**Back-to-school season**

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In a week or two, schools will again reopen after the summer holidays in Pakistan and elsewhere, not quite for all children, but never in history have as many children and youth gone to school, college and university, in Pakistan and in the world. We often forget that when we criticise that Pakistan doesn’t yet have universal primary education (UPE), which should eventually also become a compulsory school for all at primary level and through secondary, too, “at the earliest possible time”, as Muhammad Ali Jinnah said in his famous speech on education in Karachi in November 1947.
Last week I listened to a Norwegian TV interview with one of the country’s most prominent child psychologists, Dr. Magne Raundalen, now retired from the Centre for Crisis Psychology at the University of Bergen, with research related to terrorism and conflict, children’s worries about various forms of conflict, disaster and loss, and how concepts are formed. He continues chairing the Norwegian National Committee of UNICEF.
In the interview, Raundalen said that the parent generation in our time is the best we have ever seen, in Norway and in the rest of the world, generally speaking. Parents are more enlightened and aware of things than before, he said. Well, not that everything modern is better than the old things, but when it comes to childrearing, gender issues, and openness about various family matters, things have become better. For example, it is no longer quite acceptable to stash away a handicapped child in a backroom of the house; everyone shall have the right to participate at their ability and need. Alas, we don’t always follow it, but at least we know what we should do and what is right.
Furthermore, with reference to Dr. Magne Raundalen, I shall draw attention to a key point in the interview. He said that his major worry was that bad things happen to children, but nobody knows about it or talk about it, and the child suffers in silence, never to be known or only revealed many years later. Perhaps the child tried to tell somebody, but nobody wanted to listen, even told not to exaggerate or tell untrue stories. Sometimes, adults know or suspect wrong things being done, but it may be more convenient not to talk about it, rather protecting the adults than the defenceless children.
I have myself studied education, psychology and sociology. Before that, I was a school teacher for some time, a long time ago now, just after graduating from secondary school. That time, an experienced teacher gave me a very good advice, notably that the most important thing a teacher can do, is just to be alert and observe each child, considering if all is right and good with the child and his or her relationships with others. The advice sounded simple, but I quickly realised that it was a great advice.
For example, I had one pupil in grade one who refused to speak in class, but when he played in the schoolyard, he was as vocal as any. In conversation with other teachers, we thought the boy might have some form of dyslectic disorder, which is so common, especially in boys; it is just a disorder, but a teacher should realise it and help the child in the right way, especially giving the child confidence, also seeking specialist advice. Later in life, when I was a diplomat, I had a boss who was dyslectic, and I realised that it had nothing to do with competence and intelligence. For eight years, Erna Solberg was PM of Norway and she said she also had some dyslectic disorder; she could read fast but would make spelling mistakes in writing, in SMS messages, for example. Yet, few politicians could do better than her in debates and decision-making. A couple of generations ago, teachers and the public would have scant knowledge about such disorders, and if anything, they might have prejudices rather than knowledge and understanding.
The importance of observing each child in a class is indeed essential when it comes to discovering if a child may suffer from abuse or traumatic changes in the home, for example related to parents’ divorce knowing that over fifty percent of marriages end in divorce in Europe in our time. A child may suddenly become withdrawn, quiet and secretive, or change other behaviour. A good and alert teacher, even without special knowledge in child psychology, would be able to realise or suspect that something wrong may go on.
It is known that Finland scores particularly high in education, and to be a school teacher there is a particularly respected profession with highly qualified and committed staff. One of the reasons why Finland does so well in education is that they use special education more often than what is otherwise common. The teachers observe and see when some extra help is needed, and there is hardly any stigma attached to it, and after some time, when the student copes, special education lessons may be dropped. Also, Finnish children get the chance to play and be children more than children in other competitive Western societies–and in Pakistan, too, where students are graded and ranked all the way from kindergarten onwards.
True, education is also about learning basic skills, the 3Rs, reading, writing and arithmetic, and more, but it is as much about getting self-confidence, learning to share and work together, and being proud of mastering things individually and in groups, and staying curious. Education is about moral education and ethics, and that we mustn’t forget, although we have to a great extent in the last quarter century or so when knowledge, tests, and grades have been given so much attention. In future, I believe that the whole school system will be up for change; it will be less about knowledge and learning by heart, because much of the facts can be found on the Internet anyway, and AI, artificial intelligence will be coming, too. We will need moral standards and ability to consider and judge. Life skills and ability to work and look after own health and that of family members will be essential, including both psychological and physical health throughout a long life. Everyone will meet health challenges and we should be able to know more about how to handle things ourselves, not always require specialist services which would be unable to cope.
At this year’s back-to-school season, let us honour all teachers and care-givers, ordinary parents as well as top specialists in social and cognitive psychology and more–and the most important, the children and students. Let us give special recognition to the importance of common sense, to the big hearts, the kind thoughts, and the right actions. Parents and teachers who are illiterate may actually be as good, or better, than those with all kinds of degrees and bookish knowledge. No, I don’t belittle expertise and knowledge. I just remind us all that there is more than that. Besides, there is no single route to success and a good life, and the road cannot be standardised and prescribed, at least not all of it. Each life is unique and the road we take is our own, out in the unknown, out in the wilderness, and there is no turning back.
Let me wish you a happy back-to-school season – either you are a student, parent, teacher, community member, or just a concerned person watching from the sideline.