**Humanising school based education**

BY AY E S H A M E H K E R I 2021-03-12

EVERY year, a few million wide-eyed five-yearolds across the country eagerly or begrudgingly take their first steps in the institution in which they are expected to spend a large part of the next decade. An institution that is fundamentally designed to help them learn. But does the education system consider the question of whether what and how they learn is centred on fulfilling their basic human needs? While local and international assessments indicate that a large part of Pakistan`s young population is struggling, policy interventions have traditionally focused on raising academic achievement through increasingly rigorous standards and assessment measures. They have given impetus to the argument for preparing students to pass exams instead of focusing on learning and well-being, perhaps paradoxically contributing to our stagnated academic outcomes.

And yet, the status quo continues to prevail.

Sitting through a lesson in a public school classroom, it is not hard to surmise that not much of significance is happening. Five hours a day, year af ter year, children sit in one place from one gruelling period to another, passively listening to or dutifully parroting their teacher, wearily bent over their textbooks, and for the most part, rehearsing for a f ate-determining exam.

Not many will disagree with the proposition that the purpose of school-based education should not be to produce a conveyor belt of students who score well on their exams based on memorised knowledge of isolated facts. Education should not aim to create yes-men trained to go through the regimented norms of standing or sitting in military line formations showing unquestioning deference, or produce conformists unprepared for life after school. Or create spaces where children are made to collectively leap up and sing out a protracted greeting in front of an authority figure, recite rotememorised text on demand, or be verbally or physically assailed for f ailure all seemingly part of an antiquated view of schooling, centred on archaic ways of exhibiting respect, order and discipline.

In 2019, when I asked parents across rural Punjab and Sindh about their hopes and aspirations for their school-going children, most said one of two things: `parha likha ho` (be literate) and `acha insaan baney` (become a good human being).

The former is understandable. One needs literacy skills and intellectual knowledge, coupled with theability to think, reflect and reason in order to advance in life. The latter is critical for a more humane world and a more content life but is conspicuous by its absence in our schools.

Both can be connected and embedded in instruction, assessment and school structures to help children become kind, capable, conscientious human beings, who are civic-minded and socially adept, and able to solve problems, persevere in the face of challenges, thrive in a rapidly changing, polarised world and lead happy, healthy, self-ful-filled lives. And an essential first step towards this goal is to redesign and humanise schooling. A human-centred approach sees children not as passive beings to be transfused with knowledge but individuals with unique needs, interests and experiences valuable for knowledge creation; human beings to be guided with care, respect and encouragement and not be subjected to fear of authority.

Humanising or student-centred instruction, backed by decades of research, sees the child as an active member of the learning process that entails a range of skills and knowledge indispensable to future adults in their personal and professional lives, and meaningful in their childhood. Teachers must engage children in `hands-on` experiential, inquiry-based and interdisciplinary learning, reflection and dialogue; and children must experience joy and derive meaning and real-world relevance from the content they are taught.

To support this pedagogy (empirically proven to boost learning outcomes and retention), learning spaces must be flexible and allow for cooperative learning, where students can move, see and interact with each other instead of being stationed at their desks all in one direction. And for learning to bemeaningful, we must engage the child in the language they are most comfortable speaking in, while incorporating additionallanguagesgradually.

A 10-minute drive away from the Kartarpur Corridor, in a small two-room public school adopted by the education non-profit, The Citizens Foundation, teachers begin the day with an informal sit-down with their students. This is an opportunity for them to discuss how they feel and have a face-to-face conversation on what`s on their mind, what challenges they have been experiencing and how they can help each other through them. This is an acknowledgement from the teacher that the children she teaches are human beings with social and emotional needs and deserve to be treated as such.

Awealthof globalevidenceindicates thattoimprove teacher-student relationships, well-being and academic achievement,itis criticaltoincorporateinterventions targeted at fostering socio-emotional competence including skills such as empathy, self-regulation and communication) during the school day.

And finally, we must reconsider our visceral attachment to high-stakes assessments. These are demonstrably anxiety-inducing and demotivating, and force schools to adopt a solely mechanical focus on test preparation. And, based on evidence, as educationist Alfie Kohn says, these have `approximately the same ef fect on learning that a noose has on breathing`. A more humane approach would insist on assessments being predominantly diagnostic to tell us where the child needs support and meaningful feedback, and help us adapt instruction to better assist them. And instead of testing mere recall and a superficial understanding of facts, it is imperative to focus more on skills such as critical and reflective thinking through year-round measures including projects and work portfolios.

Ultimately, if we want to see children succeed in and outside school, ensure their well-being, help instil good values, and help build a more humane world, we must acknowledge, support and respect them as real human beings. In this way, instead of a vehement focus on academic achievement, parents, schools and policy experts can prioritise child welfare, both current and future, and help bring play, meaning, joy and laughter into our schools where they belong.  The writer is involved in the non-profit education sector.

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