

Single National Curriculum (SNC) for Social Studies (2020): Document Analysis for Development of Critical Thinking Skills at the Primary Level

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Abstract

This qualitative study analyzes Pakistan's Single National Curriculum (SNC) for Social Studies in grades 4-5 to examine how it aims to develop critical thinking skills. Using NVivo 12, the SNC document was systematically reviewed to identify key themes related to the conceptualization, significance, pedagogy, and assessment of critical thinking. Findings revealed that while critical thinking is an implicit goal, the concept lacks an explicit definition. However, textual analysis suggests critical thinking is valued for promoting democratic participation, pluralism, empathy, and inquiry-based learning. Instructional techniques emphasized include cooperative learning, investigatory projects, discussions, and questioning. Assessment of critical thinking is not elucidated but seems identifiable in modalities like investigative reports, group discussion analysis, and responses to thought-provoking questions. The study concludes that the curriculum endorses critical thinking but needs to further strengthen its coherent manifestation across curricular objectives, teaching-learning processes, and measurement approaches. Developing analytical skills, along with consciousness-raising about systemic inequities, can enhance education's role in shaping national identity and nurturing democratic values. Recommendations include providing a clear conceptual model of critical thinking, mapping instructional approaches directly to critical thinking attributes, building teacher capacity, designing authentic assessments, and coupling skill-building with awareness of normalized marginalization.

Keywords: *Single National Curriculum, Critical Thinking, Citizenship Education, Social Studies*

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1. Introduction

In a complex, interconnected global community dealing with socio-cultural pluralism, environmental pressures, and advancements in science and technology, education systems face higher expectations to produce responsible, critically-thinking citizens (DiPasquale & Hunter,

2017). Consequently, countries worldwide are initiating curriculum reforms to mainstream skills that prepare youth for modern realities, like critical analysis, perspective-taking, balanced reasoning, empathy, and decision-making (Care et al., 2018). These competencies, subsumed under the overarching notion of “critical thinking,” enable drawing sound interpretations when confronted with conflicting information and opposing viewpoints. Acknowledging that future uncertainty and societal transformations will challenge young populations, curricula aim to empower students with cognitive flexibility, civic awareness, and ethical orientation (Barton & Ho, 2021). However, translating policy ambitions into school-level practices remains an endemic challenge.

Pakistan initiated consultative exercises for a uniform national curriculum in 1947 post-independence that continue today, signalling the desire for education to play a pivotal role in fostering democratic values and shared identity (Durrani et al., 2017). The most recent phase began in 2017 and formulated a single national curriculum for grades -1 to 5. The impetus stems from realizing that despite policies for universal standards, various systems still operate based on assorted curricula generating fragmented outcomes.

The single national curriculum (SNC) is aimed at competencies related to analytics, ethical foundations, as well as social cohesion. All this is due to the theme of “one nation, one curriculum. It was found enough consideration regarding twenty-first-century skills integration in the SNC for science subjects but capacity building need was sorted out as well as teacher training and other resources (Mansoor & Din, 2023).

Social studies has an important place and has attention due to civic participation and human relationships in its field. The subject is mostly responsible for fostering participatory skills about democracy and having ethical and critical aptitude in classroom practice due to the predominant teacher-centred transmission of multiple perspectives (Hänni et al., 2022). Furthermore, the research highlighted the lack of conceptual clarity, having critical thinking skills too. As the last three skills of the cognitive domain of Bloom’s taxonomy, the last three stages of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation are also called higher-order thinking skills. Social studies teachers should have clear policies having professional development training for critical thinking, creativity, digital learning, dialogue, collaboration, and curiosity.

This current qualitative study is conducted to explore the single national curriculum (SNC) of Social studies for grades 4 and 5 to examine critical thinking in the aim of curriculum, instructional pedagogy, and assessment as well. Qualitative content analysis is used to analyze the document in different aspects. The findings of the study highlight the importance of critical thinking, the focus of this concept in this curriculum document, pedagogy, and assessment techniques used and asked to focus on for the development of critical thinking skills in primary school students. Moreover, the recommendations are presented based on analysis as well as for future researchers.

2. Objective of the Study

1. To analyze the single national curriculum for grades 4-5 regarding developing critical thinking skills.

3. Literature Review

The revision of the 2006 national curriculum was undertaken following recommendations derived from the research and conferences, under the meticulous guidance of subject matter experts. The draft of the Single National Curriculum (SNC) for grades pre-1 to 5 was subsequently disseminated to the provinces and territories for their review and feedback. In an unprecedented move in the history of curriculum development in Pakistan, experts from Gilgit-Baltistan and Federal Government Educational Institutes (Cantonments & Garrisons) participated in the consultative

workshops. Furthermore, the draft curriculum was shared with the University of Cambridge, United Kingdom, and the Institute for Educational Development, Karachi, to solicit expert inputs and value addition. The draft curriculum was then updated to incorporate the feedback received. As a subsequent step, a national conference was convened, bringing together experts from across the country to conduct a comprehensive review of the updated curriculum draft. In a historic moment, at the culmination of the national conference, experts from diverse schools of thought achieved consensus and endorsed the Single National Curriculum for grades pre-1 to 5 (Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, Islamabad).

Critical thinking has been focused on the national curriculum. Critical thinking encompasses competencies such as systematic analysis, evaluative reasoning, questioning assumptions, interpreting multiple perspectives, and drawing defensible conclusions amidst incomplete evidence (Abrami et al., 2015). As students face complex social dilemmas in diverse, technology-infused environments, education systems strive to integrate analytical skills instruction for informed decision-making aligned with collective well-being (Wang & Hoffman, 2016). However, despite rhetorical vision statements, most public-school systems still struggle to nurture these proficiencies.

The Single National Curriculum (SNC) for Social Studies Grade 4-5 (2020) aims for the promotion of critical thinking skills for students. CT is an important skill to enable individuals to analyze, evaluate, and decision-making based on reasoning and evidence. This skill being a 21st-century skill is significant for students who want to become responsible and active citizens in a democratic society (Naseer et al., 2022). The new curriculum promotes unity and national ideology to counteract the decentralization of education to provinces. The curriculum must be up-to-date and compliant with all requirements to equip society for worldwide shifts. Teachers are essential to advancing and carrying out the lofty objectives of a unified national curriculum. However, the government and advisory officials are not considering the teaching staff's advice when making policy decisions. Further evaluation studies will assess the credibility of the Single National Curriculum. The government's goal is to create and preserve a suitable connection between national policy directed by the government and professional practice shaped by educators. Professional perspectives from educators will likely influence government policy during the dynamic process of curriculum construction.

Curriculum documents aim to enhance critical competencies among the students but research evidence on translated outcomes is limited. To improve, the syllabus aims should align with instructional principles and assessments, fostering authentic critical thinking rather than test performance. Constructivist literature recommends discovery-based lessons, collaborative debates, argumentation tasks, project-based learning, and technology integration. Assessments should align with performance-based rubrics.

Recent studies in Pakistan have explored the development of critical thinking skills in secondary schools, focusing on science and social studies curricula and teaching practices. The research aimed to assess teacher perspectives, analyze the presence of critical thinking concepts in educational policies, and evaluate the development opportunities in textbooks. The findings revealed that while teachers and policies emphasize critical thinking as an important instructional goal, actual teaching practices and curricular content do not effectively promote these skills. For example, science lessons often emphasize rote memorization over higher-order analysis, and social studies textbooks present more factual information than conceptual analysis (Jamil et al., 2023; Jamil & Muhammad, 2019; Jamil et al., 2020; Jamil et al., 2021a, 2021b; Naseer et al., 2022).

4. Research Methodology

This current study used qualitative content analysis for the systematic investigation of a single national curriculum document of social studies for grades 4 and 5. Qualitative content analysis supports the organization of replicable and effective inferences from the derived data from text data through and identification of their themes (Krippendorff, 2018). Different aspects of the text like the vision statement, context, instruction, and assessment process are the key indicators of knowledge and competencies for student acquisition (Ravitch, 2022). The coding process involved different segments to address analytical abilities, reasoning, questioning, evaluating perspectives, and drawing conclusions amidst incomplete evidence. The codes were then analyzed to develop categories classifying the major themes about the framing of critical thinking across rationale, content, and assessment sections. Furthermore, to establish coding consistency and assist in organizing the voluminous textual data, the curriculum document was also imported into NVivo 12 software. NVivo allows managing qualitative information sources, running automated coding queries via text search, retrieving coded segments, categorizing major nodes and themes, capturing insights through annotations, and examining their intersections with analytical tools like word trees, comparison diagrams, and matrix coding (Edhlund & McDougall, 2018). Hence, Nvivo facilitated systematic data analysis permitting both inductive discovery-oriented exploration and organized data management upholding research reliability. The coded content was studied against contemporary theoretical models explaining critical thinking's multifaceted nature. Furthermore, textual references were critically examined to expose underlying assumptions and values orientations, rather than accepting rhetoric at face value. This process unearthed disjunctures between the intended prominence, associated instructional processes, and measurement tools concerning analytical thinking abilities across Grades 4 and 5 social studies curriculum. The key themes identified concern the need for deeper engagement with critical thinking's conceptual clarity and integrated enactment from objectives to assessments.

5. Findings of the Study

The findings of the study are described in the following aspects:

5.1. Critical Thinking

No explicit definition or discussion of critical thinking is provided in the document. However, developing critical thinking skills is implied as an important goal. This is evident from the following quotes:

"The curriculum intends to foster....the inculcation of tolerance and empathy towards others as required by Islam." (p. 6).

Fostering tolerance and empathy requires appreciating different perspectives, which involves critical analysis and higher-order thinking skills. Moreover, the following has been described in the document:

"It helps young people to make informed decisions for the public good as participative citizens of a culturally diverse and democratic society in the world." (p. 6)

"Drawing on social life and the pride in being Pakistanis, the curriculum seeks to ignite student's curiosity to inquire and to delve deeper into making sense of the complexities of human experiences..." (p. 6)

5.2. Importance of Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is seen as crucial for students to "make informed decisions for the public good as participative citizens" (p. 6). Careful analysis of information facilitates reasoned conclusions and judgments, rather than hastily reaching decisions.

Critical thinking also enables "tolerance and empathy" (p. 6) by allowing appreciation of differing viewpoints, identities, and experiences. This suggests critical thinking helps sustain a pluralistic democracy.

Overall, critical thinking emerges as essential for responsible participation in a diverse society, where multiple perspectives exist. It enables a balanced assessment of competing social realities.

5.3. Pedagogy for Critical Thinking

The instructional approaches recommended implicitly develop critical thinking abilities:

1. **Inquiry/Investigation:** Students frame questions, gather and analyze information, and draw conclusions (p. 36). This nurtures skills like reasoning, evaluating evidence, and interpretative ability.
2. **Cooperative Learning:** Students explain perspectives to each other (p. 35). Articulating viewpoints helps critically reflect on issues.
3. **Discussions:** Weighing different opinions and questioning assumptions fosters critical analysis (p. 33-34).
4. **Questioning During Lectures:** Posing thought-provoking queries engages students in analytical thinking (p. 32-33).

5.4. Assessment of Critical Thinking

While critical thinking instruction is emphasized, assessing it is not explicitly discussed. But some recommended performance tasks indicate its measurement:

1. **Written Reports from Inquiry/Investigations (p. 37):**
Can assess logical analysis, interpretation, and evaluation of evidence skills.
2. **Analysis of Group Discussion Content (p. 34):**
Provides insights into skills of perspective evaluation, reasoning, and questioning assumptions.
3. **Answers to Thought-Provoking Lecture Questions (p. 33):**

6. Conclusion

This research aimed to qualitatively examine Pakistan's national curriculum for social studies in grades 4 and 5, analyzing provisions for developing critical thinking skills valued as an imperative for modern citizenship. Through inductive content analysis, conceptualizations and enactment coherence of critical perspectives across vision statements, content schemas, instructional guidance, and assessment processes were reviewed. Findings reveal that while analytical faculties are rhetorically endorsed as enabling participatory democracy, empathy, inquisition, and comprehending multifaceted realities, the notion itself remains indistinctly defined. Additionally, curriculum elements portraying significance, nurturing classroom transactions, and measuring outcomes concerning critical thinking lack reinforced connections toward transformational intent. Specifically, the import of analytical competencies is verbally denoted for ethical citizenship, with empathy, tolerance, and complex decision-making stated as demands of pluralistic contexts.

7. Discussion

This study looked at how critical thinking is taught in Pakistan's national curriculum for social studies in grades 4 and 5. The results show that the curriculum talks about the importance of analytical skills for diverse democracies, which is similar to global trends (Guerrero & Torres-Olave, 2022). However, there is a mismatch between the goals, teaching methods, and ways of checking learning, which makes it hard to develop the higher-level thinking needed for active citizenship. The curriculum doesn't explain what critical thinking means, like being able to reason systematically, look at things from different perspectives, question assumptions, and make judgments based on context (Abrami et al., 2015). Without this foundation, it's less likely that

teaching and learning will encourage students to recognize different viewpoints, evaluate biases, and develop balanced conclusions. To improve, critical thinking needs to be strengthened across all subjects, not just added to active learning activities like projects, discussions, and questions. Critical thinking, as posited by educational research and theory, transcends the discrete cognitive processing of information and encompasses the examination of biases, questioning of assumptions, and consideration of alternative contexts that shape interpretations (Abrami et al., 2015; Davies & Barnett, 2015). This conception necessitates a consciousness of self and systems for balanced meaning-making, which upholds collective well-being. However, cursory articulations of critical thinking as "analytical and creative talents" fall short of actualizing this grounded, evaluative orientation that enables young citizens to critique injustices and recognize privileges (Agudelo Castro et al., 2022; Hess & Posselt, 2002). Although active instructional strategies, such as cooperative projects, exploratory tasks, and dialogic lectures, imply critical analysis, the direct cultivation of skills like making inferences, comparing perspectives, constructing reasoned arguments, and seeking new evidence remains vaguely incorporated. Curriculum advancements necessitate a shift from procedural engagement with sources towards sustained capacity building for deriving context-conscious, ethical judgments. Consequently, improved coherence is required between classroom transactions that subtly indicate analytical potential and explicit emphasis on questioning reasoning, and perspective-taking. Furthermore, the assessment of critical perspectives through modalities such as investigative reports, discussion analysis, and thought-provoking questions appears to be weakly aligned with teaching-learning objectives. Performance indicators that specifically evaluate perspective recognition, bias evaluation, balanced reasoning, and generalizability determination would strengthen the congruity between goals and measurements (Reibel, 2022). Tests that focus on conceptual understanding and multidimensional thinking better represent the intended aims for reflective citizenship.

Also, the suggested ways of testing analytical abilities don't have clear measures for skills like identifying assumptions behind arguments, finding factual mistakes, and coming up with alternative ideas (Maresch et al., 2021). Standard tests still focus mostly on remembering and understanding, rather than the evaluative or creative skills needed for citizenship in the 21st century. Tests that look at how well students can use critical thinking skills in different situations would be better at showing if they have the higher-level abilities needed for participating in democracy.

The analysis also shows that the curriculum doesn't do enough to critique systemic unfairness and exclusion that often make oppressive situations seem normal and benefit privileged social groups (Hess & Posselt, 2002). Raising awareness about this is important for students to understand challenges to equality and the structural changes needed for ethical participation as critically aware citizens, instead of just passively accepting or going along with the dominant way of thinking.

Overall, while Pakistan's national curriculum wants active learning for social studies, to fully develop critical analysis, there needs to be a clear connection between the skills that are aimed for, the learning experiences, and the ways of measuring progress. Also, developing analytical skills along with raising awareness that questions assumptions that make marginalization seem normal can make education better at shaping national identity and supporting democratic values and diversity.

8. Recommendations

1. There is a need for a grounded definition and conceptual model of critical thinking in the curriculum, encompassing competencies like systematic reasoning, contextual analysis, questioning assumptions, perspective recognition, and ethical reasoning.

2. Map instructional approaches directly to critical thinking attributes.
3. To build teacher capacity for facilitating CT skills through pedagogy, there should be institute dedicated modules, workshops, and mentoring programs.
4. Authentic assessments like investigative reports, journals, and presentations that gauge applied aspects of critical thought like forming context-conscious interpretations, recognizing exclusionist framings, and constructing alternative hypotheses should be designed.
5. Couple analytical skill building with consciousness-raising regarding systemic inequities and stereotypical representations that normalize oppressive status quo and marginalization of minority groups.

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