**Balancing acts in education reform**

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Public education in Pakistan is often a precarious subject. Reform efforts are seen with scepticism across the political spectrum.

On the one hand, progressives critique it for promoting many of the social ills which are prevalent in Pakistan today. They argue that public schools breed xenophobia through jingoistic and religiously fundamentalist content. This critique has its own place given Pakistan’s history of using education as a political tool. On the other hand, reformers face scepticism and backlash from conservatives in terms of being complicit in the secularization and liberalization of Pakistani society. Pakistan’s intelligentsia need to be much more pragmatic in their approach towards long-term social upheaval.

Pakistani progressives are correct in positing that public education has played an important role in shaping regressive tendencies common around the country today. The impact of the political economy notwithstanding, students taught using one-dimensional approaches (especially in the social sciences) often grow up to be less open and tolerant adults.

Students who are taught false accounts of history become adults with worldviews which are not grounded in truth. Instead, patterns of fallacious thinking and tribalism begin to appear in them. This is not to say that elite private school alumni cannot bear the same traits. It is just that certain aspects of critical thinking are necessary to overcome these tendencies, and weak education systems are (for the most part) unable to develop those skills in their students.

Regressive forces in Pakistan see the student as an empty canvas to be painted with specific opinions and knowledge. Unfortunately, progressives also believe that the same approach needs to be adopted to improve Pakistani society. The problem with this approach is that it is unlikely to succeed.

If Pakistan has an abundance of regressive ideas, then any attempt at democratic education reform will reflect those biases to a great extent. If our textbooks reinforce gender norms via their illustrations, then it is less the result of an active attempt to promote that idea and more a reflection of the beliefs of textbook authors.

The only pathway to add progressive ideas then is to adopt an undemocratic approach which attempts to take power away from many of the existing stakeholders in the sector. Right and wrong aside, this approach is unlikely to succeed and unable to be sustained.

Education reform geared towards promoting progressive ideals must come from the holistic development of a student’s cognitive capabilities. Skills pertaining to critical thinking, analysis, and dialogue carry with them the additional impact of promoting tolerance. Comparative approaches to various topics such as world history can train students to refrain from engaging in in-group/out-group mentality. In any case, a better educated and increasingly skilled workforce can create economic conditions where regressive ideas are less welcome.

Adopting views such as the separation of church and state in education may be principally defendable but fall short when it comes to promoting any real improvement in the country. To move forward with meaningful education reform that can enable a safer environment even for various forms of stratified communities, we need to focus on increasing the weight of critical thinking in our classrooms.

Pakistan’s urban elite will need to adopt a more pragmatic approach or risk being limited to making morally pure arguments but not causing any change. A better educated generation today will result in an environment where we can have a more productive discussion about the content of knowledge down the line. Improving the quality of public schooling in Pakistan should perhaps then be the most important priority for those with progressive leanings.

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