

The Need to Refocus

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One of the major problems facing Pakistan is that two thirds of its population is illiterate. According to latest census, literacy rate in Pakistan is 49 per cent; with female literacy almost half of that of male. Thus in terms of literacy rate Pakistan touches the lowest line in the South Asian region. If we believe in the strong correlation between literacy and economic and social development, these figures portray a very dismal picture, more so now that we have entered the millennium of knowledge and information. If one is asked to point out the major issues that all our educational system the top three would be the problems of access, dropout and quality.

According to latest figures, a large number of boys and girls in the primary school-age are out of school. The rest of them, the lucky ones, who make it to the school are not guaranteed a good physical and social environment. A large number of schools are roofless; many are without boundary walls and/or facilities of drinking water and washrooms. Many schools are one or two-teacher school, and quite a few of them are without teachers altogether. Where teachers are available there is a tendency of absenteeism. Even if they do come to school, the quality of teaching is not ensured for a number of reasons. Some of these reasons are teacher centered, while the other exists beyond the classroom and school. The ultimate outcome is that more than 50 percent (male 45 per cent and female 65 percent) of the children drop out before teaching class five. This is a tremendous national loss which could be averted with proper planning and implementation.

What could be the possible causes for the dropout of children? They may vary from context to context, however, economic pressure, remote location of schools, mass scale failure, lack of awareness on the part of community, punishment in schools, and lack of motivation inside the schools and classroom are a few causes of dropouts. A large number of poor parents in the rural areas refer their children to remain at home and work with them in the fields or at domestic chores. This way, they think, their children could be more useful to them as compared to their involvement with studies. There is a real need to educate these parents. A proper mobilization of community could lead to a possible change in the situation. Sharing with the parents the usefulness of education and its long-term advantages could help them review their notions about the usefulness of schooling. Similarly, education at the primary level should be free tuition fee, e.g. textbooks, uniform, school bag etc, should also be provided by the state. Subsidizing on tuition fee alone is no more than an illusion as the real crunch is the allied expenses.

Besides empowering the community by creating awareness and alleviating the economic pressure on parents subsidizing the tuition and related expenses we also need to bring drastic changes in the physical and social environment of our schools. A lot is required to turn these buildings into real schools. This may require fund

generation. One way to face the problem is to keep on complaining against the government about the scarce supply of funds, while the other option could be the generation of funds on self-help basis. During my involvement with a community schools project in rural Sindh, I came to realize how a community can participate in the uplift of education. This help could be in various forms, e.g. piece of land, wood, skilled labor etc, and not necessarily in the form of hard cash.

Now I could like to allude to the other aspect of school environment, i.e., the social environment. For that, one doesn't need cash. It is the relationship between head teacher and teachers, teachers and teachers, students and teachers, and students and students. The more collegial, collaborative and friendly the atmosphere, the more chances there are of enhanced and meaningful learning. The classroom dynamics sets the scene for the kind of learning the students are going to experience. In majority of our rural and some urban schools physical punishment is considered as a norm. The classroom environment does little to encourage the students to ask questions disagree with the teacher's view point and express their own perspective about the question in hand.

A large number of students drop out because of the extreme nature of physical punishment. Similarly, there are severe non-physical punishments. For instance during my visit to a school I observed a primary level class. At the head of a row a signboard was erected every day (that day it was lying under a desk as some outsiders were coming to the class). The sign board read in Urdu *Nalaoq bachhe* (dumb children). When I asked a little girl about this board she told me that those children who could not give the correct answers to the teacher's question were made to sit in that row. One can imagine the kind of impact of this psychological punishment of the self-image and self-respect of those children throughout their lives.

To develop a friendly and caring atmosphere does not necessarily require extra funding but change in teachers' ethos and attitudes. Similarly, the relationship patterns between teachers and head teachers, and teachers and teachers and teachers do influence the outlook of children as the nature of school milieu has a strong impact on the process of learning. Usually there is a lot of emphasis given to the kind of curriculum we use in schools. There are calls to regular revisions of the curriculum. But how about the hidden curriculum which is more powerful and which is least monitored and hardly subjected to any accountability, e.g. teachers' harsh behavior in the classroom, non-punctuality or absenteeism etc. Ironically, the definition of a good teacher is that of one who shows the best academic results. This definition is not only accepted but encouraged at all levels of administration as well. The extra emphasis on good academic results ignores or underestimates the significance of the actual process of learning.

Keeping in view the gravity of the situation and the enormity of challenge posed by illiteracy resulting from problems of access and retention we need to step up our efforts to increase our literacy rate. This could be done by making schools more accessible to children by creating awareness among the parents about the long reaching consequences of education and subsidizing the educational expenses of the children. Besides, we desperately need to make our schools more attractive by creating a culture of collegiality, collaboration and care. This needs a collective effort on the part of head teachers, teachers, parents and students alike.

The suggestions given above are not very novel and may meet with a cliché response which is given to any new proposal/initiative for change, i.e. 'How can we do it? We don't have the resources'. Are we really convinced from within that lack of resources is the only and real cause of all problems? Perhaps lack of resources is just one tiny piece which is missing, or misplaced to be more precise). The real problem, however, is the poor governance in education. Lack of political will at macro level and want of a broad based, holistic approach at micro level combine to act as strong resistance forces against any new initiative in the domain of education. What is needed thus is a genuine shift in our thinking paradigm; only then can an initiative work.