



"Democracy must be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife."
— John Dewey

Six hours.
One room.
Fifteen countries.

Young delegates sat across from one another inside a simulated United Nations Security Council chamber, negotiating one of the most complex geopolitical tensions of our time: the Iran–United States conflict and its implications for global peace and security.

As I delivered the closing remarks at the Model United Nations hosted by [Alkhidmat Foundation Pakistan](#) on 25 April, 2026, I watched students navigating diplomacy, disagreement, alliances, national interests, and moral complexity under pressure.

What unfolded in that room was not merely a student activity. It was democracy in rehearsal.

Students were not memorizing textbook definitions of diplomacy. They were experiencing the intellectual and emotional discipline required to negotiate across difference. They were learning that leadership is not simply about speaking louder than others. It is about listening carefully, thinking critically, negotiating responsibly, and responding thoughtfully in moments of tension and uncertainty.

As someone who has spent years in debate arenas, Model United Nations chambers, educational institutions, and leadership spaces, I found myself reflecting on a deeper question:

Can schools truly prepare future leaders if students are never taught how to think, dialogue, disagree, and negotiate with intellectual responsibility?

This question has shaped much of my own journey. Because long before I became an educational leader overseeing school systems and teacher development, I was a debater.

And debate did far more than teach me how to speak.

It taught me how to think.



Debate Is Not About Speaking

One of the greatest misconceptions about debate is that it is primarily about confidence or public speaking.

It is not.

Debate is intellectual discipline.

It requires individuals to:

- think under pressure,
- analyze complexity,
- construct arguments responsibly,
- anticipate opposing perspectives,
- and most importantly, listen across disagreement.

In many ways, debate teaches something modern societies are increasingly losing: the ability to disagree without dehumanizing one another.

This is why platforms such as Model United Nations matter profoundly in the modern world.

They teach students that global problems are rarely simple. Nations operate through competing histories, interests, fears, and priorities.

Diplomacy requires intellectual humility—the recognition that no single perspective fully captures reality. Yet many education systems still prioritize memorization over dialogue. Students are trained to answer questions but rarely to interrogate them.

They are taught to reproduce information but not always to engage critically with ideas. They are prepared for examinations, yet often receive little preparation for democratic participation.

This raises an important educational question:

What happens to democracy when students are never taught how to disagree respectfully?



The Debate Arena That Shaped Me

My own journey in debate began years ago across national debating and declamation platforms in Pakistan.

Over time, I participated in and won more than thirty national-level debate and declamation championships across universities and institutions throughout the country. I was honored to receive the [Higher Education Commission Debating Shield](#) twice—one of Pakistan’s most prestigious national debating recognitions.

At the headquarters of the [Higher Education Commission](#) in Islamabad, the names of leading national debaters are engraved on stone as part of the institution’s debating legacy. Seeing my own name among some of the country’s most respected speakers and thinkers was deeply meaningful—not because of recognition alone, but because it symbolized years of intellectual struggle, discipline, preparation, and persistence.

Another defining milestone in my journey was receiving the [Madar-e-Millat](#) Award as one of the youngest recipients in Pakistan. What made that moment especially humbling was standing among individuals who had already become giants in their respective fields, including figures such as [Dr. Abdul Qadeer Khan](#) and [Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi](#).

At the time, I did not fully understand the significance of these moments. But looking back now, I realize debate was quietly shaping something much deeper than achievement.

It was shaping courage.

For many young women, particularly in deeply traditional societies, public speaking itself can become an act of resistance. Debate chambers taught me how to occupy intellectual space confidently, how to defend ideas under scrutiny, and how to speak even when uncertainty or fear was present.

Long before I understood concepts like “breaking the glass ceiling,” debate was already teaching me how to challenge invisible boundaries.



Ten Minutes That Shaped a Life

Over the years, I have delivered hundreds of hours of public speaking.

But I have come to believe something important:

Not all minutes are equal.

There are perhaps a few defining moments in life that quietly shape everything that follows.

For me, one such moment came when I was selected for a prestigious [U.S. Department of State International Visitor Leadership Program \(IVLP\)](#) for emerging global leaders. The experience took me across ten American States, exposing me to universities, governance institutions, policy environments, and leadership conversations that expanded my worldview dramatically.

I walked through institutions such as University of Maryland, Texas A & M, University of Iowa, and Columbia University. I visited Capitol Hill and the Pentagon and observed how leadership, policy, and diplomacy function at national and international levels.

One of the defining moments of that experience came during a debate competition held at the Pentagon Headquarters, where I represented Pakistan alongside my Indian counterpart in a discussion surrounding Pakistan's nuclear program.

Winning the debate mattered less than what the moment revealed to me.

I realized that leadership is not simply about defending positions aggressively. It is about articulating ideas responsibly while carrying the weight of representation, identity, and national perspective.

But perhaps the most unforgettable moment of all came when I was given the opportunity to speak at the [United Nations General Assembly](#) session in New York.

Standing at the UN podium as a young Pakistani delegate, presenting Pakistan's position in a complex geopolitical discussion, I understood something that no classroom had ever fully taught me:

Leadership is not merely influence. It is responsibility. Responsibility toward truth. Responsibility toward people. Responsibility toward history. Responsibility toward the consequences of speech itself.

Those ten minutes of my life did not simply build confidence.

They expanded my sense of what was possible.



Leadership Beyond Institutions

Years later, during the COVID-19 pandemic, my understanding of leadership expanded again in a very different context.

I trained as a political volunteer with the [Liberal Party of Canada](http://liberalparty.ca) and participated in grassroots political engagement—door-knocking campaigns, voter outreach, public conversations, and community advocacy.

It was a humbling experience because it challenged another misconception about leadership: that leadership exists only on stages, podiums, or formal institutions.

In reality, leadership often unfolds quietly:

- in difficult conversations,
- in listening carefully to strangers,
- in community organizing,
- in policy discussions,
- and in understanding the fears and aspirations of ordinary people.

During this period, I also chaired a committee focused on advocating for accessible and reliable internet services for Albertans. In a world rapidly shifting online during the pandemic, the digital divide was no longer merely a technological issue—it had become an educational, social, and democratic issue.

This experience reinforced another lesson:

Leadership is not simply reacting to crises. It is anticipating them before they fully emerge.



What Schools Forget About Leadership

As I reflect on these experiences today—as an educator, school network leader, and mentor—I increasingly believe schools often misunderstand leadership development.

Many schools reward:

- compliance,
- certainty,
- performance,
- and memorization.

But democratic societies require something far more difficult.

They require citizens who can:

- think critically,
- listen deeply,
- negotiate responsibly,
- engage across ideological differences,
- and navigate complexity without collapsing into hostility.

And these capacities are not developed through passive learning environments. They are developed through dialogue.

This is why debate and Model United Nations matter so profoundly.

They teach students how to:

- articulate ideas,
- defend positions,
- question assumptions,
- tolerate ambiguity,
- and engage with perspectives different from their own.

In an increasingly polarized world, these may become among the most important educational capacities of all. Because societies do not fracture only from disagreement. They fracture when people lose the ability to disagree constructively.



Mentoring the Next Generation of Thinkers

Over the years, I have had the privilege of mentoring and training students in debate and [Model United Nations](#) platforms at institutions such as [The City School](#) and [Chand Bagh School](#).

Watching young students step into debate chambers reminds me constantly that intellectual confidence can transform lives. I have seen hesitant students become powerful thinkers. I have seen young people discover courage through argumentation. I have seen students learn empathy through diplomacy. And perhaps most importantly, I have seen students realize that their voices matter.

That realization can change the trajectory of a life.

Because education is not merely about preparing students for employment. It is about preparing them for participation—in society, in democracy, and in humanity itself.



The Crisis of Listening

One of the greatest crises of modern societies is not a lack of information. It is a lack of listening.

We live in an era that rewards:

- reaction,
- outrage,
- certainty,
- and performative speech.

Social media often amplifies speed over reflection and volume over understanding.

But diplomacy teaches something entirely different. It teaches patience. It teaches restraint. It teaches the discipline of understanding before responding.

The strongest leaders I have encountered are not always the loudest voices in the room. Often, they are the individuals who listen most carefully before they speak.

This may be one of the most urgent lessons schools need to reclaim. Because if education systems fail to cultivate dialogue, societies eventually lose the ability to govern disagreement peacefully.

And when dialogue collapses, polarization fills the vacuum.



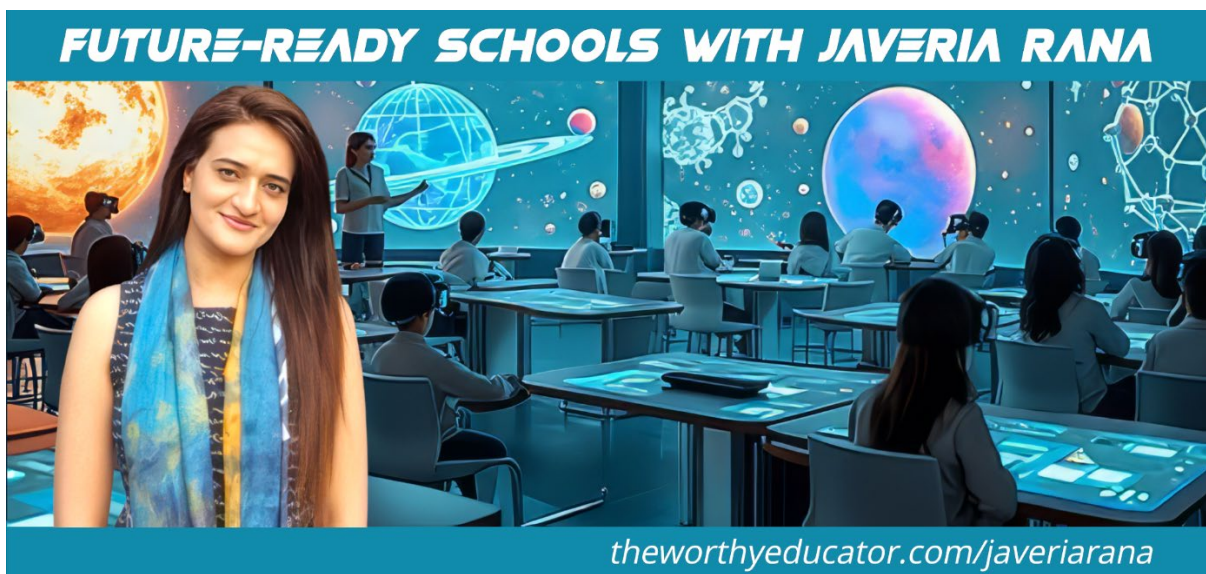
The Future Needs Clear Thinkers

As I concluded the [United Nations Security Council simulation](#) recently, watching young delegates after six intense hours of negotiation, disagreement, collaboration, and diplomacy, I found myself hopeful.

Hopeful because I saw students practicing something far more important than competition. I saw them practicing citizenship. I saw them learning how to think under pressure, negotiate responsibly, defend ideas ethically, and engage across difference. And perhaps that is the true purpose of platforms like debate and Model United Nations.

Not merely to create speakers. But to cultivate thinkers. Because the future does not simply need louder voices. It needs clearer thinkers.

And perhaps the future of democratic societies will ultimately depend not on whether students memorize the language of citizenship, but on whether schools create spaces where young people learn how to think critically, listen deeply, negotiate responsibly, and engage with the world beyond themselves.



[Future-Ready Schools](#) is an exclusive feature by Javeria Rana on The Worthy Educator. Check back regularly for new insights on education transformed!