[**Learning as a team**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1647544/learning-as-a-team)

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THOSE who have played competitive sport would be familiar with the feeling of gratification that comes with facilitating a team member to carry through a difficult shot or cheering from the sidelines to encourage someone over the finishing line. No matter where and how the team operates, there isn’t any one person who can rightfully take credit for an accomplishment. As they say, there is no ‘I’ in team — the strength lies in numbers, collaboration and joint effort. The celebration is also collective, with the exponential benefits of shared glory. The team eventually becomes one’s community and, as isolation during the pandemic has shown, human beings thrive on communal existence.

We have known the benefits of collaborative work since time immemorial. So what stops us from encouraging it in schools, teaching our children to work in groups, relying on each other’s ideas and expertise, and sharing the burden and joys of learning? Why do our children still sit in theatre-styled classrooms, reading and working alone in a class full of peers? We need collaboration, now more than ever before, as a way of recovering from the forced isolation of the lockdown.

Tapping into the benefits of teamwork in education would require some familiarity with the rules of engagement, the necessity for fairness, equitable distribution of tasks, dividing roles according to willingness and ability, etc. Teamwork does not come naturally to everyone — almost always, it’s an acquired skill through exposure, experience and deliberate coaching as the intricacies of learning to work with others takes time.

For example, a student would only know the impact of their own behaviour and attitude on others if they have gone through some rocky times working on projects that required patience and tolerance while others stretched their muscles. They can see emotional intelligence in action, practise communication and learn from mistakes in a low-stakes environment.

Teamwork is anything but a soft skill.

People often learn from experience, not through lecturing. Sometimes, they mirror the leaders or their teachers and, in this context, demonstrating how to collaborate with others would mean a degree of involvement by mentors and teachers that students can work with actively. That is why, it’s all the more important for teachers to work with the students, rather than resort to giving instructions. As students read in class or solve math problems, with a teacher up close, a peer guiding and taking the baton where one student stops, another answering questions, a fourth putting all the work and effort down for the teacher to see, they learn to operate as part of a communal unit. They learn that their success depends on the accomplishment of others; they also learn to encourage their peers as opposed to competing with them or putting them down, and they acquire leadership qualities as they take on responsibility.

In schools, we often call these ‘soft skills’ but they are anything but soft. These are the solid ingredients of a connection between peers, too often ignored in a bid to acquire skills that can be monetised. The benefits of teamwork in school life serve students well beyond their academic journey, as they learn to compromise, collaborate and establish lasting professional ties. If connection, not correction is the goal of teamwork, students learn far more than the teacher intended or hoped.

In fact, once students get comfortable with teamwork, innate trust in others starts to develop. Trust is another vital cog in the success of teamwork and there can be little trust without a connection with others.

If learnt in the foundation years, teamwork has a range of spillover benefits in adult life. It teaches children to encourage and appreciate each other’s efforts, help each other, celebrate diverse perspectives and come together holistically like pieces of a puzzle. In fact, recognition from team members tends to improve performance as well as emotional well-being. As opposed to this, working individually and competitively increases the chances of burnout, threatens psychological safety and plunges us into a survival-of-the-fittest mode. If one has to fail at anything, failing together with others hurts less than failing alone.

Teamwork in the classroom requires a host of initiatives such as listening, showing compassion, giving quick and timely feedback, dividing tasks equitably, capitalising on individual strengths etc. Assigning roles, setting rules and timelines are essential, but perhaps not as crucial as experimenting, forgiving and working peacefully together despite differences of opinion. In classrooms, this may mean much more than merely setting up group work — teaching students to communicate openly and positively, be accountable to others and spend less time complaining and more time constructing.

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