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**DAWN ISLAMABAD**

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## Learning to solve everyday conflicts

By Atle Hetland

A large group of lower and upper secondary school boys from Dawn Model Secondary School in Milat Colony in Rawalpindi attended a session called 'Brokering peace, tolerance and citizenship in our classrooms' at the Federal College of Education in Islamabad on the last day of the Children's Literature Festival yesterday. The boys asked questions and were active, but not quite as easygoing as a group of girls who came in when the session had already started. Maybe the boys were coming of age and being a bit shy, and that isn't so bad either.

"We should all be confident about who we are, but also give space to others who may have different opinions", a teacher said after the session. "Perhaps the most important we can do as teachers is to help our student become self-confident and feel good about themselves. Then they can also have the generosity of showing inclusiveness, tolerance and positive feelings to others", he said.

The chair of the session, Rumana Husain from Karachi underlined that her city is like a mini-Pakistan with people from all over the land, and abroad, with a lot of diversity. "We appreciate our own culture and traditions and, at the same time, we also learn to appreciate what our neighbours and friends have."

She also gave reference to her own book entitled *Karachiwala – a subcontinent with a city*, which was published in 2010.

When a student said that in China people don't have a religion, Rumana Husain was quick to say that there are many religious people also in China, Confucians, Buddhist, Muslims, Christians, and others. But she added that the political regime has not encouraged religion. She said that she had visited China twelve times and mentioned many positive aspects about China and its hardworking people. "They don't only copy; they also invent and create new things", she said.

"Peace is only possible through knowledge and friendship, *dosti*. Conflicts often begin from misunderstandings and misconceptions. *Dosti* is one of the most important words in Urdu", Rumana said.

She emphasized the importance of one-on-one interaction in order to learn about each other, get to respect each other, be tolerant and show respect even if one disagrees.

"If there is fight and quarrel in the classroom, there is no peace, and then we may lose the most essential relationship between people, notably friendship. Perhaps children are better at restoring friendship than adults?" she said.

The four panelists were interacting with the students and other participants in the session, and they all seemed to enjoy themselves in company if the youngsters.

Chintan Girish Modi, a peace activist, had come from India, while the others were locals, Amar Khalid, an anthropologist, Anam Zakaria, an NGO activist, and Haroon Khalid, a teacher and author of a book entitled *A White Trail* (2013), a 'journey into the heart of Pakistan's religious minorities'.

The panel engaged the students in defining some key words, such as tolerance and peace brokering, and negative concepts, such as suspicion and ignorance. Anthropology and sociology were also defined, and the importance of researching issues was mentioned.

Some emphasis was given to the importance of learning about Pakistan's neighbouring countries. The knowledge panel explained that in the past, much knowledge and understanding, even about the sub-continent, had come from the Arab world and further away.

"The name India was first used about a thousand years ago by an Arab Muslim scholar by the name of Al-Biruni. He spent a large part of his life in Ghazni in modern-day Afghanistan, in Central Asia, and he also came to areas near Islamabad", explained Chintan Modi.

Are such historical and theoretical things important to today? one may ask.

The panel emphasized in the positive, that the knowledge is important to broker peace, in the classroom and in other everyday life situations, and indeed in broader contexts.

"The more we know about others, and the more others know about us, the more peaceful the world will be", a teacher said after the session, and he smiled when he added that to be positive to others, even if we don't know each other, is "half the job of creating peace".

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**No Photos** attached.  
(Tanveer took pictures.)