**[More of the same](https://www.dawn.com/news/1657804/more-of-the-same)**

[Shazminay Durrani](https://www.dawn.com/authors/9018/shazminay-durrani)Published November 13, 2021

IN Pakistan’s grand assembly of education policies and promises, the question worth asking is: in a country where so much has been tried, why has nothing worked?

Theories abound when it comes to the determinants of quality education: teachers, curriculum, leadership, others. But a deeper understanding of the complexity of education delivery would tell us that such elements are connected in ways that reforming one necessitates some consideration of the other, and a serious review of the system within which they exist. To quote an astute headmaster: “you can get the best of swimmers, but if your water is contaminated, who will make it?”

Minimum or common standards that prescribe a core set of competencies can be worthwhile. But the branding of a ‘single national curriculum’ (SNC) that creates a ‘single mindset’ is worrying. The concern is around this desire for uniform thought. The concern is around this language of singularity. But mostly, the concern is around this touting of a silver-bullet solution. The hurrahs of fulfilled promises that meet political aspirations and mantras of newness mask real issues and create illusions of ‘the fix’. The problem is not just a binary good vs bad curriculum, but about its coherence to the system, and whether it can solve complex problems the way it claims.

Creating a ‘single mindset’ is worrying.

Let’s take the class element and let’s put it clearly: mandating the same content to be taught to all students doesn’t remove class barriers. Public schools do not transform lives because they aren’t designed or meaningfully resourced to. Even with the SNC, elite crowds will send their children to schools where the teaching is better. Private schools will solicit NOCs to use different books. The power-divide in resources and quality instruction will persist. Students in the Cambridge/IB system will have to think, speak, and write in English. So will all those who appear for competitive exams (CSS, legal, medical). Needless to say that none of the limitations on private schools will enhance the quality of public education.

Take content. Contrary to popular belief, the SNC doesn’t mark a radical departure from previous content, barring the inclusion of 21st-century skills and a shift from rote-memorisation. Commendable (if it can happen), but board examinations will still assess students the same way. In case children do acquire critical thinking skills, they might not do well on exams designed to assess regurgitation. There is your mismatch.

Take language. The premier voices his distaste for the English language and laments the fetters of Western culture, but his system prizes that language. So either we change how English matters for upward mobility, or pay heed to how the language is taught in public schools so children have better opportunities. In either case, one ought to be more prudent than demonising private schools. It’s true that local languages don’t receive nearly as much value as they should. But that’s because local language development, both in terms of prestige and practice, hasn’t been an institutional priority. And this balance between holding on to our roots while participating in today’s global space is one that the system never sought to achieve. Policies that are driven by identity crises obscure how challenging it is to make language reforms work.

And finally, let’s look at those on the driving seat of our vehicle: teachers. Previous curricula also had benchmarks. Why didn’t we meet those? Was it just a content issue? Or were there systemic gaps? Truth is if individuals aren’t skilled, change won’t occur. A curriculum is only as good as the shape it takes in a classroom. How many workshops will train a cadre that enters unprepared? How can we motivate tea­chers to do that which their job doesn’t incentivise? How will provin­ces mysteriously be­­gin to do the un­-familiar?

The conversation around teaching draws pushback because it is a minefield of interests, but it requires serious debate. It requires a renegotiation of what it means to teach, and what we can learn from those who demonstrate the courage to teach. Because ultimately, teaching is an act of courage. It entails an ability to care and cater to the diverse ways in which children learn. In under-resourced contexts, schools should be a space for children to grow, to heal from the injustices of hierarchies, and become conscious adults. But let’s not discuss what really matters.

Disparate policy initiatives like the SNC cannot work. An intervention that targets online learning disparities would be a timely step towards mitigating the class gap. An intervention that coordinates provincial efforts to elevate in-service teacher education would be another one. All this to say that reforms need resource. Palliative measures can’t cut it. They can’t make a notorious system care for its children.

At best, the SNC does nothing. At worst, it absolves authorities from doing the real work.

*The writer is an education consultant.*

**Twitter:** [**@ShazminayD**](https://twitter.com/shazminayd)

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