Policy Brief
Making Our Educational Institutes Resilient to Emergencies
Muhammad Aqeel Awan & Baela Raza Jamil

Covid-19 pandemic has affected the educational routines of over 40 million students in Pakistan. While the country at large was ill-prepared to face a pandemic, the education sector, in particular, lacked a blueprint for ensuring the continuation of learning in the face of a pandemic. After six months of school closure, schools could only remain open for in-person learning for just over two months. It raises a lot of questions as to where are the gaps in implementing Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and what should be done to make schools more resilient not only against the remaining period or waves of the Covid-19 pandemic, but for the future, likely unpredictable crises as well. This policy brief addresses some of these questions.

Institutional or organizational resilience is broadly understood as a function of three factors: preparation\(^1\), adaptability\(^2\) and transformability\(^3\). While preparation allows the availability of resources (human, fiscal and technical) to resist and weaken the impact of a crisis\(^4\), adaptability and transformability refer to the system’s capacity to not only modify the organizational routines and workings as per short-run needs but also to utilize the challenging situation as an opportunity to implement practices that could offer long-run benefits.\(^5\)

Earlier in May-2020, Ministry of Education and Professional Training (MoE&PT) formulated a resilience plan for schools during the Covid-19 pandemic in which it prioritized the following three areas: 1) continuation of learning, 2) system strengthening, and 3) addressing health (physical and psychosocial), hygiene and safety.\(^6\) Later in August, prior to the reopening of schools, Ministry of Health issued guidelines on SOPs for schools and colleges across the country.\(^7\)

Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi (ITA) has conducted a comprehensive baseline survey under a project, titled, Safe School Reopening Pilot (SRP), funded by the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA). The pilot sampled 38 schools\(^8\) of Islamabad including a sample of 1488 students and 106 teachers to evaluate: a) the extent to which SOPs were being implemented in the schools and what were the constraints, b) the possibilities for system strengthening, and c) the physical and psychosocial health of students after the lockdown. The following sections discuss the findings of the survey in light of the MoE&PT’s priority areas for resilience during Covid-19.

\(^6\) Available at: http://moept.gov.pk/SiteImage/Misc/files/0_%20NERRP%20COVID-19%20MoFEP%20%24%20May%202020%20%20Ver%202001.pdf
\(^7\) Available at: https://covid.gov.pk/new_guidelines/10September2020_20200909_H ealth_Guidelines_for_Education_Institutions_Reopening_during_CO VID_19_Pandemic_3603.pdf
\(^8\) Of the 38 schools, 19 each control and intervention, 14 were from Urban areas of Islamabad and 24 from peri-Urban areas. These schools ranged from primary to post-graduate level. The total enrollment in these schools was 29,546 with a median age of 14.1 years, and total appointed number of teachers was 908.
1. Continuation of Learning

I teach mathematics and I have certainly witnessed learning losses among students since the lockdown. (a teacher from FDE schools, Islamabad)

Shutting down schools for six months to prevent the spread of Covid-19 resulted in learning losses. The, before and after lockdown competence comparison shows an average of 20% learning losses, according to a survey by Punjab Examination Commission (PEC). When in-person learning does not remain a possibility, the question arises regarding the preparation of schools for offering virtual learning. Unsurprisingly, the schools were not prepared and the six months flew by without any significant effort to ensure continuation of learning. During this time-period, the MoFE&PT together with Pakistan Television (PTV), launched the day long TeleSchool programs for virtual learning catering to K-10. The SRP baseline survey shows that about 40% of the students watched these programs at least once. However, in the absence of proper learning and evaluation environment, majority of these students did not use the option of Tele-School consistently for continued learning.

Now after staying open for ten weeks (at secondary level), the schools are back to virtual learning. Have schools been able to transform their capacity to continue learning virtually? SRP’s findings show that while 77% of the schools have internet facility, it is restricted to the computer labs and faculty offices; moreover, the quality and strength of internet is generally not sufficient to hold multiple virtual classes simultaneously.

The survey further shows that while 72% students know how to use computer/laptop, only about 53% households have internet facility in the house. That severely restricts the possibility of continued learning for students when in-person learning is not possible.

2. System Strengthening

It is very difficult to ensure proper social distancing and hygiene under the constrained physical space of the school. (a teacher from FDE Schools, Islamabad)

While the system for remote learning needs improvement, the infrastructure for in-person learning also needs significant adaptation and transformation to ensure that the SOPs for Covid-19 could be followed and schools become more resilient to the pandemic once students return back in January 2021. The government guidelines recommend a space of 1029 square feet for 20 students in a classroom at secondary level.

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10 Akmal et al. (2020) findings corroborate SRP’s results as they show that only about 35% have watched TeleSchool programs.
In reality, there is a major inability to follow SOPs; SRP findings show an average of 490 square feet space for a class of 43 students. Similarly, government guidelines recommend a ratio of 20 students to 1 toilet, while the SRP baseline findings show that currently schools are operating at an average of 82 students to 1 toilet ratio. The lack of sufficient infrastructure combined with limited resources make it quite challenging for schools to implement social distancing and other SOPs in their given space. As a result, schools remain highly vulnerable to the spread of the virus.

![Average Size of Classrooms](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Government guidelines</th>
<th>Baseline Statistics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1029 sq. ft.</td>
<td>490 sq. ft.</td>
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3. Health (Physical and Psychosocial) and Hygiene

I fear the virus more for my parents since it is more dangerous for the elderly. (an 18-year-old girl, studying at a college in Islamabad)

Thirty three percent of the schools do not have isolation rooms in case a suspected Covid-19 case appears inside the schools, while 80% of the schools do not have any kind of health facility inside their premise.

While the health infrastructure of schools puts them at high risk, the physical and psychosocial health of students only adds fuel to the fire. Firstly, the post-lockdown psychosocial health of students is worrisome. In the intervention schools, approximately one in three students reported to frequently experience tiredness and a similar proportion of students do not comfortably socialize; whilst one in four experience frequent headaches.

![Student - Toilet Ratio](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Government guidelines</th>
<th>Baseline Statistics</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 toilet for every 20 pupils</td>
<td>1 toilet for every 82 students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

![Malnourishment among Adolescent Students](image)

**Malnourishment among Adolescent Students (Age: 10 to 19)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONTROL</th>
<th>INTERVENTION</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.8%</td>
<td>20.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.7%</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.5%</td>
<td>34.5%</td>
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</table>

Poor health facilities and status is complemented by poor hygiene facilities and practices. About 60% of the toilets do not have exhausts and smell is a major issue. The issue of unclean school infrastructure gets exacerbated because of the fact that on average, one cleaning staff person is required to clean 24 and 28 rooms at secondary and higher secondary level,
respectively. Furthermore, 90% of the schools rely on water filters for clean drinking water but it has been many months since the filters were changed. About 27% schools had at least one broken handwashing sink while another 60% had at least one sink with no running water and 20% had no soaps for handwashing. In short, health and hygiene of students and schools puts continuation of learning at serious risk during Covid-19 as well as in the face of other challenging emergency situations.

Policy Recommendations

1. On Continuation of Learning

Catchup Learning, Addressing Learning Gaps & Learning Deprivation: Introduce a 30-day interactive catchup-learning support program centered around “foundational learning for understanding”. Students need to feel confident about addressing the learning gaps with agency, rather than ‘an excessive academic overload’ without assessing the size of the ‘learning loss’.

Availing and Improving opportunities for Remote Learning: Schools already equipped with internet, need better and wider internet packages to cover all classrooms. This can allow teachers to demonstrate online/WhatsApp learning solutions in classrooms as well for continuity at homes during on/off closures and beyond. Appropriate internet provisions and trainings on usage can go a long way in ensuring that learning never stops.11

2. On System Strengthening

Infrastructure Development: Fully equipped isolation and first aid rooms with properly trained staff are an essential need. Provisions must be made for infrastructure, equipment and capacity building. Where social distancing cannot be maintained, for example in classrooms between two seats and in toilets between sinks, low-cost physical barriers/screens can be installed.

Cleaning Staff: Sanctioned positions must be filled and enhanced for cleaning staff personnel. Similar to guidelines for student to teacher and student to toilet ratio, government should issue guidelines on rooms per cleaning staff personnel and ensure their strict implementation for better cleanliness and disinfection of schools.

Training: Teachers, students and non-teaching staff should receive proper trainings on Covid-19 SOPs and other natural disaster risk management to develop capacity to be prepared and respond to any emergencies. And lead regular school emergency drills.

3. On Health and Hygiene

School Health Programs (SHPs): Initiate a longstanding need for resilient school health program (SHP) in Pakistan at a time when health and education sectors are working closely on SOPs and given Pakistan’s twin challenges to meet basic health and education targets. Given the scale of the challenge, the government could opt for hybrid solutions with links to services at schools/ nearby vicinities and/or through growing telehealth innovations operating mostly through cell phones/kiosks.

Students’ Psychosocial Health: Students’ wellbeing and mental health should be of utmost priority. Therefore, steps should be taken to implement the longstanding policy recommendation for school counselors supporting adolescents for life skills, mental wellbeing and career guidance; with particular sensitivity to gender and adolescent concerns. There could be transition arrangements training selected existing staff for the role until ‘counselors’

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11 A similar activity in Botswana has shown positive results where a low-tech SMS based initiative revealed how learning losses can be mitigated through lessons on SMS supported by parents (Angrist N. 2020)
position can be created for secondary schools.

Students’ Physical Health: To improve students’ health and immune systems, there is an urgent need to provide for school nutrition support programs through innovative and transparent mechanisms.

Conclusion & Way Forward: Embedding Resilience into the System

Pakistan has experienced several emergencies/disasters (earthquakes, floods, conflict and displacements) in the past fifteen years, however there is little provision within the education sector for building organizational resilience reflected in system-wide preparation, adaptability and transformability. The current pandemic has highlighted major infrastructure and capacity challenges that need to be revisited if learning losses are to be prevented. Public private partnerships (PPPs) may be further expanded not only for digital and non-digital learning acceleration but also for system strengthening, protection and health and hygiene improvement. Furthermore, emergency preparation needs to be factored into mainstream education system routines, backed by budgets and with regular ‘drills’ on SOPs not just for COVID but other forms of emergencies as well.

System resilience is an urgent need and an overdue investment for the education sector; disasters have to be converted into a transformation opportunity or the ‘build back better’ paradigm. There is an urgency for creating possibilities and space for ‘system adaptability’ within given contexts. The dialogues are just beginning for the “New Education Policy (NEP) 2021” and it is an opportune time for SRP to provide relevant evidence-based inputs. The NEP 2021 must address strategies/SOPs for coping with emergencies at the sector level including infrastructure upgradation, workforce preparation to face emergencies and support learning needs, together with social emotional learning (SEL), and support budgets. There is an urgency to review active linkages with social safety nets at the school/sector level.

Pakistan has some extraordinary capacities for innovative initiatives in public and private sector viz. PPPs, Health communications outreach during COVID; positive response to the call for open education tech content and platforms absorbed by MoFE&PT/TeleSchool; social safety net/social protection initiatives during COVID such as Ehsaas Emergency Cash (EEC), upgrading of BISP instruments; telehealth solutions etc. How can the MoFE&PT/Departments of Education & Literacy be further open to initiatives aligned to, and made part of a systemic response with confidence reposed in its workforce/school leaders and parents to make informed choices for resilient outcomes? It is the pursuit of such converging pathways that will create a good business case for transformability of education in Pakistan; it is a low hanging fruit that needs to be plucked.