**[Why just one textbook?](https://www.dawn.com/news/1656260/why-just-one-textbook)**

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THAT the bottom has dropped out of Pakistan’s education system has been known for many years. Efforts to change this have foundered because rote memorisation dominates the public schooling system while subject comprehension has hugely decreased. The current examination system merely tests memory. Primarily responsible for this dismal state of affairs is that only a single textbook is required for each subject. All public examination boards — and there are 25 of them — follow similar patterns.

Here’s how it works: so-called experts setting the board examinations are required to use only the prescribed textbook. As part of their standard operating procedure, they must indicate which page and paragraph of that textbook each question derives from. I first learned of this fact when participating in a meeting with officials of the Punjab education department in Lahore. Another participant, a grader of exams, concurred and said that the answer must exactly reproduce the referred text. A slight variant of the answer, even if correct, would earn no marks. This fact was reconfirmed multiple times after I participated in other meetings.

Today, there is much empty, deceptive talk about ‘learning outcomes’ by education officials. Buzzwords such as ‘comprehension’, ‘application’, ‘analytical ability’ and ‘creativity’ are bandied about. But in actual fact questions set in the terminal examinations are exclusively from the single assigned textbooks. In the model textbooks under the Single National Curriculum, end-of-the-chapter questions do no more than to ask reproduction of text for the answer. Teachers who prepare students for these exams urge them to memorise certain portions of that book. Tuition centres and guidebooks help the student further narrow down choices. By setting similar questions in practice sessions, teachers complete the cycle.

**Read:** [*Dissecting the Single National Curriculum*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1572130)

SNC reform has continued the disastrous policy of prescribing a single school textbook for each subject.

In earlier decades this was not so. Speaking in the light of my own experiences, in the 1950s and early 1960s there was no single prescribed textbook for a subject. Instead, authors were invited to write textbooks according to the prescribed curriculum, and the boards of education would grant approval to books satisfying broad curricular guidelines. Thus, for each subject several approved textbooks were available in the market and a school could freely prescribe one or two of them to students. The board examination was, therefore, not based on a particular textbook. Instead, exams tested acquired competencies.

All this changed after the Sharif Commission Report of 1959 which argued that production of textbooks was a complex task that could not be left to individual authors but, instead, must be assigned to a specialised body. It recommended the formation of textbook boards for preparing school textbooks. These would become the sole textbooks allowed in that province. Initially, an East Pakistan Textbook Board and a West Pakistan Textbook Board were established. After the abolition of One Unit in 1970, each of the reinstated provinces created its own textbook board.

With competition eliminated in one fell swoop, the provincial textbook boards became monopolies producing mistake-filled books with poor pedagogy and shoddy printing, graphics and paper quality. Books of the earlier generation had been much superior. This quality drop was bad enough but learning horizons were further limited by the new single textbook policy. Ideologically charged officials welcomed this as a way of making mind control easier. Instead of having to doctor the teaching of history in multiple textbooks, now just one needed fixing.

This change also corrupted examination patterns. Formative as well as summative assessment questions were restricted to the material in the textbook. Rote memorisation, tuition centres and guidebooks boomed. It was also an invitation to financial corruption.

**Read:** [*Bias in textbooks*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1594469)

Today, textbook authors are handpicked and paid handsomely. Worse, groups of authors band together and bring a new edition every year with only marginal modifications. Profits are huge since a single book is published in millions in a large province like Punjab. Every new edition means a larger financial burden on parents. Although the state has been providing free textbooks in public schools since the 18th Amendment, students of private schools following the state curriculum also need to buy newer editions every year.

An attempt to undo the menace of single textbooks was made in 2007 under the National Textbooks and Learning Materials Policy. This initially envisaged reverting to the pre-1970 practice of multiple books and would have downgraded provincial textbook boards into authorities for regulating textbooks rather than authoring them. Instead, authors and publishers would have been invited in open competition with several approved textbooks for each subject and grade. But pernicious influences mysteriously crept in during the later rounds of the policy drafts; only one of the approved textbooks would be used in all the provincial public schools. Vested interests had successfully subverted change, preventing it from happening.

Now, under the PTI’s Single National Curriculum the disastrous single textbook policy has been reinforced by the Single National Textbook scheme. The textbooks prepared by the Ministry of Federal Education, with all their errors and poor pedagogy, have been passed on to other provinces to print as the product of their respective textbook boards. Thus teachers and students will experience only one book per subject per class. Clearly, examination questions will also be restricted to their texts. Notwithstanding all the nice verbosity about higher cognitive skills, this is a further step backwards.

Incalculable damage has already been inflicted upon Pakistan’s young through rote learning. Their learning deficiencies show up in repeated surveys like ASER and NEAS, which show year after year that most of the students of public and low fee private schools are two to three years behind their grades in basic skills of language and arithmetic. They carry their deficiencies into their professional jobs, as is so evident.

The very first step towards improving education standards in Pakistan must be to end the single textbook policy, and to set exam questions from the curriculum-defined learning outcomes. This is not a revolutionary suggestion, it is simply a statement of the obvious — and a reminder of something that once was. Any government seriously committed to improving education must begin with this.

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