

The importance of

Education drawn 16.2.03 By Dr Shahid

THERE is a general concern about the quality of education at various levels in Pakistan. In almost every seminar, workshop and conference experts and decision-makers complain about the falling standards of education. Every new government immediately embarks upon reforms by constituting new committees, task-forces and think tanks. What happens to the recommendations of these commissions and committees is not a secret anymore. Each time we prefer a quick-fix approach that leads us nowhere.

Unfortunately the notion of quality of education, held by those who believe in such quick fixes, is dominated by quantitative measures, e.g. number of buildings, the number of 'trained teachers', and the quantum of physical facilities, etc. This notion of quality is not only incomplete but also misleading. Consequently, the measures taken to improve quality do not get us the desired results.

In this article, I intend to unravel the notion of quality in Pakistan and then make a case for more effective teacher education in order to bring a qualitative improvement in education. The idea of quality should encompass the physical and human resources available in a school together with what actually goes on in the classroom, i.e., curriculum, textbooks, teachers, students and their interaction with each other.

It would be useful to think of quality as a cline or a continuum — i.e. where gradual changes can be effected — instead of an either/or approach, where one believes something either has quality or not at all. For instance, the presence of a school in a certain location could be one aspect. The number of schools available in a certain country could be another way of looking at the quality of education since the higher the number

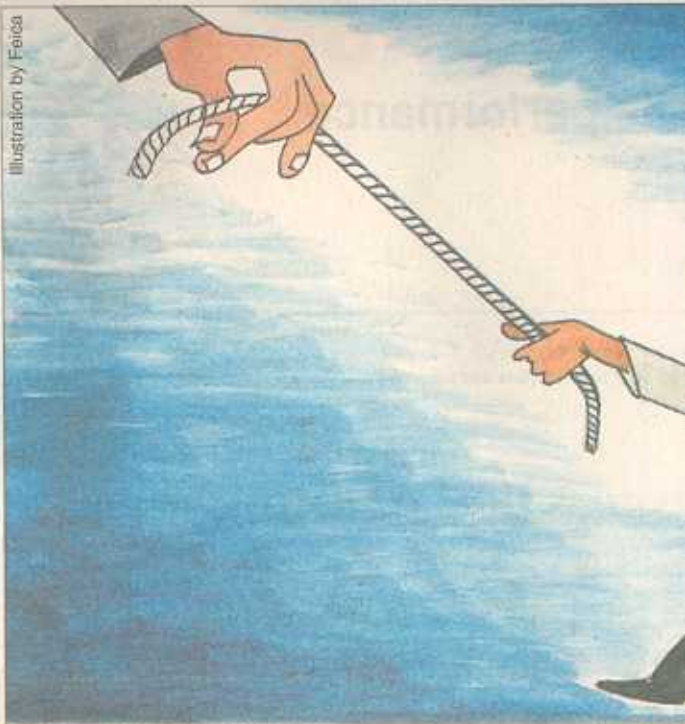
of schools, the higher is likely to be student enrolment. Another aspect of quality is the appropriateness of school buildings. In Pakistan there are a number of schools building which have no boundary walls or no roofs.

Another dimension of quality could be the facilities available like clean drinking water and toilets. Many schools lack these basic facilities. Yet another layer of quality could be heating and cooling facilities, the quality of the furniture, or the number of students per class. Other than physical resources, what are also important are human resources, in this case teachers and head teachers. A number of schools in Pakistan have no teachers at all. A related issue is that even if teachers are appointed they are generally absent. Usually in schools situated in far-flung areas, teachers make internal arrangements where they can remain absent certain days of the week without being detected.

So far we have looked at the visible or tangible aspect of quality, for example, the number of schools, physical facilities, and the number of teachers present. Now we turn to the more subtle and qualitative aspects. This can be simply described as what actually goes on in the school and the classroom, i.e. the school milieu, curriculum, textbooks, and the actual teaching in the classroom and so on. Improvement in quality requires attention to both domains. But unfortunately most of the initiatives have been geared towards enhancing quality through its quantitative aspect since this is relatively easier to measure and demonstrate.

The key factors that contribute to this second aspect of quality of education are the type of curriculum taught, the type and quality of textbooks used, the assessment system, and level and quality of teaching in the classroom. Each of these factors is crucial in determining the

Illustration by Faiza



benchmarks of quality in any educational system. Let us very briefly view these quality-determining factors and their status in Pakistan. The curriculum in Pakistan has always been criticized for its non-relevance with real life. It is thought to be outdated, inflexible and is never regularly revised or updated. This criticism has been made by many people concerned with education, notably by practising teachers, educators and researchers. Textbooks are another important factor in shaping a curriculum. In Pakistan a number of the textbooks are written in a very complex manner and it is not easy to understand them without some help. The complexity is reflected in the language and syntax used as well as at the organizational, cultural and conceptual levels.

Similarly, the assessment system that we have is geared towards testing the ability to conserve 'knowledge'. If we look at the examination papers of dif-

ferent education boards of Pakistan we realize that there has been little attempt to tap the higher order thinking-skills of students. Most of the questions are of the 'what' type, requiring students to merely reproduce information.

As a result, those who are good at memorizing and who have effective recall skills are bound to get better grades. Ironically, in most of the cases, the students who get good grades have a very shallow understanding of the material for which they received the grades. This assessment system has a negative 'backwash' effect on teachers and students. Teaching in the mainstream schools in Pakistan is far from satisfactory. The classroom dynamics are totally controlled by teachers and the mode of teaching is the lecture. There is little room left for creativity or for students to express their own point of view. One way of confronting the challenge is to