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**An equitable learning**

Nothing could be better for the children of our country, and for other people who live within it, than a learning which is at the same level for children from all income groups, all class brackets, and all ethnicities, regardless of where they live, or what their parents do.

Such learning is on offer in countries such as Finland and Denmark where the state pays for the entire schooling of the child from primary level to university and offers exactly the same classroom environment for every child. For us, of course, this is nothing short of a dream.

The kind of education offered at most government schools and many lower tier primary schools can simply not compare with the education offered at the best and most elite schools in the country, even though education at these institutions does have its faults. For one, it focuses on education alone and passing exams, which can put the child en route to a place at a big university, rather than a more holistic understanding of society, he or she lives in and important aspects of life, such as caring for others, kindness, and not simply giving marks but learning also to fail and to try one's best rather than ensure an ‘A’ grade in every subject, usually by attending tuition classes or the many tuition centres which have sprung up around the country after school.

The government's single national curriculum, or SNC is intended to be a step towards offering one level of education for all children. In this sense, it is a commendable measure and the books put out for the primary level are essentially not flawed with some content, which is somewhat superior to the books that they replace. But these textbooks still follow the deeply ingrained principle of rote rather than encouraging the tremendous capacity of a child to imagine and reason.

For the more elite schools and other ones as well, there is the question of whether children will be able to comprehend a system that forces them to study science, English and maths in English at the primary level, but then switch to Urdu for these subjects at the later level. This would simply create more confusion in a system while language is already an immense problem and children, except those attending the most elite schools, who come from homes where parents often speak fluent English, also struggle to manage the language to grasp even the basics of its grammar, and later on, at the matric level, to pass the mandatory exam in the language, which is necessary for them to go on to higher education. In many cases, a very large number of them are simply not able to do so. And the education therefore, comes to an unfortunate end.

Perhaps the first step to offering an education of value to all children in the country is not to make it essentially uniform, but to make it of a standard that meets certain marks. There are landmarks set out globally for these standards. We need to understand why our extremely intelligent and talented children do so badly at reading, writing, maths, and other basics at both the primary and secondary level. Studies by private organisations have shown children in class 5 unable to properly read a sentence from Urdu textbooks intended for class 3 or even a lower grade, while the same applies to English language textbooks or mathematics questions.

In this situation, it is obviously not difficult to understand the problem lies not with the children, not necessarily with the curriculum itself, but with the kind of teaching they are offered. In our country, teachers have gradually sunk to the very bottom of the professional pyramid. They are regarded as lowly persons with little hope in life and fall far below the level at which doctors, lawyers, chartered accountants, or other professionals stand. There has been a drastic change from the time when teachers were respected by the students and parents. And, of course, the difference is extreme when compared with Scandinavian countries where teachers are often the best paid professionals in that country, or match the salaries earned by other top earning professionals.

In the first place, this needs to change. Every classroom must have a qualified and well-educated teacher familiar with teaching children and the expertise which goes with it. Parents are eager that their children learn English to gain educational opportunities, but teaching standards can simply not offer them even the basics in the language because the teachers themselves are not able to grasp it or fully understand how to impart the grammar and the nuances that the language comprises. This has changed over the years and it can sometimes be noted, at least in anecdotal evidence, that those from a higher age group who attended government schools speak and write in better English than children who are today studying in either lower-tier private schools or government schools, which have of course collapsed to lower levels than ever before.

If the government's goal is to offer quality teaching to all children, teacher training has to be looked at. This is not an easy task, but it is one that somehow has to be handled. Teachers must be given the basic skills they need to manage imparting education to pupils at every level. At the present moment, even schools which charge high fees and advertise themselves as English medium, and are considered elitist, lack teachers with the requisite skills to educate children at the levels that are required. Very often these schools will hire unskilled teachers with no qualifications simply on the basis that they speak reasonable English or have the right mannerisms to fit into an "elite" school somewhere in the country.

Change is essential. Indeed, it is something that we cannot wait for any longer. But the focus must be also on quality and not just similarity. There is no point in giving every child the same education if it is not, up to the expected standard. To achieve this is not an easy task given our present problems and our present difficulties with education receiving a budget far below the recommendation set by Unicef and other world organisations.

The education budget in the country is amongst the very lowest in the world and below countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. With this budget, we cannot really hope to educate our children or train teachers. A great deal more than textbooks has to change if the education system is to prosper and truly give children an education that can benefit them later on in life.

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