

Breaking the Silence

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When I joined a public sector college as a lecturer in Education, I was brimming with ideas. I wasn't even aware that my ideas would be considered so new and revolutionary in a college not so far from my alma mater, where I learned these teaching strategies.

I designed my courses, Seminar in Psychology and Seminar in Curriculum. I also added seminars as a course requirement, in which students have to take a burning issue related to their particular course and research that topic through literature review, gather data through questionnaires and interviews, design logs, pamphlets, brochures and banners, invite guests from the relevant field and engage the media. Until then, these courses had not been planned in such a manner by instructors. Classroom presentation was the more popular format among my colleagues.

This novel idea was a problem for my colleagues and the administration. Some popular comments about my work were: Who ever heard of a seminar at this level? What is Ms. Misbah thinking? Why is she involving her students in such a tough task? This is so irrelevant for pre-service teachers (students). What a waste of students' time and money!

What made matters worse was that I encouraged my students to plan their seminars around sensitive topics such as sexual harassment in the work place, depression among eunuchs due to society's attitude, suicidal ideation among students, the role of punishment in learning. Everyone had a problem with that__ my colleagues, the students' parents, the college administration_ everyone, except the students because I had created a vision in them. The young minds were fertile ground for these ideas to take root.

Starved for a chance to express themselves, to do some research autonomously, to be heard, my students jumped at the opportunity. Even if I had wanted to back-track, my students were not to be deterred. Not a single one of them.

Huma was one of my students working on the issues of eunuchs. Her mother came to see me one day. She was very disapproving of the whole idea. I tried to help her understand that we are not promoting eunuchs but only trying to create understanding and sensitivity towards a segment of our society that already exists. She did not see it that way. She didn't want such a taboo subject on her daughter's resume. I finally gave in and agreed to switch Huma over to another group.

Huma was of another mind. When I told her of her mother's concern and tried to change her group, she vehemently refused, saying she had done all the spade-work for the seminar.

It was the day of the seminar. We had invited people from the media and the leader of the eunuch community in Rawalpindi. The whole college community turned up, some out of genuine interest and some to witness what they thought would be a total fiasco.

The event was a total success.

When the leader of the eunuch community came on stage and gave a speech, he moved everyone in the audience with a description of his community's problems. He was so moved he didn't know what to say "I have been invited to functions just to dance and sing but I was never... no one from our community was ever invited before on an educational platform like this, no one has ever given importance to our community, but I

am very thankful to the instructor and her students who did this great job by highlighting our problems”. He was overwhelmed with emotion.

All my critics were silenced.

It wasn't I as a person but a mind-set that had been victorious that day; the mind-set that believes in talking about issues in order to find their solutions, the mind-set that trusts young people's talent and respects their opinions.

Today, the new director of our college specially requests me to arrange these seminars.

I had taken a risk by opening up taboo subjects, by stepping back and allowing my students to take center-stage, even by pulling out boxes of the packed multi-media projector from the college cupboards. Nobody knew how to use the machine. Nobody wanted to learn and take the risk of damaging it. Except me. I called up the dealers of the machine and requested them to come and show me how to operate it, which they did. That was all it took. A little bit of effort and a whole lot of trust, in my students, and in the process of learning as a critical exploration.

These little efforts make a big difference. Taking this spirit to take challenges forward, my students arranged seminars related to different issues in their teaching practicum in different schools of Islamabad.

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