"Explore not Memorise": Proposing a Shift in the Role of Schools in Reimagining Education in South Asia

Amanthee Harshana Pussepitiya[1,2,] *

[1]BA Greek and Roman Studies, Department of Classical Languages, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka,
[2]Masters Student at Trinity College Dublin, University of Dublin, Ireland
* amantheepussepitiya@gmail.com

Abstract

Education can be broad yet specific, global yet regional. It also should be sensitive to changing times and the changing student bodies, addressing each new generation's unique skills, ideologies and problems. This study endeavours to reconceptualize the educational paradigm, focusing on formal education's capacity to stimulate student interest in different branches of knowledge and encouraging independent reading and learning. Generation Alpha and the impact of COVID-19 are pivotal elements in this exercise of reimagining the role of educational institutions. Drawing from World Bank, UNICEF, and UNESCO reports, alongside recent scholarly research, this analysis predominantly centres on the South Asian context, while maintaining broader global relevance throughout the discussion. The solutions proposed are also sensitive to the social, economic, and cultural nuances of South Asia. Primarily focusing on the idea of "formal education as a stimulus" the paper intends to prompt discussion on education's new directions.

Keywords: Reforming Education, Generation Alpha, Post-pandemic Learning, Smart Learning, Independent Study

Education can be understood as broadly or as specifically as one wishes and discussed in many different contexts, be it formal education, informal education, and other forms that fall between these two ends of the spectrum. It is also a sphere that demands change with every new

generation, changing global trends and demands. While each geographical region has its unique approaches to education, moulded by factors such as national ideologies, national economy, and skill demand, the internet has created a global connection, allowing trends as well as problems of one part of the world to be transmitted to the opposite side of the globe in a considerably short time. This paper attempts to rethink "education" and the role of educational institutions, particularly schools, in a world where they are not the sole entities of knowledge dissemination. When a world of knowledge is at the tip of a finger, what is the new role of a textbook? When a YouTube video offers graphical and replay-able content on almost any topic, what is the new role of schoolteachers? In the world of AI, what are the new skills a student should be taught? And most importantly, with the sense of agency enabled through technology, how can a student's interest be retained within a conventional classroom setting? This paper builds on answering these questions, proposing solutions, or posing open-ended questions, and while the questions are global, the statistical information used will primarily be drawn from the South Asian region.

The following discussion is structured into three main subsections. 1) The concept of formal education as a stimulus of a student's interests. 2) Generation Alpha and COVID-19 as important factors when reimagining the role of educational institutes. 3) Suggestions that could enable the proposed approach to education.

Given the multiple ways in which education is defined, it would be wise to decide on a single definition and establish common ground. The Cambridge Dictionary defines education as "the process of teaching or learning, especially in a school or college, or the knowledge that you get from this." Education, therefore, is about imparting and acquiring knowledge. The definition is also sensitive to the role of formal institutions that are a part of this process. Although informal education is beyond argument as equally important and impactful, this paper will focus only on

the formal educational institutions and within them, particularly the schools. As the definition suggests, education is a two-part process with equal involvement of the educator and the educated. The ideas and the proposals of this paper will primarily concern the educator and their role in making the "reimagined education" a reality.

1. Formal Education as a Stimulus of a Student's Interests

Traditionally, a child enters a school at the age of five or six and is taught letters, language usage at a primary level, numbers, and colors and generally taught to make sense of the world around them. After the first five years, they are introduced to more broader subjects and are expected to delve deeper into what they already know with each passing year. This involves complex language usage, mathematics, science, the history of their country and the world, and geography, to name a few. At this level, the child is introduced to a range of subjects and is expected to select a few subjects they would like to pursue in the third stage (and for most, the final) of their formal education. For students of South Asia, this third stage is highly competitive, with a place in a state university or the prospect of a decent entry-level job at stake. In all three stages, there is a government-regulated curriculum with term-based examinations and assessments used to measure how well-acquainted a student is with this recommended curriculum (Dundar et al., 2014). The competitive nature of these exams, along with the predominantly teacher-centered and rote-based approach to education in South Asia (UNICEF South Asia, 2021), pushes students to try to "remember" as much information as possible learned within that academic term or year.

This cycle of input and output of information, along with the pressure to perform in the examination, limits or completely removes the possibilities of students exploring a subject beyond the curriculum on their own. This is not from a lack of interest or intent, but rather a lack of time and mental energies to direct into such explorations within the school terms. This

eventually leads to the creation of a student body more invested in and reliant on the memory of a text and less interested in free thinking. This is the question the paper wishes to address, not by assuming that there is one good solution to the problem but by inviting all those involved in the educational apparatus to consider these proposed potential solutions and act upon them at their discretion and to their ability.

The suggested alternative to this form of education is where a formal educational institution, the school, acts as a stimulus to prompt students to explore a subject on their own, rather than handing them the facts that they "need to know and remember." To explain this with an example, instead of asking the students to remember the events and the time periods of all that happened in the First and Second World Wars, the students are encouraged to explore a single event of the Wars by themselves. The textbook will allow them to contextualize the wars within world history and introduce them briefly to each event, from which the student could pick and explore the one that interests them the most. In a class of thirty students, there will likely be thirty different events being explored, based on which aspects of war most interest them, be it weaponry, strategy, war crimes, victimhood, or economy to name a few options. The aim is to enhance skills such as analysis, research, and filtering information while also engaging in a topic that interests them the most.

There can be very clear objections to this idea, which should be addressed before moving further with the argument. Firstly, one can argue that this may not work for all subjects which is a fair argument. While subjects such as history, social science, or geography may lend themselves more readily for self-exploration and self-study than mathematics or chemistry, it is not to say a student who is more interested in geometry cannot be allowed to explore it in depth within the classroom. Secondly, one can argue that not students of all ages can engage in such

assessments, which is another fair objection. The most suitable group for this form of exercise could be the secondary-level students who have acquired foundational knowledge on a number of subjects in primary education. A study done on "Using Curiosity to Improve Learning Outcomes in Schools", discusses how there is a steep decrease in the curiosity of students between primary and secondary levels of education, and one major reason for this is the negative reaction of the teacher to the reaction of curiosity-evoked behavior in students who are also under pressure to complete a curriculum (Singh & Manjaly, 2022). This proves that there is already an unspoken and unexpressed demand for curiosity-evoking teaching methods at this level.

This paper therefore proposes a reimagined form of education, primarily targeting the students at the secondary level of education, in which the school curriculum acts more like a scaffolding that the student holds on to while they navigate the path of knowledge exploration. A system where a student is encouraged to explore the world of knowledge on their own, under guidance, during which they will acquire skills in filtering knowledge, distinguishing between information and misinformation, and cohesively presenting their findings. The next part of the paper will look at the changes in the world in the last five years that facilitate this proposed form of education.

2. Generation Alpha and the Post-Pandemic World

The title reveals the two main factors that will be discussed in this section: the youngest generation of learners in the world, generation Alpha, and the most recent global phenomenon, the COVID-19 pandemic. We may be attuned to these two entities in varying degrees, but the paper will discuss them in light of how they either better facilitate or even demand a change in the educational system we currently have.

"Generation Alpha" is classified and branded as such by Mark McCrindle, an Australian demographer and social researcher, born between 2010 and 2024, this generation is the most open to technology yet and has been exposed to technology as "pacifiers, entertainers, and educational aids" (McCrindle & Fell, 2019). Tapping into the work of McCrindle and Fell and other researchers on this generation, a few key traits of this generation can be identified. One such is the curiosity of this generation (Kato, 2024). The easy access to information through the internet, the ease with which they handle all electronic devices, and exposure to a world beyond their neighborhood, family circles, cities, and even countries have allowed this group to know things the previous generations could not even imagine. To make a group so widely exposed and interested in something within a textbook is a challenge in itself.

Second is their approach to gathering knowledge, linked to the impact of social media on their attention span. Recent research done in the field of psychology has revealed that forms of social media such as Tiktok, Instagram reels, and YouTube shorts have a considerable impact on reshaping the sense of time and the attention span of their consumers, and with this, a shift in the way in which information is acquired and digested (Zaveri, 2023). This is neatly phrased by Monica Ares at the Reimagine Education Conference 2023: "One aspect of social platforms like TikTok is engagement in "bitesize" moments that release endorphins, which this generation likes to learn from." (Cornish, 2024). This is a generation that can and is interested in acquiring information through non-conventional means such as social media and other forms of media, which also poses a significant challenge to educators who try to approach them with conventional methods.

This curiosity, coupled with their ability to acquire information more easily, has also developed a sense of autonomy unseen in previous generations, and this is discussed by Jessica

Kato, a literacy resource teacher for the Campbell Kapolei Complex Area in Ewa Beach and Kapolei, Hawaii. In her article titled "What Educators Need to Know about Generation Alpha," published in February 2024, Kato explores Generation Alpha in an attempt to understand how educators should respond to this generation. One key factor she mentions is the desire of the young learners to have ownership over their education: "Sometimes that means having more ownership over what they learn. Other times it means getting a say in how they learn or how they demonstrate what they understand." (Kato, 2024)

The future of education, therefore, in South Asia as much as in the rest of the world, should be ready to receive students with heightened curiosity, unprecedented technical savvy, and an interest in having a say in what they learn. Although this segment focused mainly on Generation Alpha, most of the discussed attributes are also applicable to the last-born Gen Z (McCrindle & Fell, 2019).

Some of what has already been discussed about Generation Alpha overlaps with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and it should be considered in reimagining quality education. A study done in 2023 on the impact of COVID-19 and online learning on the students of Bangladesh discusses how the global pandemic and shift to online learning have made the students more open to non-conventional forms of education and assessment (Saha et al., 2023). The study also sheds light on how having recorded lessons has allowed the students the opportunity to rewatch the same content, and it can be argued that this also opens the possibility to further search segments they are interested in, which is not an option within the in-class teaching-learning process.

A tech-savvy generation and a global pandemic that has pushed the general student body to engage more with technology and technology-based education have, in turn, created a

situation where conventional formal education will have to fight for its place in the world. Although initially thought to be a momentary shift, it can be understood that the shift to online education is permanent and has changed the fundamentals of knowledge acquisition for good. This shift, instead of being negative, can be harnessed and used in the process of reshaping educational approaches.

The next and final segment of this paper will propose some ways in which South Asian educational institutions might be able to accommodate this new world and lead the way to an education system that focuses on education as a stimulus.

3. Reimagining the Institutionalised Education

This segment of the paper looks at how educational institutions, particularly schools, could accommodate the form of education that allows the student to explore a subject area on their own, as discussed in segment one. It will also take into consideration the changes and trends in knowledge accumulation discussed in segment two and propose several possible changes to the educational approaches.

Developing on the previously touched upon idea of self-learning, the study suggests that secondary-level students, aged between 12 and 16, should be allowed to explore different themes within a subject. The fundamental ideology behind this proposal is to shift focus from a detail-oriented, exam-based approach to education to a more exploratory approach. Considering the practicality of such a shift, the study suggests that educators approach this concept through smaller steps, such as class-based assessments, which can allow space for students to learn and explore and ultimately lead up to a larger shift on a governmental level. Having had a foundational education from years 6 to 12, the student will be equipped with sufficient skills and understanding to undertake such assignments with guidance from educators.

A report published by the World Bank in 2014 titled "Student Learning in South Asia," the most comprehensive on the subject so far, examines the class-based assessment schemes and practices of South Asian countries (Dundar et al., 2014). This report reveals that only a few countries in South Asia; Nepal and Bangladesh, have nationally regulated class assessment schemes, while the schemes and practices found in Pakistan and India lack perfection in concept and execution. There is no evidence of a nationally instituted class-based assessment system in Sri Lanka (Dundar et al., 2014). The data reveals a regional lack of interest in class-based assessment, a key component that can be utilized to accommodate the proposed education system. Thus, the paper suggests that this could be one area to be acted upon to realize the proposed system.

Finally, the paper suggests rethinking the "sources" of information in formal educational settings and enabling more modern forms of information and knowledge acquisition to be accommodated within the school systems. To elaborate on this suggestion, the paper suggests that educators allow non-conventional sources such as (reliable) YouTube videos, social media content such as Tumblr and Pinterest, and educational content on other social media platforms to be accommodated as "proper" sources, upon verification. One argument against this suggestion could be the vulnerability of the student to misinformation. While this is a valid concern, it can be argued that, living in a social media age, students should also be equipped with the skill to distinguish between information and misinformation online, which has become a crucial survival skill for the generation concerned. Finally, going by the suggestion of Jessica Kato, the paper suggests that schools can support and encourage students' work to be taken to public platforms "where their voices can extend beyond the classroom" (Kato, 2024), which can positively motivate students to engage with the content.

Conclusion

The idea proposed by the paper is straightforward, the reasons for the proposals are clear, and solutions to the problem are up for debate and conversation. In a world of change and a new tech-savvy generation, there is a demand to rethink and re-imagine institutionalized education. The paper suggests that this can be done best by turning the memory drive and exam-based secondary level education into a more self-based exploratory education that will allow the student to explore their interests with guidance while sharpening the necessary skills to survive in the age of information and AI.

References

Asian Development Bank. (2017). *Innovative Strategies for Accelerated Human Resource Development in South Asia Student Assessment and Examination Special Focus on Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka.* https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/385686/student-assessment-exam-sa.pdf.

Brazel, J. (2022, January 18). *Top education trends in Southeast Asia for 2022*. https://www.turnitin.com/blog/top-education-trends-in-southeast-asia-for-2022.

Cornish, L. (2023, December 14). *Reimagining Higher Education for Generation Alpha*. QS. https://www.qs.com/reimagining-higher-education-for-generation-alpha/.

Dundar, H., Béteille, T., Riboud, M., & Deolalikar, A. (2014). *Student Learning in South Asia Challenges, Opportunities, and Policy Priorities*. World Bank Publications.

https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/554381468294334286/pdf/Student-
learning-in-South-Asia-challenges-opportunities-and-policy-priorities.pdf.

Education | English meaning - Cambridge Dictionary. Cambridge Dictionary. (n.d.).
https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/education.

Kaplan, J. (2024, January 16). *The oldest gen alphas can almost drive: Here's how millennials'
kids will shop, work, and live*. Business Insider. https://www.businessinsider.com/who-is-
generation-alpha-how-shop-spend-education-work-live-2024-1?r=US&IR=T#gen-alpha-
already-knows-how-to-spend-and-they-re-ready-to-do-so-2.

Kato, J. (2024, February 2). *What educators need to know about generation alpha*. EdSurge.
https://www.edsurge.com/news/2024-02-02-what-educators-need-to-know-about-
generation-
alpha#:~:text=These%20children%20are%20unlike%20any,that%20as%20we%20educat
e%20them.

McCrindle, M., & Fell, A. (2019). Understanding Generation Z: Recruiting, training and leading
the next generation. *McCrindle Research Pty Ltd*.

Re-thinking education in South Asia. Oxford School of Global and Area Studies. (n.d.).
https://www.area-studies.ox.ac.uk/article/re-thinking-education-in-south-asia.

Richards, J. (2023). "Schooling without learning is a terrible waste of precious resources and of
human potential"–The South Asian paradox. *International Journal of Educational
Development, 103*, 102904. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2023.102904.

Saha, B., Atiqul Haq, S.M. & Ahmed, K.J. (2023). How does the COVID-19 pandemic influence students' academic activities? An explorative study in a public university in Bangladesh. *Humanities & Soc. Sci. Communication, 10*, 602. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-02094-y.

Singh, A., & Manjaly, J. A. (2022). Using Curiosity to Improve Learning Outcomes in Schools. *Sage Open*, *12*(1). https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440211069392.

Tomsett, J. (2013, December 15). This much I know about…the lack of space for student flair in our examination system. *Johntomsett*. https://johntomsett.com/2013/12/15/this-much-i-know-about-the-lack-of-space-for-student-flair-in-our-examination-system/.

UNESCO (2022, November 2). *Private education has grown faster in South Asia than any other region in the world, report shows*. UNESCO.org. https://www.unesco.org/gem-report/en/articles/private-education-has-grown-faster-south-asia-any-other-region-world-report-shows.

UNICEF South Asia. (2021). *Education*. https://www.unicef.org/rosa/what-we-do/education.

Zaveri, J. (2023, May 23). *Tiktok and the death of the attention span.* The Oxford Blue. https://theoxfordblue.co.uk/tiktok-and-the-death-of-the-attention-span/.