What Should We Be Teaching Our Students?

By Dr. Sakena Yacoobi

What should we teach students? What is the nature of the challenge facing schools today? These questions are central. While my views will draw from my experiences in Afghanistan, they can be applied to any school system in the world. After the years of fighting in Afghanistan, the country and its people were devastated. There were few schools; most women and children were illiterate. Hope was lost and trust dissolved. Communities had been destroyed and fighting was everywhere.

Faced with these challenges, I knew that education was the primary key to rebuilding our country. It was crucial to establish quality education systems that would enable people to grow and then change their lives. Because we live in a complex, ever-changing world, it is essential for students to develop critical thinking skills and the ability to solve their own problems creatively and collectively so they can be independent persons living in a cooperating community.

While we need to teach students core curriculums, I believe we also need to promote core values and belief systems that lead to peace and harmony. Students need this foundation to become morally centered individuals with a community focus and sense of responsibility. We are living in a world with people and nations at odds with each other. Teachers have an important role to play raising awareness and questions about values with their students. In Afghanistan, we at the Afghan Institute of Learning (AIL) believe that teachers need to ask students their feelings and ideas and promote values which lead to a peaceful and harmonious society. Examples of values that we ask teachers to encourage with their students include:

- Individual responsibility; accepting responsibility for one's own actions
- Opened-mindedness, including a healthy recognition of uncertainties of social and political reality
- Toleration of diversity
- Compassion and respect for others
- Generosity of self toward others and the community
- Willingness to compromise

We also believe that students need to be encouraged to have a spiritual or philosophical connection to something outside of themselves that promotes peace and harmony. This is their choice, but a strong belief system gives students strength to overcome obstacles and challenges in life.

So many schools focus solely on curriculums that they forget to spend time living and reflecting on strong belief systems and core values and implementing and utilizing those values and principles daily with students.

Additionally, students need the opportunity to experience and utilize what they learn. There should be outreach programs and internship opportunities in place for further development. Students should be given "hands on" experience that correlates with what is taught in the classrooms so they can implement their learning in a real world experience. There is no separation between learning and doing.

Envisioning the future of education and creating sustainable educational development is complex and directly linked to information technology. The pace of change is mandating that we develop faster, more flexible thinkers, multi taskers with broad understanding of a multi- faceted world. This brings ongoing challenges. Much of today's learning happens inside of a particular social context. Teachers need to broaden that context so as to incorporate other viewpoints, other cultures and values.

Teachers also need to bolster the social context of their classroom. When a classmate asks a question, the whole class learns. When one student laughs at a teacher's joke, all the rest of the students perk up. These are pieces of a learning environment that may disappear if the learning process becomes too hyper-individualized and too much of a one-person experience and students see themselves as learning for and by themselves. Advancements in technology has broadened the types of training methods we can use. As teachers, we use technology as an avenue to enrich the students with progressive learning methods. As with anything else in life, we need to find a balance. Technology is not to be used to remove face to face interaction and student to student contact. When technology is used properly, it can enlighten students with a broad spectrum of learning that has endless possibilities.

The challenge of balance between core curriculums, technology, core values and strong belief systems will always be there and there are ever changing variables. However, the foundation of learning begins with core values and strong belief systems and are the constants. Teachers remain pivotal in children's live having multiple roles, they are guides and coaches in education and in life.

Dr. Sakena Yacoobi is Founder and CEO of the Afghan Institute of Learning (AIL). AIL is a groundbreaking, grassroots organization, providing education, training, healthcare, legal assistance and emergency aid reaching 13 million Afghans since 1996. AIL is empowering women, children and communities to live harmoniously and peacefully. She also established 4 private schools, a radio station and a hospital in Afghanistan. Born in Herat, Dr. Yacoobi earned a bachelor's degree from the University of the Pacific and master's in public health from Loma Linda University. She has received many honors and awards, including six honorary doctorates.