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Special education and empathy with others

By Atle Hetland

“A ship in a life-threatening emergency at sea sends out ‘mayday, mayday, mayday’. It calls for help from ships nearby. Parents of children with special education needs should also call out ‘mayday’. The situation of special education children in the home, at school and in society are similar to a ship about to sink”, said an experienced teacher after a session at the Teachers’ Literature Festival in Islamabad yesterday.

It was May Day, the International Workers’ Day, and the teacher used the wordplay to underline his point about the special education crisis, and he added that there are many other emergencies in education, too.

The Teachers’ Literature Festival was organized by Oxford University Press and the Open Society Foundations at the Federal Government College, Islamabad, in cooperation with government departments and private sector sponsors.

Zobaida Jalal, former Federal Minister of Education, said in her address that although there is a need for more funding from the government for special education, there are many things we can do at local levels too. “We can all participate; we can give our time and help”, she said, as she explained that the federal education ministry’s role is mainly in policy matters and coordination.

“Sometimes, funds don’t lead to betterment either”, she said, and referred to the increase in teachers’ salaries not necessarily leading to better work performance by the teachers. She stressed that teachers must be committed and their interest for the teaching profession “must come from within”.

The former education minister spoke with passion about the importance of mainstreaming ‘challenged children’, and she said she found that term better than ‘special children’. She wanted more challenged children to be included in the ordinary schools and classes.

“Special children belong to our communities and can enrich the learning environment”, she said, mentioning that dyslexic children, and children with physical handicaps, and hearing and seeing impairment, should be part of ordinary classes.

Zubaida Jalal drew attention to a children’s book entitled *Just like the other kids*, published for the World Bank by Oxford University Press. The little book was written by a group of children themselves, and at the end of the book, there is a section showing famous men and women who had handicaps, including Albert Einstein, who had a form of autism, and Thomas Edison, who was dyslexic and had hearing problems. High-achievers from Pakistan, with challenges, were also mentioned in the book.

Harris Khalique, an acclaimed poet and columnist, spoke in his slot at the session about two children’s books translated from Persian by Fahmida Rias. *The Simurgh and the Birds*, which means the ‘conference of the birds’, is written by the Sufi poet Farid ud-Din Attar, and so is *Our Shaikh Sa’di*, which contains selections of stories from Gulistan (the rose garden) and Bustan (the orchard).

The books include poetic stories about ‘all the flowers in God’s garden’, and ‘all the birds in the sky’.

“The flowers are different, with different shapes and scents, with different colours and sizes, but they are all needed to make the garden beautiful. The birds, too, are different; they sing differently, their feathers are different and they may have different habits, some being non-migratory birds, while others travel seasonally to the end of the world, and back again”, explained Hariss Khaliq.

“The wonders of the world are many. We should learn to take pride in individuality and diversity. But we should not be individualist and egoistic”, he said, and underlined the millennium-year old ideas of Sufism, with validity in our time. “The essence is to be helpful and show kindness to others, not only on following religious rituals.”

The books Harris Khaliq discussed are central works that can help children develop greater tolerance and understanding for others, including for children and adults with physical and mental challenges. In concluding his talk, Harris Khaliq recited a short poem from one of the books entitled ‘We human beings’:

We children of Adam are limbs of one another, as they are all created of the same substance.

When one limb is in pain, the whole body becomes restless.

When you ignore the suffering of others, you do not deserve to be called a human being.

No Photos attached.
(Tanveer took pictures.)