

Where we competed with ourselves

Radhika Aradye

My school in Japan was a British School called St. Michael's International School. It was in Kobe. When I went to Japan I had passed Standard III from St. Anthony's High School in New Delhi, so I was admitted to Standard IV and was in that school for three years.

This year I finished my schooling and now I am in a college! When I look back at the eight different schools I attended, I realize that St. Michael's has made me what I am today. My teachers there taught me to enjoy studies, to do original thinking, to love myself and to love the world.

In Standard IV my teacher was Mr. Shand. He taught us everything except music, physical training, Japanese and a subject called as reading skills. There was no fixed curriculum or textbooks, which had to be covered. At least Mr. Shand seemed to have all the freedom to decide how best he would develop his students to pull them up to the level of mental growth expected of a particular age group.

In history we chose topics of our interest from the ones Mr. Shand gave. Mr. Shand told us to collect all the information on the topics of our choice by referring to the books in the library, which were selected after consultation with the librarian. We worked either individually or in twos.

Geography was taught partly in the same way, and partly in outdoor lessons when he took us out for walks in the mountain and showed us how rivers and lakes were formed, how plantation was done to stop the erosion of soil and so on. In the same way, from the top of the mountain he explained to us why population is dense on the plains, and why industries grow around the port. We had no tests, no homework exercises, no examinations, and yet we thought we had learnt geography very well.

For English we not only read books recommended by the teacher but also the books we thought we should enjoy. In the class we wrote our own stories and poems. The teacher would sometimes give us a topic, sometimes he gave us a line or sometimes he showed us a picture on which to write the story.

Mathematics constituted of sets of cards of different levels. We were required to work through them at our own speed and capacity. So at any given time in a class, there would be students doing Math of the level of a class below or two classes above.

Science consisted of studying slides ranging from cells to the moon. Everything we were taught was supported by practical examples. For example, in Standard IV we were to study parts of the human body. We were given two plastic models - actually we were

given parts - one male and one female. We had to identify each part, paint it and fit it in its place to construct the model. In science too, the emphasis was on understanding and not on reproducing. We did not have to write answers to questions. While studying blood cells, we were asked to prick our own fingers and make slides, which we observed. And all this we did in standard IV!

Music lessons were great fun! Our teachers taught us all kinds of songs and moreover taught us how to play them on a recorder. We would also play musical Bingo where prizes would be rubbers and chocolates, the aim would be to teach us various kinds of musical instruments and musical notes. We had lessons in folk dancing, which we thoroughly enjoyed. But what we enjoyed most was the play-acting. Our teachers told us to select a story, write a short play on it, form groups, distribute the roles and enact it.

Everyday our first period was used this way and we all thought it was the best possible start for the day at school. In one term Mr. Shand hit upon a novel idea! He announced in the class that we were going to make a film during the term and the film included all our studies! So he suggested a few themes for the story. We selected 'The Time Machine'. We invented a suitable story making the time machine run into the remote past and also the remote future. We wrote the dialogues. We made costumes. We made the time machine. Mr. Shand taught us about the make-belief world of films and so we decorated our time machines with all sorts of things like springs, wheels, tapes and what not! We had outdoor shooting in a forest and we wore strange costumes as barbarians! It took us two and a half months to complete the film and we thought we had learnt a lot during those days, much more than what we would have learnt from textbooks. In Christmas parents were invited to see this 'great' film made by Standard IV pupils and the parents were so proud of their little ones who had turned into stars!

We had library period once a week. It was not just for returning and borrowing books, but we were also shown how the library works - how books are registered, how they are arranged on shelves and so on. Two students were actually made to sit next to the librarian and they stamped the books given out and put back the books returned. Once Mr. Shand asked us in the class what we wanted to do in life and I was the only one who said, "I want to be a writer". Mr. Shand liked that idea. He said, "Why not start from today? Write a storybook for our K.G. classes. Draw some pictures. Make it a neat manuscript. And then I will ask the K.G. teacher to read it out to the students. We will go and see how they like it!" I was so thrilled! I remember at least five of my books were read this way, and the little children told me, "Radhika! It's a beautiful story. I liked it!" But Mr. Shand did not stop there. He said to me, "Radhika, when you will become a great writer, you will need to know typing. I am arranging typing lessons for you everyday in the recess. Let's go to the office and fix it". So for two years I learnt typing from the age of nine!

Mr. Jackson, who was my teacher in Standard V, has etched a permanent corner in my heart for himself. He was 40 years old and a confirmed bachelor. He hated competition and wanted each child to think highly of itself. In Standard V there was a girl who was still doing Standard IV Math, but when we did our respective sums correctly we all got 'excellent' in our notebooks. Once he said to my mother, "If at all you must compete, you must compete with your own self. Try to improve yourself day after day. That is the message of Hinduism, isn't it? In every life your soul becomes purer till it attains freedom. What a wonderful idea!" I don't remember the exact wording of the motto of St. Michael's but its meaning was, 'A child should never feel that it is treated unfairly' and every teacher strove to line up to it. We were free to argue with our teachers. They always wanted to understand why we were doing a particular thing. Not one teacher was authoritative, nothing was forced on us.