[**School experience**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1714236/school-experience)

[Neda Mulji](https://www.dawn.com/authors/8398/neda-mulji) Published October 9, 2022 Updated a day ago

The writer is senior manager, professional development, at Oxford University Press Pakistan and a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, UK.

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MOST of us were students once upon a time and harbour some great memories and some that we would rather forget. Teachers often try to enhance their students’ experience and provide better treatment than was meted out to them. Yet, we hear how schools have deteriorated in stature, quality and performance.

There is much debate about why students have regressed. Some say it’s due to a plethora of distractions; others blame schools for becoming lax in implementing quality teaching methods. Whatever the reason, whilst many schools have access to better facilities, quality education is now a rare find.

What has gone wrong and what can schools do to transform their students’ learning experience?

If we focus on the list of disadvantages faced by schools, a lack of equipment and digital facilities, noisy environments — what with the excessive honking on our roads — high teacher turnover and large classes top the list of difficulties. However, none of these can and should stop great teachers from giving their students a memorable learning experience. We all have moments of school life that we’d rather forget but a general nostalgia for well-spent years at school usually stays embedded in our personalities.

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What makes a school experience memorable? Many adults describe it as a place of belonging and identity, a place where students find acceptance, camaraderie and comfort. A sense of identity is essential for students to feel pride in upholding the values of the school. It comes not only from the students but also the school leadership, and essentially teachers who embody the spirit and ethos of the school and have used their expertise to inculcate it in their students. The values stay with the students well beyond their academic life.

What can be done to transform learning outcomes?

Where once the school was the students’ only communal space for meaningful relationships and shared values, we now have a third space in the digital arena where students escape for a sense of belonging.

Video-gaming communities are one such example, virtual sporting communities are another. The school experience, as a result, has become fragmented creating the need for more concerted effort to retain students’ interest and emotional involvement in school life.

A school with a high teacher turnover naturally becomes bereft of such opportunities and, as a result, many schools have struggled to retain some of their best teachers. In fact, in the current climate of digital migration, teachers can easily find earning opportunities elsewhere.

As teachers continue to grapple with learning gaps, academic work takes priority. Whilst this may be the ultimate goal and the main benchmark that schools are judged on, the aim could be approached with an inside-out strategy focusing first on student experience as that is directly correlated to their performance. Faltering academic performance, erratic grades and demotivation are usually preceded by emotional or social disengagement from school life. To contain a problem like that, students’ school life needs to be monitored by the management, and teachers with their decades of experience. Various forms of pastoral care can be used to take disengaged or disgruntled students into the fold.

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Historically, schools have succeeded in enhancing their students’ experience by enabling them to try out new things that may help uncover their gifts and talents. Student learning communities also find strength and encouragement in opportunities for collaborative decision-making that stimulates complex thinking processes, such as an interior décor project for the classroom or school hall.

Introducing new tools at each level has been shown to improve learning outcomes by as much as 77 per cent in the first two months. The reason? Improvement in engag­ement as the cycle of monotony is broken. The tools need not be digital; they can be homemade board games, brain teasers, manipulatives or just role play. In fact, anything that can make students fall in love with the subject will develop a level of curiosity that acts as a springboard for their academic success.

However, not all learning takes place in the classroom. Whilst teachers may be working hard towards student learning outcomes, there is a critical aspect of student life playing out in the field during recess and after school hours. Fairness and inclusiveness, social engagement and opportunities for play outside of the classroom can create a sense of belonging that can make or break their experience at school. That experience determines whether the child gets out of bed motivated to face another day or switches off to a world of escapism and procrastination, not being able to grapple with the daily grind. The signs and symptoms are obvious to those who keep a close eye on children’s well-being.

*The writer is senior manager, professional development, at Oxford University Press Pakistan and a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, UK.*
[neda.mulji@gmail.com](http://mailto:neda.mulji@gmail.com) **Twitter**: [@nedamulji](https://twitter.com/nedamulji)

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