**How we learn**

BY Z U B E I D A M U S T A FA 2021-07-02

A HEFTY sum of over a trillion rupees has been earmarked for education collectively in the federal and provincial budgets for 2021-2022 that were announced in June.

This amount has been growing over the years. But this massive financial investment in human resources has not produced the impact that could have rationally been expected on the learning outcomes of children in Pakistan. This has been confirmed year after year by Aser (Annual Status of Education Report).

Aser 2021 released recently has also recorded the learning losses suf fered during the pandemic lockdown. Its key finding is shocking. In 2019, 22 per cent of Grade 3 children had managed to work out two-digit division sums. This percentage dropped to 12 this year.

The question that comes to mind is whether we are trying to achieve the impossible? The fact of the matter is that we need to be clear about what educating a child really involves and what our aim should be.

Alot of research has been done on this subject and child psychologists agree that children are different from adults in this respect.

Dr Maria Montessori, a well-known name in child education who had studied medicine as well, understands it best.

According to her, the mental and physical development of a child takes place in a natural milieu and if this is encouraged it f acilitates a smooth transition to lifelong learning.

Montessori`s philosophy is very profound and esoteric.

She says that a child does not learn through a process of knowledge being transmitted from a teacher to the student as our conventional system seeks to do but fails.

Actually, a child learns through her own experience that is initially limited to her immediate surroundings. Her sensory perceptions facilitate the child`s learning process. Vision, hearing and the tactile senses are important in this growth while her movement helps the development of the brain and the growth of neurons. The role of language is vital to this growth process which is accompanied by the child`s cognitive development symbiotically.

In this period, that generally lasts until the age of six, the child is familiarising herself with and adapting to her environment.

This forms the basis of a sound education and ensures that the child grows up to be a well-adjusted adult.

Our schools are regrettably not providing this opportunity to children. They militate against a child`s learning in the name of discipline and raising the level and pace of learning. They have textbooks full of abstract concepts beyond her understanding.Aboveall,astrangelanguageisimposedon her that she cannot comprehend. This creates a sense of insecurity and confusion in her.

A lot of this learning will come later but only when the child has developed physically, mentally, emotionally and cognitively and the time is appropriate for it.

Yet educationists and parents are always in a hurry to push the child rather than let her move at her own pace. This pressure does a lot of harm to the child as does the emotional abuse and corporal punishment that children are subjected to in schools, madressahs and even in homes. Violence impairs their security and retards their learning.

Books, if correctly graded and age appropriate can, become a great asset for enhancing a child`s learning experience. That is why I believe the Pakistan Learning Festival is a valuable exercise that must be supported. It focuses on books and stories which are the best way of entertaining a child while giving her experience of the familiar.

A happy child is a child who learns. The PLFdoes what our education system does not do. It restores the joy of childhood to the child though only for two days at a time.

Another learning experience that stunned me took place at Karachi`s Koohi Goth Women`s Hospitalfounded by Dr Shershah Syed who has spent a lifetime serving women and motivating them to uplift themselves. I was there recently to attend the certification ceremony of 24 young women who had completed the six-month `Hunarmand` course. By providing them training in home nursing, kitchen gardening, first aid, basic language skills and social etiquette, this course had transformed the lives of students. One of them put it succinctly. `I was nothing but now I am something.` Having met them at Koohi Goth, I can testify to their confidence and their ability to articulate their thoughts.

Noorus Sabah, the course coordinator, an MA in Zoology from the Shah Abdul Latif University, Khairpur, is herself an inspiring figure who crossed many hurdles to become a role model for others.

This is what I call true learning which many university students are deprived of. It is time our educators picked up ideas from various events that should be a learning experience for them. Even a small beginning could lead to the change we are hoping for. m www.zubeidamustafa.com