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**What makes a good educator?**

It is no secret that the Pakistani education system is broken. Elite schools refuse to enroll differently-abled children, corporal punishment still exists, math and science curriculums are outdated, and teachers are expected to balance additional civic duties, and teach through a pandemic with limited to no professional development opportunities.

Being an idealist who believes in the power of education and its potential to transform Pakistan, I struggle with this – what makes a good educator in our context? Reflecting on my experience, speaking to my peers and the people around me, an interesting theme became apparent.

Empathy – educators who acknowledge students as human beings with emotions, weaknesses, and strengths. For most of us, we remember the professors and teachers who impacted our emotional state, whether it was the extra day for an assignment, condolences over a death in the family or kind messages in class. Psychological research confirms that emotions impact cognitive processes and learning is no exception.

One of my professors would start each class by telling us to be kind to ourselves. Every single time. Towards the end of the semester, most of us started to listen. It impacted my learning experience in every single course that semester. In the context of the pandemic, educators who asked their students how they were feeling and acknowledged the difficulty students now had to deal with made a difference.

I know of a university educator who adapted dramatically to make her classes accessible to her students; she was aware of budget constraints, emotional states and other difficulties that the pandemic brought. She used WhatsApp to curate a comprehensive and challenging learning experience for her students. Her university did not require her to teach via WhatsApp. It was her empathy and kindness that made her an excellent educator.

Related to this, how an educator makes you feel matters – how they value different students, whether they’re able to build their confidence, how they choose to view and improve their individual students’ learning arcs. If someone struggles with public speaking or writing in their second language, what goes through the teacher’s mind? Do they react or teach? Do they believe humiliation is a justified teaching tactic? How do they view questions? Do they truly believe they can learn from their students?

All of this impacts how the educator teaches and the learner’s experience. I know too many women who were told that ‘boys are better at math’ their whole lives. And too many people whose teachers expressed anger when they struggled to learn in class. It makes a world of a difference to have a teacher who reassesses their teaching method if you fail a test.

Finally, an educator needs to be equipped to teach. Part of the onus is on individual teachers – are they keeping up with evolving knowledge in their fields? Do they value their students and look for their strengths in a classroom? Do they reassess, re-evaluate and evolve if their teaching methods aren’t working? Do they take pride in how ‘difficult’ their classes are and boast about how few students receive top grades? Do they move beyond lectures to impart knowledge? Do they rethink and adapt their pedagogies? Do they plan their lessons and assessments?

However, part of the onus is on state and society. How we value educators, how we prepare them and whether they have access to networks of support and capacity building. A math teacher does not need to have perfect English – in fact most teachers don’t. Unless someone is teaching the English language, we need to accept that for much of Pakistan, English is a second, third or fourth language.

It is not easy to be an educator in Pakistan. In my experience, educators who have managed to make a positive impact are ones that have been empathetic and conscious and had the resources to teach. Quite simply, perhaps the first question an educator should ask in class is ‘How are you?’

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