

Creating Poverty & Alleviating it - In one breath!

Prof. ANITA GHULAM ALI

'Children's involvement in football stitching in Sialkot has received considerable attention. US - based pressure groups, and European Trade Unions have played a particular role in highlighting the issue'. (Voices of children in Sialkot, Pakistan).

The West often masquerades its self-interest as an enlightened concern for the 'trials' of the Third World. As in the case of football stitching in Sialkot, the West's naked demonstration of a double-value system is like a guided missile strategy aimed at the hands, which rather than pressed together in an act of supplication, were engaged in honest labor. Pakistan, a Muslim, Asian, underdeveloped country, winning contracts to supply Tango, the official football of the World Cup? 34.6 million balls- 80 percent of the match balls!

The education of boys is 'desirable'. At last even the most disadvantaged, and those who live beyond the 'designated civilized areas' of the province of Sindh, will almost never have a negative attitude towards the suggestion that children should go to school. However, the next immediate concern is put forward as brutally frank. What advantage, what monetary gain, what job is ensured after the children have 'finished'? That is the Catch 22 situation faced by all who 'dare to go where angels fear to tread'. Our planners have envisaged primary education without the dynamics required for its application. In practice, five classes of primary education 'endow' you with the capability of recognizing letters of the alphabet, numerals and for the smarter youngster, the ability to write their names. Can something more be expected from basic education levels?

Perhaps not really, except if it is followed by training programs targeted at various needs of an area, related to skills required for activities that sustain livelihood. Only a unified system, linked in a manner that each level - Primary, Secondary, Higher Secondary - could be units that may be the terminal stage (of that unit) and for which every unit should include a variety of common employable skills, for culling out practices that make education a means to an end. Philosophies and sermons about the 'value added' to life by education, do not assuage hunger or the desire for status.

Third World youth are constantly in a state of frustration. Broken promises, deceptive value systems, and an absence of opportunities to exhibit their talent and / or in equal degree to vent their anger, is not a mood conducive to cool calculation or long term planning. An appeal, then, to substitute their earnings from labor for school fees, would be met, quite justifiably with a quizzical expression and a volatile verbal retort! Still more irritating to the thinking Pakistani is the callousness of conventions, resolutions, and threats of sanctions against countries allowing child labor. In affluent countries (the 'enlightened' ones) children may not be employed in factories in the thousands. However, the norms of these 'superior' societies require the fledgling to start earning at

almost the same age as the girls in the carpet industry in Baluchistan, Pakistan. Baby sitting, mowing lawns, looking after senior citizens, waiting at bars, hotels, ice-cream parlours, delivering newspapers, doing odd jobs, delivering pizzas - jobs that are inherently hazardous, are considered ok. They are not considered 'exploitative' because in most cases the earnings bring in what is needed to buy what is required for a more interesting home and social life. Ironically, the contribution of every member of the family, in his/her own way, is presented with pride as an opportunity to have a taste of life and empowerment in preparation for maturity and an independent status! Yet the same are cogent reasons for taking an educated view of child labor, where work is undertaken because of poverty and is a preparation for the fast growing young population to contribute to the national income.

It may appear from what has been written above that child labor is not considered undesirable - there can be nothing further from the truth because of the unenviable tribulations of children who work, at an age when they should be experiencing things on which they can reflect later on in life and which form the basis of their attitude to and treatment of others. Crime amongst youth could be put down to a number of factors and certainly, in great measure, to how they have been dealt with. The close-knit family unit is less liable to nurture children who are callous, disinterested in the welfare of others and shirk social service. The child labor force in Pakistan includes at least 30 percent (of boys usually) who leave home to work in the big cities as rag pickers, coolies in bazaars, domestic servants, professional beggars or regular factory workers. It is this segment of the child labor force that is invariably persuaded, under threat by the mafia, to commit crime, peddle drugs and indulge in anti-social practices.

Since the concept of counselling is new in Pakistan, not finding favor in such an atmosphere, children and youth have no opportunity to bounce their ideas, opinions, thoughts, disagreements etc, with their immediate environment, with those whom they are in contact, and with conditions in general. Such information, or rather a lack of it, is a great loss to educators in particular and to those now examining the child labor issue. (Some interesting and moving comments can be found in the study done in Sialkot.)

Schools for children, in factories under the jurisdiction of the earmarked Industrial Trading Estates, in liaison with the Ministries of Labor and Industries (the Social Welfare Department has little to recommend it!) should of course be planned and managed by a board with sociologists, psychologists, experienced freethinking educators, and representatives of all agencies involved. It would help the board after the takeoff stage to have two representatives from the young laborers as well. I am aware that many who read this would get hiccups, jump out of their seats, or suggest. I take a long walk to cool off! Unfortunately, it is this kind of closed window that has further polluted our youth and educators!

However, the writer has 28 years of experience in sharing planning and management of projects with young men in colleges. A most rewarding experience. Highly recommended.

To lure children, albeit as a personal decision, schools should be very different from the stereotype school. Academics should be based on communication - discussion and debate as an aid to learning- rather than lectures, books, etc. A greater part of the time, however, should preferably be spent on net/ basket ball practice, judo, karate, etc. Recreation that combines physical energy and activity and that replenishes the normal functions of the vital organs. Even if some students come only for the recreation, there should be no bar on them for doing so. Hopefully, since they are spending time at 'school', they will wander in curiosity into classes as well. The knowledge that they are represented in the hierarchy will also encourage individuals to contribute, from time to time, to achieving the ultimate aims of the program.

Child labor and the whole gamut of issues must be seen dispassionately. There should not be pity for the poverty-stricken, but an all-encompassing strategy that addresses relevant conditions, makes maximum use of available human resources and plans for the future.

The human element must be given top priority: protection from hazards, maximizing skills and providing easy access to formal recognized education.

In conclusion, at this preliminary round of thoughts, the country is dependent on the strength of its people. This is its Achilles' heel. Since we know this, what deters us from making it known that we know?