**Reservations about SNC**

BY Y A S M I N A S H R A F 2021-06-21

I AM an educationist with experience of teaching in primary grades for more than 20 years.

I have looked into the Single National Curriculum and the relevant Punjab Curriculum and Textbook Board`s (PCTB) books in considerable detail. It makes me sad to think of the future of the students now that most schools will be forced to study from the PCTB-prescribed textbooks.

I wish to express my apprehensions about the PCTB textbooks.

Firstly, the sheer volume of the subject matter to be covered in an academic year which is usually seven and a half months long is frightening.

For example, on average, there are about 23 chapters in the Urdu books of Grades 2 to 6. If we include the grammar units in the review exercises of each lesson, the number of chapters doubles to 46.

Generally, one 40-minute period in a day is dedicated to languages. Five periods in a week means that the teacher gets 130 to 150 periods in a year to cover the given content. That comes down to three periods for each chapter, which is obviously insufficient.

No one disagrees that the SNC Islamiat curriculum is massive, much larger than ever before. Nazra, that starts with the Noorani Qaida, has been extended from a few siparas to the entire Quran, accompanied by the memorisation of several surahs, ahadith and numerous duas, in addition to Islamiat books. The new Islamiat curriculum is likely to exert a lot more strain on primary students than before.

Religion is a very delicate matter. How an `aalim` from a madressah system or a teacher approaches a topic concerns me. It is yet to be seen whether guidelines will be given to the aalims and teachers to ensure the correct interpretation. One has, however, to give credit to the hierarchical and methodical compilation of the five books, as each book builds on the knowledge given in the previous one, unlike the random collection of topics in the science books.

Next, if we delve deeper into the content matter of general knowledge, we see that it lacks creativity, is repetitive, and does not encourage critical thinking.

Considering the average age of the children at this level, they are already aware of most of the topics included in the general knowledge books. They are curious little creatures. We give very little credit tochildren who by the age of five have already mastered a language, in many cases two or more with correct syntax without being tutored.

If the general knowledge textbooks are to serve as the foundation course for Science in Grade 4, they lack logic and ignore the mandatory principle of hierarchy that states that the introductory topic must serve as the basis for the next more complex topic. Missing links or mediatory pieces of information lead to confusion and is akin to climbing a ladder with missing rungs in order to reach the top of a tall building.

If on the other hand, the intended outcome of the general knowledge books was to create awareness of oneself and an understanding of others then too the content mat ter is lacking.

When studying a language, grammar supplies knowledge of the syntax and structure and litera-ture serves as a vehicle for a number of different things. Not only does it encourage students to appreciate words, literature helps them to grow as individuals and lets them develop a deeper understanding of the people and the world around them.

Urdu textbooks from Grades 1-5, however, lack depth and diversity. They do not encourage analytical thinking and individual perspectives. They lack the very aesthetics that make Urdu the ornate language that it is.

Interestingly, all the essays and stories in each book have been written by the same author. For example, one writer has written all the content of Grade 1 except for the poems, another of Grade 2 and so on.

One fails to understand why this was done.

Clearly, single authorship doesn`t ensure diversityof perspective.

For an enriching reading experience, excerpts from the writings of well-known Pakistani writers like Kishwar Naheed, Maqbool Jahangir, Imtiaz Ali Taj, etc. could have been included. As educationists, we all know that for any type of learning to happen, the students must first enjoy the materials presented to them; the rest will flow smoothly. Including a diverse collection will not only enrich the students` language skills but will also help them have a more rounded outlook on life.

One writer, one style, one agenda will inevitably get tedious and boring. No wonder, repeated surveys by National Education Assessment System (NEAS) as well as Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) and Alif-Ailan all show the widespread poverty of language skills among school students.

Moreover, instead of enriching the students` Urdu, the Urdu books seem supplement to Islamiat in defiance of Article 22-1 of the Constitution.

Inclusion of religious matter in general knowledge, Urdu, and English is worrisome too. Excessive religious content can inadvertently inculcate a sense of self-righteousness and lead to bias. Is this what we really want? The PCTB books may be perfect but the insistence that only these books or books with similar content be used by all the schools reminds me of these lines (translated) from Hukamnama by Javed Akhtar sahib: `Someone has decreed, that the winds confirm their direction before they even begin to blow.` Shafgat Mehmood and Murad Raas have reiterated that private schools are free to use materials of their own choice. But are they? Page 6 of the minutes of the meeting of PCTB held on Jan 7, 2021, states otherwise: `No private or public school shall prescribe or suggest any kind of book or reading material without getting its approval from the government or its authorised officers/ department/organisation and in case of its violation, all kinds of legal action shall be taken.

Most countries agree that curriculum outcomes should be decided by the state, but they do not insist on using only the state-prescribed or similar books designed by any single authority. The writer is an educationist.of perspective.

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