Successful Schools, Stagnant Education: The Dilemma of Urban Centers

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Abstract

With so much focus on illiteracy, we sometimes forget the dire state of affairs in our urban centers with regard to education. Education in the Muslim world has increasingly regressed into an exercise of rote learning, a mass of discrete knowledge, and a frenzied race toward what we deem "useful" skills. By showing the ground reality in private education in Karachi, Pakistan, this article strives to highlight the cyclical and future-oriented trends in schools that are inimical to the very spirit of education. In doing so, it emphasizes the need to adopt thinking as the primary skill taught to students in schools, with everything else encompassed within its fold. While Karachi is a case study here, the importance of creating thinking cultures within schools is a crucial and very relevant concept to schools everywhere in the world, including the United States.

> Education … is a process of living and not a preparation for future living.
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> – John Dewey

Introduction

Illiteracy is a major problem in many developing countries, including much of the Muslim world. The Arab Organization for Education, Science, and Culture (ALECSO) reported in 2014 that a staggering 97 million people in Arab countries were illiterate.[1] Literacy rates in Pakistan and Bangladesh are only 55 and 57 percent, respectively.[2] The situation with regard to out-of-

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school children is equally alarming. Despite the many impressive strides made in school enrollment, "one in every four children and young adolescents (more than 21 million) in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are either out of school or at risk of dropping out."[3] Similarly, "there are a total of 27 million children out of school in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka."[4]

While achieving literacy across the board is a daunting challenge for these regions, education itself becomes a burdensome task even when children are enrolled in schools. The divide between public and private education, the tug of war between mother tongue and *lingua franca*, and the ongoing firefighting due to the lack of infrastructure and appropriate learning materials, as well as teacher incompetency, all transform an already bad predicament into a ruinous one.[5]

Millions of dollars are currently being spent across the world in international development initiatives by the United States for the express purpose of improving basic educational outcomes for early elementary grade students. "All Children Reading" was devised after research showed that although previous efforts at increasing school enrollment were successful, there was, in fact, very little or no learning at all taking place within the schools. As a result, extensive projects have been launched to ensure that students are able to learn to read, write, and do simple arithmetic according to their grade levels.[6]

Statistics about rural areas and low-income neighborhoods in cities have a way of shocking us so much that we sometimes forget that a quiet crisis is also underway in our urban well-to-do schools. Unquantifiable in many ways, education is stagnating in urban centers even as schooling appears to be thriving. In our own lackadaisical way, we are so content to watch our children go through the cycle of attending schools, achieving learning markers, and continuing on to higher education that we fail to critically assess the quality of education and, hence, any serious improvement remains out of reach.

In this article, I will focus on the private educational milieu in Karachi, a large Pakistani city where the medium of instruction is English and the vast majority of schools have adopted the IGCSE Cambridge educational system, the world's most popular international qualification for 14 to 16 year olds. This overview and evaluation is based on my experience as an educator as well as parent – and as someone outside the system who completed her secondary education and undergraduate studies in the United States and then returned to work as an educator in Karachi.

Private Education in Karachi

Schools come in a variety of shapes, sizes, and forms in this Pakistani metropolis. From neighborhood small-scale schools housed in bungalows to sprawling custom-built campuses, from convent schools to franchise operations, from westernized institutions to Islamic ones, there are plenty of options. Or not. In reality, getting admission into a parent's school of choice can be a long, arduous process that involves great anxiety, a series of tutoring sessions to prep for the entrance tests, or enrollment in branded programs that have a reputation for being stepping stones to highly coveted schools. Schooling nowadays starts from as early as 2.5 years, and many parents recognize that there is a highly unlikely chance of finding a seat for their child later on if they do not place him/her in such a school by that tender age. Homeschooling, not surprisingly, is becoming the preference for a small but growing minority of educated households.

Rote learning is quite common in Karachi. While it is cute if children memorize a poem as part of routine classroom activity, it is rather worrisome if they are expected to copy and then memorize questions and answers written on the blackboard for the upcoming test. Most of the time they are blindly committing words they do not understand to memory, whether in Urdu or English. As far as these schools are concerned, to educate is to impart knowledge. Teachers acquaint students with different subjects in order to expose them to different branches of learning and assess their understanding by asking them to regurgitate the information. As a result, students are filling their brains with piles of disjointed data that they (rightly) feel will be of little use in the real world.

These are not the only types of schools, however. Many schools recognize that they are a crucial step in a child's journey through this world and thus focus on the development of "life" skills along with advancing the student's knowledge. These tend to be broken down as "literary," "scientific," "mathematical," and so on. Over time, certain students emerge who have an expertise in specific subjects and pursue their calling. This leads to an imbalance because the other subjects are studied due to their requirements, not for their value. (The rest of the students continue to turn in a mediocre performance in all subjects, more or less.)

Admittedly, the teaching of knowledge and skills is fundamental to all children's schooling. After all, without them students may find themselves lost in an increasingly progressing and dynamic world. In this sense, schools are generally considered to be the very place that set the foundation for chil-

dren's future success. During the school years, parents and teachers alike stress exceptional performance in preparation for further schooling. In addition, consciously or subconsciously, certain subjects are deemed to be more important than others due to their professional worth (in this case, the hard sciences and mathematics).

Indeed, there is so much emphasis on these "useful subjects" that the humanities are thoroughly neglected. In short, higher-order thinking skills are routinely applied in the hard sciences and mathematics and are practically absent in humanities subjects. While students enrolled in schools following the Cambridge system are expected to take biology, chemistry, and physics simultaneously as early as middle school in preparation for their O Level exams, English literature is hardly offered in most schools as an O Level subject. Even Urdu is generally required as a second language by the vast majority of schools, turning an otherwise challenging course into an effortless exercise.

Whereas some schools require students to take additional mathematics (akin to calculus) as well as mathematics (a combination of algebra, trigonometry, and geometry), Pakistan studies and Islamic studies predominantly consist of dates and facts to be memorized. English language continues to be a focus, but it is as much a scientific process (methodical answers for comprehension questions and summaries constricted by word limits) as a creative one (essay writing). With the advent of prosperous prospects in business and finance careers, schools have adopted accounting, economics, and statistics as extra subjects.

Parental pressures for children to excel in every grade, leading to the expectation of exceptional outcomes in O Level and A Level, is so great that they are willing to do anything, ranging from dangling rewards in exchange for excellence to showing extreme anger and disappointment at lower-than-expected grades, as well as shuttling them from one tutor to another, in order to supplement their school education. After-school tutoring is now a thriving business in Karachi, with teeming tuition centers asking for prime rates per subject so that the students can have access to reputed teachers. Only a tiny minority of families escape this quandary.

The demands of such an education are so great and its outcome so far-reaching that students must be prepared to sit for at least seven or eight subject exams per year, the results of which will determine their entrance into A Level colleges and further higher education. In other words, their academic future is not based on their cumulative grades over the course of a few years, as is the case with American high schools, but on the results of the exams that are given within the timeframe of four to six weeks after the eleventh grade. Dur-

ing this process, the students must decide which career path they wish to pursue, take A Level courses, and apply for universities accordingly.

In this environment of futuristic preparations, it only makes sense that the humanities become a hindrance to those students who find themselves proficient in the hard sciences, mathematics, or business. The humanities are considered no more than necessary components that they must master to help, rather than harm, their grade point averages. Most unfortunately, so many students who actually enjoy the humanities, who willfully take up English literature, for instance, in O Levels and A Levels, end up abandoning it in pursuit of more popular careers such as dentistry, accounting, economics, engineering, and medicine.

A Case for Teaching Thinking Skills

Naturally, such an atmosphere of education raises numerous causes for concern. On the surface, it seems that students are learning a great deal at school. They have tasted a sampling of English literature, built foundational skills in the major branches of the hard sciences and mathematics, and have learned their country's history in meticulous detail, among other things. Indeed, many of them excel, often going abroad after A Levels and earning scholarships too.

Yet if all of their present efforts are aimed at the future – from tests to exams to college admittance assessments to job interviews – then, what exactly are they learning *now*? How passively or actively is a child's brain engaged in the lesson? How energized is it at the moment? Is it simply registering or responding to information? Is it merely understanding it or making connections?

In *Early Childhood Education*, George Morrison argues:

> "Knowledge" in the sense of information means the working capital, the indispensable resources of further inquiry; of finding out, or learning, more things. Frequently, it is treated as an end itself, and then the goal becomes to heap it up and display it when called for. This static, cold-storage ideal of knowledge is inimical to educative development.[7]

In short, there is a difference between a child who is mastering both the information and the skills involved in various subjects and one who is not just absorbing, but actively processing, synthesizing, and evaluating that information. The first one is stocking up for the future, be it the upcoming assessments or professional learning, whereas the second one is making the most out of the present moment – living his education. The first one is soaking it all up in her mind, whereas the second one is enriching his mind; he is *thinking*.

Thinking is one of the most fundamental functions in human beings. Unlike motor skills, it does not improve on its own over the years. Rather, students must be given consistent practice in order to achieve the best results.[8] If students are used to a knowledge- or skill-centric methodology, then they are sure to find thinking quite challenging.[9] Yet this does not mean that they do not possess the capacity to think effectively; each child is inherently capable of thinking.[10]

The foundation for thinking skills must be laid during the formative years. Assimilating thinking into the curriculum from an early age is essential in helping students develop the habit of skillful thinking. Matthew Lipman envisions children who one day will be "more thoughtful, more reflective, more considerate, and more reasonable individuals."[11] But he also realizes that if we want children to become reflective adults, we must encourage them to be reflective children first. If children are not urged to think from an early age, they will "stop speculating and playing with ideas."[12]

In other words, thinking does not emerge out of a vacuum. It comes from building an atmosphere where questioning concepts, considering their implications, and problem solving are routinely encouraged. It is promoted by supporting thought-provoking dialogue, animated discussions, and instilling tolerance of differing opinions. Within schools, the responsibility for creating such an environment falls upon teachers and administrators.

Indeed, there are many ways a teacher can approach his subject. For example, a teacher can come to class, pick a certain topic, and begin explaining it. Or perhaps she may write questions and their answers on the board for the students to copy. Another teacher may explain a concept and then ask students to complete comprehension and application exercises. Still another might begin the class by writing an enigmatic statement or a question on the blackboard in an attempt to stimulate their minds.

In each of the above scenarios, the students are learning what the teachers are teaching. If the teacher is giving the information, they are taking it in. If she is discussing the information, they are asking questions. If he is assigning a practice task, they are doing it. If she is inspiring their minds, they are rising to the challenge. The teacher sets the tone for the classroom, and the students follow his/her guide like a flock of sheep following its shepherd. Needless to add, their learning depends heavily on the type of teaching being used in their classroom.

When the teaching of knowledge or skills becomes the end rather than the means of education, thinking suffers. After loading the students with note-taking and application/comprehension assignments, there is very little time

left for evaluating and synthesizing the information. In the rush to complete the syllabus, to continually assess the students, and to perpetually view the content as more important than its recipients, the teaching of thinking skills at schools repeatedly takes a back seat.

Unfortunately, students are quick to sense the prevailing environment within a classroom. When undertaken only occasionally and in a cursory manner, students resist exercises in analysis. In that context, they are very vigilant and focused; if anything is considered outside of the syllabus, they openly question its value. After all, students are smart – they catch on to a teacher's style very fast and then pursue a strategy that will earn them the best marks. They pick the easiest routes to complete their work and pay extra attention during review time; they know that if the teacher is covering certain points right before an assessment, it is for a reason. Their personal experience vouches for the fact that if they follow a teacher's guide, they will succeed in the class.

Thus the cycle continues. The teacher utilizes traditional methods to educate her students who have been trained to devour anything thrown their way. Only the rare student will stop and question something. Otherwise, this exam-oriented system of education gets more and more entrenched both in the teacher's approach and in the students' minds, to the neglect of the present development of thinking skills – not to mention the utter lack of regard for those pupils who require greater attention, more time to grasp concepts, and extra help to keep up with the rest of the class.

No doubt there are many ways to educate children. Some are better than others, but together they make a whole. If one part is overly emphasized and another one is thoroughly disregarded, no matter which one it is, education takes a beating. Our purpose should be to make sure that each one gets its share – and yet the sharing may not be equal. No doubt, comprehension of a concept is invaluable for the growth of any student, but it should be considered a stepping stone instead of the goal. Only then will we offer our students a chance to question ideas, make connections, and draw conclusions.

We must remember that in the end, students will not recollect the precise formulae, the proper sequence of historical events, or the exact plot of a text. However, they must be equipped to deduce a problem independently, approach a text confidently, and educate themselves about any given topic, trend, or technology. This will not happen by "stocking up" but by living their education, by internalizing *technique* and not content. Sadly, in a knowledge- and skill-centric methodology, the opposite occurs.

Perhaps it is time for us to rethink our approach, our priorities, and even our various visions for our schools, teachers, and students.

The Umbrella Skill

Although I have highlighted the scholastic predicament of Karachi in this article, the need to create thinking cultures within schools is hardly limited to the Muslim world or other developing nations. In reality, it is just as relevant to the United States as anywhere else.

If we approach education in such a manner that the teaching of thinking skills becomes our foremost priority, then our entire perspective will change. Connections will appear automatically. Literature will borrow mathematical concepts for clarity. Mathematics will be supplemented with fiction. History will become alive in literature classes through the teaching of whole books.[13] Scientific thinking will be applied to the humanities and vice versa.

Teachers themselves will discern not just the vitality of their own individual subjects in education – but the fact that *together* these subjects can achieve the necessary educative objective. They will begin to view the content as a means to achieve certain goals; the information-recipient dichotomy will automatically decrease. Higher-level tasks will begin to form an inherent aspect of the subject, be it mathematics or English literature.

This is the essence – not that knowledge, comprehension, and other skills are unimportant or useless, but that they alone should not form the focal points of education because that is what disintegrates the wholeness of education. Thinking becomes the thread that connects all life skills, thereby empowering our young students to step into the world of professional education with confidence and a readiness to scale new heights, not just to pursue the inevitable degree and a job somewhere down the line.

In the end, the teaching of thinking skills keeps the purpose of education alive – to kindle spirits, not fill vessels.[14]

Endnotes

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7. George S. Morrison, *Early Childhood Education Today* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill, 1998), 76.
8. Robert Fisher, *Teaching Children to Think* (Cheltenham: Nelson Thornes Ltd., 2005), x.
9. Morrison, *Early Childhood Education Today*, 76.
10. Fisher, *Teaching Children to Think*, 1.
11. Ibid., 128.
12. Ibid., xii.
13. Charlotte Mason (1842-1923), a British educator, encouraged the use of "living" or "whole" books, by which she meant first-hand sources as opposed to authoritative textbooks. They are often written by a single author who is personally passionate about the subject, rather than a team of people who pack facts and information on a given topic into a textbook.
14. Karen Andreola, *A Charlotte Mason Companion: Personal Reflections on the Gentle Art of Learning* (Elkton, MD: Charlotte Mason Research & Supply, 1998), 8. This statement may have been inspired by Plutarch's quote: "The mind is not a vessel to be filled, but a fire to be kindled."