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**Managing MGT**

Part - II

In Part I of this article (May 23), I began a discussion on key dilemmas associated with Multigrade Teaching (MGT) and presented a few facts about MGT which have arguably shown a downward trend to the access and quality indicators of the education system in Pakistan.

It is critical to look at how the MGT challenge should be holistically responded to on several fronts. While evaluating possible ways to deal with this issue, there seem to be two plausible prongs of the broader strategy to address this challenge.

The first should focus on measures which could help minimize the obvious effects of MGT in schools which were originally designed with two classrooms and were provided with two teachers. We know that, partly due to poor planning and also owing to a genuine lack of financial resources, such schools do not get budgets for the construction of more classrooms and recruitment of new teachers for years. This claim is supported by the fact that there are more than 20,000 two classrooms/teachers schools in the country.

Practically speaking, the government may consider bringing a policy change in the design and size of the classrooms of new schools and adjust it according to the requirements of a multigrade teaching approach. The bigger sized classrooms must then be complemented by specialized equipment, furniture, and fixtures to create multigrade friendly learning spaces for improved classroom management and foster effective learning. The government education departments can also take concrete steps to promote collaborative and independent learning in the classrooms by providing personal learning kits for students. These may include student writing boards, setting up of reading corners in each classroom, and specialized Audio/Visual aids.

As far as the second prong of the strategy is concerned, it should focus on improving the state of affairs in the ubiquitous multigrade schools in the country. At the policy level, the government needs to recognize that MGT is a pervasive challenge and in its current form it is causing ineffectiveness and inefficiency to the utilization of its scarce human and financial resources. So, the government should aim at providing such an enabling environment and support mechanism to teachers that they start introducing MGT teaching strategies as a preferred pedagogical choice instead of taking it as a burden.

The first step in this direction will be to differentiate and mark MGT schools from monograde schools. This could be done based on certain parameters such as student enrolment, number of teachers and classrooms, geographical location etc. The challenge here would be irrational Optimum Student-Teacher Ratio or OSTR in a large number of schools in the country. This means that there are multigrade schools with as low as 21 students and only one teacher whereas there are also single teacher schools with as high as 315 students. So, there is a dire need to effectively use data in order to inform policy choices to make practically viable decisions.

Under the ambit of policy level intervention, an important consideration is to ensure that any MGT policy is aligned with overall policy space within the landscape of education delivery. For instance, financial resource allocation for construction of schools/new classrooms should be made responsive to MGT policy recommendations, which might suggest to prioritize the construction of at least one new classroom in single teacher schools to reduce the severity of MGT, whereas the education departments may have other construction plans which may be technically and politically more appealing. Similarly, this may also clash with current policy related to the posting and transfer of teachers whereby the MGT driven policy may suggest a mandatory provision of an additional teacher in single teacher schools which may not meet the criteria of OSTR.

At the technical front, it requires great attention to detail while developing the pedagogical design of a multigrade solution. As mentioned earlier, in a multigrade situation the students of two or more grades study simultaneously from the same teacher. But which grades would sit together? How would the time-table be designed? Which particular learning topics could be clubbed together? And what specific teaching methodology or particular strategy should be employed by the teacher? The responses to all these questions need contextually relevant and technically sound foundations for the development of a pedagogical design for MGT. The good news is that a lot of academic literature is available which outlines some of the best practices of MGT in other parts of the world in similar contexts as Pakistan.

Now, at the operational level, it must be kept in mind that all the great policies and technically sound pedagogical designs would remain inapplicable unless they address the specific needs of teachers who are responsible to implement them. Hence, teachers should be provided high-quality teaching and learning materials that they can use to effectively manage teaching and learning processes in the MGT context. Some of the materials could be lesson plans with a special focus on promoting flexible grouping to use collaborative learning as a viable teaching strategy. Yet another example could be the provision of relevant practice exercises for students. Above all, teachers must also be equipped with essential classroom supplies so that they are only focused on teaching rather than managing logistical constraints.

One cannot forget that the teacher has a pivotal role in the entire scheme of things to implement MGT strategy at any level. In this regard, all the provincial and federal education departments must initiate training programmes which are responsive to the needs of MGT teachers.

Unquestionably, MGT is an issue of national importance that needs the attention of policymakers. It is a serious roadblock in realizing the government’s efforts in improving student learning outcomes and retention. It is also constantly inflicting teacher motivation. However, the silver lining is that it can turn into an opportunity if it is handled at the right policy level. It is important to bring out-of-school children back to the school, and equally important to retain the existing students and offer them quality education.

Concluded

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