**Fix the education system**

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The recent controversy over A-level results in Pakistan has stirred up new thinking on education. While most A-level students who sat for their exams earlier this year are likely to retake them in November 2023 as offered by the Cambridge Board, others are more worried about their future, given how the grades affect students’ chances of scoring admission in top-ranking institutions. It is not just students but their parents, teachers and others from various spheres of life who are also now looking at the exam system through a different lens.

Some education specialists believe that Cambridge has changed its exam format to some degree this year – a shift from a mainly rote-based system to something that requires greater thinking and ability to put forward arguments clearly. It is unclear if this is truly the case, but those who have been teaching at schools offering O- and A-level education for years do agree that just like the FSc and matric exams, these exams now promote rote learning; they are now less intellectually demanding of students whose creativity and talent is tested in this. This is something that people are wondering about.

There are now other exams available in the country which can be seen as an alternative to A-level and appear to provide students a greater opportunity to use critical thinking mind and come up with original thought. The idea of education should be to develop in students the ability to think for themselves and go forward from that point on, instead of encouraging them to memorize page after page of text and repeat it verbatim on answer sheets.

Moving away from this could in fact be the critical step needed to alter our education system and make it more meaningful in different ways. At present, especially at the FSc and FA levels – which is the examination system undertaken by most students in the country – we have an extremely high dependence on rote learning. The fact that teachers are not trained to teach, but only to make students learn all lessons by heart, simply exacerbates the problem. We need to move away from this.

In recent months, there has been much discussion over the national curriculum and how to improve it. This can be achieved by simply altering the examination system and setting it up in a way that requires students to think as individuals and not repeat long passages of text as if they were some form of robots, or as ‘parrots’. This is essential to creating capacities which many parents and even teachers do not believe students possess. It is essential then to move away from this system.

The ability of young children to think and come up with answers to complex questions was exhibited earlier this year at a session organized by a private group which offered winners a chance to visit NASA in the US. Students from low-income schools were asked to develop a scientific object of their choice and on their own. The results were fascinating. Teams of young girls and boys worked together and came up with interesting inventions, including making paper from chicken feathers. The winning teams visited NASA in Houston and gained an experience which would not have been available to them had it not been for this effort. Besides this, we have also seen plenty of other examples of students performing extraordinarily well in other tasks at school when they are given a chance to think and come up with original ideas.

This would of course mean some major steps within the educational system, beginning at schools and ideally moving on to higher education perhaps in one or two years at the time. In the first place, teachers will need to be trained to educate children as intelligent beings and not as objects capable of rote learning like a recording machine. To do so, they need to undergo new courses and a new curriculum for government-school teachers as well as a compulsory criterion that teachers at private schools have proper certification.

In addition, parents and children would also need to become accustomed to the new mode of learning and understand that it does indeed constitute education and not just games as many parents believe to be true of exam systems which demand the child lead the way in the educational process. The fact that children everywhere are able to think is a well-established fact, but the problem lies in our failure to allow them the opportunity to do so or to move forward through their wit rather than through memorization.

Indeed the fact that our exam system is based on memorization may be the most basic flaw in our exam system. We do not need a single curriculum; we need a curriculum that has a basic point on which all students must come through – such as standards in Urdu, Maths and ideally the native language of students as well as English at a later point in their education. We also need an education system which has the capacity to introduce tests and exam papers which force students to think and develop their ideas or thoughts, instead of relying on borrowed ones from exam guidebooks, still widely available at all educational stores and at roadside markets everywhere in big cities.

Altering the education system in this manner could be of enormous benefit to children everywhere and also help them develop the skills they would need in the outside world as well as from high learning. It is imperative that we begin putting in place such a system block by block and keep building it up. The results of the A-level exam should act as a reminder of what we need to do. It is hard to believe that the results were affected entirely because exams were suspended in parts of the country by political protests. It seems far more likely that at least a large number of candidates do not have the skills Cambridge seeks in its students.

Our examination and teaching system needs to change so that our students at all levels can move forward and not be held back by our focus on rote learning and the many flaws it brings with it. This has to be our first priority in the education sector so that young people can learn how to think, and we can produce thinkers like Dr Abdus Salam and others, who once made their way to the world’s top centres of research while starting from our government schools.

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