Understanding, Action, and the Use of the Cane in Sri Lankan Schools

Introduction

The 2013 conference of the American Society for Cybernetics had as its theme 'Acting - Learning - Understanding: reflecting, collaborating, conversing, doing'. It was a conversational event, in which much of the time was spent working in small groups, and reporting back to the whole conference in a plenary session. Many of these plenary presentations brought about moments of reflection or laughter. However, the responses of attendees indicated that a presentation made by Chathurika Kannangara (one of the present authors) made a particularly strong emotional impact on the attendees. This, together with the group discussions which preceded and followed the presentation, led directly to her receiving the Heinz von Foerster Award for the most significant contribution to the conference. While the authors do not suggest that her contribution was better or more important than any other, we do believe that it is worthwhile to include a summary here, in order to provide a public record of the interventions which led to the award, together with reflections on its cybernetic implications. The paper is jointly authored, but in order to maintain the authenticity of the reportage, those parts which reflect Kannangara's personal experience are written in the first person.

Education in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka provides universal, free education up to undergraduate level. Provision includes free uniforms, free textbooks, and so on (Ministry of Education Sri Lanka, 2011) , making it a real possibility for any Sri Lankan who has the motivation and talent to become educated, and to aspire to a professional career. These are substantial achievements, and are often seen as one of the outstanding features of the country and its administration.

Along side the state provision a large number of 'international schools' have been established, including both private for-profit institutions and those run by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and charitable entities. This raises the question of why such schools are needed, given the universal availability of public education. The answer which is often given is that it cannot be expected that government schools will achieve sufficient levels of improvement in standards of English, for example see Baldsing (2013, p.51). An alternative explanation, however, is to be found in the educational approach taken. In the state sector teaching is dominated by the memorisation of facts and an extremely behaviorist approach to teaching and learning (Markar et al., 2006, p.4), and discipline is imposed with corporal punishment. NGO schools and private schools have the attraction of offering partial relief from the conditions prevalent in the state sector

Use of the cane in a school in Sri Lanka

On the first day of the ASC 2013 conference I was invited to reflect in my group on examples of how acting leads to learning. My contribution focused on my experience as a school teacher in Sri Lanka. Having finished my advanced level examinations at the end of my schooling in the public education system I was passionate in my desire to become an educator, and this led me to search for jobs as a school teacher. After completing my English teacher training diploma and completing a year of primary school teaching practical experience in an International School in Sri Lanka, I applied for a job at a school sponsored by a foreign NGO, which had the objective of educating students from under-privileged backgrounds. I was interviewed by the Head, a Sri Lankan, and in the course of the interview we had an argument about the use of the cane in the classroom, as my training had not included the use of the cane in teaching or disciplining. Nevertheless, following a week's trial, I was offered a job as a teacher at the school. I believe that the fact that I could speak English fluently was a strong contributing factor in the decision to appoint me by the NGO staff directors, as many of the Sinhalese staff were not able to converse with the NGO staff. Together with the letter offering me the job I was also given a cane, and was then directed to my class rooms for teaching. After some time working in the school I was forced to the conclusion that the cane was in use throughout the entire school, and that most of the students would not respond until and unless they were shown the cane or the teacher shouted rudely at them. I was helpless in this situation because the Head had great power at the school, and a junior teacher had minimal opportunity to change prevailing practice. My action in resisting the use of the cane did not lead to any change. I learned that violence was not simply a choice made by educators, but rather was a systemic result of the nature of the education system and its social environment.

On the second day the main theme proposed by the Conference for discussion was Understanding leading to Acting. In the group discussions it was strange for me to hear acting through understanding being spoken of as a common occurrence, because in my experience in Sri Lanka I observed it more in the other direction. I found my mind was pounding with a question, which had been in the back of my mind all the time which I spent working in the NGO school: is it possible to make an intervention which can change this? In my group this led to a long conversation. In response to questions I explained that in my experience people do learn, and they do understand. For example, the Head at the school, and others like them, have studied educational psychology in their training. They understand that using the cane as a punishment can leave long term marks on a child's mind. They also realise that there are legal concerns related to corporal punishment. But when it comes to action, they carry on acting in contradiction with what they have learnt and understood. Similarly, I explained, I personally do understand that it is not right to make use of political influence or a bribe in order to get some work done. But that work will drag on for years and years without that influence, so I myself might make use of these methods to get my work done. In this case, I have my understanding that it is not ethical to apply influence, but I still do it. The urgent question for someone in my position is whether it is ethically wrong to avoid acting in accordance with learning and understanding, or whether one should accept that there is a need to adapt to the norms of a societal system.

At the plenary session I enacted with group members some aspects of the incidents which I observed at the school. The presentation was hierarchical, showing how I faced the challenges as an individual, and then took action to take the challenge to higher level. The hierarchical chain went on from the individual, to the peer group of teachers (foreign and local), directors, then through foreign teachers to some sponsors, and finally to the presentation at ASC 2013.

The outcome for me was an improved understanding of the forces which prevent change in the use of the cane taking place, but little insight into understanding the mechanisms which generate its use.

The response of the attendees

The presentation of this discussion to a plenary session of the conference seemed to make a great impression on many of the attendees. Why should this be? We did not conduct a survey or interviews to establish the answer, but we have two explanations to offer. Firstly, our impression from the discussion is that both the small group and the plenary session were struck by the immediacy and intractability of this problem, presented by someone who had recently arrived from a country which was emerging from a long period of violent conflict. This contrasted with the abstract nature of many of the discussions at the conference. Secondly, the issue was highly personal, but also representative of the global problems facing humanity in the 21st century. Thus the conference was challenged to consider how this attendee could act in order to reduce the amount of violence in the education system in which she had worked, and how could any solutions be transferred to other situations. In this way the problem and its presentation offered an opportunity for attendees to consider how their reflections on *Acting, Learning, Understanding* might transfer to other contexts, and how they might scale up to the societal level.

The issue may be conceptualised in terms of Bateson's levels of learning (Bateson, 1964, reprinted 1972, p.289). Level I involves 'change in specificity of response by correction of errors of choice within a set of alternatives. This could equate in practical terms to the question 'given this behaviour, is this an appropriate moment to beat this child or not?'. The challenge presented is to move to Level II, where there is 'a corrective change in the set of alternatives from which choice is made'. In practical terms, this would make possible a realisation that the whole practice of corporal punishment needed to be questioned, not just when it should be applied.

Reflections

In some ways the NGO school which was the context for the above experience was unusual within the Sri Lankan context, because of its norms of behaviour, staff arrangements (combination of local and foreign), facilities and rich environment, with exposure to English, German, extracurricular activities, and the arts. Nevertheless, there were many similarities to other schools in the country. In retrospect, the particular characteristics of the NGO school made the presence and nature of corporal punishment more salient, because the culture of the NGO, and its stated policies, were in stark contrast to some of the realities of practice which it shared with the wider Sri Lankan education system. One of the common aspects was

precisely the use of corporal punishment, which was a commonplace way to discipline students, especially in government schools but also to varying degrees in NGO and private schools. The exception is in international schools, where corporal punishment was avoided because of the high fees paid by parents. It should be noted that corporal punishment has been illegal in Sri Lanka since 2005. Despite this, many incidents that have been reported by campaigning organisations since this date. The Asian Human Rights Commission provides a focus for many such reports of severe beatings, for example (Asian Human Rights Commission, 2012, 2014). Still more harrowing is the report of 'a 13-year-old Sri Lankan girl who died from serious injuries received from being punished with a cane at school' (NGO Advisory Council, 2011). Newspapers in Sri Lanka also carry frequent reports of violence in schools. For example in 2012 the Sunday Times of Sri Lanka concluded that "Corporal punishment still prevails especially in rural areas" and stated that nine students were hospitalised after being reportedly beaten by the deputy principal for eating cakes that were intended for the end of term party (Fazlulhaq and Wipulasena, 2012). Similarly in 2014 the Sri Lankan Daily Mirror described how a student was hospitalised with a broken eardrum (Jayawardena and Adikari, 2014).

Personal experience suggests that a great many more incidents do not become public in any way, due to a consensus among parents and teachers that corporal punishment is both acceptable and beneficial, and to a concern to avoid potentially damaging publicity and administrative problems. This is confirmed by Wijemanne (2014), who writing for UNICEF states that "Abuse also occurs in schools to an extent not adequately recognized. ... Reporting is done only by a few who have the courage to report. Hence it is by no means representative of the actual numbers affected. ... One reason is that reporting of abuse in schools makes life unpleasant for children and their parents. A silent stance is often adopted as children and parents find it difficult to fight a rigid school system which protects the abuser, who is most often a teacher or principal, and not the victim."

In recent years important work has been done from an academic perspective by de Zoysa and her colleagues , who found the prevalence of corporal punishment to be 'very high' and 'significantly associated with psychological maladjustment'. She concludes that 'despite the belief of many Sri Lankans to the usefulness of corporal punishment, it has negative repercussions' (de Zoysa, Newcombe and Rajapakse, 2006).

An approach to the problem

Both during the conference and subsequently we have discussed how the problem of institutionalised violence in schools could be addressed. Even a cursory analysis shows that an explanatory description of the causes is a complex undertaking. This is unsurprising, as if there were an easily identifiable route to elimination of violence in education it would no doubt have been taken, given that Ministry of Education in Sri Lanka has already forbidden any type of corporal punishments in Sri Lankan Schools, and that this is being followed up by legislation (Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children, 2013). Nevertheless, some general points may be made which indicate a direction an enquiry could appropriately take.

Firstly, there is no obvious reason to suppose that the violence in the public education system in Sri Lanka is any greater than that deployed in the 19th and early 20th centuries in British educational practice on which the Sri Lankan system was based. The question of the use of violence in education is therefore a general one, and not restricted to the specific historic characteristics of the Sri Lankan education system. Moreover, the problems of Sri Lanka, while they are distinct, have a number of points in common with other South Asian countries, see (UNICEF, 2001).

Secondly, violence has been endemic in Sri Lankan society since the mid 20th century, far beyond the confines of education. This violence has been driven not only by the conflict between Sinhalese and Tamil populations, but also by the Maoist informed revolutionary violence of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (Skanthakumar, 2013, p.16) . These two factors are by no means specific to Sri Lanka, and indeed violence has been theorised to be inescapable in the decolonisation process in general (Fanon, 1963).

In Sri Lanka, and similar contexts, rather than seeking a unitary cause for the use of violence in education, it may therefore be more productive to ask

- What mechanisms have enabled the British education system (and others) to move away from institutionalised violence?
- Are these mechanisms absent in Sri Lanka?
- If they exist, are these mechanisms suppressed in Sri Lanka, or drowned out by other mechanisms?

Some cybernetic reflections

It is easy to imagine how the violence which occurs in society at large may generate violence in education, but it is also credible to propose that violence in education (both in the home and in institutions) could be a strong factor in generating or maintaining the conflict. An illustrative example of the forces involved may be seen in Jeyaraj (2013), who reports as follows:

> Earlier the lady teacher Ms.Priyani Susila Herath who was in charge of discipline at school had admonished a schoolgirl for wearing her uniform shorter than the prescribed hemline level … The student was the daughter of Provincial councillor … (the father) stormed into the Nawagattegama Navodhaya school carrying a heavy pole. … The UPFA Provincial councillor had started abusing the teacher threatening physical harm and demanded that the teacher kneel down before him. She had refused to do so but the vice-principal and other teachers were terrified and had compelled her to do so. … A group of thugs connected to him started an intimidation campaign. They began riding their motor cycles in a group and hovering around the residences of Ms.Herath and the other teachers cited as witnesses in the Police complaint.

In seeking to understand how these patterns of violence are linked, we find a useful starting point in an approach to the problem suggested over 60 years ago (Ryan and Straus, 1954), cited de Zoysa (2008, p.148). She describes how Ryan and Straus:

> ...postulate that parents in societies which are rule-driven (as is Sri Lanka), as opposed to those which are more "loosely structured" emphasizing initiative and creativity, tend to rely more on physically forceful means for controlling their children. Further, cross-cultural comparative studies have shown that those societies high in conflict and warfare (again, as in Sri Lanka) tend to be high in the use of corporal punishment [Otterbein, 1974, cited in Straus, 1994]. Thus, the patriarchal social structure, the impact of its history of conflicts [Sivanayagam, 2005] in promoting a sense of normalization of violence, and the less strict child monitoring laws may be some of the factors contributing to the reported high prevalence of parental corporal punishment in the study.

Both the trauma reported by Jeyaraj, and the analysis de Zoysa attest to cycles of violence in the education system and society at large which constitute a feedback cycle, a class of system which is at the heart of cybernetics. Ashby (1956, p.53), defines it as follows: 'When this circularity of action exists between the parts of a dynamic system, *feedback* may be said to be present'. This suggests that it will be useful to view our problem through the lens of cybernetics. However, Ashby goes on to warn that 'when the parts rise to even as few as four, if every one affects the other three, then … knowing the properties of all the twenty [possible] circuits does *not* give complete information about the system. Such complex systems cannot be treated as an interlaced set of more or less independent feedback circuits, but only as a whole' (Ashby, 1956, p.54). The difficulty in disentangling the mingling of cause and effect in situations such as the use of violence in education is a generalised problem in the study of societies. Indeed a major strand of sociology is dedicated to clarifying this. Giddens states the problem clearly: 'social structures are both constituted by human agency and yet at the same time are the very medium of this constitution' (Giddens, 1976, p.121).

If the consequences of the interacting factors are too complex to be analysed (as Ashby's comment suggests), then what is the appropriate unit of analysis? Within the cybernetic literature a possible unit of analysis is offered by Bateson's work on *ethos*. In his paper 'Bali: The Value System of a Steady State' he applied this concept in seeking to answer the question 'Why is Balinese society non-schismogenetic?'. The concept schismogenetic is equated in (Bateson, 1935, reprinted 1972, p. 68) with 'progressive differentiation' between people or groups who identify an other as different. This process may be symmetrical, 'in which the individuals in two groups A and B have the same aspirations and the same behavior patterns, but are differentiated in the orientation of these patterns', or complementary, in which 'the behavior and aspirations of the members of the two groups are fundamentally different'. (Bateson, 1935, reprinted 1972, p. 68). In seeking to explain the stability of social relations in Bali, Bateson defines his task as being to 'describe schematically the process of character formation, the resulting Balinese character structure, the exceptional instances in which some sort of cumulative interaction can be recognised, and the methods by which quarrels and status differentiation are handled'. (Bateson, 1949, reprinted 1972, p112). This is contrasted with the Iatmul of New Guinea, whose culture, he proposes, 'includes a number of regenerative causal circuits or vicious circles', which lead individuals or groups to 'participate in potentially cumulative interaction' (Bateson, 1949, reprinted 1972, p126).

The concept of schismogenesis has been applied by some authors in seeking to understand patterns of authority, its abuse, and the responses this generates. For example Hampden-

Turner (1982, p.174) proposes an analysis of Nazism in these terms. Similarly the abuse of priestly authority in Spain has been described by Mitchell as 'authoritarian schismogenesis', repeating generation after generation, in which 'the transhistorical ideology of discipline and desire in which transgression in not an unfortunate anomaly but a functioning part of the system' (Mitchell, 1998, p.6).

The application of these ideas to the Sri Lankan context would be a major undertaking, but might prove of value. It would, for example, help in the creation of a model which could bring together into one system the experience of individual school pupils and teachers and the overarching patterns of behaviour in the culture. An example of a candidate structure for analysis is the religious culture of the island. 70% of the Sri Lankan population is Buddhist, at least nominally, and Article 9 of the Constitution states that 'The Republic of Sri Lanka shall give to Buddhism the foremost place and accordingly it shall be the duty of the State to protect and foster the Buddha Sasana...' (The Government of Sri Lanka, 1978). The Buddhist scriptures reject violence (Harris, 1990), although the detail of interpretation is contested. This seems to have no appreciable impact on the use of violence in society at large (Strathern, 2013). It could be hypothesised that this mismatch between the stated principles of the dominant religion, on the one hand, and the actions of its adherents, on the other, is paradigmatic. This could then legitimise other contradictions within the more constrained domain of education. The same may be argued, of course, for Christianity in nominally Christian countries such as the UK, the only difference being that non-violence is a less prominent doctrine in many Christian sects. It would be interesting to conduct an analysis of violence in Sri Lankan schools making use of Bateson's analysis of ethos and schismogenesis, and the example of religion which we have sketched above provides indicates an area in which it could be applied to the large scale social phenomena in Sri Lanka. An understanding of the mechanisms which bind together the forces maintaining the use of the cane would provide a basis of understanding which could lead to action, and suggests a way in which an issue which captured the interest of the American Society for Cybernetics Conference of 2013 could be further examined within the cybernetic tradition.

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