**Is it child abuse?**

BY Z U B E I D A M U S T A FA 2021-09-24

HERE is a narrative to introduce the subject so close to my heart. At a family gathering, I was chatting with my cousin`s granddaughter, a lively girl of three. As she told me about her interests I asked her to move closer as I couldn`t hear her and I pointed to the hearing aid I was wearing.

She obliged me and showed great interest in the tiny device, asking intelligent questions about it before examining it. What impressed me was her curiosity and eagerness to learn.

We were both speaking in Urdu, not because this is the national language but because it is my mother tongue as well as hers. At that age that was the only language she understood. Could we have had such a meaningful conversation on such a serious subject had I spoken in English? More importantly, would she have even been interested? Certainly not, for a child is interested in what she is engaged in.

And she will engage fully only in that activity which allows her to participate in it. This is possible only if the language used in this process is one that the child understands.

Thisisnorocketscience.Itis abasicfact of nature that our educators choose to ignore. This kills our children`s interest in their `education` (which is actually selflearning) and their motivation to learn.

Under the present system, the child is required to listen to a teacher who does all the speaking in a `strange language` that the child doesn`t always understand. In some cases, the teacher is not fluent in it either. The child`s input is not asked for.

Can one really expect the student to be interested in all the mumbo jumbo, let alone enjoy herself? Formal schooling actually disrupts the natural learning process that begins at birth. If our educators really have the good of the child at heart they would try to take the natural process forward and would not rob the child of what gives her joy and a sense of security that her own language provides.

What I find extremely distressing about the Single National Curriculum and the language policy it enshrines is that it totally ignores the needs and sensitivities of the child. The Nutshell Conference on the SNC held on Sept 3 is the latest forum in the series debating the ever-evolving SNC these days. All the participants had a stake in education but there could not have been a more uninformed group in the context of the child`s learning needs. Each of them started from the premise `I know best`. The teachers` lack of knowledge of the child`s psyche causes a lot of emotional insecurity that leads to many ills in society.The SNC does not address the security aspect of the choices made in the curriculum. These issues, especially language, affect a child`s ability to learn. For the sake of `uniformity of the mindset` the SNC tries to end diversity. It kills critical thinking and this results in rote learning and cultural alienation. Above all, cognitive development slows down. If the medium of instruction were in the child`s own language for a few years, it would ensure that she develops a well-adjusted personality and enjoys education for the rest of her life. This is a well-recognised principle the world over. Yet the architects of the SNC have chosen a bizarre policy that has been changed surreptitiously over the last year or so while being shrouded in ambiguity.

In a nutshell, as I understand it, English and Urdu will be taught as subjects from Grade 1. General knowledge/social studies and Islamiat will be in Urdu while science and mathematics will be taught in English.

This language mix does not meet ourchildren`s emotional needs.The language imposed on her is not her mother tongue in most cases but a `mumbo jumbo` of unfamiliar words which become a linguistic barrier that will thenceforth hold her back and force her to adoptan artificial learning method that she will never enjoy.We need to understand that Pakistan is a multilingual state and education will have to be multilingual as well. It must be based on the mother tongue. This means that it varies from region to region and that militates against the principle of uniformity our rulers are so keen about. Of course, the national language Urdu and English too will also be taught incrementally. This language ladder needs to be worked out carefully.

Ten years ago, Hywel Coleman, a renowned linguist, had prepared a followup report on Pakistan`s education for the British Council in which he suggested that Pakistan should conduct research on languages in Pakistan.If this had been done we would not be floundering around with the SNC. It is still not too late.  The writer`s book Reforming Schoo| Education in Pakistan and the Language Di|emma has now been published.

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