[Nida Usman Chaudhary](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/nida-usman-chaudhary)

June 20, 2021

**SNC and shrinking provincial policy space**

While the PTI’s education policy boasted of a six-point ‘Education Emergency Plan’ which included an increase in education funding from 2.1 percent of GDP to 5 percent, investment in teacher training and information and communication technology, and re-engineering of governance based on complete decentralization and de-politicization, in practice the ruling party has focused on only one of its points – to impose a uniform system of education for all with the same medium of instruction, same curriculum and same assessments.

This was pursued relentlessly by peddling false narratives of an ‘educational apartheid’ that posited elite private schools as perpetuating class inequality in society – an analysis which is not only flawed in theory but also dangerous in practice as it reflects a lack of understanding of how a class-based society originates and also shows the deliberate deflection of the state’s responsibility on to private entities.

A class-based society originates when the means of production and wealth are unequally held. Confusing ‘equality’ with ‘homogenization’ is a disservice to education and promotes incorrect narratives to extend ‘control’ over what is taught to the students. ‘Sameness’ does not automatically mean ‘quality’. There is a need to recognize that children have different learning needs and require a system that is flexible, inclusive and accommodative, instead of the one that limits their options.

Making the curriculum identical will not eliminate the economic inequalities. The sham of the ‘uniformity is equal to egalitarianism argument’ is further evident in the fact that the new curriculum leaves co-curricular activities, including drama, sports, arts etc, out of its ambit and places them in the sphere of schools which will each have different resources and so the stated equality will still not be achieved. Therefore, the claim that ‘one nation, one curriculum’ would equalise and get rid of the education apartheid without first fixing the economic inequalities is false and misleading. Indeed, uniformity of thought and ideas at the expense of diversity is an indicator of the concentration of power in a few hands and not of a democratic polity.

The idea of ‘one nation, one curriculum’ is in itself exclusionary as it envisages a unitary and singular idea of ‘nation’. Pakistan, however, is the sum total of the various ethnic, linguistic, gender and other minorities that make up our beautiful and culturally rich country. A single majoritarian curriculum may lead to their suppression and erasure when their voice is not represented in the books that are based on a single curriculum with the aim to promote one and not the others.

Not only do children have the right to study and learn about their culture, language, history, people, they also have different learning needs and require a system that is flexible, inclusive and accommodative, instead of the one that limits their options. The SNC is silent on the needs of such diverse groups of children, including those who may be differently-abled, are ostracized or belong to a minority. In terms of learning objectives in general also, the curriculum is very heavy and contradictory, requiring children to adopt the project-based learning methods on one hand and on the other, to continue the practice of rote-memorisation. The increased syllabus and ideological focus of the curriculum will further lead to the alienation of students from learning.

Parents’ right to choose the kind of education they want for their children is a fundamental human right as per Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Further, Article 18 (4) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) binds state parties to have respect for the liberty of parents and, when applicable, legal guardians to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions. Not only does the SNC fail to take account of this choice, in effect it actually takes this right away from the parents.

The SNC creates implications for the publishing industry as well, subjecting it to an arbitrary three-tier review process to acquire NOC for books which must be in line with the SNC. This reduces diversity of learning resources and adds to the cost and time of production of books. The ultimate loss is of the students, who will have limited access to learning materials, especially those that are diverse and independent. This kind of control over books and curriculum goes directly against any effort to decentralise and depoliticise governance in education and, in fact, brings education even more directly under the scrutiny and control of political and bureaucratic offices.

Perhaps, the most alarming impact of the SNC is the bad precedent it sets in terms of recentralising, on a de-facto basis, what is otherwise a provincial subject after the 18th Amendment of the constitution. It appears that, unlike the Sindh government, which has outright rejected the SNC, the government of Punjab has played an insincere role as regards the policy domain of the province and has regrettably chosen to ‘concur’ and follow the directions, the model books and curriculum prepared by the Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, which it had no constitutional mandate to prepare in the first place. The erosion of provincial autonomy did not start with the SNC and certainly will not end with it either, but no devolved subjects will lie safely in the provincial policy domain if such a precedent is allowed to be set. This is unacceptable.

The state has a duty to maintain a uniform standard of education as opposed to a uniform curriculum and provide access to quality education in public schools. According to data provided by the Unicef, Pakistan has the second highest number of out-of-school children where 22.8 million children are out of school; of these, the larger number comprises girls. Lack of safe, affordable transport and functional toilets are among the many reasons for this phenomenon – particularly when it comes to girls.

It is the responsibility of the state to address these issues, including provision of emergency menstruation kits in girls’ toilets. This duty of the state will not be discharged by deflecting the blame for its own neglect on private schools. In order to fulfil this duty, the state has to ensure that a certain standard of quality education is provided in state schools and the necessary funding to ensure the minimum standards of infrastructure, equipment and teachers’ training is delivered so that the gap between state and private schools is reduced.

This would go far to increase school enrolment and lower dropout rates but, sadly, these have not been the focus of the government. FY 2020-21 saw the government decrease the education development budget by 50 percent, while the share of total education budget decreased from 20 percent in FY 2017-18 to 17 percent by FY 2020-21. This again shows how the government has backtracked on its stated goal to increase the education budget.

With this decrease in budget, scholarships and other beneficiary schemes for students have been revoked or reduced by the government and investment in teacher training and information and communication technology could also not be prioritised and scaled up and neither is infrastructural development to ensure equitable access to schools is on the cards. In other words, it seems that while the current government continues to fail to achieve its own stated promises, it nevertheless dangerously succeeds in shrinking provincial policy space, and space for democracy and fundamental rights.

The writer is a diversity and inclusion advocate.