

Two Brothers Skip Traditional Schooling for an Early Start on a Different Future

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Under Sri Lanka's conventional education system, children typically face their first major milestone at age ten with the Grade 5 Scholarship Examination. Yet, we recently met a young boy who had already tackled and cleared an exam on par with the G.C.E. Ordinary Level at that very same age.

At just ten years old, Deran Nolasko de Silva sat for the British Council's Edexcel International GCSE and passed with flying colors. He took on Commerce, Business Studies, Economics, Mathematics, Sinhala, and English. That was five years ago. By the time he turned twelve, he was sitting for the G.C.E. Advanced Level examinations in

2023 under the commerce stream. Studying Economics, Business Studies, and Accounting in English, he secured three simple passes (S). Today, he is fourteen years old.

"I went to school until the third grade," Deran shares. "After schools closed for COVID and reopened, I stopped going. I went to St. Anthony's College, Wattala. Learning from home has been wonderful for me. I didn't study under pressure; I enjoyed all the regular playtime a fifth-grader should have. I stuck to a schedule: schoolwork from around eight in the morning until noon, and after that, complete freedom. No more work—just great playtime, watching cartoons, and catching as many cricket matches as I wanted. Writing my O-Levels at ten didn't scare me at all. I went in relaxed, wrote the papers, and came back."

When I took the A-Levels, I was twelve—the youngest student sitting for the exam at the time, surrounded by older kids. During the A-Level Accounting paper, I hit a snag. I brought a scientific calculator, but the exam hall supervisor told me I couldn't use it, even though plenty of students had used them at other centers that year. That pressure got to me. I had to borrow a calculator from someone nearby, use it, and hand it back, managing only half my work that way. I actually thought I might fail, but I managed to secure an 'S' pass."

Before the younger brother made this mark, the elder had already paved the way. Theekshana Nikolai de Silva also decided to drop out of regular schooling during the pandemic to study from home. He sat for the same Edexcel International GCSE subjects as his brother, and he passed as well.

"I was the first to prepare for the O-Levels," Theekshana explains. "When the country locked down for COVID, I was in the eighth grade, already preparing for my London O-Levels. Back then, I was studying fifteen subjects in total—nine school subjects and six London O-Level subjects. Dad taught me all the London O-Level accounting subjects, as he was teaching that subject at an international school at the time."

However, since Dad had trouble teaching me mathematics, he hired a tutor to come over. When the tutor arrived, Dad told me, 'Son, study hard, because you're going to end up teaching math to your younger brother.' And just like he predicted, I ended up teaching the London O-Level math to my younger brother. Dad pulled us both out of school. I dropped the government O-Levels and took the London O-Levels when I was

thirteen. After that, I took the government A-Levels in Economics, Business Studies, and Accounting through the English medium."

The elder brother faced the G.C.E. Advanced Level exam at fourteen, while the younger took it at twelve. According to them, it wasn't overwhelmingly difficult because the Edexcel curriculum had already laid the groundwork.

"Because of the London O-Levels, the foundation for the government A-Level commerce curriculum was already set for both of us," they say. "We only had a little extra to study. Since Dad taught these subjects, we had no fear. He explained everything and always told us not to stress over getting 'A's or 'B's, but simply to pass the exam. And we did just that."

The boys' father is Lasantha de Silva. As mentioned earlier, he is a teacher as well as a writer. His primary wish was for his children to learn freely and walk whatever path they chose.

"Whether an exam was happening or not, if there was a cricket match, we watched it," Lasantha says. "No matter how much people say a team is bound to lose, the three of us will watch a cricket match. That's how these boys wrote their exams every single day. When the country locked down for COVID, we only had one smartphone. Since I was a teacher too, I had online classes to run. We managed somehow and did all our learning through that single phone. I always told the kids just to face the exam and pass. I never pushed them to get 'A's or 'B's. All I wanted was for them to pass."

To outsiders, learning from home might look like social isolation. One might assume that missing out on daily peer interaction and school life is a heavy toll for a home-schooled child. Yet, talking to these brothers revealed no shyness or awkwardness whatsoever. They possessed a social ease that easily matched that of any school-going child.

"Not going to school didn't mean we missed out on friends," the boys note. "We had neighborhood friends and family friends, so our social interactions were entirely normal."

"We didn't tell the children to do their A-Levels just to push them into a rigid career track," the father explains. "They simply needed a recognized qualification to move forward. I wanted them to finish their schooling early because I realized that under the

current system, spending a massive number of years sitting in a classroom is unnecessary.

I had planned out a Master's path for them. My eldest son registered at a private institution to pursue his degree, but on the day of the exam, they wouldn't let him sit because he had long hair. I had specifically asked the administration beforehand if his long hair would be an issue and was assured it wasn't. Yet on exam day, they gave him a hard time over it. Still, he managed to write the exam."

Now, these sons are forging their own unique paths.

"After that, my eldest decided to study astronomy," Lasantha says. "He started learning it entirely on his own. He wants to reach a place where he can conquer the world someday. Ever since I started visiting the library, my eldest son has been devouring books on astronomy."

During our chat with the father, the eldest son chimed in:

"There are no more astronomy books left for me to read at the library. I'm actively looking for more resources. Rather than reading books on everyday topics, I much prefer diving into space science."

The younger son also shared a glimpse of his reading habits:

"I mostly love reading bear stories. By now, I've read every single bear story available at the library. For my future, I've chosen music. I want to carve out my own unique musical identity—I'd love to become one of the best ukulele players in the world."

The instrument he plays, and even its name, feels unfamiliar to many of us. Their father happily clarified:

"A friend of mine brought this ukulele for my son. He started playing it all by himself, learning straight from YouTube. Anyone who sees it assumes it's just a toy guitar, but it's a real musical instrument."

As we bid them farewell, we left with the lingering impression of a father and two sons who have chosen a life of freedom and a vastly different, extraordinary future.

Photos by Krishan Kariyawasam