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For any society, nation or country, education has become a tool for survival in contemporary times. Long gone are the days when military might was the most significant factor for a nation to make its mark. In the 21st Century the race is about innovation and intellectual capital. As artificial intelligence and robotics become a part of our ecology, nations unable to adapt to the changing patterns of the social fabric will find it difficult to catch up.

Having said that, for developing countries, such as Pakistan, to adjust to change on such a scale would be very hard. This is due to the fact that its education system is fundamentally flawed. Let me take you on a brief journey to the best education systems of the world and discuss some lessons from those countries.

Finland is the best to start with. It has the best education system in the world. Fifty years ago, Finland had a reputation for having a terrible education system and risked becoming the economic step-child of Europe. Over the past half century, it has turned its schools around and is hailed internationally for its exceedingly high educational outcomes. How did they do it?

Firstly, Finnish educational institutes have discarded the concept of homework. One could wonder what the rationale behind such a decision is. Finnish educationists tell you that the students should have more time to be their age and enjoy. They are of the view that students have a lot to do in their lives: like being together, being with their families enjoying family time, playing, listening to music and reading. School teachers in Helsinki tell you that many school children probably do nothing but maybe climb a tree. Is that worth it? Of course it is. They learn to climb a tree and enjoy nature. They also discover insects, plants and herbs and they may ask their teachers about. This is real learning; at least the Finnish think so.

Secondly, children in Finland go to school only for 20 hours a week, including an hour-long daily lunch break. The idea is that human brain needs to relax every now and then to function optimally. If you are constantly at work, you stop learning. The Finnish children do better by going to school for less hours.

In some of the European countries, education is free. It is illegal to set up a school and charge tuition fee. Rich parents have no option but to send their children to public schools. This compels them to ensure that public schools are doing well. Moreover, by ensuring that the schools have class diversity, they encourage harmony, prosperity and sustainable development in the long-run.

Slovenia offers free university education to the locals and international students alike. Many American students as well as those from other countries come there to study. Slovenia charges close to zero in tuition fee so that the students do not have to bother about finances. This way they have less stress and more learning; eventually less

involvement of youth in social crimes and other illegal activities, which usually is seen to be the outcome of stress and frustration among youth.

Ever wonder why the French, and French children in particular, do not suffer from weight problems, obesity, diabetes, and hypertension unlike their other counterparts across the globe? It emerges from their model primary school cafeterias, where they learn about balanced diet and saying no to fizzy drinks, eating moderate quantities of fresh food at set times. Daily exercise, in the form of three recess periods (two 15-minute and one 60-minute recess every day) and walking or biking to and from school are routine.

Nutritionists, health experts and teachers sit together on a weekly basis to decide the coming week's menu for the children. School canteens are required to provide school-going children with: a starter of vegetables, salad or soup, a warm main course high in protein (meat, fish or eggs); a side dish of vegetables or grains; a cheese course or dairy product; plus raw or cooked fruit balanced with a dessert and an afternoon snack. The kids drink water (there are no other drinks of any kind available at lunch, and there is a national ban on vending machines and junk food in French schools). Dessert is usually fresh fruit, but a sweet treat is often served once a week.

This is not a picture from some fancy school in Paris; it is the same everywhere. Even villages in the remotest corner of France have the same image of a school cafeteria. The French believe that balanced diet is the key to a healthy mind and healthy body; only then can students learn better, perform well in education and contribute positively to the development of their country.

Coming to Pakistan, it is facing a serious challenge to ensure that all children, particularly the most disadvantaged, attend, stay and learn in school, let alone be innovative. While enrollment and retention rates may have improved somewhat over time, progress has been slow to improve key education indicators in the country. More than 20 million children aged 5-16 are out-of-school. Gender-wise, boys outnumber girls at every stage of education. Higher education presents its own story of bedlam. Art, music and subjects like philosophy are almost missing across the country's educational institutes weakening the social make-up of the society.

There is compelling evidence that education quality, rather than the number of years of schooling, is a driver of economic growth and equity. Despite this, educational reform efforts in Pakistan pay scant attention to improving what happens inside the classroom. They focus instead on improving school facilities and school management, in part because these are easier and more visible than raising standards of teaching and learning inside classrooms.

For Pakistan to catch up to the European models of education, there is a long way to go. Reforms are under way; progress is very slow, but still there is a silver lining to the cloud. We need to take on all aspects of reforms in education system. It is already too later for going step by step. The government should embark on the reforms journey on all counts at once. These must include: the quality of teachers, the learning environment, career counselling, availability of healthy food, a uniform education, setting-up innovation-centers in universities, linking the industry with education and so on. This is the only way forward to the sustainable development based on equity.

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