**Happy children**

BY Z U B E I D A M U S T A FA 2022-04-08

LAST week, I went to Lyari to attend the Food and Fun Festival. Organised by the Ilm-o-Hunar School, the event left a positive impression on me as the youth appeared to be enjoying themselves.

Dressed in their Sunday best, they exuded confidence. The performance was delightful but creativity had to substitute for professionalism. Did it really matter, though, if the stage props were improvised and a single microphone was passed around, from actor to actor? Or that the actors were all speaking in Urdu, which the audience fully understood? The themes of the plays were appropriate for the audience. In one play depicting a classroom scene, the students were asked what they aspired to be when they grew up.

For the boys, the choices were lucrative professions such as business. The only girl among them, who had fought her way to school, said she wanted to be a teacher and educate all the children in her community.

What a commendable sentiment! The festival had another positive aspect.

It provided an opportunity for the senior girls to demonstrate their culinary skills by preparing dishes at home and selling them at the stalls set up for visitors. At the event, I realised how challenging it must be to run a community school on a shoestring budget and yet give children a chance to change their lives. Not all of them will emerge as success stories, but none of them is among the 23 million out-of-school children in the country. The credit goes to Mrs Samar Husain, the principal, and her husband, Afsar Husain, the administrator, who are managing the school smoothly for a small family trust. Afsar Sahib, however, feels that more teacher training would certainly enhance the quality of education.

Why can`t we aim for a network of community schools in every low-income area to give every child some education and proficiency in literacy and numeracy all over the country, with the exception of remote areas which only the authorities have the resources to access? Thus a majority of children would be sufficiently educated to lead a decent life. Facilities for vocational training, like Ilm-o-Hunar provides, also help.

The children who become success stories could be mainstreamed into the regular system -something that the AKIED and Indus Resource Centre are trying to do with their non-formal schools.

I`ve been rereading world-renowned social scientist Dr Akhtar Hameed Khan`s book that expounds his philosophy of urban community development. Another book on my reading list is by Dr Maria Montessori, the Italian physician and educationist who formulated her philosophy after extensive observations of the child. Each has somekey principles to offer for the benefit of such a project. The Ilm-o-Hunar School in Lyari seems to be moving in the direction of becoming a model community school.

The foremost principle enunciated by Dr Khan is self-sustainability and that is possible only if there is austerity and zero ostentation. This should be underpinned by transparency in accounts to ensure that dependency on massive, outsized funding, and the possibility of embezzlement, is preempted. Given the limitations of initial access to expertise (in this case teacher training), Dr Khan acl

This approach offers a major advantage and does not challenge the community`s essential cultural practices and norms. It also respects the dignity of the population it serves. It therefore wins acceptance in the community, which is imbued with a sense of public ownership. Changes come from within, and can be led by the community`s own social workers, with wider exposureand mentoring.

They alone enjoy the conndence of the community.

The principles drawn from Dr Montessori`s works are seemingly simplistic but actually quite profound. She perceives the childin the context of the community to which she is closely linked and which provides her protection. What I gather from her writings is that in early childhood, emotional security is crucial to the child`s physical, mental, social and cultural development. Emotional security comes from her bonds with the community, in which communication plays an important role. Hence Montessori`s emphasis on teaching a young child initially in her mother tongue. In multilingual societies we can opt for an indigenous language of the area with which the child is familiar.

Communication is the tool that binds and language is indispensable to it.

A secure child is a happy child. This state of emotional and mental well-being facilitates a child`s learning and thinking process and social adjustment. Happy children are motivated and become self-learners. They do not need the carrot or the stick to induce them to study. For them, learning itself is their reward. So, community schools like Ilm-o-Hunar are serving a purpose. They have a positive role to play in our otherwise barren education system. m www.zubeidamustafa.com