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*“Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed.”*

THESE words, from the preamble of Unesco’s constitution, offer hope to educators around the world in testing times. As an educator, I cannot afford to lose hope, even when I witness the appalling incidents of violent extremism linked to university campuses and involving highly educated young people in the country. Last year’s suicide bombing by 31-year-old Shari Baloch, an MPhil graduate and mother of two was the latest incident of violence involving highly educated people. Earlier, we witnessed the murder of Sabeen Mahmud by a graduate of a top business school in Pakistan, the killing of Mashal Khan on campus and the terrorist network Ansarul Sharia operating on university premises and led by a Master’s degree-holder in applied physics.

Violent extremism among the highly educated is not a new phenomenon, nor is it specific to Pakistan. A study, published by Princeton University Press and titled Engineers of Jihad: The Curious Connection between Violent Extremism and Education explores the profiles of young people involved in terrorist activities around the world and finds a large number of qualified engineers among them. The study finds that almost half of the ‘jihadists’ recruited within the MENA region had received higher education.

My concerns as a teacher who has taught university students for many years in Pakistan focus on the following: a) what is it that we call extremism or violent extremism? b) what is it in education that can counter or prevent extremism?

To combat extremism through education we need deeper introspection.

First, violent extremism and the terminology around this phenomenon is considered complex and widely debated. These terms are seldom defined clearly in policy documents. Unesco defines extremism as “attitudes or behaviours that are deemed outside the norm”. It acknowledges, however, that this definition is inherently subjective as it can take on different meanings, depending on who defines the norm and decides what is or is not acceptable. For clarity, I use the following definition of extremism offered by Desmond Tutu: “… when you do not allow for a different point of view; when you hold your own views as being quite exclusive; when you don’t allow for the possibility of difference”. This is what I see as the problem.

This definition gives us a clue as to how education can be used to prevent or counter extremism. If extremism is understood as the closing of minds to the possibility of difference, preventing or countering extremism should entail doing the opposite, which is opening minds to the possibility of difference. It means education can prevent or counter extremism when it fosters respect for difference and encourages open critical thinking that questions preconceived ideas. It is not education in general, but critical thinking, critical consciousness and reflexivity that prevent or counter extremism.

Hence, to combat extremism through education we require deeper introspection on the purpose of education. We need to ask if the purpose of education is “learning to fit in the world as it is” or “learning to transform the world as it should be”; do we wish education to teach conformity to students or do we wish to nourish their independent critical thinking? It is education of the latter type rather than the former, which may effectively counter extremism on campus. If young minds have legitimate ways of questioning, challenging and transforming oppression in the real world, if education provides them ample opportunity to challenge domination, they would not support violence to achieve their goals.

This is where I see the promise of critical pedagogy to counter extremism. Criti­cal pedagogy represents a wide range of teaching practices that take inspiration from the philosophy of Paulo Fre­ire, a Brazi­lian philosopher who envisioned classrooms as sites of social change. It argues that suffering is a humanly constructed phenomenon and can be alleviated through collective action. It is precisely the kind of education that gives a sense of purpose and empowers students to make a positive change in the real world through peaceful means.

Countering extremism through education entails fostering critical consciousness by promoting pedagogies of freedom. It involves nurturing minds, instead of controlling minds, developing thinking, instead of restricting thinking, empowering students, instead of controlling students. Extremist ideologies lose their appeal when education allows young minds to think freely and inspire social change. Here lies the promise of education. To be effective, counter-extremism policies must aim to teach young people how to think rather than what to think.

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