**Messing with education**

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Education in Pakistan has been perpetually in peril. Not because the government did not have resources; it had them for all other purposes, including some wrong ones. Mainly education has been in peril for at least two reasons: lack of political will, and absence of the right direction.

Political will can have multiple and complex definitions but for the sake of simplicity we may try to understand it as a will by political actors to commit resources to achieve change. Resources may be in the shape of capital – financial, human, political, and social capital. Even if a government allocates these resources, sufficient energy and time management is crucial to achieve the desired change. Of course, the risks are there but the top leadership must be ready to take those risks that come mostly as opportunity costs to that end.

For the education sector in Pakistan, when we say that political will has been missing, we are not talking about speeches and statements that education managers, planners, and political leaders – including prime ministers and presidents of Pakistan – have been delivering at conferences and convocations. Full of cliched expressions and platitudes such as ‘no country can progress without education’, ‘we need to focus on our youth’, ‘critical thinking is important’, ‘education is our priority’, they go on ad nauseam. Saying all this without political will shows a lack of commitment.

The education lexicon in Pakistan has become devoid of meaning. If political will means allocation of resources, let’s consider for a moment where we stand now. First is financial resources, which have never touched the required levels in Pakistan in its 75 years. We cannot overstate the fact that for a country such as Pakistan, the government must allocate somewhere between five and 10 per cent of GDP to education if we want to achieve at least universal primary education of some quality in the near future. The argument that the sector does not have the capacity to absorb that much is hollow.

This argument cites some lapses in the current allocation to prove its point. It is true that even now not all the money allocated finds its way to full utilization – and some of it lapses every year. But we must keep in mind that around 90 per cent of the education budget goes to salaries which all teachers receive without fail. The remaining 10 per cent or so that should go to development projects experiences some lapses for various reasons. Only a minor portion of development expenses lapses every year and a major reason for that is the delayed release of funds.

The second issue, which depends on financial resources, is the drastic reduction in the number of middle and secondary schools. Nearly 50 per cent of students who enroll in primary schools end up dropping out because of the missing transition from primary to middle level. The number of middle and secondary schools is much lower and unless the government allocates more finances to build better and well equipped middle and secondary schools, education will keep suffering. Then the next drastic dropouts take place from secondary to higher secondary or college-level transition.

College education is perhaps the most neglected area of Pakistan’s public-sector education. Expecting the higher education sector to perform better, without first improving and revamping intermediate education is one of the root causes of the poor state of higher education in the country. Though there are departments within education ministries that manage college education, most of the officials are involved in postings, transfers, and appearing in courts as respondents in an endless number of cases that teachers and head teachers keep filing. The budget allocated to college education is also dismally low, and most government colleges appear as desolate places where nothing much happens.

From primary to higher education, we have seen that nearly all governments have messed with the education sector – grandiose claims but little to show on the ground. The way the PTI government mishandled education needed some reversals of harmful decisions. Unfortunately, the new government appears to be as clueless as the previous one and just like the finance ministry is dangling between Ishaq Dar and Miftah Ismail, the education ministry too seems to be caught between two ministers.

The previous government had introduced a highly controversial and rather harmful single national curriculum (SNC). The new government must immediately dissociate itself from this farce, rather than trying to once again gather ‘experts’ to revise it. Developing a curriculum is not the job of the federal ministry. After the 18th Amendment to the constitution, this falls under the purview of provincial governments and the federal government and its ministers must desist from indulging in an activity that is futile and wasteful.

Constitutionally, it is the Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training. That means the ministry must focus on its primary tasks of managing educational institutions that come under the ambit of the federal government. It cannot and should not arrogate to itself tasks that are no more under the federal ministry’s ambit. The previous government wasted tens of millions of rupees on dozens of meetings and inviting ‘experts’ from across the country to produce curricula for primary education and that too was nearly a 90 per cent replica of the 2006 curricula that was revised in 2012. Such ambitious exercises of revision after revisions are meaningless and wasteful.

Then what should the ministry do? It should devise plans to improve education at all federally managed educational institutions, allocate adequate resources and implement those plans. And that itself is a gigantic task because there are still hundreds of federally managed schools, colleges, and universities across the country that need better quality books, state-of-the-art equipment, improved teaching methods, and well-educated and trained faculty. That should be the primary focus of the ministry of federal education, rather than once again wasting resources – that are already in short supply – on conferences and meetings to once again review and revise the SNC.

Then the second significant responsibility of the ministry is professional training that needs substantial input of resources. There is a need to establish and run more institutes of professional training in every district of the country, and improve the quality of existing ones. Our students mostly pursue bachelor’s degrees with a lot of concentration on theory and little on professional training that could help them find suitable jobs. For this purpose we must learn from at least two neighbours, China and India. The Chinese model of professional training is one of the best in the world and they manage to equip their youth with high quality professional expertise in a short period of time.

With India we keep competing in arms and weapons procurement, without realizing that we must also compete in professional training. In Pakistan we do not have a single institute of professional trading that can compete with the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs). Right now there are at least 23 IITs in India that the central government funds. It allocates more than one billion dollars a year for these IITs across the country. India calls them Institutes of National Importance and so they are with a highest degree of autonomy.

That is equivalent to Rs200 billion just for 23 IITs, whereas in Pakistan for over 100 public-sector universities the government does not give even Rs60 billion. This pantomime of education that we have been witnessing for 75 years in Pakistan is no more amusing. Please stop messing around with education, leave provincial matters to the provinces, and focus on professional training.

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