

2016 International Essay Contest for Young People

【Youth Category – Honorable Mention】

Building the bridge 100 meters above
- Through Education with Humanity
(Original)

Syeda Zeenat Junaid

(Age 24, Pakistan)

Lyari Nadi- the 'underworld'. It was originally a stream off the mighty River Indus- an idyllic picnic spot 30 years ago. Today it is home to garbage galore, mud huts and naked children playing.

I, volunteering at the high school here asked my students, what they would like to be when they grew up. Astonishingly all wanted to be like the 'posh people in the supermarket above'.

100 meters above the river level, as if above all this misery, woods have been cleared and a newly built supermarket towers proudly with glass doors, air-conditioning and chic customers. People who built it and flock here are 'civilized', 'modern' and most importantly 'educated'. They have degrees to their names, jabber in English, wear western clothing- powerful symbols of elitism in my country.

With a pang I realized that children of Lyari Nadi were simply dreaming to escape the hardships of life around, through schooling eventually 'working up' to reach the elite supermarket level, the only visible horizon from their huts below.

Humanity's pursuit to happiness lies in Education. But when didactic education is merely a tool to secure safe socio-economic spots in a capitalistic, extractive system where dehumanizing disparities still exist, it perpetuates the very horrors we are trying to overcome on the first place.

Following this realization, I incorporated into my teaching two attitudes which I believe prepare students to become better human beings, not better human doers, to see education not as the means to an end but as a liberating ignition of all new means:

Cultivating a Culture of Curiosity

At varying levels of our educational journey we are trained to keep perspectives, intellectual rigor, emotional energies focused to specific, 'practical' fields. 'Jack of all trades is Jack of no trades' is the common wisdom. I believe this leads to lifelong sensory deprivation. It engenders fear of unknown and prejudices.

A curious mind plays with kids of other tribes, explores music of other genres, recognizes the common life themes in Celtic folklore or among Tanzanian fishermen. We realize that in our human struggles, emotions and instincts, no matter how foreign and incomprehensible a distant culture appears to be, we are still a common body.

Field trips at local planetariums sparked in the kids a new perspective- 100 meters distance between 'them and success' was nothing before the majestic vastness of the universe. Upon returning, some expressed their wish to translate astronomy literature into their local languages, so that they could communicate their wonder for Andromeda Galaxy and black holes to their community.

I trust, a curriculum appreciating world history and arts, natural sciences, literature and languages not only educates our souls, helping us become sensitive, respectful world citizens, but also broadens our horizons to new heights. Our critical thinking skills, creativity and spontaneity in the most unforeseen, distant scenarios are honed. External limitations are no longer intimidating. We feel more empowered in our humanity, as we become more aware of it. This leads to-

Interaction with the Environment

John W. Gardner - Much education today is monumentally ineffective. All too often we are giving young people cut flowers when we should be teaching them to grow their own plants. On studying Hook's law my class and I experimented with tensile strength of local fibers. With the extracted knowledge, parents of some kids initiated to craft rugs out of them. For the first time these rugs were introduced at a stall next to the supermarket above and were enthusiastically purchased.

In drawing competitions I encouraged my students not to draw the generic idyllic scenes, but to embrace their individuality, to express their impressions of a polluted stream. These sketches got published in local newspapers and gently reminded people of their part in ruining communities when they dump wastes in rivers.

With confidence in intrinsic abilities and resources and respect for other lives that accompanies an open mind and heart, we discover novel ways of applying our knowledge and skills that are in harmony with the ecosystems around us. Education's role is not to train us into specific cogs in the wheel for our survival, but to liberate us to be the gears of a better philosophy for tomorrow.