

## COMMENTS

Dear Editor:<sup>1</sup>

(THERE is an error in Professor Russell’s citation of the publication: Part One and Part Two are of the textbook and not of the *Teacher’s Manual*. The number of pages mentioned above, is for the *Teachers Manual*, excluding the Introduction. The two volumes of the Textbook have 58+26 and 44+26 pages respectively. The *Workbook*, pp. 89+8, and audiocassettes, a set of two, are not mentioned in the review).<sup>2</sup>

I thank Professor Russell for his review (to be referred as Review) that he wrote on my request (Review, p. 382). Two members of the Urdu Project Team, Mrs. Farhat Ahmad and Mrs. Rashida Mirza joined me in writing this response.

In his review, Professor Russell appreciated the quality of the production of the books; commended one particular story, “*Nādiyā kā Bhā’ī*” (*Urdu for Children*, Part I, pp. 7–10); and was favorable to the *Teacher’s Manual* after a “cursory reading” (Review, p. 384). Most of the review, however, consisted of an unfavorable critique of the content of the stories, and of our omission of mechanics of teaching writing Urdu script.

Professor Russell is critical of some of the textual selections. There are 40 text pieces—29 texts are contributed by the team (26 stories and poems—original texts, 2 translated from English, and one folktale retold), but the reviewer inadvertently counts the total number of texts pieces to be 42, (*ibid.*, p. 383). Professor Russell compliments the team members for their 26 original pieces by observing that “these, by and large, are the best” (*ibid.*). However, he has reservations about two of them. He thinks that the village setting of “*Gājar kā Paudā*” (Carrot Plant)

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<sup>1</sup>A profound apology to our readers for publishing Dr. Sajida Alvi’s letter with almost no editing. It was feared that any editorial changes, however well intentioned, might only add to her dissatisfaction—electronically communicated—with the AUS’s conduct in publishing Prof. Russell’s review, which she had herself solicited from him. The AUS will not accept further correspondence on the subject. —Editor

<sup>2</sup>The Editor would like to assume full responsibility for the “error” as the citation was added by him at the request of Prof. Russell.

should have been in the city to make it “realistic” as most “Pakistani residents in Canada live in towns and, presumably, many of them grow vegetables in their gardens.” In our view this is a debatable assertion. He also objects to the introduction of animals in an imaginative poem on winter, “*Nīlī Śadrī*” (Blue Vest):

[T]he idea that the onset of winter needs to be made interesting to the reader by pretending that it causes the elephants to put on hats is absurd. A straight description of what winter brings would be much more appropriate. (*ibid.*, p. 383)

We argue that Prof. Russell is underestimating the power of a child’s imagination. If we pick up a modern grade-one reader we will find a variety of selections, including some selections that relate to child’s immediate environment and some that are tales of adventure and mystery set in far off lands, even far off planets! The writing team members as well as the language arts experts and children’s literature specialists we consulted agreed that children between the ages of 4 and 6 are particularly fascinated by birds and animals. Therefore, the idea of selecting elephant, tiger, monkey, peacock, sparrow and crane as characters in the poem was not “absurd,” according to the experts. Village setting in the case of *Carrot Plant* was chosen to let the children’s imagination take them from their immediate environment to a village. Prof. Russell is probably aware that in modern education, a conscious effort is made to expose the children to varied experiences to broaden their outlook. In Canada, children are taken on to such field trips to visit pumpkin patches and pet farms and to participate in sugaring parties. Today, the phenomenal success of Harry Potter is a good example of the powerful attraction of mystery, adventure and fantasy for children of all ages.

Prof. Russell questions our use of 11 selections taken from materials published in Pakistan, implying that anything written for Pakistani children is not suitable for children growing up in Canada. We disagree with him on this point. Fine literature in Urdu for children, in our view, transcends national and geographical boundaries; and it has universal appeal for the children. Poems such as “*Billō kā Bastā*” (Billo’s School Bag), and “*‘Azrā kī Gurjā*” (‘Azra’s Doll), for example, fall in this category. These poems, read by millions of children are beautiful and have an intrinsic appeal for the children of Indo-Pakistan origin no matter where they are growing up. Furthermore, the writers of these poems are household names in Urdu literature. Who does not know Sufi Tabassum, a writer of excellent children’s poems; and that genius of a man, Ibn-e Inshā’, a versatile writer, who has written some excellent pieces for children. “*‘Azrā kī Gurjā*” and “*Billō kā Bastā*” are poems of universal appeal for children, much like

the English poem, “Twinkle Twinkle, Little Star.” Another poem, “*Din*” (Days), introduces the days of the week, and “*Rang*” (Colors) the Urdu words for colors. These poems fall in the category of the English rhyme “One, two, buckle my shoe.” “*Murghī aur Čiriyā*” (The Hen and the Sparrow) is a funny poem introducing children to the calls of birds which they love to repeat. “*Tūlī*” (Butterfly) is a beautiful poem about a colorful butterfly fluttering from flower to flower and the writer exhorting the children not to try to catch it as doing so would make it ‘wilt.’ What a beautiful metaphor!

Among the classics, Alṭāf Ḥusain Ḥālī’s (d. 1914) poem, “*Kehnā Baṛōñ kā Mānō*” (Listen to Your Elders) has roused Prof. Russell’s ire. In his words:

“Oh God,” I thought. “All that money wasted on serving up once more that boring rubbish which has been inflicted on children for the last hundred years and more.” A paraphrase of the essentials of the poem, using only words which the poem itself uses, would run “Simple children, you haven’t the least idea of what’s good and what’s bad for you. So if you want to be great, and live with honor in the world, do as your elders tell you.” Not only boring, but pernicious. Children need to be taught to question any- thing anyone says, no matter who says it, (though “question” does not imply “reject”). And many parents are no less “simple” than the children. It was a simple child who saw, and said, that the Emperor had no clothes [on] *sic*. And to say that children haven’t the least idea of what’s good for them is absurd. They may not always know, but then neither do their elders always know.” (*ibid.*, p. 382)

We argue that the message of the poem is “Listen to your Elders,” as the title implies. This is indeed the message that children will pick up, as they can relate to the poem given their personal experience, as when at home when the parent says, “Jim, you have to listen to what I am telling you . . . .” (We should remember that the material has been prepared for children in junior and senior kindergarten and in grade one.) Whether we like it or not, it is the responsibility of the parents to guide their children to the best of abilities. Plato’s suggestion that the children be put in the academies to be raised by competent teachers trained in the principles of childrearing has never caught on! Nevertheless, “*Kehnā Baṛōñ kā Mānō*,” a classic Urdu poem for children, is not “boring rubbish”; it is part of their literary heritage, and an excellent vehicle of transmitting family values.

Professor Russell praised us for not beginning by teaching the alphabet to the children in our instructional materials but then points out that there is “no indication anywhere in this material of how and when this task is to be undertaken” (*ibid.*, p. 383). And, then he described in detail his own method of teach-

ing the mechanics of writing Urdu script, published in his *New Course in Urdu and Spoken Hindi*. We concur with his suggestions. However, the fact is that we recommend a similar approach for *Urdu for Children*, as explained in the *Teacher's Manual* under the heading, "Vocabulary Flashcards." After giving details of various text-oriented activities, we offer this advice to teachers:

So far the children have experienced words in the context of the text and they have had the experience of listening to these words. They have developed a concept of what these words "mean" and some words have become part of their speaking vocabulary. Some of the words from the text are now highlighted and used to build up the children's sight vocabulary. This is done with the help of picture and word flashcards. Once the children are able to recognize words in print, attention can be focused on word attack skills, such as the sound of the initial letter and the names of these letters. (*ibid.*, Introduction, p. 6)

The words we selected for the flashcards come from the stories and poems. The same words are used in the *Workbook* and then broken down in letters so the children could recognize the letters in their initial, medial and final positions. As well, in the introductory pages of the *Workbook*, under the heading, "Writing Mechanics," the objectives and specific instructions are given for 4, 5 and 6 year old children respectively. I may add that my students taking Introductory Urdu course at McGill find the *Workbook* very useful in their initial introduction to Urdu alphabet and writing mechanics. They also enjoy using *Urdu for Children*, Part I & II as resource books along with M.A.R. Barker's *A Course in Urdu*, vol. I, as the basic text.

I am deeply disappointed with Prof. Russell's concluding statement in which he denigrated the content of the textbook and considered the output of the production team slender. He then expressed the hope that those who prepare the teaching materials will recognize that "the first essential quality of good teachers is that they think carefully of who it is they are teaching, accord them both love and respect, and think what it is they want and need to learn and what they neither want nor need." He concluded that we did not grasp the essentials (*Review*, p. 384).

In responding to Prof. Russell's review, we greatly regret having to write this rejoinder, for we hold him in great esteem for his contributions to Urdu literature. Whereas it is alright for him to question the content of the stories, his casting doubts on the integrity of writers and their understanding of children's needs compelled us to respond appropriately:

1. Prof. Russell thought that we used a large part of texts (slightly above 25%) from books written for children in Pakistan; considered Ḥālī's poem unsuitable; and criticized the animal characters in a poem on winter; and the use of village setting for a folktale. We vehemently disagree with Prof. Russell that on these few (in our view insignificant) points on which he evaluated the quality of the materials as "poor."
2. We are aghast at Prof. Russell's remark that the "output of the production team is remarkably slender"; and that the writers were not sensitive to the needs of the children. I should draw Prof. Russell's attention to the fact that all those who served on the writing team are trained teachers and have spent most of their lives in teaching and working with children in Canadian public schools. Their classroom experience was the biggest asset for this project. As the Project Director, the most daunting task for me was how to transform lifetime teachers into writers. We sought the advice of language arts specialists and experts in writing stories for children. Professor Russell, however, did not fully appreciate the labor, patience and time invested to each and every lesson. Also, he probably does not know how many drafts of each story were written, and field-tested before it was approved. It was this grueling process that culminated in 26 original stories written by the team for children born and raised in Canada.
3. This project was supported by five Boards of Education in the province of Ontario. Each and every story was field-tested by five to seven instructors (other than the writers) who were teaching Urdu to children in these boards of education under their Heritage languages program. Therefore, Professor Russell's assertion that the writers wrote these stories without consulting the children is groundless.
4. I only wish that Professor Russell had read the Introduction to the *Teacher's Manual* more carefully than giving it "a cursory reading" in his own words. Had he done so, he would have noted that we had painstakingly spelled out the philosophy underlying the development of these instructional materials and the child's place therein. On the second page of the Introduction, we described the central theme of the material and our own underlying approach in these words:

The material in this course is built around the theme "All About Me," a theme the children in the primary division can relate to easily. This theme is broken down into the following topics: food, seasons, clothing, toys, describing oneself, festivals, school, birthday, ecology,

family, time, my house, animals and the birds. There are forty lessons built around these topics, with one to four lessons on each topic.

Language as meaningful whole: Each topic is introduced by a literature selection containing a story or a poem. The children respond to the selection as a whole while also focusing on the meaning of the text. They experience the selection in many ways by listening to it, repeating it in unison, and looking at it on the chart. Having experienced the story or poem as a whole, the children then deal with smaller units: for example, by focusing on the word-attack skills.

5. I would also like to add that in the *Manual*, we have provided detailed instructions for each lesson, by keeping in mind that textbook may also be used by a teacher with no formal training in teaching. The rationale for preparing the audiocassettes to accompany the text is to help the children listen to the stories and poems on their own, and also those teachers whose mother tongue might not be Urdu or who are not first generation immigrants from India or Pakistan. In the second edition of these books, we will include more comprehensive vocabulary sections to assist such teachers as well as older children.

To conclude, *Urdu for Children*, in our view, is a pioneering and comprehensive set of books of its kind written for children growing up in the West. The members of Urdu Project Team will welcome meaningful discussion and constructive suggestions in order to improve this set of books for editions. The second set of six volumes (Textbooks 2 volumes, *Let's Read Urdu* 2 volumes, *Let's Write Urdu* 2 volumes, two audio cassettes, and *Teacher's Manual*) for grades two and three is currently in press. It is gratifying to know that these texts are currently being used in various boards of education in Ontario by a large number of children enrolled in Urdu classes.

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#### Professor Ralph Russell's Response:

Dear Editor:

I MUCH appreciate the courteous tone of Sajida Alvi and her two colleagues' response to my review, but I don't think I have anything much to retract. And I

much regret that I have to call their response to my criticism of their inclusion of Ḥālī's poem less than honest. They know very well that "*baṛōñ kā kahñā māñō*" doesn't mean "listen to your elders." It means what I said it did—"do as your elders tell you"—and the thoroughly objectionable content of the rest of the poem is just as I summarized it. *Of course* children should listen to their parents—and even more importantly perhaps, parents should listen to their children. But that is not what the poem says. Granted that it is "a classic ... poem" and is "part of their literary heritage"; it is *not* "an excellent vehicle of transmitting family values." That something is traditional does not in the least mean that it is good. All traditional values (in all societies) have to be constantly assessed, and some are to be maintained, others modified, and yet others completely rejected. (Plato's view too, I heartily agree, is to be rejected!)

I do not imply that *anything* written for Pakistani children is not suitable for children growing up in Canada. Some of it undoubtedly is. But a lot isn't, and I doubt very much whether "*Billō kā Basta*" is. I no longer have the book in front of me, but if I remember rightly the piece refers to *gullī ḍandā*. It is my experience that quite a lot of Pakistani adults, let alone children, don't even know what *gullī ḍandā* is or how it is (was?) played.

On "*Gājar kā ṭaudā*" I accept that my criticism may well have been invalid but I still maintain my objection to "*Nīlī Ṣadrī*." Stories about animals (like Aesop's and those of the *Panchatantra*) are indeed appealing, but straight realism followed by the sudden introduction of animal fantasies in the same short piece does not belong together.

I'm not convinced that the children who are the target audience have been adequately consulted. "Teaching children" is by no means synonymous with consulting them. Anyone familiar with traditional Pakistani methods, still used in mosques all over Britain, is only too well aware of that. I'm sure the methods of the Canadian teachers are a great advance on that, but it still doesn't follow that teaching equals consulting.

Nor does the argument that children are being taught from these books carry much weight. They are taught from whatever materials are available, and these may be good, bad, or indifferent. Teachers of Urdu in British schools have commonly used the *Urdū kī pahīlī, dūsarī*, etc., *kitābēñ* used in Pakistani schools, and the less said about the quality and suitability of these the better.

I am always dubious about the conclusions of people who claim to be experts on children's needs. Once children have been effectively encouraged to feel that it is perfectly proper, and indeed desirable, to express their opinions politely but honestly to parents, teachers, and adults in general, even (and perhaps especially) where these differ from those of their "elders and betters," it is they, the children, who become the authority on what children need and like.

One hopes that increasingly they *are* being so encouraged and are increasingly responding to that encouragement. (To which I should add that we in Britain, and, I'm sure, you in Canada, still have a long way to go along this road. This does not mean that any of us has to wait for anyone else before we go on ahead.)

I'm afraid I *still* think that the "output of the production team" is remarkably slender. This does not at all mean "casting doubt on the integrity of writers." I have no doubt of their integrity, and I'm sure that they have labored hard. What I do say, with all due respect to them, is that they have not (yet) acquired the skills and attitudes required to make them equal to their task.

— RALPH RUSSELL  
*London*