**Single national conundrum**

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In August 2021, schools across Pakistan reopened their doors to millions of children who had been at home for almost 18 months. The excitement of returning to schools, for many a safe space, was quickly marred with the announcement of the Single National Curriculum. Since August last year, there has been nothing to prove that this is a national policy – not that it matters; the seat of power, Punjab, is always the goal. And as for the curriculum itself, it quickly emerged the new offering was more of a conundrum. And remains so to date.

The confusion surrounding its implementation did not help generate support for it. Why did some private and even state schools refuse to adopt it? And on what basis was a five-year extension for ‘consideration’ granted to the madrassas?

Then came the content of the SNC-approved books. To their credit, the private-sector schools gave input but the Punjab Textbook Board had to add in their two cents not so much as academics but as policing to see if the content toed the party (read: religious) line. Books that were made for primary schoolchildren from years one to five were riddled with ludicrous content, clearly ostracised minorities and portrayed regressive gender roles while digital literacy consisted of mere definitions with a digital citizen being defined as one who uses Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp. There was zero skill development which could at least offer some foundation for further development at higher education level; zero emphasis on proper translations or language construction which made learning easy; from learning about world history, primary schoolchildren were now learning that being a good citizen means paying taxes.

This is not a curriculum for children aged 5 to 10. This is what the current elected officials believe in.

Despite research being offered by many including esteemed scholars such as Dr Rubina Saigol and Dr Pervez Hoodbhoy and many others, all of which fell on deaf ears, it was only until the matter hit the Social Media Courtroom did the director of the SNC begin to engage.

Sadly the communication was a one-way series of videos which do not offer much beyond carefully constructed gloss of what the content is: on paper, it looks good but then one wonders, why the urgency when the content is so problematic and why could it not be rolled out until all problems had been addressed? Who is gaining what from this?

A YouTube Conference by Nutshell Group did little to reassure; when your rural representative says that the SNC is designed to encourage entrepreneurship in the form of ‘dukaans’ in the local market, it is easy to say the SNC is anti-progress. Or when your federal minister says the SNC is to be adopted only in spirit but your provincial minister claims ‘mafias’ are meddling in the strict implementation in all schools, one wonders at whose mercy is these children’s future? Who is calling the shots?

A Twitter Spaces conversation with the provincial minister for education which resulted in hurt feelings on his part after being asked why digital literacy was not being given priority over ‘achi tarbiyst’. The minister was more concerned why wouldn’t we as parents want the government to teach our children tarbiyat? One can only marvel at the confidence.

But let’s take a look at the timeline of government issues and orders regarding the SNC post-August 2021.

On November 10, 2021 the School Education Department of the Punjab government issued a directive consisting of religious policing. Really, one can only marvel at the priorities when it comes to children. Religious policing over what they’re wearing, gender segregation and eradication of music was being given priority over what they’re learning.

On December 2, 2021 a national call via newspapers was also made by the Ministry of Education and Professional Training for textbook publishers, private school operators, individuals, companies, educationists, non-profit organisations was also made. A call was also made by the British Council for sectoral experts around curriculum development, textbook development and assessment. As per Dr Chughtai, the disastrous printing of those books was conducted by her predecessor but it begs to be asked: how did she not know any of this? At the end of the winter term, this is the call being made? Why was the SNC rolled out at all?

And now a term later, what was on offer to rectify this? A meeting with printers and publishers. To create books, not to rectify what was already out there, but for Years 6-8. This is where the horror began to set in. There is a difference between a publisher and printer. A publisher develops books, a printer prints them. In Pakistan, academic books by and large were either from India, Singapore and Malaysia amongst other countries. These books were then either sold as foreign books or mass produced via local printing and sold in the market. Publishers developing curriculum based books are a handful, with the major one being Oxford University Press.

To ask printers or even publishers who don’t have any connection with academia to set the curriculum is just unfathomable. The deadline was even more ludicrous – February 2022.

On December 3, 2021 another directive issued that the SNC is a core curriculum and schools are able to add on any books they like. Books are not created overnight. A comic book requires great thought and careful consideration, these were academic books! Where were new books for primary schoolchildren to come from given how all previous books had been scrapped?

Basically, the SNC grossly undermined itself. It emerged as a great equaliser and now it claimed that it offered the ‘minimum’ as a core. Throughout, the following countries were touted as examples of having single national curricula – Thailand, Finland, US, Hong Kong, New Zealand, Australia, Netherlands. First of all, our PM had clearly stated Western influence is bad for the country so why were these countries even quoted? Clearly, the memo didn’t make it here.

Secondly, aping these countries is one thing but do these countries also have a Rehmatulil Aalameen committee with ulema vetting books?

But alright, fine. The SNC is gracious enough to give space for additional content to be added to the core curriculum. Let us then revert back to the PM’s first speech post-election where he held up a brain scan of a Pakistani child and spoke about the severe malnutrition and consequential deficiencies suffered by Pakistani children which lead to them losing out in the human race. How were children going to cope under the SNC which expected them to learn a language in a format that was alien to them?

Let us also acknowledge the abuse that millions of children suffer at home at the hands of parents who beat their children as they desperately cobble together pennies to make ends meet and send their children to school hopelessly hoping for a better future.

It is no secret our culture promotes hitting and beating children as a means of discipline and with the core curriculum and additional subjects I shudder to think how our mentally deficient, malnourished children have suffered, at the hands of suffering parents. Girls especially were most vulnerable for they ran the risk of being kept at home if expected results are not delivered. Trauma is already embedded in the experience of being a Pakistani child.

On December 4, 2021 religious policing began in regional schools. On December 8, 2021 Dr Ejaz Akram was appointed as chairperson of the National Rahmatulill Aalameen Authority under the Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training. A hue and cry resounded at this appointment – after all, he was ONLY in charge of what young minds will read and learn.

Young minds will never get a shot at competing on the global stage because what they really need is to be taught to think, receive skill development and to appreciate and respect life, not be chained for life due to crippled learning and lack of skills.

A whole academic year has gone by in which children have struggled to cope with the language, forget learning concepts. A whole year gone after two years under Covid which further crippled any learning. How many more years will go by before we have the right curriculum which does justice by our children?

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