**Second chance education for youth**

On **Jul 22, 2022** [Atle Hetland](https://nation.com.pk/authorpost/columnist/atle-hetland/)

Debates about education and learning are never-ending issues, also now during school holidays. Education commissions, specialists, and politicians talk about what we should do. Alas, they rarely come up with alternatives and exciting ideas, just more of the same. Today, I shall draw attention to ‘second chance’ education and training for youth and adults, and some basic principles about education.
In our time, there are many ways of providing education, not the least with the use of distance education, e-learning, and other modern technology. We had some of it before, too, called correspondence courses. In my youth, 40-50 years ago, we added local groups, called ‘study circles’, to the correspondence courses. It was similar to today’s e-learning, but we received the material by post, and send our answers and questions by post back to the correspondence institute. Let me underline the importance of the study circles, making the learning process less individual and lonely. I believe that education is never complete unless we can discuss with other learners, a teacher, or a group leader, such as in the ‘study circle’. This we recently realized during the corona pandemic when so many schools and universities were closed and students felt very lonely since they could just ‘talk to the computer’, even if a teacher was at the other end.
Before I go on, let me refer back to last week’s article, which was mainly about basic education in schools. I underlined that we have gone astray and made a stressful school in almost all countries, also in Pakistan’s competitive middle-class schools, mainly only alright for the academically and bookish oriented students. I said last week that the school should be a pleasant place to be, liked by all children. Since children are curious about discovering and learning, also practical things, the school must let all this creativity develop. Also, the school must be a place where the children learn to care for others, working in groups and individually. The school must teach good values, critical thinking, how to find and evaluate information, and how to master one’s life. The latter is certainly important since all at some stages in life face problems, some even serious social and mental challenges, and physical illnesses. If children can learn at school that each of them is valuable and they can feel self-confident, we will get a better world for them and the rest of us.
I discussed some of these issues with a Pakistani university professor, Dr. M. Ali Nawaz, who is now teaching in Qatar, on leave from Quaid-i-Azam University, having his degrees from Pakistan, Norway, and the USA. He drew attention to the importance of understanding how students learn, using his teenage children as examples. He said that it is better if students at schools, colleges, and universities are allowed to learn at their own pace, often working on projects, that some would complete quickly, others needing more time, and some sometimes branching off into aspects they were particularly interested in. Not all learning content can be organized that way, but many things can, and through such learning, the knowledge, skills, and values that the learners obtain would be internalized in each learner; each learner would feel ownership of what they learn, in groups and individually, and they would feel pleasure about the process and results, wanting to learn more later, key aims of all education.
Let me now go back to the second chance education for youth and adult education, which I started writing about today. In Pakistan, there are many young people, both boys, and girls, who never had the opportunity to attend school, or they dropped out very early. For such youth, there is a need for a second chance to learn literacy and other basic knowledge, skills, and values. Even more than for children, youth and adults must be given an education that is ‘functional’, notably that it is relevant and useful to their lives, and so that it is directly useful for them. Courses and education campaigns for youth should emphasize being functional. Then laborers and others, also jobless, would be attracted to attending. Women, housewives, and others must certainly be included.
The second chance education I have in mind should be organized by all kinds of organizations, with a national campaign flair to it, say over some years to pick up the backlog of people who have been deprived of basic education. The state (government) should play the lead and coordinating role.
An earlier article referred to Tanzania’s successful literacy and general knowledge campaigns in the 1970s, with support from donors like Canada, Sweden, and others. Also, Somalia and Ethiopia did well in adult education at that time. They involved employers, labor unions, NGOs, political parties, religious organizations, sports clubs, and so on. Ordinary schools and teachers were important, but it went much broader than those.
In Pakistan, many unemployed young people have graduated from universities, colleges, secondary schools, and primary schools, who could be involved as teachers and coordinators of the second chance education I am talking about. In our time, it is not only radio and TV that can be used to provide material but also the Internet, mobile phones, and other media. Core books and booklets must be made available because soft versions of material are not enough. To learn to read and write requires pen and paper, pamphlets, and booklets. No, I don’t think all learning material should be pre-prepared as can so easily be done with all the technology we have nowadays. I believe that much of the content depends on what the learners want and need to learn, diversified and connected to various occupations, geographic locations of the towns and communities, and so on.
At this stage, we cannot be too detailed about how the education campaigns should be organized. First, political and professional leadership must be formed, with the definition of aims and goals. Then the implementers and organizers come on the scene as representatives of the future learners.
Let me underline that we must not be made to believe that to do this, to make Pakistan literate, skilled, and educated, is all that complicated. It is not. Tanzania did well 40-50 years ago, well, with some mistakes and shortcomings. Pakistan can do it better today. But there must first be a vision and will. Tanzania had that. Pakistan must get it. Education for all must be brought to the top of the agenda. That goes for schools and second chance education for youth and adults.
Second chance education should be seen as a right for all who were not included as children. That was unfair and they are deprived of a better life with better opportunities. The country is also not benefitting from the intelligence, skills, and potential of so many people who have been left outside the mainstream because they were not given the education and skills they need to contribute. There is urgency in the matter. We cannot wait till the school children of today graduate and enter the workforce and adult life. Many of them, too, don’t go to school. We must enroll all children in schools with relevant curricula. And we must give a second chance to those who have missed out, the youth and adults, who are full of energy and potential, eager to develop their country and communities.