

Schools' Participation in Great Conversation: A Proposal for School Improvement in Pakistan

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Abstract

This paper proposes the value of building social relations through critical conversation in schools in developing countries and particularly in Pakistan. The current climate in most of the schools in these countries reflects 'apathy' and 'ignorance'. It is argued that schools possess a capacity for wisdom if they develop a habit of engaging themselves into critical discourse. Schools can be personified as human beings to speak and open their minds and hearts in front of their stakeholders and share their successes and challenges to form a real sense of school community. The paper also shares an example of one of the professional teacher association networking in Pakistan which engenders the culture of critical conversation in teachers, headteachers and school managers through their monthly interventions supported by one of the international private universities in Pakistan. The findings of these self directed initiatives are very encouraging. It is proposed that similar initiatives may lead schools to sustainable developments.

Great conversation is a way of exploring the strengths and potential of self and others through critical discourse. This idea may be capitalized to improve the schools particularly in developing countries where schools are mostly viewed as factories. They hardly have been personified as human beings with ability to talk and share. There is a need to unfold their mysteries by getting them talking and growing together.

Although substantial initiatives have been taken since few decades to improve schools in these countries, most of them reflect extrinsic interventions. However, those schools which have invested their time and energy to engage stake holders into critical dialogue are astonished to see the surprised change in their school culture. Schools possess a capacity for wisdom, if develop a habit of involving themselves in critical conversation and meaningful discourse. This psychotherapy has proven to have substantial impact on stake holders' behavior and attitude towards school improvement.

Schools can be personified as human beings with ability to talk and share like children. Children are complex and sophisticated; they learn and develop, so do schools. Children behave in acceptable and unacceptable ways at different times, so do schools. Children develop their own sense of identity and self-esteem, so do schools. Children have relationships that involve parents and teachers, so do schools. Children have social relationships and learn to communicate with others in and out of their family, so do schools. Children are vulnerable to the power of others for good or ill, so are schools. Thus, schools are considered as mystical beings like children; they need to unfold their mysteries by talking and growing together.

Contemporary research studies strongly support that, engaging schools in critical reflections and professional dialogues termed as 'Great Conversation' have shifted greatly from lethargy to, what Hargreaves and Fullan's term, as 'moving and collegial schools'.

What characterize schools as moving and collegial?

In olden days, when teachers were bold, schools were simple places¹ in terms of facilities and resources; children learnt their lessons on a sand tray or a slate. Courses were delivered via single, often shared textbook. The most common form of curriculum delivery was teacher dictation. Such scenario sounds like a tale of woe today; nonetheless, many of us, including this writer, have experienced such schools which would not have significantly handicapped our career progress and life.

Today schools have improved drastically in their teaching learning approaches, facilities and resources; parental involvement, school development planning, school leadership trainings, physical environments, shared vision and mission statements, etc. But most of us, who are working in educational development, are still experiencing the immense voices of dissatisfaction and growing concern of public regarding schooling of today. Why is it so? What went wrong? Is it because we have forgotten the whole purpose of education? Is it because of teachers who have become merely technicians and lost their boldness and empowerment? Is it because the school - leaders are threatened to share powers with teachers? Is it because we still consider parents as problem makers in schools? Or is it because schools are busy preparing students only for the uncertain world economies and complex market

¹ I.Reid, K.Brain & L.C. Boyes, 'Teachers or learning leaders? Where have all the teachers gone? Gone to be leaders, everyone. *Educational Studies*, 30:3 (2004).

jobs? What is that is 'missing' in the whole process of school improvement?

The problem

Working in the area of teacher education and school improvement for almost two decades, what I have observed is that, in our contexts, schools are increasingly becoming places of 'ignorance' and 'apathy'. The current climate in most of the schools regarding understanding issues related to education are described² as 'I do not know' and 'I do not care either'. These indifferent attitudes in most cases lack critical conversation and professional dialogues which are keys to moving and collegial schools.

Schools need to develop meaningful conversations about their beliefs and practices with all their stakeholders such as students, teachers, parents and community. The underpinning assumption is that schools, which are involved in critical reflections on their beliefs and practices and engage themselves in professional dialogues, have high chances for improvement. Critical conversation provides opportunities to schools (personified as human beings, as mentioned hereinbefore) to speak and open up their minds and hearts in front of their stakeholders and share their successes and challenges and form a real sense of school community which learns to communicate honestly with each other.

Critical conversation as an approach to school improvement

Critical conversation according to Burbules³ may be defined as a 'pedagogical communicative relation' of a particular kind, a conversational interaction directed intentionally towards teaching learning as learner is at the heart of schooling. Conversation is not fundamentally a form of chatting or question answer communication; it requires engaging 'social relation' with emotional as well as communicative aspects. The emotional factors in conversation include concern, trust, respect, appreciation, affection and hope. The communicative virtues are tolerance, patience, openness to criticism and inclination to admit mistakes; a desire to render one's concern in a way comprehensible to others; willingness to re-examine presuppositions and to become less dogmatic; listening carefully; considering alternative view points, and expressing one self straightforwardly and reasonably.

² S. Stephenson, *School Based Planning: Talking and Growing Together*, Canada, 1994.

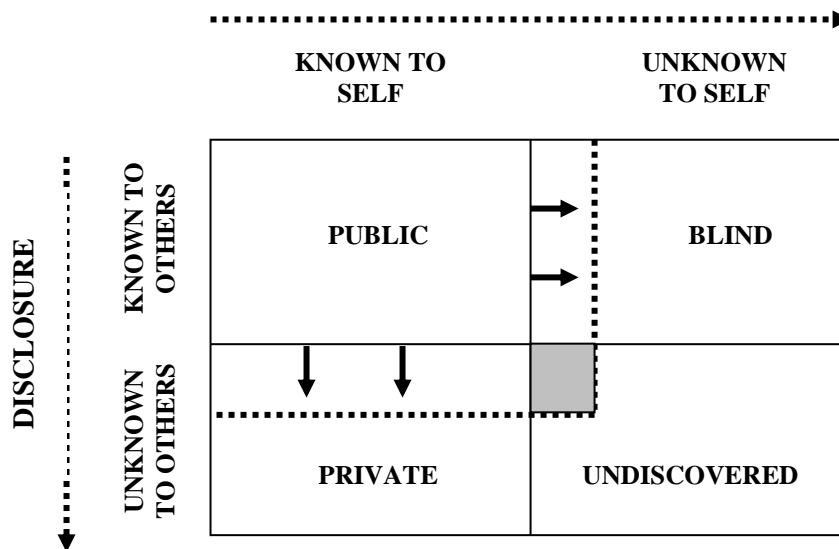
³ N.C. Burbules, *Dialogue in Teaching: Theory and Practice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993).

This is ‘an ongoing interactive practice’ motivated by intrinsic satisfaction. Because the core value of such process is relations, it must be undertaken in a spirit of mutual respect and concern, and not presumed to be the role of the privileged or the expert.

School improvement is like self improvement

School improvement is like self improvement. It is worth sharing here the analogy of the famous Joharry Window in which both the authors Jo and Harry (refer to diagram below) point out that to understand others one has to understand self. They further elaborate that each human being is divided into four dimensions of ‘self’: public self, private self, blind self and undiscovered self. In public self one is known to others as one can see others so one is very particular about his/her appearance in public and tries to improve it constantly to save his/her public face. However, three quarters of one’s self is unknown either to himself / herself or to the others. For example, in private self, one knows oneself but others can not see him or her as it is hidden and therefore one may conceal the things under carpet and feel himself less bothered to improve them. In blind self, one closes his / her eyes and does not want to see him or herself; however, others can see and tell him or her, what needs to be improved. Thus one has to be vigilant and open to hear the voices of others. However, the fourth dimension of self is mystical and no one can predict about this ‘undiscovered self’. One can discover the potential of this self by self dialogue and getting critical feedback from others.

JOHARRY WINDOW FEEDBACK



The beauty of such conversation is, that, it brings the 'self' into sharp focus – the commitment to 'what can I do' thus, provide opportunity to understand 'self' with its status and limitations and hence willing to listen to broader purpose(s), greater possibilities and fundamental issues. As 'self' needs constant attention to improve, so do the schools. However, today, in current scenario in schools, fragmented approaches and mechanical efforts towards completing the task related to syllabus, has the strongest hold on our ability to do what we want to do, not what we have to do. Thus, the most important aspect for school improvement in this case, which is the relationship, is totally missing. What is needed is to slow down and make deliberate efforts to freeze some time in our school planners to build relationship through self directed critical conversation. It is a powerful mechanism for change - change which would be bottom-up, grass root driven and therefore more likely to succeed.

A network of continued self inquiry in Pakistan

For schools to successfully engage in improvement initiatives, they need a forum within and out side for continued self inquiry to change their beliefs and existing practices and try to explore possibilities for adopting improved practices. Networks are seen as being very important for these purposes.⁴ In this regard the Aga Khan University Institute for Educational Development (AKU IED) established in 1994 at Karachi, Pakistan, is engaged heavily in such initiatives to build capacity of public and private schools in less developing countries, representing East Africa (Kenya, Tanzania, Zanzibar and Uganda), Central Asia (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Afghanistan), Syria, South Asia (various parts of Pakistan, Bangladesh and India) to engender the culture of critical conversation. This is guided by their philosophy that teachers and other educational leaders as 'reflective practitioners' must be engaged in continual self-inquiry for improving the quality of education in their school contexts. Since its inception, AKU-IED has, within a relatively short time, initially motivated headteachers which formed a voluntary association called School Headteachers Association for Development of Education (SHADE) which is recognized as credible and significant forum for

⁴ S. A. Baber, Z. Sarwar and Q. Safdar, 'Networks of Learning: Professional Associations and The Continuing Education of Teachers', in Retallick, J. and Farah, I. (Eds). *Transforming Schools in Pakistan: Towards the Learning Community*. Oxford, University Press, 2005.

engaging schools into great conversation. The initiative was followed by emergence of a cluster of associations.

Recently, with generous support of AKU IED and the Aga Khan Foundation Pakistan, these associations have established a formal networking, namely, the Professional Teacher Associations Network (PTAN) of seven voluntary clusters of associations striving to achieve the self motivated school improvement initiatives in a variety of disciplines. These associations are:

- Mathematics Association of Pakistan (MAP)
- Science Association of Pakistan (SAP)
- School Headteachers Association for Development of Education (SHADE)
- Association for Social Studies Educators and Teachers (ASSET)
- Association of Primary Teachers (APT)
- Pakistan Association for Inclusive Education (PAIE)
- Health Education Association for Learners/Educators and Health workers (HEALTH)

These associations collaborate with each other to utilize their human and material resources. They participate in critical professional dialogues once a month on Saturdays including summer session/short courses, Olympiads for children, symposium for teachers, conferences, seminars for stake holders (parents, policy makers), participation in critical dialogues in schools, etc.

The experience of such collaborative efforts in schools in Pakistan has demonstrated that these professional discourses have enabled the personified schools to transcend practical actions by asking critical questions in the ethical and moral dimensions through conversation. Though, there is no place of hierarchy in such conversations, as any controlling authority may hinder the free expression of thoughts and issues, however, research studies⁵ conducted in the context of Pakistan, suggest that the school leadership may facilitate the process as a first step to set the norms of such conversation. Nevertheless, it is not an individual activity but a collaborative thinking of key stake holders which bring new insights about situations, beliefs and values, through mutual support. Conversation helps stakeholders to move and form the realm of private and hidden dimensions of 'self' as referred by Joharry and creates level of understanding about constrains of

⁵ T. Simkins, C. Sisum, & M. Memon, 'School Leadership in Pakistan: Exploring the Head Teachers' Role, *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 14:3, pp.275-91.

one another's practices. Once they identify the core issues, they try to address them with the spiral and the cyclic approach of action research as introduced by Kemmis and Mc Taggart,⁶ i.e. plan to address the problem, act on it, observe the change, reflect on what happened and why and then, re-plan and re-act. This is a slow process evolutionary, however, focusing on the most significant issues emerging from their contexts has helped schools as moving and collegial schools.

Critical conversation – an endless agenda

The agenda is endless. Because its nature is exploratory, it's meaning and methods continue to unfold and discover the 'undiscovered'. The challenge is that it requires considerable time, efforts, talent and commitment. In today's school system, teachers' work load, pressure of external accountability and appraisal and expansion of curricula in schools, make it difficult to find time and energy to participate in such voluntary dialogues. However, the schools which have introduced some initiatives in this regard have experienced the power of critical conversation to change their beliefs and practices. They have found focus, meaningfulness, efficacy, determination, and self control over their work, which has led them to grow and develop intrinsically. They feel a sense of personal worth, ability and power to control and improve the situations in their work. This psychotherapy of engaging them in critical conversation has helped most of them to be responsive and creative to address the issues collectively which are the core values of improved schools.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is important to understand that today the most crucial dimension which is missing in human kind is our ability to talk together about subjects that matter deeply to us. Schools are not exceptional; they are the integral part of the societies in which we live today. This attitude of isolation and ignorance has formed a deep and pervasive flaw in whole process of education and school improvement.

The current proposal for encouraging schools to participate in great conversations may therefore be viewed as the niche for school improvement as such initiatives, though small in scale, have proved to provide a sense of increased harmony, teachers' fellowship and creativity in schools in Pakistan. Although such initiatives at the early stages often

⁶ S. Kemmis, R. McTaggart, and J. Retallick, *The action research planner*, 2nd ed., Revised, Aga Khan University Institute for Educational Development, 2004.

lead to frustration but one should not undermine the value of building human relation in schools. It is also important to understand that in all human dynamics, facing frustration is normal and inevitable. However, through strong level of commitment and continuous struggle to fight against ‘ignorance’ and ‘apathy’ in schools, this will lead us to sustainable school improvement.