**[Why de-school?](https://www.dawn.com/news/1706867/why-de-school)**

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WILL Ali Akbar Hashmi’s hard-hitting speech in the National Assembly on Independence Day cause our parliamentarians to rethink education in Pakistan? Hashmi is a student who shed light on the plight of out-of-school children living in poverty.

Earlier, Dr Al Karim Datoo, an anthropologist in education, had written in this paper about the marginalised children in Pakistan. According to him, the school that was supposedly the solution has become the problem itself.

At present, we have about 200,000 schools in Pakistan that impart education to about 37.5 million children. According to Unesco, another 23m children are out of school. But it is believed that the figure is higher given the large number of dropouts during the Covid lockdown. More importantly, not all our ‘enrolled’ children are receiving a decent education. In some instances, out-of-school children display better numeracy, spatial intelligence and interpersonal skills than their school-going compatriots, as Dr Datoo confirms. Such children learn from their rough-and-tumble life on the street.

Public-sector schools are for the poor and the service they provide is also poor. Small wonder education has made no impact whatsoever on society at large. That leaves the private sector to shoulder the responsibility of educating Pakistan. Its capacity is limited as the low-fee institutions run by NGOs and private individuals generally do not boast of a high standard of education.

The guiding principles of child centres will set them apart from schools.

Instead of looking for feasible solutions, our education bosses continue to make futile attempts at cosmetic changes. Dr Datoo is spot on when he identifies the problematic issue as being our education system being too school-centric. There is a disconnect between the child living in poverty and the demands of our schooling system. Therefore, he suggests that alternative approaches be considered. I would add that new methods should also be tried where an existing school is proving to be a total failure. A new approach may succeed beyond expectation.

The government is not willing to relinquish its monopolistic control over education that is possible only through a rigid school system. No alternatives are acceptable to it.

The fact is that there are many methods of teaching and learning without putting the child through the rigours of the present system. It has also been established that a child learns best when she is exposed to knowledge informally.

Instead of schools, I envisage ‘child centres’ located near the habitats of poor communities to make them accessible to their children. Such a centre should have sufficient open space and a few large rooms and essential amenities including water, electricity, etc. The staff should be trained in early childhood education but use unconventional methods. They will be carers and will facilitate the child’s learning by encouraging her to discover her own ‘knowledge and potential’. For that, educational tools such as educative toys, posters, books, writing material and communication technology should be available.

The aim should be to ensure that children gain competence in the three R’s and acquire basic skills in computer use. Above all, the idea is to motivate children to develop their self-learning instinct and cultivate the book-reading habit.

The basic guiding principles of the child centres will set them apart from the schools. Freedom from the tight discipline enforced in our schools would mean no timetable, no study plans and the choice being left to each child to work for as long as she wants to. The centres will provide an environment of love and emotional security. It will welcome children of any age between four and 12 years and they will work in mixed age groups. Each child will have the freedom to choose the ‘work’ she wants to do and for how long, singly or in a group.

The child centre will have its timings but the child can come and go as she wishes. Informal learning opportunities should be there in abundance in the form of book fairs, street theatres, storytelling and science stalls. To state the obvious, the language of the centre and its activities will be the language of the environment of its locality which the child understands.

What next? The child who is enrolled in such a centre would ‘graduate’ at age 12 without being required to pass an exam. Then it is the family’s decision to mainstream her or not. To keep the doors open for all children to enter a secondary school, the authorities must devise a process. Thus a wide range of choices will be available to the children. Many may not even want to enter the formal school system. Does that matter? They would not be any worse off than what they are today as rag-pickers. The child centre experience will enrich their lives and make them better citizens tomorrow than what they are today.

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