**Follow the child**

BY Z U B E I D A M US T A FA 2021-07-30

RECENTLY, I had a deeply satisfying experience that gave me hope for our children. I attended five lectures as an observer in a five-week course for teachers` assistants sponsored by the Pakistan Montessori Association, Karachi. This `return to school` exercise reinforced my faith in the future of our children who alone can save Pakistan.

The lectures prompted some soul-searching. I could understand how we are failing our children and thus our country. It was William Wordsworth who wrote `The Child is father of the Man` in a poem. But state and society are destroying the spirit of our citizens of tomorrow.

This truth immediately dawned on me when I heard the first lecture by the eloquent and erudite Tayyaba Saleem. She was very focused on the Montessori philosophy. But my mind`s second window was looking at our schools as they are. It emerged clearly from the course that Pakistan needs a Dr Maria Montessori (1870-1952), an Italian physician, neurologist and educator. Farida Akbar, a veteran Montessori trainer of trainers and an authentic exponent of the Montessori philosophy, put it simply at the certificate distribution ceremony: `Follow the child.

That is what this philosophy is all about observe the child and give her space to explore her own instincts to self-educate in a secure environment. This wonderful experiment began more than a century ago in a working-class neighbourhood of Rome.

The fact is that this system will never get outdated because it draws its strength from its intrinsic connection with the nature of the child that has remained unchanged. Dr Montessori was an activist who travelled widely to spread her message. She was in India when World War II broke out in 1939.

She was interned and she used this period to popularise her philosophy about the child.

That is how Mrs Gool Minwala became her student and a pioneer of the Montessori system in Pakistan.

According to the Montessori philosophy when the child is born its basic need is security. She derives it by seeking an `inner equilibrium` that gives her a sense of balance and happiness. To achieve this the child has to adapt to the community in which she is born and of which she is an integral part. Her `absorbent mind` helps her imbibe whatever she hears or observes in her environment.

Her innate sense of order also facilitates this adaptation process. Parents and teachers play a key role in giving the child the stability and permanence that are essential for her sense of security.

While the child is experiencing this emotional growth she is also developing physically, mentally and cognitively. The basic principle that must be observed by parentsand teachers is to introduce a new skill reading, writing or language -only when the child is ready for it.

In the phenomena of growth and security, language plays a key role as this is also the period when the child is beginning to communicate with her playmates and the adults in her life, and express her thoughts and articulate her needs.

It was clear to me that our conventional education system militates against these principles that primarily protect the child`s sense of security. Our schools begin with the assumption that the child knows nothing and the teacher transmits knowledge to her. Our regimented and disciplinarian approach allows no freedom or initiative to the child who is put in a straitjacket. Rote learning is the pillar of our education system. Critical thinking is killed at the start.

Another major flaw in our system is that it encourages competition and seeks to find a quick route to success that is measured in monetary terms. That would explain the cor-ruption in our examinations. The crazy quest for an English-speaking utopia is a result of our love for shortcuts and our impatience. This robs the child of her own language without teaching her good English.

She is dumbed.Tayyaba very wisely decided to deliver her lectures in Urdu. Initially, the advocates of English expressed some reservations but they accepted the decision. Later, they admitted to me that they had absolutely no difficulty in understanding all the lectures. Tayyaba told me that she has never had such an interactive class because the students understood the lectures and could frame very sensible questions as language posed no barrier. Yet the majority wrote their assignments in English. I cannot comment on their proficiency.

Some significant remarks from the participants: `I came expecting to learn pedagogy but I got more -an understanding of the child.

`If something goes wrong with my child I know she is not to blame.

`Fathers should also join the course for improved parenting.

`Initially I felt contempt for Urdu but now I respect it and want to use this language.

The Pakistan Medical Association which gave its position on child abuse last week should note: robbing a child of her language amounts to child abuse. m www.zubeidamustafa. com