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Let a thousand flowers bloom

We must realise that treasure buried in the hearts of Pakisatni children is more valuable than the coal buried in Thar

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Editorial & Opinion



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Can we create a society full of visionaries and dreamers, who seek to change the world for the better? The first step is to understand that every child has this potential. We need to provide the right environment to allow these seeds to grow. A crucial element of the right environment is love, which is the birthright of every child. There are lots of statistics currently in use to compare nations. To my mind, a crucial question is: how much care, attention and love do we provide to the children of Pakistan? There is no doubt that our current score on this count would be very low. [MALNUTRITION AND STUNTING AMONG CHILDREN IN PAKISTAN IS VERY HIGH](#). The question is, what we can we do to change things?

Research coming out of [POVERTY ACTION LABS](#) at MIT, headed by Esther Duflo and Abhijit Banerjee, suggests that we need to radically rethink current approaches. They identify three I's — Ideology, Ignorance, Inertia — as the biggest obstacles to progress. Ideology here refers to the battle over private schools versus public schools. All over the world, including Pakistan, one can find excellent examples of both kinds. The factors which make schools a success are committed and inspirational teachers, and community involvement. The ideological battle over privatisation versus government provision of services distracts from the real issues at hand, and hence creates an obstacle to progress.

Inertia refers to the tendency to avoid making big changes. The old and familiar is comfortable, and innovative ideas always carry the risk of failure. Only a sense of deep discomfort that our existing methods are not working well can create the impetus for change. Ignorance is the most interesting in the current context. Factors which turned up as keys to the education puzzle in the Duflo-Banerjee research are rather surprising and unexpected. First, surveys in the Third World show that the most common dream of the poor is that their children will have government jobs. Second, colonial educational

systems were designed precisely for this purpose: to groom a small minority to pass certain difficult exams and join the colonisers in the job of governing the colony. Colonisers are long gone, but the institutional structures have not changed very much. The idea that education is a lottery which gives huge rewards to a few winners is extremely damaging. It can lead parents to concentrate attention on one bright child, while depriving others of educational opportunities. [THE HIGH RATES OF TEACHER ABSENTEEISM IN VILLAGE SCHOOLS](#) is also because teachers think that all their efforts will come to naught — the children don't have the material to make it. Duflo-Banerjee find that the problem lies not in poor infrastructure, low salaries, or other material problems; rather it lies in low expectations. The teachers don't believe in their students, the parents don't believe in their children, and discouraged by this negative environment, the children fail to believe in themselves.

The good news is that there are remedies for this low expectation trap. A large number of successful experiments have been carried out which dramatically increase the educational performance of children. There are three underlying principles behind successful interventions. The first is an incremental education. Instead of a big prize at the end of a long journey, we must learn to make every day worthwhile. Many curricula exist which ensure that children learn something interesting and useful every day. We must adapt these to local conditions, teaching agriculture and botany in villages for example. The second principle is even more important. We must make parents, teachers and children realise that every child is an infinitely precious gift from God. Given a nurturing environment, every child has potential to develop in ways that we cannot imagine. The third principle is to understand our collective responsibility as a society for all children. We must learn to think of all children as our own, and to facilitate, nurture and love them as our own.

There are numerous examples of how love has changed the lives of those without hope. One inspiring example is that of [KIRAN SCHOOL IN LYARI](#), one of the areas of Karachi notorious for gang violence. With courage and dedication, Sabina Khatri transformed the school, changing the lives of the students and their parents. She realised that if the children were given more love and attention at school than they received at home, they would start to have doubts about their family. This was not a desirable outcome, since the family is the foundation upon which one needs to build. To resolve this problem, she decided that the parents must be educated as well. This radical approach has paid off, and hundreds of children have received scholarships to attend elite schools in Karachi. By believing in the potential of her children to achieve, she enabled outstanding achievements from a poor, violence-wracked neighbourhood.

There are many people like Sabina Khatri, who have invested in unpromising areas in Pakistan, and transformed the lives of children and adults. The for-profit private sector cannot do this job, since one cannot make money by educating the poor — they cannot pay for this education. To improve government schools, it is essential to enable local communities to be part of the decision-making process, by putting them on school boards for example. But, as individuals, we cannot wait for the government. We must realise that the treasure buried in the hearts of the children of Pakistan is far more valuable than the coal buried in Thar. We must become the change that we want to see in the world. After all, what is the point of development, if not to provide a better future for our children? If we cannot devote our lives to the process, we can do a little bit. Every reader can easily change a few lives for the better, and spread this message to others. If we do this, we will create an unstoppable dynamic for change. A large number of small changes can create a revolution.

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