**[She knew best](https://www.dawn.com/news/1808716/she-knew-best)**

[Zubeida Mustafa](https://www.dawn.com/authors/975/zubeida-mustafa) Published January 26, 2024 Updated a day ago

WHY the hurry to leave? Why no farewells? Regrettably, we will never know. Farida Akbar, the best exponent of Dr Maria Montessori’s philosophy in Pakistan, is no more. She passed away on Jan 10, leaving her loving family, friends, Montessori fraternity and admiring students bereft.

Mrs Akbar’s unassuming and quiet personality concealed a beautiful mind that revealed itself when she spoke. Her knowledge of various social philosophers, the education systems in vogue and child psychology was phenomenal. Given her love of books and huge capacity to listen patiently to others made her what she was: an excellent and reassuring counsellor to parents and students alike.

Gool Minwalla, who studied the Montessori system from Dr Maria Montessori herself, founded the Pakistan Montessori Association in 1949. Mrs Akbar never tired of reminding us of the greatness of her mentor who had helped her discover the miraculous world of the child. Mrs Akbar already had two Master’s degrees — in psychology and education — when she obtained her Montessori diploma in 1975. There was no looking back thereafter. Having joined the PMA and emerged as Mrs Minwalla’s ‘right-hand woman’, she became the key figure in sustaining the Montessori pedagogy in Pakistan. She went on to become the ‘trainer of trainers’ and was appointed chief executive and di­­r­ector of training of the Montessori Teach­ers’ Training Centre in 1999, retiring in 2020.

Having a deep knowledge of the Montessori philosophy and an understanding of its application, she became the best friend a child studying in Pakistan could have. Only if the government had sought her advice! She believed in giving a child freedom of choice within the bounds of a safe environment to help the child discover her own potential, while allowing her sensory, motor, emotional and cognitive development to advance at its own pace. “Why do teachers try to control a child to discipline it?” she would often say, with exasperation in her voice. “You cannot teach critical thinking to a child. It comes naturally to it if you allow it to express itself in the language it has been learning since birth. It explores by asking questions in its own language and you must provide it answers. Teaching it in a language that it doesn’t know at this stage will dumb the child.” There was much wisdom in what she had to say and I could go on quoting her on a child’s needs and how the child must be handled.

Farida Akbar believed in giving a child freedom of choice.

It was the best learning experience for me when she agreed to guide me in an experiment: I launched a play centre called the ‘Aao Khailein Markaz’ to see how young children learn in a relaxed environment where they could communicate in their own language (in this case Urdu) and play with the learning material of their choice. Although the Markaz could not survive for long (the parents failed to understand our aims), I learnt a lot myself by tracking the progress of the child, especially in articulating its thoughts. Mrs Akbar was deeply interested in the Markaz and would visit frequently to demonstrate her pedagogy to Hawwa, my friend who had volunteered to teach the students. Mrs Akbar would graciously invite Hawwa for lunch to explain the principles underlying the practice. She would also make flash cards herself, pushing aside my protests, saying she enjoyed doing it.

I think it was the teacher in her that drove her. Her commitment to education was unmatched. I often invited her to accompany me on school visits. I was amazed by her meticulous observation and analysis that turned out to be spot on when I probed further. She never said no when her advice was needed in any matter pertaining to education. Once she spent the entire day with two teachers from the community school in Kheiro Dero, teaching them how they could make the Montessori material themselves and use them in their classrooms. As a member of the PMA, she helped establish schools in the northern areas, attended numerous Montessori conferences and was appointed external examiner for Montessori institutions in many countries. She was an asset and her contributions will be remembered. The Association Montessori Internationale in Amsterdam appointed her twice to the Scientific Pedagogical Committee.

Hers was a versatile personality. Her love of Urdu literature, and her interest in intellectual activities, such as panel discussions, lectures, festivals and book club sessions, made her a willing and enjoyable companion. Rest in peace dear friend. It seems Allama Iqbal wrote this verse just for you:

(There is no limit to your knowledge and love/ In the orchestra of nature there is no song sweeter than you.)

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