Dear Teacher,

By Subista Kayastha

This is for every child made strange by their own mind, punished for being a question in a world that only wanted answers.

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ABSTRACT

This research looks into the problem of student alienation in mainstream schools, with a special focus on primary schools in Lahore, Pakistan. The research applies workshop-based and artsy methods to show how harsh teaching approaches, focus on rehearsed lessons, and fearful classroom habits may make it difficult for students to pay attention mentally and emotionally. The study found that students' ability to express themselves truly weakens with each year they spend in school. Emotional expressions were open and honest in young students, compared to older students who spoke and acted as expected by society.

At a handicraft workshop for 1st and 2nd-grade students at GHS Chamru Pur, it was again observed that alienation occurs before grade 3, corporal punishment is commonly accepted, writing is not yet fully formed, and learning makes them feel fearful rather than curious. The study employs critical education theories by Paulo

Freire and Don Miguel Ruiz to claim that teaching in the usual education system steers children toward following rules instead of expressing themselves and enjoying learning.

Learning environments should improve by keeping things safe and open to emotions, giving space for new ideas, and listening to students. These changes are vital for students to learn effectively and become emotionally strong, think independently, and be aware of themselves.

INTRODUCTION

The traditional education system in South Asia, including Pakistan, continues to be structured around rigid hierarchies, standardized testing, and authoritarian classroom cultures. This system places overwhelming emphasis on academic performance and discipline, often sidelining students' emotional, psychological, and creative development (Shaheen, 2011; PRISA, 2023).

Within such environments, learning is narrowly defined as acquiring and reproducing information assessed almost exclusively through rote-based evaluations. Children are rarely prompted to think, talk or learn from their situations. Instead, teachers are made to use identical pedagogical methods, meaning they ignore the needs of learners and stop them from thinking creatively.

In this way, schools promote straight obedience, similar thinking and little room for creativity—making it easier for students to distance themselves emotionally.

1. This research started when I studied in Bhaktapur, Nepal, as a child and moved to Lahore, Pakistan, for my undergraduate years. Though geography and language were very different, both areas showed issues in common, such as stress for students, the muting of creativity, classes primarily based on grades and fearful environments. I thought my feelings were private issues, but they were part of a group experience.

   Student interviews in Lahore showed that many were not motivated to learn since they tried to avoid the consequences of performing poorly rather than genuinely enjoying the subject. These experiences reflect what scholars describe as the internalization of a "hidden curriculum"—a set of unwritten rules that shape student behaviour, identity, and self-worth (Heath, 1970; Bourdieu, 1977).

2. A central observation driving this research is that many students see themselves not as participants in learning but as passive recipients of pre-packaged knowledge. The teacher's authority is often absolute, and the classroom becomes a space where silence is rewarded and questioning is punished. As Freire (1994) argues in his critique of the "banking model" of education, such pedagogical approaches treat students as empty vessels to be filled with facts rather than as co-creators of knowledge.

   This model stifles intellectual engagement and discourages emotional investment in learning. Over time, repeated failure, public comparison, and lack of validation lead to learned helplessness: a psychological condition where individuals believe their efforts are futile, regardless of their potential (Psychology Today, 2019; NeuroLaunch, 2024).

3. The cumulative result of these experiences is alienation, a psychological and emotional

estrangement from one's learning environment and, in many cases, from one's sense of self. As Ruiz (1997) explains in The Four Agreements, children are domesticated into systems of fear, shame, and conditional approval, which they carry into adulthood. In the school context, this domestication manifests through fear of mistakes, reliance on external validation (such as grades), and suppression of inner voice and creativity.

brings emotional wellness, self-expression and learning enjoyment to the core.

4. In light of these conce rns, this study investigates how traditional educational practices in Pakistan contribute to the emotional alienation of students. Drawing on qualitative and participatory research, this study involves children in writing tasks, reflection sessions and informative interviews to discover how they handle what they learn at school.

Besides noting emotional distance in youth, the approach should support a kind of schooling that

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework: Alienation in Educational Contexts

Alienation in education refers to students' feelings of disconnection, powerlessness, and estrangement within the learning environment. This usually happens when schools emphasize being like everyone else and memorizing facts rather than expressing themselves. This type of alienation is more noticeable in South Asian contexts due to the widespread use of traditional teaching approaches.

Creativity Suppression in Traditional Classrooms

Shaheen's (2011) investigation into Pakistani primary education reveals a systemic undervaluing of creativity. While policy papers highlight the value of creativity, most lessons in classrooms are designed to teach by imitation rather than encouraging students to be creative. Because the school's policy does not reflect its actions, students feel their creativity is downplayed and distance themselves from the main community.

Cultural Constraints on Creative Expression

Ng and Smith (2004) examine the situation where creativity is actively fostered in Asian schools. According to the study, rules and respect for a culture's beliefs can limit new ideas. Due to their strong conservative beliefs, certain teachers tend to block creative thinking since they think it might lead to problems in the classroom. These cultural differences might make students believe they are being left out or ignored by others.

Systemic Challenges in South Asian Education

According to PRISA, education in South Asia faces significant challenges, including differences between genders, limited resources, and an old curriculum. In Pakistan, the introduction of the Single National Curriculum was meant to provide a consistent education, but it did not adequately address students' various needs. Such problems make students different from the norm feel even more lonely and out of place.

Impact of High-Stakes Examinations

French, Dickerson, and Mulder (2023) argue that schools should not rely too much on tests that could affect a student's overall grade. These critics claim that too much weight on memory-based tests causes students to get anxious and stressed. Relying more on final tests than on learning experiences causes students to view themselves mainly through their test scores, which can make them feel apart from the community.

Examination Anxiety and Student Well-being

Masoodi and Kales (2025) look into the emotional impact of anxiety during exams on higher secondary students in Jammu. Their research shows that many students have moderate to severe anxiety, leading to problems in both their grades and their happiness. Together with gender, family background and place of residence, these challenges further point out how there are many different aspects to student alienation in regular schools.

Emotional Disconnection and the Domestication of Children

The Four Agreements
Pedagogy of Hope

Don Miguel Ruiz explains in The Four Agreements that from a young age, humans are trained just like animals, seeking rewards and praise while avoiding punishment to fit in with the group. Ruiz says this process starts in the family and becomes even stronger in schools.

It becomes clear to children that if they want to be part of the group, they must obey, control their normal instincts and act according to other people's expectations. To go along, they usually hold back their true feelings and do what is expected instead. Domestication is a good idea to fit with the traditional learning style in South Asia.

Many times, teachers tell students to limit their creativity and free thinking by urging them to study books, obey teachers and be quiet. Education advises kids to depend on their school achievements rather than list to their own feelings. Gradually, students incorporate these rules into themselves, so they begin to push themselves to avoid failure, afraid that it will mean they are not good enough. Ruiz's theory shows us why many people who begin with traditional education feel separate from their learning and selves. They are made to listen less to their inner voice, ignore their creativity and use their success or failure against standards to decide if they are good enough.

The loss of personal freedom causes this alienation from academics, religion and emotions. Instead of questioning and curiosity, students listen quietly to the teacher's words. Moreover, Ruiz's idea that most agreements we make with the world are fear-based fear of rejection, fear of punishment, and fear of failure is reflected in the anxiety, shame, and emotional suppression experienced by many schoolchildren.

As a result of these agreements, kids turn into adults who carry trauma and find it hard to free themselves from the influences they face

in school.

Looking at this framework, we realize that traditional schooling often leads to strict thinking and, over the long run, cocooned emotions that often make it harder for children to excel outside the classroom.

Freire points out in Pedagogy of Hope that the "banking model" educational approach is unacceptable since it sees students as empty containers to be taught by the teacher. This approach means students listen and are not involved in their learning. Freire says this process stops students from exploring their thoughts and separates them from their education.

They do not see students as beings with knowledge and emotions; instead, their job is to memorize and obey directions and not question the usefulness of what they are taught.

Such an approach tends to result in students believing that what they think or go through is unimportant in the classroom. After a while, this situation results in people losing touch with their feelings, becoming insecure and having weak self-esteem. Students start to regard education not as something to help them improve but as something that challenges their ability to follow the rules. It becomes important to them that they do well in exams instead of having a strong connection with life itself.

The Four Agreements likewise show how rubrics used by society contribute to the "training" of humans, as Freire describes. In Ruiz's opinion, since childhood, individuals are influenced through rewards and punishments to form beliefs that cause them to fear and criticize themselves. In traditional schools, children tend to feel that erring is shameful, that success requires praise from others (in the form of high grades), and that slowly challenging the rules can be dangerous. Such fears make students reject themselves, not express what they feel and block their creativity, all of which add to their sense of isolation.

Freire and Ruiz show that this alienation results from what we learn and does

not happen automatically. The outcome results from education systems that aim to exert control and make everything conform to a single standard. Because of this, students grow up smart in school but sometimes feel lonely, cold towards people and distant from education.

He suggests reviving education by involving students in a discussion that leads to shared knowledge. On the other hand, Ruiz suggests letting go of old family traditions that weigh down on a person. Overall, their contribution supports giving students back their identity, freedom and emotional presence to overcome the adverse effects of injustice.

The idea of "cultural capital" created by Pierre Bourdieu helps gain more insight into alienation. According to Bourdieu (1977), schools value dominant groups' behaviours, speech, and beliefs but overlook those who do not share them. For students in Pakistani public schools from rural, working-class, or minority-language groups, their problems are usually due to their customs and ways of speaking being considered inferior. In this way, people may feel isolated and insecure, which are important signs of alienation. This theory shows that emotion and learning are closely tied together.

In Vygotsky's view (1978), people's thinking skills are formed through social experiences. If students are not emotionally attached or afraid to show their feelings, meaningful learning cannot happen. Under these circumstances, the emotional environment in a school holds the same importance as its curriculum in deciding students' achievements.

To sum up, the theories agree that mistakes within one person do not cause alienation but are the outcome of systemically prejudiced schooling systems. They explain that a significant reform effort is required, moving past teaching and facing school social class structures.

METHODOLOGY

The research was done using an arts-based method, observing and interacting with children. Its purpose was to analyze the connection between rigid schooling and children's feelings, imagination, and experiences at school. In this study, researchers conducted observations and interviews with primary-level classes in a government school in Lahore, Pakistan.

Research Site and Participants

I organized an organized public school where I teach in Lae. It was appropriate because the site is typical of South Asia's educational system and convenient for all participants. Students between the ages of 6 and 11 who were in Grade 1 to Grade 5 took part in the study. Every class comprised 35 to 45 students, and students of all genders participated in the activities. This study showed how children's development differs in the first few years of primary school.

Workshop Design and Procedure

The workshop was planned with two important stages meant to support students in expressing themselves and to observe any changes in their independence of thinking.

Phase 1: Icebreaker on Aspirations

At the start of the activity, students were asked, "What is your dream job for the future?" They were given the chance to project their ideas on the blackboard. This exercise aimed to learn each student's goals and observe how they responded individually and as part of a group.

Phase 2: Letter to Their School

In the second activity, students composed a letter meant for their school. Being an open-ended prompt, they could tell what they enjoyed at their school or what they wished could be different. The researchers wanted to see if the children could express real emotions and look for patterns in both language and tone as they advanced through school. Teaching was simplified, and students in grades 1 and 2 could sketch instead of write when assigned tasks.

Materials Provided

Students were provided with various tools to help them express themselves creatively and comfortably. These included:

- Blank sheets of paper
- Pencils and erasers
- Coloured pencils and crayons

These materials were chosen to encourage a range of expressive formats and reduce anxiety around writing, particularly for younger students.

Data Collection and Documentation

The data consisted of the following:

- Written responses on the blackboard from Phase 1
- Individual letters created during Phase 2

All responses were collected anonymously. Younger students were asked to draw self-portraits instead of writing names. Written data were later categorized by grade level for analysis. The researcher also noted classroom behaviours and peer interactions during the

sessions.

Teacher and Administrator Interviews

Informal interviews were conducted with the school principal and selected teachers to gain a deeper contextual understanding. These conversations focused on classroom discipline, student behaviour, pedagogical expectations, and perceived limitations of the current education model. Their insights were used to complement and contextualize the student-generated data.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical standards appropriate for research with minors. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and activities were conducted in the presence of school staff. No personal identifying information was collected, and permissions were secured from relevant school authorities.

FINDINGS

The workshop findings revealed several recurring themes illuminating the current educational structure's emotional and cognitive impact.

Fear of Humiliation and Group Conformity

During the aspiration activity, students often mimicked their peers' responses, frequently repeating popular choices like "army officer" or "footballer." Even when incorrect spellings appeared on the board, subsequent students copied them exactly. This behaviour highlighted a fear of being singled out or ridiculed for expressing something different, suggesting that the classroom environment may discourage authentic self-expression.

Decline in Creativity with Advancing Grades

A stark contrast emerged between the letters from younger students (Grades 1–2) and those from older students (Grades 4–5). The younger children's letters, though limited in writing ability, were emotionally

honest and specific. For example, one child said, "Miss Maria is nice because she does not ever hit me," highlighting how they felt without polish.

The style and what was shared in letters from grown-up students was usually repetitive and unimaginative.

Examples of what students say are, "I like that we have plants at school because they supply us with oxygen," and "I like my school because teachers are caring."

These repeated responses suggested that, over time, students internalized what they believed was the "right" answer, often suppressing their personal feelings in favour of socially acceptable ones.

Emergence of Robotic Expression

Being able to answer in scripted ways instead of figuring out the reasons behind a situation suggests pressure to obey and succeed in school. This type of writing, similar to what computers generate, showed how schools might lead students to conform to standard rules instead of staying true to themselves.

DISCUSSION

The research shows that student's involvement with the school regarding emotion and thoughtfulness improves as they finish each grade level. As students pass through the education system, the space where they interact transforms from a place to express themselves into a place where they respond in robotic and predictable ways instead of using critical reasoning or strong emotions.

Paulo Freire pointed out that this is similar to the "banking model" education, where students are only viewed as places to deposit new knowledge. Here, education focuses more on following directions and memorizing things than discovering new things.

As students copy incorrect answers because they fear embarrassment or penalization, the classroom mainly encourages conformity rather than allowing for new ideas. This idea matches Don Miguel Ruiz's explanation of domestication, where children

start accepting rules that force them to pretend to be others to be liked. After a while, this mindset leads to a fear-driven belief system involving fear of making mistakes, rejection, and not matching other people's standards.

Also, when comparing young students' emotional responses to older students' limited ones, being genuine decreases with age. This suggests that rather than maturing into more sophisticated emotional expression, students are learning to suppress their feelings in favour of producing the "right" answers.

Suppressing emotions is commonly seen as discipline, but truthfully, it shows that a child is alienated. This causes students to separate from who they are and how they learn and grow.

Because the curriculum is designed rigidly, students learn by repeating tasks, and there is much stress placed on testing, which makes alienation among students worse. The school system is not flexible for students'

diverse needs and intelligence but demands all students to be the same. Consequently, children who think in new ways or share their thoughts differently tend to feel ignored or unimportant. It does not just miss the chance to support them but actively shuts down their abilities.

Since authority is strongly linked to South Asian society, this situation is even more intense there. Teachers are rarely taught to identify emotional problems, and their work is mainly assessed on how well their students do on tests. So, the classroom's structure encourages students to conform and gives negative feedback to different people. Though these feelings may not be seen initially, they eventually result in inner disappointment, low self-esteem, and lasting insecurity.

We should also realize that schools teach students specific rules, norms and values without saying so, making up a "hidden curriculum." It does not only teach what children need to know. It gently passes messages about obedience,

respect, and the roles of different people and those who get noticed. In Pakistan's schools, students who are disadvantaged economically are commonly subjected to minor discrimination, for example, through less teacher attention, language problems or automatic placement into less important careers.

These exclusions make the emotional distancing students feel even worse because of the emphasis on rote learning. At the same time, classrooms are often the first place students experience shame and failure in an institution. Being scolded in class or made fun of for grades can gradually lower a student's self-esteem.

People in South Asia label these practices as "motivation," but they only lead to dread and suppress free expression. Overall, there is a generation growing up who looks at schooling as a process they should survive.

Educational alienation can influence someone's life far after they graduate from school. Many alienated students mature into adults who have a tough time believing in institutions, making decisions or trying new things emotionally or mentally. Many people raised in such situations grow up believing that their voices do not matter and that they should not be considered. As a result, students may have academic difficulties when participating in civic life, getting a job, or interacting with others.

CONCLUSION

This research proves that the traditional approach to education in several South Asian schools introduces emotional alienation in students. During the workshop, it was clear that students at the beginning of their education were interested and wanted to express their ideas, yet this enthusiasm was eventually exchanged for compliance. The loss of creativity and openness among adolescents highlights how rigid requirements in the system make students act more generally and less as individuals.

Classrooms are often transformed from spaces for curiosity into places where students fear failing and being ridiculed. As students measure their worth with high grades, consistent lessons, and teacher praise, they begin to lose interest in their own ideas and interests. This process negatively influences education and harms people's emotions, health, and long-term life.
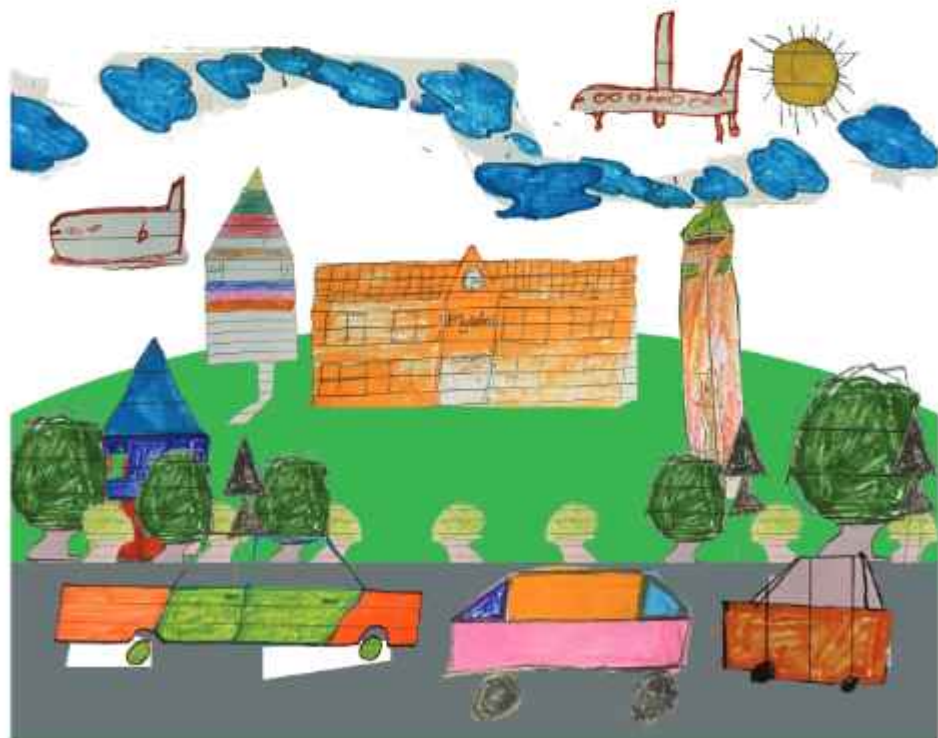
Recommendations:

Redesign Curriculum to Encourage Critical and Creative Thinking:

Shift your focus from recalling facts to being creative, analytical, and showing emotional understanding. As a method, you could conduct tests within projects, offer unclear tasks, and let learners partake in thoughtful discussions.

Teacher Training in Emotional Literacy and Child Psychology:

Help teachers understand when a student looks depressed, feels worried, or is no longer interested in class. Teaching spaces should be built to ensure inclusion, care, and emotional help as part of training.

Institutionalize Student Voice:

Include methods for students to express themselves, like offering them access to confidential forms, helping them organize student councils or giving them a chance to keep creative journals.

Reduce Reliance on High-Stakes Testing:

Carry out both assessment of skills and story-telling that highlight improvements, cooperation, effort and creativity over simply asking for correct memories in a pressured environment.

Promote Holistic Education Models:

Planning daily arts activities, physical education and lessons for skills and emotions is important to promote balanced growth.

Further Research:

Examine how not attending school can influence someone's mental well-being, academic progress and relationship with others. To sum up, ending educational alienation requires us to change more than the curriculum—it means we should review how we understand learning, success, and education's importance.

Focusing on empathy and honesty and encouraging students to act on their own helps schools transform from places of misery to where everyone is happy and can explore and learn together.

It is not only important for schools to focus on student alienation; the whole society needs to be concerned. If schools continue to suppress creativity, uniqueness, and emotional feelings, we may end up with students who can think but do not feel enough.

Because there is little room for imagination and creativity in areas like Pakistan, education must be based on a new direction in explaining learning and success. Policymakers ought to ensure that emotional well-being is considered in education policies. Emotional literacy should be introduced in the Single National Curriculum alongside other subjects.

Government teacher colleges should change their programs to include classes about working with traumatized students, how to build empathy and child psychology.

School evaluations should incorporate emotional and social development indicators—not just exam performance. Creating safe, expressive, and inclusive classroom environments must be part of every education policy conversation.

Lastly, students should not just be the subjects of education policy; they should be their co-authors. By institutionalizing platforms for student feedback and school councils, we can rehumanize education and rebuild a culture where learning is joyful, expressive, and liberating.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A:

Workshop Report –
Understanding Young
Learners' Perspectives on
Education
Workshop Title
Understanding Young
Learners' Perspectives on
Education
Location & Participants
School Name: Government
High School Chamru Pur
Location: Lahore, Pakistan
Grade Levels: 1st and 2nd
Grade
Number of Students: 30
Objective
To explore how young
children perceive their school
environment and what they
enjoy and struggle with while
assessing their capacity
for self-expression through
writing.

Workshop Structure & Observations

1. Icebreaker Activity: "Your
Name & Your Dream Job"
Task: Each student was
invited to come forward and
write their name and dream
profession on the board.
Observations:
Most students copied written
responses, showing peer
dependency and lacking
individual expression.

Only two students admitted
they did not know how to write
their chosen profession, which
revealed both honesty and
limited writing development.
This behaviour indicated
a strong tendency toward
memorization over original
thought, suggesting that
classroom culture emphasizes
early conformity.

2. Letter to the School Activity

Task: Students were asked to
write a letter describing:
What they love about school
What they do not like
Their favourite teacher and
the reason why.

Observations:

The concept of letter
writing was unfamiliar
and developmentally
inappropriate for most
students. Many could not form
complete sentences, while
some did not know how to
begin writing.

Most students defaulted to
talking when engaged, which
proved far more effective for
collecting meaningful insights.

Unexpected Insights from Conversations

1. Normalization of Physical Punishment:
Many students mentioned corporal punishment casually, without distress.
The behaviour was seen as a natural part of schooling—"something that just happens."
Many described their favourite teachers as those who "do not hit us."

2. Emotional Experience of School Life
Positive associations were primarily with non-academic time (e.g., playground, lunch break). Learning and studying were described as "difficult" or "not fun."
Emotional security was associated with kindness and protection from punishment, not with educational outcomes or intellectual curiosity.

Key Findings from the Workshop
Writing skills were underdeveloped for students in 1st and 2nd grades, making writing-based assessments ineffective for understanding their experiences.

Verbal expression proved more insightful than written responses, emphasizing the need for alternative, age-appropriate qualitative research tools.
Students normalized violence and discipline, which masked underlying fear and emotional disconnection from school.
Students' joy in school was linked to unstructured activities, not classroom learning—suggesting that formal instruction is not perceived as engaging or emotionally rewarding.

Implications for the Research Paper
This workshop reveals that alienation begins far earlier than previously considered. Even at the entry point of formal education, students:
1. Prioritize compliance over curiosity
2. Associate safety with non-aggressive teachers rather than with teaching itself
3. Struggle with written self-expression, yet can articulate deep emotional insights when spoken to with empathy.

Recommendation Additions

1. Introduce non-written participatory methods like storytelling, drawing, and guided play for early-grade emotional assessment.
2. Teacher training in non-violent discipline strategies must be prioritized.
3. The curriculum for Grades 1-3 should include emotional literacy and communication skills alongside foundational academics.

This image shows a collection of illustrated books created by children during a workshop in Nepal. I asked them to express any problems they faced in education and to come up with their own solutions. The books revealed deep struggles. Some children shared how hard they tried in studies but kept failing, others wrote about feeling lonely, and some even mentioned being body shamed at a very young age. But despite the seriousness of their problems, most of the "solutions" were not their own. They said what adults usually say: "Work harder," "Just go talk to someone else," and "Keep trying." This showed me that while the children were brave enough to name their pain, they had not been given the space to imagine real, personal solutions, only to repeat advice they have been told, even when it does not help.

For an icebreaker, I asked Grade 1 and 2 students, aged 5 to 7, to write their dream goals on the board. The first child said "army," and the next repeated it. Soon, nearly half the class wrote the same. Then someone said "footballer," and the pattern repeated. Even the same spelling mistakes were copied word for word. This image shows more than just repeated answers—it reveals that the children weren't unable to imagine different futures, but were afraid to. What looked like agreement was actually fear of being wrong or laughed at. Their dreams were shaped not by imagination, but by pressure to conform.

In this collage, students were asked to write anonymous letters to their school, sharing both good and bad things. While the junior-grade letters showed a variety of thoughts and drawings, the senior students, especially those in Grade 5, repeated the same phrases such as "I love the plants," "Trees give oxygen," and "The teachers are very nice."

Ironically, the school has barely any plants or trees. This uniformity reveals that as students move to higher grades, their creativity and authenticity begin to fade. What was meant to be an honest expression turns into a performance, showing how older students have already learned to say what is expected rather than what they truly feel.