[Dr Ayesha Razzaque](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/dr-ayesha-razzaque)

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**Newton in a dupatta**

Some time back, a publisher submitted a science textbook to the Punjab Curriculum and Textbook Board (PCTB) for review and approval for use in schools. On one of the pages was a picture of Sir Isaac Newton next to a tree, depicting the scientific legend of the moment an apple fell from the tree that would inspire him to discover the law of gravitation. In that picture Newton was shown wearing a long garment and maybe long hair or a wig, as was fashionable for that era. One of the comments from the PCTB’s review of this book was that the ‘lady’ in the picture be edited to add a scarf on her head, so as to observe proper purdah. True story!

These are the kinds of comments textbook publishers receive and have to address when they deal with the PCTB. The PCTB has recently come under fire after a notification came to light that significantly raised review and approval fees for NOCs for private publishers’ textbooks for the new Single National Curriculum (SNC) of grades pre-I to V. The public outrage it generated even forced the federal government to step in and to direct the PCTB to revise and reduce those fees.

Consequently, on April 5, the PCTB issued yet another notification on the issue, superseding two previous ones. Even while having a third go at it, the PCTB managed to make things even worse by making the process of obtaining an NOC even more opaque than before.

It is already April, and instead of simplifying the process of obtaining NOCs for private publishers, the PCTB has expanded its process from a single review to not two, but three reviews. The first one will be conducted by a five-member External Review Committee. Most interestingly, the notification explicitly states that the unspecified charges ‘will be settled by the concerned publisher’. What exactly does that mean? What is this, if not an invitation to bribe?

The second review will be performed by the Muttahida Ulema Board. Will similar boards representing other religious communities also be given an opportunity for review, or does the ulema board have a monopoly on the right to feel offended? The cost of this review also remains unspecified and is left up to publishers and reviewers.

The third round of reviews will be conducted by the PCTB’s own Internal Review Committee, for a nominal cost of Rs10,000 per NOC.

The PCTB also received a lot of blowback for explicitly denying private schools the use of textbooks other than those it will publish for the coming academic year. It ostensibly reversed itself on that decision as well, but has now set an unrealistic deadline, April 30, for the submission of manuscripts that have already completed the first two of three reviews. Publishers do not expect to meet this deadline.

The PCTB will take a month to conduct its own internal review and another month to issue an NOC. Even if anyone is able to meet the PCTB’s deadlines, the earliest they will receive an NOC will be May 31. The last date an NOC will be issued will be July 1. In either case, it leaves little time to print and distribute millions of books.

Supplementary reading materials, which were exempt from this review process in earlier notifications, are now also required to go through the same review process and will also require NOCs before use in schools.

Finally, according to publishers I spoke with, to finish the job and ensure that no school (public or private) can deliver above and beyond the SNC, Punjab has decided to explicitly disallow the teaching of computer studies, art, music, handwriting, drama etc. Their reasoning? “You will overburden children. The SNC prepared by the government is a well-balanced curriculum and enough for children at the primary level.”

On one hand, the federal government has been proudly touting the inclusion of 21st century skills in its primary curriculum and computer studies in its middle school curriculum, but on the other the Punjab government is claiming that introducing children to computers at an early level is overburdening the child. Thus, the SNC, long described as a minimum learning standard, has been turned into a “maximum learning standard” in Punjab, making its rendition of the SNC’s implementation the most regressive and chaotic.

Another issue that has private schools and publishers perplexed is that of language at the primary level. The primary level SNC requires teaching of only General Knowledge (in Urdu) from grades 1-3. At grade 4 the subject splits into Science (in English) and Social Studies (in Urdu). According to an earlier understanding, private schools and publishers had been assured that they could continue to teach Science (in English) as an additional subject in early grades, as they do now. The PCTB has reversed its decision and has informed private schools that will no longer be the case.

I have been writing about this government’s education manifesto since the 2018 general election. The issue began garnering attention about a year ago, when curriculum documents of Phase-1, grades pre-I to V, leaked into the public domain. Every unaffiliated member of civil society that has taken a close look at the National Curriculum Council’s work product identified most problems with the SNC’s contents and rollout we are witnessing now. Why is it that apparently the only people who are still defending the SNC are the people that developed it, but no one else?

Instead of fixing what was identified as wrong then the government kept gaslighting everyone. The federal government’s continued claims of having taken all stakeholders on board stands discredited as Sindh has opted out of the SNC and even madressah representatives are making noises to the same effect. Meanwhile, Punjab, which has embraced the SNC, has gone completely rogue.

The federal government has been deflecting and ignoring criticism from independent reviewers that the SNC is heavy on religious content. In another development about a week back, we learnt that, in response to an application filed by the civil society seeking implementation of a judgment passed in a suo motu dated June 19, 2014, Chief Justice Gulzar Ahmed made similar observations.

On Feb 8, 2021, the court ordered the Ministry of Education to ensure the SNC adheres to article 22(1) – which says that: “No person attending any educational institution shall be required to receive religious instruction, or take part in any religious ceremony, or attend religious worship, if such instruction, ceremony or worship relates to a religion other than his own” – and submit a written report to that effect which, on review, was deemed insufficient.

The ministry’s response was that “all teachers will be instructed to send students of other religious beliefs outside the classroom when such content is taught; and will receive alternative examination questions.” That is not a solution but a crude workaround. According to people present at the hearing, this infuriated the court which noted that unless the issue is resolved in a month’s time the secretary of education will be fired. Justice Gulzar also remarked that it would be better to go back to the curriculum taught in 1960, when he used to go to school, as it was better adjusted with regards to religious content. As of this writing, the date for the next hearing has not been set.

In its rush to roll out the SNC before the 2023 general elections, the concerned departments did not even bother to give basic instructions (such as adhering to the constitutional rights of minorities) to textbook writers whose job it is to translate the learning outcomes in the SNC into course contents. To top it off, the PCTB went a step above and beyond and has straitjacketed publishers and private schools imposing a curriculum when the very basis of it is being questioned by educators, civil society commentators and now the Supreme Court of Pakistan. To make matters worse (if that is possible) it added another layer of review by ‘Ulemas’ who, at least in my opinion, are not going to make the books more tolerant or diverse.

So, if you see Sir Isaac Newton wearing a dupatta in your child’s Science textbook, now you will know whom to thank.

The writer is an independent education researcher and consultant. She has a PhD in Education from Michigan State University.