Re-thinking School Leadership and Management during COVID-19 in Pakistan

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Covid-19 presented several challenges to the global infrastructure and it has certainly changed systems in almost every walk of life. Recovery will most likely create a new normal and the aftermath of the pandemic will change us as a species (Gleiser, 2020). Many commentators believe that the pandemic has offered humankind a chance to rethink its ways of life. Uncertainty could catalyze positive action. Responsibility, among various other values, is being revisited because simple actions like shaking hands, not wearing masks, and crowding at community gatherings could expose all individuals to risk.

The negative impact of the pandemic was severely felt by the education sector globally. The United Nations estimated that nearly 600 million children have been affected alone in South Asia by the lockdowns triggered by the pandemic (Menon, 2020). Coupled with the anxiety of losing jobs, managing online schooling and protecting the mental well-being of children and adults have laid a great burden on the people of the world. Studies have highlighted the impact of the pandemic on families and educators who have experienced emotional distress, financial instability, and threats to basic needs (Usable Knowledge, 2020). Apart from uncertainty harboring fear and anxiety among students, families, and educators, virtual learning has presented greater challenges than success stories. The biggest challenges were access to reliable internet and devices for all children, and communication between

teachers and students and teachers and parents. The drastic change in schedules and responsibilities has exposed educators to the point of burnout.

A Short Note on Pakistan's Education System and its Challenges

Since the 18th constitutional amendment, education in Pakistan has become a part of provincial jurisdiction (Senate, 2010). The provincial governments are primarily responsible for the overall governance of the public and private education systems and the multifaceted education system of Pakistan is distraught with challenges. On the one hand, the country has not been able to attain compulsory education for all, and on the other hand, there is a vast public and private divide in the educational systems. The public schools are mostly neglected, while the effectiveness of private schools is questionable. Since the 18th amendment, administrations have struggled to uphold the commitment made under Article 25 A, Free and compulsory education. As a nation, Pakistan has yet to learn the value and importance of education for individual and collective benefits. Amidst the closure of schools due to non-compliance with COVID-19 SOPs, continued financial losses, and little to no effective means of online learning, the situation is one of doom and gloom for the vast majority of children in Pakistan. A forward-thinking approach and mindset will be needed to overcome the ever-widening gaps and challenges in post-pandemic Pakistan. The role of the government and private sector is key in mitigating the challenges heightened by Covid-19.

What School Leaders and Managers Can Do to Manage the Change Post-COVID-19

The pandemic has severely disrupted the world's education, health, and economic systems. The very machinery is now said to be dysfunctional and warrants change to ensure equality and justice for all. The following section discusses ideas in detail that can help schools galvanize change in the educational system.

Focus on Mental Health, Well-Being, And Social Development

The pandemic has reminded us that the very objective and most pertinent outcome of good education should be to focus on the balanced and holistic development of children. Schools need to rethink the implementation of the curriculum and the teaching and learning processes in order to attain academic growth to ensure the positive emotional and social development of the child. The

emphasis of a good education should be on building relationships, developing leadership skills, responsibility, cooperation, and collaboration. The focus should be redirected to the right objective –i.e. helping individuals develop unique identities and developing their innate skills and capabilities towards meaningful learning and success. Teaching and learning methodologies require recalibration from the traditional teacher-led to learning-centered education classrooms (Malik, 2020). The uncertainties due to the pandemic have impacted individuals of all ages. Many children and youth returning to schools and colleges may need emotional counseling (Razzaque, 2020).

Strengthen Teacher Education and Teacher-Student Communication

Teacher education programs should focus on the mental well-being of teachers and ensure the development of competencies to build positive relationships with students so that they can nurture young minds. Teachers must be supported to establish one-to-one and class-wide communication with their students. They should be taught how to create an environment where students feel safe and secure asking questions that are important to them, making mistakes, and receiving a timely and encouraging response from the teachers (Spencer, 2020). Teachers' repertoires must be strengthened to address the needs of children and youth with physical and learning disabilities (GCE, 2020). Professional education programs should be redesigned to ensure teachers have the necessary skills to build positive relationships with the students and mobilize all resources for the sole purpose of nurturing young minds. The importance of mental well-being and mental health is novel for teachers in Pakistan and there is an urgent need to address this challenge. The education system/schools can seize the moment and emphasize the quality of teacher intake and induction, monitoring and continuing professional development to focus on mental well-being and mental health. Despite barriers presented by the lockdowns, hybrid schooling models or remote learning, emphasis on empathy and confidentiality is pertinent for teachers to develop a rapport with their students. Therefore, there needs to be an emphasis on safe teacher-student communications.

Differentiation and Inclusive Education

Pakistan is also struggling to provide quality mainstream education for children with physical or learning disabilities (Haider, 2008; Malik, et al., 2020). Furthermore, children who were previously struggling with academics may fall

further behind, as such, learning opportunities for students will have to be managed. The education system needs to chalk-out plans for developing skills, knowledge, attitudes, and values to help children attain the year-on-year learning milestones (Malik, 2020). Schools can seize the moment and emphasize on the quality of teacher induction, monitoring, and continuing professional development to focus on inclusive education, mental well-being, and mental health of all stakeholders. From a culture of teaching, schools are at an advantageous position to reimagine and redesign a new culture, that of learning. Teacher training and education must be expanded on special needs education. In the aftermath of the pandemic, teachers' gamut and mental faculties must be strengthened to address the needs of children and youth with physical and learning disabilities (GCE, 2020).

Focus on Reimagining the Role of Technology in Education

Since technology has assumed a central position to ensure that teaching and learning continue despite the lockdown, schools need to develop a robust framework for including technology to assist teaching and learning (Usable Knowledge, 2020). The framework should focus on educational outcomes and how technology can assist in achieving those. While each school will need its own framework and strategies depending on the context, the government needs to establish a national framework to guide the schools. The government in coordination with schools should develop consortiums to discuss how education technologies can empower the teaching and learning process, how teachers can use technology in classrooms and beyond, what kind of academic leadership is required to spearhead the inclusion of technology, what outcomes are envisaged and how will the effectiveness of the outcomes be measured.

Safer Infrastructure

Personal hygiene and social responsibility have never been more important than now. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided the education system with an opportunity to pivot from the conventional student-teacher relationship to a holistic approach of engaging students, teachers, families, and the community toward a safer environment for the students. Schools should focus heavily on educating teachers, students, and families and thereby the community, maintaining personal hygiene, and building responsible habits. In the effort, schools will have to implement standardized SOPs across the board in order to ensure safety and security for all.

The culture of learning can permeate the culture of care, which would support the emotional and social development of all students. Thus shifting from a teaching culture to a learning culture to help learners assume ownership of their learning will be a primary focus for schools. Schools will have to continue educating teachers, students, and families on the importance of safety and preventive care (Sargrad & Calsyn, 2020). Schools can also help in reducing the risk of spreading Covid-19 with the following steps.

- Ensure social distancing measures in the classroom seating plan
- Effective screening and response – no entry inside the school for anyone with a fever or Covid-19 symptoms
- Self-isolation policy for all staff and students to ensure a culture of care and positive influence
- Education for preventive care and responsibility – school circulars, signage, guidelines for information and reminders
- Flexible schedules for children to continue attending schools
- Ensure hand hygiene and sanitization of the campus

Government and low-tier schools may be challenged to implement the simplest of preventive measures such as hand hygiene, soap and running water in washrooms, screening procedures, and social distancing measures (GCE Secretariat, 2020). However, the government must step in to help such low-tier or public sector schools to combat the challenges of re-opening schools.

Strong Leadership and Coordination

The ripple effect of the pandemic, in and beyond education is yet to be completely understood. Many commentators think that the threat is far from over and the world must brace itself for the aftershocks of the pandemic. In such uncertain times, schools should rally together in strengthening data collection and monitoring (Malik, 2020). Covid-19 is likely to change education for the better only if the will of people is strong and intentional. The time now is to prepare the schools, teachers, and students to be resilient in the face of adversities.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic response has demanded that international policymakers to re-think public health strategies. The education sector should treat this as an opportunity to develop robust disaster preparedness and risk reduction plans as well as plans to tackle global health emergencies in order to safeguard the most vulnerable spectrum of the population.

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