

Education Concerns

(SNC to NCP)

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Acronyms

AEPAM	The Academy of Education Planning and Management
AKU-IED	Agha Khan University – Institute of Educational Development
ASER	The Annual Status of Education Report
AJK	Azad Jammu and Kashmir
CoP	Constitution of Pakistan (1973)
CUP	Cambridge University Press
DCAR	Directorate of Curriculum Assessment and Research
DEAs	District Education Authorities
DRA	District Registering Authority
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
FGEIs	Federal Government Educational Institutions
GB	Gilgit-Baltistan
HRCP	Human Rights Commission of Pakistan
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
ICT	Islamabad Capital Territory
IPEMC	The Inter-Provincial Education Ministers Conference
ITA	Idara Taleem-o-Agahi
ITMP	Ittehad Tanzeemat-i-Madaris Pakistan
KII	Key Informant Interview
KP	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
LMS	Learning Management System
LUMS	Lahore University of Management Sciences
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
MoFEPT	Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training

MoI	Medium of Instruction
MTBs	Model Textbooks
MUB	Muttahida Ulema Board
NBF	National Book Foundation
NCC	National Curriculum Council
NCHR	National Commission for Human Rights Pakistan
NCM	National Commission for Minorities
NCRC	National Commission on The Rights of Child
NEP	National Education Policy
NOC	No Objection Certificate
OOSC	Out-of-School Children
OUP	The Oxford University Press (OUP)
PAPSA	Pakistan Alliance of Private Schools Association
PCC	Provincial Curriculum Council
PCTB	Punjab Curriculum and Textbook Board
PEP	Pakistan Education Policy
PLWD	Persons Living with Disabilities
PMIU	Programme Monitoring and Implementing Unit
PML-N	Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz)
PPP	Pakistan People's Party
PSMA	Private Schools Management Association
PTBB	Punjab Textbook Board
PTBs	Provincial Textbook Boards
PTI	Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf
RCC	Regional Curriculum Council
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SED	School Education Department
SLO	Student Learning Outcome
SNC	Single National Curriculum

STB	Sindh Textbook Board
TFD	Taiwan Foundation for Democracy
TIMSS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study
TPA	The Textbook Publishers Association
TRC	Textbook Review Committee
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
USE	Uniform System of Education
USF	Universal Service Fund

Foreword

Dr. A.H. Nayyar

That Pakistan's public system of education requires a major repair is hardly disputed. It has been in a state of continuous decline for decades despite many policy actions and reform agendas. It is a state of serious crisis, and the poor education the students get poses a grave threat to the future of the nation. Both official and private surveys show year after year how those children who are fortunate enough to be in schools lack adequate skills in literacy and numeracy.

While taking charge in August 2018, many hopes were pinned on the incumbent government, especially because of the tall political claims and the promises made in their National Education Policy Framework the same year. The framework stressed four priority areas: *(a) putting out-of-school children (OOSC) back to schools; (b) augmenting the quality of education par excellence; (c) removing 'educational apartheid' by bridging the gap between the prevalent class-based education system; and (d) emphasising technical and vocational education.*

Over three years and a half passed without tangible progress in any of the four priority areas. Instead of bringing a uniform system of education (USE), the government moved in a different and fruitless and retrogressive direction by producing a Single National Curriculum (SNC), a move that spawned an unprecedented amount of debate in the country. The enormity of comments reflects the fact that SNC was affecting almost all the sectors of education – public, private, low-fee, elite, madrassas, etc. Interestingly the debate continues because what came forth was a step-by-step introduction of the new curriculum, and much more was yet to come¹. Barring a few voices of support, most of the commentaries are deeply critical of the SNC on various grounds, which are laid out in detail in this book.

SNC is, in fact, a derogation of the promise of the Framework to remove apartheid in the provision of education, replacing it with a uniform education system, meaning thereby raising the standard of learning and educational facilities to the same level as in the best schools. But this would have involved a huge investment in public education. It is a fact that Pakistan's public education is a severely starved sector, being allocated a mere two percent (%) or less of the Gross Domestic Product. The promised uniform education system would have required at least two to three times as many resources. Since that was not possible, and since something cheap needed to be done, the result therefore is the SNC. And what has come out as SNC is in

¹ The books were revised again in 2024, covering the claims and practical measures taken by the caretaker and then the upcoming PPP and PML-N's coalition government from April 2022 to November 2024.

Nevertheless, through a house-to-house survey, Idara Taleem-o-Agahi (ITA) produces the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) by assessing children's competency from Grade-I to Intermediate. It also looks at the enrolment, learning outcomes and basic schooling facilities as well⁵⁰. Similarly, Alif Ailaan, an initiative launched by a team of media and communication experts, has been identifying the gaps and concerns in educating children. Apparently, policymakers were also assisted in implementing better policies and the general public was sensitised about the significance of education. However, how much are such voices heard by the federal and provincial governments and education bureaucracy is uncertain⁵¹. The same is not clear in the case of the SNC too.

As amply demonstrated above, it is the missing schools and missing facilities, inadequate enrolment, the gender gap, rural-urban and public-private disparity and enormous inadequacies of the existing schools that need to be addressed first – which is obviously not possible without due priority and appropriate allocation of funds. Not the so-called SNC but rather bringing millions of OOSCs back to schools and immediate provision of missing facilities that need to be the government's top priority, not the other way round. There is a prominent need for a school census. How many children are missing from which schools and which Union Councils, Tehsils and Districts? How many new schools need to be constructed across the country and where? Which and how many facilities are needed, where and in which schools? How many new teachers need to be appointed, where, at what level and with which qualification? Madrassas essentially need to be counted to know how many children are being schooled

there, what is the quality of teaching and learning there and what is their future. Provincial Education Foundations (PEF), Punjab Education Initiatives Management Authority (PEIMA), Wafaq-ul-Madaris and ITMP need to facilitate in this regard. Identifying, locating and putting these children back to schools with micro-planning is the real challenge. Incentivise like school meals or stipends and some financial support can be then planned to retain these children in schools. Similarly, there is a need for effective planning to bring Madrassa children to schools as religious teaching, if at all, should only be supplementary, not exclusive.

Mere re-doing a curriculum, in the absence of the required number of schools, teachers, labs, libraries, playgrounds and other prerequisites is tantamount to putting the horse before the cart. Teachers' training is another significant area the government needs to invest in and improve before embarking upon implementing something like a uniform or singular curriculum. All that requires allocating at least 6% annual budget for the development of education as committed by several developing countries, including Pakistan, in the World Conference on Education for All (1990)⁵², 32 years back. One can begin with 4% at least. In fact, the SNC move was nothing more than old wine in a new bottle for about a dozen education policies and curriculum reform efforts are there on record in the seven and half decades of the country's independent existence. None could achieve its stated objectives due to a lack of commitment, insufficient financing and unclear aims at large.

Perhaps no stronger arguments are required to prove that, it is not the curriculum alone, even if it is relatively better, but

pre-schooling, academic environment, infrastructure, quality of instruction and helping aids that certify the quality of education. The proposed framework almost entirely undermined that. Theory-driven SLOs, teaching guidelines and training packages, lifted and refined from 2006's initiatives, were certainly not going to revolutionise the quality and content of education.

In Dr. Adil Najam's^{xi} views, "literacy cannot be seen in isolation from the broader failures of the education system. Pakistan's literacy problem has persisted, with 25 million children still out of school, making the country the second largest in this regard after Nigeria...Constitutional mandate for education remains unenforced, questioning why there is no societal or governmental push to implement Article 25, which guarantees every child the right to education...Failure of education policies stems not only from ineffective governance but also from a lack of demand from society itself...The root cause of this crisis lies in the absence of public outrage and societal pressure to improve education, ultimately limiting the nation's potential for progress".

Highlighting systemic flaws and societal apathy, he argues that *"as a society, Pakistan does not genuinely value literacy, which is reflected in both the government's lack of enforcement of literacy-related policies and the public's indifference to education"*. Suspecting the official claims of the education ratio being 60-80 percentage, he believes that, *'such figures are often manipulated to present a more favourable picture'*. Asserting further, he states that *"education is not prioritised in societal values or rewarded, resulting in deep divides -*

^{xi} Dr. Adil Najam is the global president of the World Wide Fund (WWF) for Nature as well as dean emeritus and professor at Boston University. His views have been extracted from his interview with Zehra Batool published in The News.

economic, geographical, and educational - across the country. This lack of genuine care for literacy and education is a telling sign of deeper societal issues that prevent any meaningful progress in addressing the nation's literacy challenges”⁵³.

Though SNC was trumpeted as an act of ‘*putting an end to class-based, apartheid or discriminatory system of education*’, demonstrably it was an act of political deception, especially keeping in mind the country’s vital indicators of education falling at the far end of the global education spectrum – including the measures set by MDGs and SDGs that Pakistan already failed and was going to fail again. In addition, the effort or the spirit of SNC was nothing new. The idea and the policy position have been there since the 1970s. On top of that, as acknowledged by the government herself, more than two-thirds of the syllabi proposed, was already adopted since 2014, under the process maturing from 2006 to 2009. Just striking one-fifth of the change with great pomp and the show was raising a storm in the teacup.

Concerning the school closures caused by COVID-19 during 2020-2021, a corresponding report ‘Measuring Learning Losses’, developed by ITA and UNICEF, reveals that compared to 2019, enrolment of children (aged 6-16) dropped by 2% points in 2021. However, about 63% children reported of their parents stepping up efforts to sustain or enhance their children’s learning. Less than one-third i.e. 32% of children stated that their schools provided them with some learning materials during the school closure, whilst 58% reported that their school teachers or school management never reached out to them. Nevertheless, around 32% of the children did seek some help from PTV’s TeleSchool

Programs. Likewise, around 40% of the children, who have smartphones at home, reported of continuing with certain bits of learning. The ratio of Grade-III children who could read an Urdu story in 2019, fell from 19% to 15% in 2021 while their capability of reading English sentences dropped from 21% in 2019 to 8% in 2021. Similarly, the number of students of the same level who could solve the 2-digit division declined from 17% to 10%⁵⁴.

The World Bank terms such effects as ‘learning poverty’ and estimates it to reach down to 75% from 79% in 2019. Given the serious shortfall of trained teachers to teach English as a second language, most of the public and low-income private schools will have detrimental effects on their language learning. There is a serious need to take remedial measures to address such needs and lacunae. The idea of a SNC might have proved its effectiveness when serious problems of education resources had been resolved⁵⁵.

Despite failing to address glaring issues and concerns around the structure and substance of education, the MoFEP was acknowledged by the PTI regime to be one of the top 5 ministries performing better and achieving its targets within time⁵⁶. One fails to understand, what criteria were employed to measure the ministry’s success as nothing was on track even according to its own step by step plan.