student hears the word discipline she/he must understand that the word discipline is something positive. Unfortunately for far too long discipline has been associated with reprimand, and punishment resulting in a total misunderstanding of the word. Children must understand that to achieve anything in life, a person

must to be disciplined and that this brings in organization to the individual. This understanding must come in through realization and not through fear. Administrators of student personnel, teachers and children must work towards creating a disciplined, well structured, organized environment in which a sound education system flourishes.

These three concepts (1) The fact that every child is unique (2) That teaching methodologies must incorporate the varied learning styles of students and (3) That the word discipline must always be understood in a positive light, must be present in every educational institution.

S. Thomas' College and Ladies' College are private Anglican schools which function within the National Education System of Sri Lanka. We attempt to give every student in our schools a special place while providing opportunities to develop to their maximum potential. This is achieved within the parameters of the national Education Policy and the ethos of our respective schools. This is a sensitive balance to keep.

The National Education System is evolving incessantly. During the last century we have witnessed several attempts at education reform. From the Kannagara era ending in 1948, Dr Udugama's tenure in 1971, President J R Jayawardene's White Paper in 1981, the Education Reforms of President Kumaranatunge's administration introduced in 1995 to the curriculum changes and methodology presently in progress.

The 1995 reforms concentrated heavily on the shift from didactic teacher centered teaching to student based child centered learning. Activities and projects were introduced to try to teach children to learn through discovery and research as opposed to being taught and reproducing. The activity based teaching and learning methodologies introduced were consolidated with School Based Assessments which had to be designed with the understanding of the multiple intelligence of the child. The varied abilities of the children gained expression while focussed activities and projects were assessed. Judging a child's capabilities on just one end of term examination was expected to diminish within the new reform system. Group work ensuring deeper understanding of working together as a team was incorporated into methodology. Bilingual teaching was introduced at Grade 6. Four subjects could now be taught in English namely Maths, Science, Health Science and Social Studies. All of this has helped to buttress and reinforce modern educational thinking.

Over and above imparting knowledge based in a sound value system our schools have always striven to be microcosms of harmony and unity. We have tried to create communities where racial and religious prejudices do not exist. In a country torn apart by war stemming from deep racial and religious divisions,

our schools have maintained its multi religious, multi ethnic character resulting in a healthy “one family unbroken” atmosphere. This is our greatest contribution to the nation.

In our Christian schools we believe that we are guided and directed by God. We know that with God nothing is impossible. Consequently we believe it is our sacred duty to draw out love with love. Every child is special and we consider it our duty to see that every child knows it. We respect the dignity of the child and teach them at all times to understand that,

I quote

*“We are born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us.*

*It is not just in some of us*

*It is in everyone*

*And as we let our own light shine*

*We unconsciously give other people permission to do the same”*

End of quote - Barack Obama.

Thank you

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