**Improving learning**

BY FA I S A L B A R I 2022-02-18

JAVED and Shumaila are worried. They are not sure what to do. Their daughter, Zoha, enrolled in Grade 3 in a medium-fee private school, is struggling to keep up with her work. Zoha`s teachers and the head teacher have expressed some concerns about her slower progress a number of times. Javed and Shumaila have started helping Zoha more.

They are also thinking of getting her a tutor, but they are worried too. Zoha already spends a lot of time studying and trying to keep up, and Javed/ Shumaila have already added a bit to study time. If Zoha gets a tutor as well, in addition to the lady who already comes every day to help Zoha read the Quran, Zoha would have no time left for play, television and relaxation. Javed and Shumaila are already seeing some personality changes in Zoha that they do not like. She is becoming quieter and does not seem to be as happy as she used to be even six months ago.

Like many lowto middle-income countries, there is a learning crisis in Pakistan. Assessment data for children at various stages of schooling clearly shows that most of our children have significantly lower levels of learning compared to children of the same age in many other countries as well as compared to standards that we expect children of particular ages to have achieved. The World Bank has termed this as `learning poverty`: a child is `learning poor` whether she is in school or out of school, and is not reaching a particular level of learning/ skill that is expected of her. Learning poverty, in Pakistan, even for basic literacy and numeracy skills that are expected to be acquired in the early grades, is quite high.

Despite all reforms that have happened over the last few decades, and there has been a lot of reform, most schools in Pakistan do a poor job of teaching.

Our assessments show this. Many schools have poor infrastructure and lack facilities. Many still do not have the required number of teachers, and in too many schools the teaching/ learning thathappens, when it does, is not of an acceptable standard. Too many teachers still lack content knowledge, pedagogy skills and the motivation to teach; for too many teachers, teaching is just the job of last resort.

Child preparation for schooling is low in Pakistan too. Given our poverty levels, too many children come to Grade 1 without early grade exposure; too many children have little or no support from home in their early years; and far too many children come from households with limited capacity to support the education process in later years as well.

But changing home circumstances is not easy and requires much larger and deeper societal change and action.

Child abilities vary as well. But clearly it is not child ability differences that are driving learning poverty in Pakistan. It is the ineffectiveness of the system that seems to be more at fault. If teachers have raised red flags, Javed and Shumaila should consult experts for Zoha as 10-12 per cent of any child population has challenges that require specific interventions. Another friend`s child had difficulty learning mathematics. Eventually, when experts were consulted, we found that the child had dyscalculia. But most cases of learning poverty are not due to child ability differences. I am not an expert in the area but my interactions with Zoha have not given me any cause for concern. My feeling has always been that she needs better learning and coping techniques as the pressure to learn gets too much at times. She is not alone here; a lot of parents complain of the heavy load literally in terms of the bags children take to school and learning expec..

tations as well that we expect our children to carry. This is not fair and right, nor is it advisable.

There is literature for developing countries that argues that sometimes we try to teach too much, too fast and too early. Teaching at the right level and teaching at the right pace are important for more effective learning and for child health anddevelopment. But in our effort to ensure that our children do well and can compete, we forget they are children.

There have been complaints about related issues in the Single National Curriculum too. Parents and teachers have complained at times about the difficulty of language used in the early grades as well as the difficulty of concepts and content. Some complaints have also been about textbooks having too much to teach. The good thing is that SNC for Grades 6-8 is being finalised, and the curriculum/ textbooks for Grades 1-5 have been under review for some time. This is the time complaints about difficulty of content, concepts and language should also be reviewed. Learning is hard work and needs a lot of effort. But it does not need to be a process that breaks the spirit of our children or puts unhealthy levels of pressure on them.

Every child, I repeat, every child, irrespective of anything else and by virtue of being a child, has the right to have access to quality education. This has been signed on by Pakistan through various international declarations and it is part of the basic rights section of our Constitution as well (Article 25A). We have not been able to give this right to millions as yet. But even for the millions who are in school, we are not ensuring quality education for each child and most of our children are `learning poor`. We cannot do much about household differences across children but ensuring better child preparation, effective teaching/ learning in school and a more nuanced view of the learning process to ensure learning at the right level and pace can help our children learn more and grow and prosper through the process. Learning should not be a process that sets up children for unhealthy trials and, for many, even failure. m The writer is a senior research fellow at the institute of Development and Economic Alternatives, and an associate professor of economics at Lums.