

Lessons in education for the future

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A new school year has just started. We all say that education is important, and we are upset that Pakistan spends so little public money on it. But we are happy that a new plan has recently been released, intending to get five more million children in school by 2016, just a year after the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have left us behind.

Yet, when was it last that we thought hard about what education really is? What should children, youth and even adults learn in school, college, university and other institutions and organizations? Although that too is sometimes also important, education is much more; it is about learning to think, analyze, understand, and so on, and finding new solutions to problems that we have today and such that we don't even know about, but which will have to be solved tomorrow, by those who go to school today.

Key lessons in education for the future were given in the prestigious 'Delores Report' in 1996, named after its chair Jacques Delores. The full title is *'Learning: The Treasure Within'*, which was a report to UNESCO of the International Commission for the Twenty-first Century. Yes, it is philosophical study, discussing principles and foundations of education. But this report is useful and practical, and it is not outdated; not all UN reports can boast of being relevant 15-20 years after they were written!

The Delores Report underlines four much cited pillars of education for the future: Learning to know; learning to do; learning to live together; and learning to be. But, alas, we seem not to like to explore complicated issues which require us to think hard about what we have done in the past, including admitting mistakes that we have made. And more importantly, find new ways that can take us forward in the future, leading us along new and unknown paths.

Earlier this week, the parliamentary elections in my home country Norway were held. The Labour Party Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg lost after having been in power for eight years. Erna Solberg from the Conservative Party will take over. She is expected to do well in many fields, but as for my topic today, I am not afraid that the Conservative Party is not quite right for the job, neither in Norway nor anywhere else in the world. They are two one-eyed supporters of what they call the 'knowledge school', with emphasis on science subjects and measurable curriculum. They want tests and grades from quite early in the compulsory primary school, in line with what many technocrats in Europe also want now-a-days. But we need a broad-based, all-inclusive and rounded form of education for all. Facts and data are often temporary. It is a waste of time to try to learn things that are outdated tomorrow.

Special education must be given more attention since many children have special needs, something which Norway's new PM knows, too, since she was diagnosed with visual dyslexia at the age of 16; it is a common disorder in many children. In Pakistan, such handicaps may never be discovered and no assistance given to the otherwise gifted students. Do you think Erna Solberg would have had a chance? In addition, she comes from a lower middle-class background.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) is made up of the world's 34 wealthiest countries and it has a special programme measuring how well teenagers do at school. It is called Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), organizing tests to measure what the teenagers know in math, science and the mother tongue. The older organization, International Association for the Evaluation of Education Achievement (IEA) and its programme with the acronym

TIMSS, has similar tests. Students with reading disorders and other handicaps would not score well on such tests – and they would not be seen as PM caliber! Interesting, the father of the outgoing PM, who was also a top politician, also had dyslexia. He was a great politician, but the PISA tests would never have discovered that.

In the Nordic countries, not least in Norway, politicians and educationists, get worried if the country doesn't score among the top ten, or rather, the top five, on the PISA tests. Often, Finland has scored higher than Norway, making politicians say that the Norwegian school system is poor, although it is amongst the best in the world, after all. But I should add, too, that the Finns are doing well, as well as South Korea and other countries on international tests. But in South Korea children are drilled hard in an extremely competitive school system, with regular school-day plus evening classes and private coaching, sometimes till midnight; which is also not uncommon in other countries, especially in low and middle-income countries. Children are kept like broilers with little time for games and play. It may sometimes be worse than many forms of what we otherwise term 'child labour'.

The international achievement tests measure what is easy to measure (math, science, language and spelling). They don't measure other important aspects of education, maybe the most important aspects, such as ethics, esthetics, art, cultural awareness, social and political understanding, ability to cooperate with others and listen to different views, and so on. These are central aspects in educational policy documents and aims of basic education for all. They are things that any mother and father would like their children to learn. A basic concept should be: 'first be kind, than be clever'. Parents unwittingly know that, and the Delores Report gave it intellectual backing, but the one-eyed leaders in our technocratic world relegate such virtues to the lower slots of their educational achievement hierarchies.

Unfortunately, educational achievement tests don't have the instruments to assess, or appreciate, values, attitudes and opinions of pupils - and of teachers. And then, what is measured at tests and exams is what we see as important. We grade and rank students, select and differentiate clever from less clever based on tests. In the end, our societies get workers and managers who are clever at tests, not necessarily good at cooperating with others and being kind to fellow human beings. We make broilers and technocrats out of children who should also be recognized for being social and ethical human beings. We make the grades they get at tests and exams more important than seeing rounded, harmonious and social human beings.

In Pakistan, the competitive, individualistic and selfish middle-class values of our education systems, especially in the private schools, are unfortunate for the country's future. They are also contradictory to many of the good family and community values that Pakistanis have. When did we last have a debate about the importance and forms of evaluation forms, i.e. grades, exams and ranking of students? When did we last consider the negative effects of all it? Why are there so few teacher training college professors who remind us of what is essential in socialization and education of children and youth?

It will take further debate, and many articles, to discuss what the content of our schools should be. Today, I have only raised questions about some fundamental aspects of education - in our technocratic time when we often misunderstand what education. Often, we teach children unimportant and outright wrong content and values; we don't take time to reason about what education and learning really is; we don't give the children the childhood and future they deserve. Only the luckiest few, like the incoming Norwegian PM, Erna Solberg, can be successful against many odds. I hope that she in her political work will reduce the importance of the PISA tests and thinking, and instead, give heed to the wisdom in the Delores Report. I hope that we in Pakistan will get a broad and deep talk about what education really should be. We need more education, yes, but we also need the right forms of it, built on the right values.

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