**Single national curriculum and diversity**

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Ever since the launch of Single National Curriculum (SNC) for pre-primary and primary levels back in August, 2020, there have been opposing views about it. Those in favor of it argue that it will help in creating a sense of unity and equality in the education sector of Pakistan. While those against it consider it somewhat unethical and against the basic spirit of inclusion.

Most of the time these arguments stem from lack of awareness or suspicions. I have written in a previous column that usually people tend to confuse curriculum guidelines with syllabus or textbooks. It is important to understand that all three are distinct. Many international countries also have national curriculum. Different terms like curriculum guidelines, core curriculum standards and minimum national curriculum are used internationally to describe national curriculum.

These curriculum guidelines provide essential information on goals and objectives for teaching certain subject areas. Theydescribe the minimum learning outcomes expected from students. A good curriculum guideline also provides examples of activities, teaching materials and appropriate learning settings. Based on the guidelines the schools have the liberty to select textbooks of their choice. Teachers have the liberty to adapt their classroom environment, teaching strategies and learning material according to the requirements of their students. More of less, all this information is embedded into the SNC. SNC is a public document now, need of the hour is to access it, read it and review it.

Difference of opinion is beautiful as it contains the seeds for growth and innovation. But blindly following views of others or criticizing for the sake of criticism does not lead us anywhere. All teachers, parents, educationists, administrators from education sector should go to the official website of the ministry of education and professional development and personally go through the curriculum. It is the right of all stakeholders to give feedback to improve what is meant to be our “Single National Curriculum”.

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Let us take the example of SNC for general science. The curriculum guidelines provide five key strands; life sciences, physical sciences, earth and space sciences, skills, attitudes and STEM (Science, technology, engineering and mathematics). Then it provides standards, which can be called the minimum standards for each strand, that is what a child should learn by the time he completes his primary education. This curriculum guideline also provides a structure how these strands can be developed across grades and gives examples of how scientific concepts can be taught and generalized using real life situations.

Those from education sector can relate to the concept of SLOs (Student Learning Outcomes). These SLOs ensure that minimum learning outcomes are achieved at the end of a specific education level. We can say that SNC has revised, enhanced, improved and structured the SLOs in a consolidated way along with all required supporting material and guidelines. SNC has also provided research baked practices for the ease of implementation and for facilitation of administrators and teachers.

Considering the educational environment of our country, we do realize that we have a variety of schools ranging from public schools to private schools running in collaboration with public sector such as PEF (Punjab Education Foundation) supported schools, religious schools or madrasas, NGO run schools, private street schools, chains of private schools running under franchise model and elite private schools. To be very honest, do you think that schools from all streams impart same quality of education? I am sure the answer is no. Well, the disparity in access to quality education deepens the socio-economic divide in the society.

Having minimum student learning out comes enforced through SNC will ensure that even children passing out from a street school or a rural private school, have a fairly reasonable level of academic achievement across subject areas.

Elite academic institute can go beyond the minimum curriculum standards and can give their students exposure to as much information as they want. In my perspective SNC is not about holding the high achievers from going beyond set limits. Rather it is about pulling the less privileged students up to get access to a fairly good standard of learning. It is not always justified and fair to look at things with specific glasses on. When it comes to the national interest, becoming neutral and evaluating things in the perspective of larger good becomes essential.

Personally, I had some question marks in my mind about SNC in perspective of inclusive education. In order to be a truly representative curriculum, it had to indoctrinate a spirit of inclusivity. It was indeed a relief to know that a committee had been notified by the ministry to ensure that curriculum carried a sense of inclusivity and appreciation for diversity in its basic fabric. Being a member of that committee, it was heartening to know that all higher management of the ministry and the Prime Minister himself are highly sensitized toward the importance of accommodating diversity in regular schools.

The committee on inclusive education is keenly working to ensure that SNC is literally the curriculum for ALL, and flexibility for making required adaptations is ingrained in it. Incorporating principles of Universal Design of Learning (UDL) and differentiated instruction into the teaching process and ensuring provision of required teaching and assistive aids will eventually open the doors of mainstream schools for millions of out of school children with special needs. Since the committee is still working on its recommendations, I will discuss this aspect of curriculum in detail in a future article.

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