Introducing Remedial Education into Yemen

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The other day I was talking to my favourite teacher from my school days, telling me about how challenging it is to make all the students in the classroom learn. One thing led to another and we touched on the issue of the self-fulfilling prophecy in education. Teachers can sometimes label students as "slow", "backward' without perhaps a proper understanding of whatever it is that interferes with a child's learning. Then my teacher was telling me about the first time he mentioned "dyslexia", (which is a problem in reading, with various symptoms, such as: seeing the letters backwards, or up-side down...etc, although dyslexia has come to be recognised as the mother of learning difficulties.) He then went on to tell me that he had been considered a complete lunatic fit for the mad house, not the school…as open mouthed they had all stared at him.

At that moment I smiled and thought to myself, "here we go" history is repeating itself, and I'm the new lunatic in the educational lineage. His voice cut into my thoughts as I smiled at his comment, "I can't believe it….my student …now my colleague discussing remedial education with me….."

If we look at the high rates of school dropouts, failures, and repetition in education, one should consider Remedial Education1 as one of the possible remedies, even if it may not necessarily be the panacea, considering the fact that educational achievement is a highly complex phenomenon.

Underachievement in schools could stem from a number of reasons, socio-economic, a curriculum that does not offer life skills or is not relevant to the children's environment, various problems within the educational system, inadequate educational provision; but the most crucial one remains that of a lack of understanding of the cognitive aspects of information processing and the different learning styles of individual children. A child with special needs is a child who learns in a very unique way that needs to be addressed through remedial education, and at the end of the day every child does have his unique style in learning.

However, there are lots of concepts that can be taken from remedial education to assist a wider range of children at school, within the framework of inclusive education. Prior to this Inclusive Education was understood to apply only to disabled children but at present it actually implies that the educational system should cater to all the different segments of the child population, subsuming the category of disadvantaged children. This by no means suggests that the curriculum should be formulated for every individual child but that it should be diverse enough to cater to various individual differences and teachers should be well trained to improvise well enough for the children to learn in different ways. As far as Remedial Education is concerned, the learning difficulties or disabilities could be categorized so as children are streamed and taught in these remedial classes in order to help them overcome their difficulties and improve the educational output.

Having worked with children who had learning disabilities I could definitely see the difference between their learning needs and those of children with no disabilities. When the materials and methodologies were adapted to their needs, these children could overcome their learning disabilities and perform to the best of their potential. However, to most disadvantaged children, (in Yemen alarmingly large numbers of school age children) this is often considered to be a luxury that neither they nor the system can afford. Thus in this way a large segment of the school age child population is excluded from education, by defacto. "Education for All" by the year whatever becomes ink on paper and academic discussions at Conferences, unless this issue of Inclusive Education is given serious thought. Many countries have also got compulsory universal education as their policy statement gracing ministries of education. However, a policeman's approach to compulsory education has never worked in developing countries, and the root causes of exclusion, like poverty, user fees and other hidden costs of education, and other problems of access need to be addressed.

My work with disadvantaged children coming from poor families in Yemen has convinced me of the need to review the whole concept of Inclusive Education, and to examine the root causes of dropout from school, high rates of failure and repetition in the public school system. Apart from several systemic factors, like quality, relevance, educational provision; a major factor is that of the lack of understanding of the learning difficulties and disabilities of different children. Remedial education has proven to be successful in many countries and responsible for increasing levels of school performance and achievement. The first step to planning the child's learning starts with assessing his level and diagnosing the problems that interfere with certain concepts, or in connecting different ideas, etc... in different disciplines. Once these are identified, appropriate remedies for overcoming these difficulties should be identified in accordance with the child's learning style. Teachers can then be trained on the process of identifying and testing, and thus on how to help individual children learn better. Simple remedies for the improvement of classroom dynamics can go a long way in helping children learn better.

Unfortunately most teacher training courses focus almost solely on the lesson plan and how to impart content to students and not much on how to cope with different classroom problems encountered and how to help students learn.

Remedial education is a very broad term that can be used on an individual basis and also on a broader basis, i.e. having children with similar problems grouped together. Concepts taken from remedial education can be used to help children who achieve less than their peers due to reasons other than those that cause learning disabilities. Maybe the most important concept that should be taken from remedial education is making the educational system flexible enough so as to cater to a greater number of children, across the board, which can be termed Inclusive Education in its widest sense, as an educational system that has the potential to cater to a wide category of children and includes the concerns of all children nationwide, whether rural, urban, disabled, disadvantaged, etc..

My experience with remedial education on a small scale with working children has also given me a good insight into the nature of the problem of education for this disadvantaged segment of the child population coming mostly from poor homes, many of whom have to combine school with work. Alternative models for non- formal education do exist and might seem to be the obvious solution. However, non- formal education is a complex area, which can be either condensed literacy classes for those who wish to go back into the formal system or others that combine skills training for older children who cannot go back to school. It is questionable whether a separate non- formal educational system is sustainable in the long- run which may end up marginalizing the children further. Whatever is done should also consider the problem of scaling up the model into the public school system. Therefore it would seem that Remedial Education within the school system itself is more viable in the long- run. This might initially be high cost but in the long- run it will be more cost-effective than the high rates of failures and repetition which have a higher cost both in material and human terms. The kind of extra classes given in the schools for those children who could not keep up in the morning is not real remedial education. For it is a mere repetition of the same thing that goes on in the morning without any attempt to understand what stood in the way of this child's learning in the first place. In the case of children who spend hours at work there needs to be some special measures to cater to their special needs. Moreover, these children already come to school with their unique experiences, and knowledge and maybe need more innovative ways of learning further. This is why there is a need for diversified curricula that can cater to all the children.

In Yemen, to start with, the teachers are poorly trained, the schools are badly equipped, the curriculum not being able to cater to all the different categories of children, and the lack of existence of any kind of remedial teaching, and it is not difficult to understand why there is a very high dropout rate from public schools. Teaching methodologies put most of the onus on rote learning, and the assessment in examinations follows the same pattern…..students have to put down whatever has been memorized. Even if the new curricula are changing to an activity based one, many of these children who come from rural areas which have few facilities for this will not be helped. Teachers need to be re-trained on more innovative teaching methodologies to capture the interest of the students. Moreover, it is not only a curriculum that needs to be changed, it is the whole system which includes the curricular orientation, teaching methodologies which should aim at critical thinking skills, and also the examination system and assessment which needs to be more competent- based rather than content- based.

In conclusion, these small pilots and experiments such as I have described here are only meant to point at some lessons learned and try out several ways of introducing remedial education on a small- scale. However, if these experiments are not scaled up to become systemic, the trend of excluding large numbers of school age children from the formal educational system will continue. Secondly even for those who manage to go through the system and even get to higher education, there will still be a problem of producing crammers who cannot find jobs because the system has not prepared them with skills they can use in later life. Thus education has to be looked at with a very long term view beyond passing examinations onto adult professional life. Teachers and the teaching profession have to be accorded the status deserved, for good teachers make for good professionals in later life. Mediocre teachers can only lead to mediocre unemployable doctors and engineers. It is up to the nation to invest in education and to efficiently use the resources which should become commensurate with the educational outputs. Remedial Education can certainly contribute a few miles towards that long and difficult journey.

Notes

1 Any course which is designed to assess students' performance level, identifies factors that interfere with learning, and adapts the materials in accordance to the needs.

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