[**Unpacking education**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1662965/unpacking-education)

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WHENEVER there is an event that shocks us — the lynching of Mashal Khan, the murders of the two brothers in Sialkot, the [gruesome killing](https://www.dawn.com/news/1661878/ghastly-murder-of-lankan-man-in-sialkot-shames-nation) of Priyantha Kumara, and even the events that happened at Minar-i-Pakistan — one of the first reactions from people is that education has failed us.

But immediately, perhaps in the same conversation, there is also a demand that education should be doing more. It is only through education that we would be able to reduce, control or eliminate such behaviour. This may appear to be a bit of a paradox. But it is not. It is true education is important. But its content and how this content is taught are important too. This is where we need to unpack things.

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For instance, the Single National Curriculum includes nazra and a commitment has been made to include Seerat-un-Nabi (PBUH). Their study, it has been said, even by the prime minister, will help children become better human beings.

There is still some debate regarding our decision to make Islamiat and Pakistan Studies compulsory some decades ago. Was it thought that since everyone should know the basic facts about the country or articles of faith, making these subjects compulsory would ensure that this objective would be achieved? Did our decision-makers believe that making these subjects compulsory would impact identity formation too, making it easier for the state to mould young Pakistani minds by exposing them to a particular vision of the country and religion? And that this would, in turn, make people stronger or better Pakistanis and Muslims?

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How should we look for empirical evidence for this? The problem is that there has been so much that has happened in other spheres that it is hard to know what should or should not be attributed to the changes in education. But, clearly, things have not improved as policymakers may have expected. We do not have ‘better’ Pakistanis and Muslims today than we did in the 1980s and 1990s. This might, though, largely be attributable to the much larger global changes that have happened in the region in which Pakistan is situated than what might have been happening in the realm of education alone. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan changed a lot of things in Pakistan: the inflow of arms and US money, the import of ideology from Saudi Arabia, the creation of the mujahideen, the Afghan war, drug trade, the decimation of Afghan society, the refugee problem, and so much more. And then came 9/11 and the ‘war on terror’. How do we assess the exact impact of making Islamiat and Pakistan Studies compulsory when there are so many other factors to consider?

If an untoward incident happens, adding a course on ethics might not be the most appropriate way to address the issue. This observation may extend to increasing content in the subjects under discussion if morals are not where we think they should be. If Pakistani children are not ‘good ‘Muslims’, simply adding to existing content in education may not prove to be the solution.

There are many reasons for this. It is not that educational content has no impact. Clearly it does. This is what education is about. Content shapes minds, determines knowledge and understanding and hence gives form to identities and basic beliefs. No one is denying that and there is no way we can deny the importance of education or the importance of content in education as there is a lot of empirical evidence on learning and connections regarding content.

The issues are different. There are limits to how much a child can take: according to their age, ability and prior learning levels. Burdening a child, in terms of more content per subject and the number of subjects that a child reads, does not necessarily improve learning, understanding and knowledge. There is some literature that already argues that we, especially in South Asia, are putting too much pressure on our children. What effect will adding more content and more subjects in such a situation have?

Literature also shows that the teacher makes a large difference in learning. How a teacher teaches, how she engages with students, makes the content engaging, interacts with her pupils and encourages them, explains content or makes the latter relevant in the context of the students’ reality and understanding levels are crucial. If the teachers teach poorly, which we know is the case for the vast majority of schools in Pakistan, a change in content will not impact anything.

We also know student learning is better when students engage with the content more, can question things, critically examine what is being taught and so on. But many teachers would not think of critical engagement in the subjects under review. And in most schools they are not taught that way either. I remember my own experience: I learnt a lot of the Pakistan Studies course just so that I could reproduce it (rote learning) for examination purposes and get it over with.

So, if this is what added content is going to do, how is this going to make us better Pakistanis/Muslims and how will it address the social issues that we want education to address? And I have not talked of the manipulation of content at all. But that too, when conservative and even extremist views are already a part of the mainstream, can be an issue.

So, without thinking things through, will we be making the same mistakes we have made many times before? It seems so. But it is worse. As has been said, we never step in the same river twice. Every time we fail we increase stakes for the next intervention and reduce the probability of success. Are we willing to take a chance again or is it time to have a deeper rethink before we change things?

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