**School education challenges after reopening**

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Covid-19 has posed several unanticipated challenges for the education sector in countries like Pakistan where vast numbers of students are now at risk of falling behind. Pakistan’s educational woes however are longstanding. A decade after the right of education was guaranteed by a constitutional amendment, 25-A, Pakistan has the dubious distinction of world’s second-highest number of out-of-school children. According to Unicef, over 22 million of Pakistan’s 77 million school-going children remain out of school. While enrollment and retention rates have been improving slowly, the provision of good quality basic education for all remains an elusive goal. Pakistan has some of the world’s worst education indicators. Unfortunately, Pakistan has the world’s second-highest number of out-of-school children (OOSC) with an estimated 22.8 million children.

In these circumstances, the official notification for the closure of schools came at a time when almost all private schools were trying to wind up the academic year and preparing students for their final examinations. Due to the drastic turn of events in the wake of COVID-19, Pakistan’s 77 million school-going children remained out of school for more then 6-8 month. Private schools had been unable to manage their accounts to pay their staff’s salaries. The elite schools and campuses of the largest schooling systems which comprised of 2 percent of the community could easily met the needs of their staff and managed other expenses, but low-cost schools comprised of 85 percent under Rs 2000 fee and 13 percentage affordable-cost schools under Rs 5000 fee of the total community – a majority of which operate in remote areas – could’t do so. Because they rely on the collection of monthly tuition fees, as most of such institutions are housed in rented buildings, apart from utility bills, taxes and salaries etc. Parents living in low-income neighbourhoods were mostly daily-wagers who didn’t had enough resources to pay the school fees of their children. As most of the businesses have been closed because of the current lockdown, these people have been rendered jobless so that after reopening of schools about 50 percent of the students mostly girls and teachers didn’t come back to schools.

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Likewise, when the schools received closure orders, the administrators were directed not to collect advance fees in compliance with the High Court’s decision. Education Ministers and politicians for the sack of cheap popularity shouted to parents not to pay school fee to schools until revised fee bills. Most of the parents didn’t pay fee during lockdown resulting the teachers weren’t paid in this critical situation, and they become jobless. Similarly, the owners of the buildings demanded rents and companies providing utility services asked for the bills be paid from the schools, so this situation forced more then 10,000 low-cost schools to shut down. All Pakistan Private Schools’ Federation, educationists and even government officials believe that the financial crunch caused by the COVID-19 pandemic will force a number of more low-cost schools to shut down permanently.

According to a UN report, the Covid-19 pandemic has created the largest disruptions in the education systems in history. The closure of learning spaces impacted nearly 94 percent of student population worldwide. Almost 1.6 billion students in more than 190 countries across the globe were affected by the closure of education institutions when the World Health Organization declared Covid-19 a pandemic. The closure of schools in Pakistan disrupted the learning pursuit of over 50 million students of schools and colleges. Pakistan’s education system comprises 317,323 public & private institutions, accommodating 50,292,570 students and 25,36,584 teachers. Out of these about 2 percent or less than 1 million students of elite private schools have been lucky enough to resume their learning through online tutorials. Whereas the rest – about 48 million children – enrolled in government and low fee private schools have been abandoned by the system, as management of these schools neither have the resources nor the capacity to launch individualised online courses for their students.

Initiatives like the ‘Tele-school’ program by Pakistan Television, online classes and ‘Taleem Ghar’ have though been launched with good intentions, but practically have failed to help resume continuity of learning of about 95 percent students due to numerous technical bottlenecks at the level of transmission and the receiving end. Covid-19 has further widened the quality gap between public and private schools, increasing the number of drop-out and out-of-school children in the country. This can leave more unequal access and lower accountability for quality, which tends to harm for poor students disproportionally, especially girls. The Teleschool channel is uneven in its quality. According to government figures, about 36 percent of Pakistani households have broadband Internet, whereas, according to World Bank only 15.5 percent of the population used the Internet in 2019. There is a fear that this situation will either increase the number of out-of-school children or direct many of the students to get enrolled at public educational institutions, which are already overcrowded and lack basic facilities to serve the pupils already there.

Low-cost school owners find themselves in a double bind: if they ask for fees from daily-wager parents, it may increase the dropout rate and they may have to shut down their institutions permanently; if they don’t, they will definitely go closure of the schools. Moreover, these parents may not be able to send their children to other schools, so it’s not in anyone’s interest to let low-cost or affordable-cost private school owners fend for themselves in such circumstances, especially when around 23 million children already don’t go to school and public institutions can’t accommodate every kid. All Pakistan Private Schools’ Federation, had written letters to the President, Prime Minister, the federal finance minister, the education ministers and the Governor State Bank, seeking interest-free loans and relief packages for the low-cost private schools.

There is expected financial damage of Rs 500 billion of the economy of private education and allied professions due to the unwise coronavirus emergency. There is predict that such circumstances will further deteriorate the financial power of those running low-cost schools, and that they will need the government’s assistance, which unfortunately, is not available or possible, give the current state of affairs. Since it is an epidemic, the federal and provincial governments must help to low-cost schools. The government needs to focus on evolving a comprehensive long-term strategy that is holistic and all encompassing. Based on real-time data, risk assessment indicators and the trend of transmission in Pakistan, we will have to make decisions that are in the best interests – educational or health – of our children.

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