[**Learning from Afghanistan**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1649649/learning-from-afghanistan)

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WHAT did Afghan kids study after Mullah Omar’s Taliban were ousted in 2001? What was their school curriculum and, most importantly, how does it differ from PTI’s controversial Single National Curriculum (SNC)? When the Taliban government permitted boy-schools to reopen last week, these questions somehow popped into my mind.

Quick answers were unavailable because the Afghan ministry of education’s website has been taken down. But, fortunately, Google helped locate several hundred Afghan school textbooks on various [websites](https://eacpe.org/randomly-selected-afghan-textbooks/). Their printed versions had been distributed for free in schools. Textbooks are, of course, supremely important in developing countries as the primary vehicles for delivering education.

As an outsider, my initial expectations were low. Twenty-first century Afghanistan is largely tribal and backward, consumed by external wars but equally by countless feuds between families, tribes and religious sects. It has two national languages and six to eight regional languages. Wouldn’t Afghan education be utterly messed up? Inferior to Pakistan’s, the inheritor of a well-developed colonial-era system?

My assumptions were spectacularly wrong. Browsing the textbooks, I had accidentally stumbled into a world unknown to even qualified Pakistani education experts. While readers who know Dari-Farsi and Pashto (the primary languages of these books) should double-check, I think their opinions will not differ greatly from those, such as me, who can only comprehend these languages via written Urdu.

Though weak and corrupt, the former Afghan government has left behind excellent school textbooks.

First: I examined science books for classes 1-12. These cover mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, and computer science. Geology is taught from class 10 onward, an unusual addition which implicitly recognises that Afghanistan’s future lies in mineral wealth. The expositions are clear and pleasing with systematically organised graphs and coloured illustrations. Although the end-of-chapter problems are simpler than in O-A level books, the content and quality competes well.

Pakistani textbooks are very different. For years my colleagues and I have begged our education authorities to drastically revise locally published textbooks. All are faulty in content, poor in pedagogy and badly presented. The reader is invited to revisit my [Dawn article](https://www.dawn.com/news/1225815) of 2015 titled ‘Burn these books please’, a failed attempt to bring the Sind Textbook Board to its senses.

Such pleas proved fruitless and Pakistani school textbooks remain the world’s shoddiest. Dr Anjum Altaf, former Lums dean, recently analysed the Pre-I Mathematics Primer. Written under SNC guidelines, this was forced upon all schools, public and private, some weeks ago. To [quote](https://sindhcourier.com/single-national-curriculum-review-of-model-textbooks-part-iv/) from his five-part page-by-page review, the Primer is “woefully inadequate and someone would have to try really hard to make anything worse. It is an unforgivable cruelty to have children subjected to it although some would surely survive it”.

Second: Recognising Afghanistan’s sectarian divides, and to prevent every mullah going his own way, Islamic Studies (Hanafi) is taught separately from Islamic Studies (Jafari). Religious matters are strictly kept out of secular subjects but the religious textbooks are comprehensive. They teach Quran, Seerat-un-Nabi (life of the Prophet [PBUH]), akhlaq (ethics), tafsir (interpretation), tajweed (pronunciation), fiqh (jurisprudence), etc. Special books for use in madressahs cover usual topics in math, science, English, and world history. But they are simpler and less detailed than those for ordinary schools.

This two-level system — and keeping religious matters confined to religious books — makes sense. But Pakistan’s SNC goes oppositely: religious topics permeate books teaching Urdu, English and general knowledge. Quite senselessly, madressahs and ordinary schools are yoked together. While all students should know how the modern world works, 99 per cent of madressah students will never use math or science professionally. So why use the same books and force students to take the same exams? This means the PTI government is shooting for a lowest common denominator, lower than even the existing one.

**Read:** [*Kidding with SNC*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1631551)

Third: In seeking to build an Afghan identity in a linguistically diverse country, former governments hit upon speakers of one language being taught the basics of another. Dari/Arabic script is used in classes 1-12 for teaching Pashto through Dari but, equally, Dari through Pashto. For classes (1-9), Dari and Pashto are also used for teaching regional languages: Balochi, Uzbek, Tajiki, Turkmen, Arabic and Pashayee.

In contrast, starting with Bengali, Pakistan has discouraged local language learning from 1947 onward. Where can one find an officially published book using Urdu to teach Sindhi, Pashto, Balochi, Punjabi, Hindko, Seraiki, Brahui, Shina or Kashmiri? Instead, Urdu is imposed upon all. But, quite comically, most political leaders and functionaries have insufficient grasp over any one language. Inadequate self-expression leads to their speaking an unpleasant mixture of English and Urdu often called Minglish/Urdish.

One does not know who wrote and produced the hundreds and hundreds of officially authorised Afghan textbooks. Exceptions aside, names of authors are absent. But, with so much local content, they could not be foreigners. No credits or funding sources (was it USAID?) are given, perhaps for security reasons. To make the books more palatable, the stamped publication date for all books is set to Hijri-1398. This translates into 1978, the year before the Soviet invasion. But the high quality electronic printing technology suggests they are very recent.

Will the current textbooks continue to be used in Talibanic Afghanistan? Very probably, yes! For one, history textbooks soft-pedal Taliban atrocities from 1996-2001. For another, Kabul’s warrior-rulers cannot create quality education material into the foreseeable future. Thousands of diligent, intelligent Afghan teachers and editors worked hard to produce that which presently exists. Most must have fled.

The governments of Karzai and Ghani were weak and corrupt. Even if “artificially nurtured and pumped up”, they have left behind a solid legacy for Afghanistan’s forthcoming generations. One cannot dismiss it all as foreign aid because Pakistan too has been the recipient of American aid for most of its history.

This suggests that Pakistan’s leaders — the prime minister and his education minister particularly — should study the Afghanistan model before they further dismantle the Pakistani education system. Their replacement, the SNC, will reduce quality further while keeping educational inequalities intact. Pakistan’s participation in the modern world will nosedive. But our national leaders only give orders. They do not think, listen, or read. Twenty years later, Pakistanis will ask: what legacy did these people leave behind?

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