**Educating the Young Ones**

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“Children must be taught how to think, not what to think.” — Margaret Mead

The purpose of education has been defined in many ways. Education is not preparation for life, it is life itself (Jon Dewey); it is the key to unlock the golden gate of freedom (George Washington Carver); it is to turn mirrors into windows (Sydney J Harris); it is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world (Nelson Mandela). From the cradle to the grave a human being constantly remains in the process of learning, something that is facilitated by the availability of opportunities. Thus, one cannot say with certainty that a seven-year-old school-going child is learning more than a child of the same age working as an assistant at a mechanic’s workshop. The former may be studious but the latter would definitely be street-smart. Both are learning to grasp the essential elements of life on which their survival is dependent. They shall both live their age albeit in circumstances poles apart from one another. Nonetheless, they shall live.

Coming to the functions associated with education, one of the many put forward by great thinkers is to make people literate which enables them to read and write and that of course become the foundation stones of knowledge. Alvin Toffler says: “The illiterate of the future will not be the person who cannot read. It will be the person who does know how to learn.” However, what Martin Luther King Jr suggested is perhaps the crux of the human fabric a society should be composed of. He said: “The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. Intelligence plus character-that is the goal of true education.”

How best to improve this human fabric is nothing more than imparting social values addressing the impressionable minds of young children. They are quick to learn as their heads are like clean slates that will permanently capture the knowledge given to them at this stage and what better knowledge than the principles of humanity, empathy and languages. After all, they are too young to be taught physics and chemistry but old enough to make them socially viable members of a healthy and happy society.

According to Britannica despite many cultural and political differences between countries and nations, in terms of the curriculum of elementary education, they all seem to be on a similar footing. For one thing, all are committed to providing mass education to their citizens implying that everyone must be able to at least read and write. Two, they all would be interested in making their people law-abiding citizens for which elementary education plays a pivotal role as it lays emphasis on literacy, basic arithmetic skills and most important basic social studies and science (mostly related to personal hygiene, dietary necessities and environmental cleanliness).

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This proves the point that rather than converting the young population into rote parrots, the national curriculum must focus on training their minds to think, observe, analyse and develop their faculties to create and adapt moral and cultural values.

In our neighbouring country, each state has a director of public education who has the additional responsibility to inculcate basic education through productive activity and local crafts to all children between the ages of 4 and 14. Children are most comfortable in the surroundings in which they are born. The language, food and way of life are in-built into their bodies. They are accustomed to things they see every day of their lives since their birth and expecting someone living in the tropics to identify, say, a polar bear is asking too much from them. This concept of introducing children to their local environment first and then to the larger ones is accepted by all but the methods employed vary from country to country.

Few educationists in Pakistan understand the importance of using indigenous materials for promoting education at the elementary level. Our reliance is more on imported books designed to suit foreigners ignoring our local culture. One lady, Quratulain Bakhteari a leading social worker in Pakistan has endeavoured to turn around the local school system, particularly in the much neglected Baluchistan province. Nominated for Nobel Prize in 2005, her incredible outlook with respect to educating the young ones focuses not on creating competition but on developing a sense of participation through different projects set up to improve living standards for all. Establishing over 2000 schools and enrolling over 200,000 female students is not a small matter. She too has stressed the need to utilise local items in books for helping to spread literacy and facilitate children in their learning process. The government in power should be looking out for such experts to revolutionise education and empower the young ones in a way that can restore the self-respecting image of the country.

While public schools are employing Urdu and regional languages to impart education at the primary level at least, the high-end private schools are more concerned with promoting English as the number one language of choice demoting Urdu to just a subject. Considering the huge fees they charge parents perhaps this is justifiable but in the long run, one can feel the prejudices simmering in the attitude of even very young children towards their own culture and towards public school goers. Instead of unifying the diversity of this nation and developing respect for each other’s differences, such gimmicks cause rifts poising people against people which is a dangerous trend for the survival of our country.

Summed up beautifully by Maya Angelou, the idea behind educating children should inculcate a humanistic stance best described by her in the following words: “My mother said I must always be intolerant of ignorance but understanding of illiteracy. That some people, unable to go to school, were more educated and more intelligent than college professors.”

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