[**Upskilling teachers**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1764775/upskilling-teachers)

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FOR decades after independence, schools in Pakistan ‘imported’ education in the form of skilled and experienced teachers from other countries. It was not just the privileged schools but, across the board, schools had access to skilled teachers at a time when it was still safe and feasible for foreigners to live in Pakistan. The Middle East has, for very long, also followed this model successfully to improve the provision of education for its residents, particularly for diverse curricular needs. Across Pakistan, we now have about 15 examination boards that cater to vast differences in curriculum, academic targets and skills. However, we don’t have all teachers specifically trained to deliver the curriculum, actively monitor the success of students and mentor those who fall behind.

The irony is that we continue in the same vein although we now have more opportunities to learn from global experts. There are free courses that teachers can access for their professional development, as well as paid e-learning degrees. However, knowing where to look and how to select what is required for job progression is a battle for teachers who have not been taught the necessary digital skills. This is why they continue to resist the local online training available, choosing instead to undertake in-person teacher-lead training.

For decades, many of our educators and students have been numbed into the belief that teaching is about delivery of content rather than a journey of curiosity, exploration and discovery. Many will argue that their students cannot get good grades without rote learning when, in fact, skilled teachers can use retention strategies successfully during lesson time. During lesson time, however, we skip essential steps — the necessary 21st-century learning skills that develop our students’ critical thinking, problem-solving, and creative ability.

In a recent discussion with a teacher who has more than three decades of classroom experience, I was told that teachers simply don’t know or understand 21st-century pedagogy. Without formal training and teacher licensing, schools are mostly rudderless ships following the units of the textbook in a race to cover content in time for exams. A textbook can be a treasure house, but only if used by skilled teachers.

Teachers are not taught the necessary digital skills.

In the absence of skilled teachers, students are left to struggle to understand concepts, which results in frustration and feelings of incompetence. This ad hoc system of ‘surviving’ school life can hardly promise a holistic education. A school is a place where students are sent to thrive, not merely survive the system.

Many students know how to use digital tools and create content that they share far and wide, but they still don’t produce anything deep or concrete. What we produce as a nation depends on what we have cultivated — the thinking process determines the outcome. If we don’t upgrade our own skills as educators, we end up allowing the ‘dumbing down’ of society, something we can’t really afford as the fifth most populous nation-state in the world. The most dramatic consequences of decades of compromising on quality may be future generations that have to borrow content for businesses and outsource skills for lack of in-house expertise.

From our carpenters and plumbers to our doctors and engineers, we are hard-pressed to find the quality of knowledge and expertise that we were once proud of. Apprentices don’t have experts to learn from; students don’t get enough academic support in school; university graduates walk away with degrees that don’t land them jobs.

Of course, there are top-notch Pakistani universities that are worth their salt, but we don’t have enough of these to serve our large population. We no longer have the talent or resources to rebuild our education sector with homegrown expertise.

For those who are committed to the profession, there are many avenues to learn from but, sadly, there are no shortcuts to developing skills. Reflection and collaboration may be a good place to start, followed by assessing teachers and developing action plans that can bring change. Teachers require a solution-focused approach to teaching — training to learn new classroom strategies and a system of continuously assessing and monitoring their subject knowledge. Eventually, upgrading skills and self-learning may result in massive benefits for our students.

The tragedy of our education landscape is that “the roads may keep on changing but the song remains the same” -- to borrow words from a popular music band. Changing roads need new strategies as skills for the future cannot be taught by age-old methods that were developed for another time.

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