

A case for promulgating ethics education in Pakistani schools

Anika Khan

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Enter a school in Pakistan and often, you see wall displays communicating messages about good character and values. But when you look at the curriculum of most schools you discover a void: ethics as a subject is missing from classrooms.

In 2007, an ethics syllabus was introduced in the National Curriculum for non-Muslim students as an alternative to Islamiyat. Ten years later, very few public or private schools actually offer ethics so hardly any Muslim and few non-Muslim students have access to ethics education.

In fact, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa online school curriculum no longer includes an ethics syllabus, while the Punjab Textbook Board's curriculum includes ethics as an alternative to Islamiyat for non-Muslim students, an approach that in itself is debatable.

The slow process of incorporating ethics into schools makes it clear that ethics comes low on our list of educational priorities. A recent [article](#) in *Dawn* referred to the kind of ethical problems that can arise because of the lack of exposure to ethics education in medical colleges.

This becomes an even more pressing issue in the context of school education where young students are faced with ethical dilemmas not only in the physical world, but with unprecedented problems related to cyberbullying, appropriate boundaries of interaction on social media and the violation of privacy.

While government curriculums do make (half-hearted) attempts to incorporate ethical values into some subjects, the style is often didactic and the content is limited. A secondary problem is the way in which ethical content is actually taught to students.

In most Pakistani schools, Islamiyat classes are supposed to deliver lessons that build character and teach ethical values. In actuality, the teaching of religion is fraught with the same kind of pedagogical problems that affect our teaching of other subjects which is based on rote learning and discourages enquiry and critical reflection.

A pilot study conducted by me in a local school showed that teachers of Islamiyat, with perfectly good intentions, focused more on teaching factual information and religious rituals and paid far less attention to the ethical values that characterise Islam, such as courage, wisdom, temperance, compassion and, above all, justice.

While this was a limited study, it is likely that the teaching of religion across the country similarly lacks a focus on ethical content.

Some educators have argued that religion does not have to be part of the discussion on ethics in Pakistan, but I find this viewpoint myopic. Religion is important to most Pakistanis as the medium through which they make sense of life.

My experiences in teaching ethics to students and working with teachers in Pakistan has shown that religion often enters discussions spontaneously because it is the lens through which children and teachers will often view a problem to understand the right or wrong of it.

But let me add a caveat here: Religion is important as a source that can lead to the development of a virtuous character. But rationality and moral reasoning are also important to cultivate for thinking about ethical issues.

Religion teaches us to treat others fairly and to develop virtues like honesty and compassion. Rationality helps us analyse social practices and assess whether they are just and fair.

Humans have many aspects and a holistic education addresses all of them and what we are talking about here is not separating the two strands of virtue and reasoning but bringing them together to address the whole individual.

The question then is: How can we bring ethics into schools in ways that encourage children to develop good character while simultaneously learning how to reason about difficult issues?

In my opinion, an ethics syllabus that is merely theoretical and disconnected from lived realities may not be very effective. In fact, it may give rise to the same phenomenon of rote learning without understanding to get ‘good marks’, something that we witness in other subjects in so many of our schools.

While learning by rote can admittedly be useful if we are memorising the multiplication tables or a verse from the Quran, ethics is one subject in which there should never be rote learning.

At a school level, ethics education should incorporate discussion on issues such as bullying, honesty, civic responsibility, environmental degradation, and the dilemmas associated with technological and scientific advancement.

While examples from the sources of religion and culture can be used to emphasise virtuous conduct, children should simultaneously learn to identify ethical concerns and reflect on them.

The key here is to let children’s voices be heard freely in non-incriminatory classrooms where they are not punished for their temerity in asking questions or in disagreeing with the teacher’s viewpoint.

It is only then that students can think critically about social issues and recognise the ethical dilemmas that we encounter in our daily lives: For instance, why it may be better to fail honestly than to cheat to get the grade we want, or why sharing someone’s pictures online to ridicule them can amount to cyberbullying.

Ethics is so much a part of our lives that it need not necessarily be brought into classrooms through the agency of a special syllabus but can also be incorporated into discussions across the curriculum.

School environments can foster ethics through teachers who role model ethical behaviour and incorporate ethics and critical thinking into discussions on diverse subjects including religion, science and literature.

Non-traditional methods can also work such as research on a burning ethical issue followed by script writing and dramatic presentations that highlight the ethical concerns. Building on classroom research and discussions, it may also be beneficial for children to exercise their ethics 'muscle' by volunteering for community work.

In whatever way schools choose to incorporate ethics, ethical discussions will stay with students longer if they are relevant to our own context and connected to the sources that give meaning to their lives.

Most importantly, children need opportunities for critical thinking and analysis that help them reason about the ethical aspects of our own social and cultural practices.

Will this solve all our problems and make us all ethical? Sadly, no. However, it will make young people more sensitive to ethical problems in society and more aware of their own responsibility.

It will also give them tools for looking 'inside' to examine their own lives and actions. As Socrates says in Plato's *Apology*, "The unexamined life is not worth living."

Anika Khan works as Senior Lecturer at the Centre of Biomedical Ethics and Culture, SIUT, Karachi. Her work at CBEC involves promoting ethics education in schools in Karachi, including schools in low income areas.