

Grade 10 Teachers' Perceptions of Reduced School Hours and the Smart Syllabus during Covid-19 Pandemic

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To control the spread of Covid-19, the government of Pakistan implemented a strategy involving a smart (reduced) syllabus that students were required to complete while being allowed to attend school only on alternate days. This research aimed to analyze grade 10 government school teachers' perceptions of the challenges associated with the government's strategy implemented during Covid-19 in Lahore, as well as how this strategy influenced the performance of grade 10 students. From 43 government schools, 127 grade 10 teachers were recruited using a multi-stage sampling technique for this qualitative research. The results of the study revealed that teachers' resilience and adaptability significantly influenced their ability to balance professional and personal responsibilities. The study also found that reduced school hours and the smart syllabus led to learning loss, widened the performance gap among students, and contributed to increased mental stress for both teachers and students. This research recommends evaluating the long-term impact of the smart syllabus and reduced school hours on student performance and teacher well-being. Also, it recommends building teachers' capacity to handle novel challenges that may arise from any unforeseen pandemic-like situation.

1. Introduction

Learning outcomes for schoolchildren depend on multiple factors, including but not limited to parental involvement and support in the learning process, educational facilities, and the learning environment at home as well as at school, and the role of school management (Masud et al. 2019). It is a measure of students' academic achievement that indicates how well they have grasped the concepts taught in the classroom and how the overall educational environment has positively or negatively impacted the teaching process (Kapur, 2018). If the standard operating procedures for educational institutions change, then the influence of these factors on learning outcomes may also change (MolokoMphale & Mhlauli, 2014).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, educational institutions all over the world were closed, and Pakistan was no exception, leaving billions of students out of school, which led governments to take extraordinary measures to overcome learning losses (World Bank, 2020). The Government of Pakistan implemented a multifaceted approach to reopen schools while overcoming the challenges related to the pandemic after the lockdown, and two key aspects of this approach were reduced school hours and a reduced syllabus (termed the Smart Syllabus) (Mofept, 2020). According to the Pakistani government's SOPs, schools were allowed to permit only 50% of their students to enter the premises at a given time. Therefore, students of each class were divided into two groups: Group A and Group B. Since students' time spent in class was significantly reduced, the education department reduced the content of the syllabus to accommodate the limited instructional time (Noor et al., 2020).

Understanding teachers' perceptions of the syllabus and the time students spend at school can provide valuable insights into the impact on schoolchildren's learning outcomes (Kumar & Lata, 2020). The current research investigated how school teachers of grade 10 in government schools in Lahore perceived the challenges associated with reduced school hours and the Smart Syllabus for the students.

1.1 Research Objectives

One of the objectives of this research study was to analyze teachers' perceptions of the challenges associated with reduced school hours for grade 10 in government schools in Lahore due to Covid-19. Another objective of this research was to investigate teachers' perceptions of the influence of the smart syllabus on grade 10 students' performance due to Covid-19 in Lahore.

2. Literature Review

Students' performance is likely to be negatively impacted due to unprecedented changes in classroom engagement between teachers and students, leading to poor results (Gopal, Singh & Aggarwal, 2021). A research study by George (2020) recommended that teachers should be trained on how to implement necessary changes in their teaching strategies, especially when they have to teach in difficult circumstances with limited resources to achieve the desired goals.

Covid-19 brought extraordinary challenges to the world, including the education sector, which attracted significant attention from researchers (Di Pietro et al., 2020). Academic activities were severely disrupted, while a record number of schools and universities remained closed for months



(UNESCO, 2020). By March 28, 2020, more than 1.7 billion schoolchildren were out of school worldwide due to the pandemic (Owusu-Fordjour, Koomson, & Hanson, 2020). According to UNDP (2020), by mid-March 2020, the government of Pakistan decided to close all educational institutes on an emergency basis. School closures due to Covid-19 prompted governments to explore practical solutions to address the challenges posed by the pandemic (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Gonzalez et al., 2020).

One of the factors that impact students' learning outcomes is their attendance in school (Olufemi, Adediran & Oyediran, 2018). Research by Farooq et al. (2011) revealed that secondary school students' learning outcomes have an inverse relationship with their physical absence from the classroom. Physical attendance became an issue for schools and universities when they reopened after the lockdown and standard operating procedures (SOPs) were implemented by the government to control the spread of Covid-19 (UNICEF, 2020).

According to UNDP (2020), many students, and even parents, did not send their children to school due to the fear of the virus, and this caused a severe loss for the students. According to the SOPs imposed by the government of Pakistan (Mofeet, 2020), schools were allowed to permit only 50% of the students to enter their premises at a single time; therefore, students of each class were divided into Group A and Group B. Each group was permitted to attend classes on alternate days, resulting in the total number of hours studied at school being reduced to 50%. Since the learning time of the students was decreased significantly, schools had to bring about critical changes in their students' learning objectives, which required them to reduce the content of the syllabus to be covered by the students (Noor et al., 2020).

Jez and Wassmer (2013) found that there is a positive relationship between school study time and students' learning outcomes. The study conducted by Gromada and Shewbridge (2016) concluded that disruption in routine and study schedules causes problems for both students and teachers, resulting in poor academic outcomes. According to Engzell, Frey, and Verhagen (2021), students experienced learning loss because of school closures and inadequate learning opportunities during Covid-19. García and Weiss (2020) reported that the Coronavirus pandemic caused mental distress among students who were partially or completely disconnected from the school system, leading to a decline in their academic performance.

The content of the syllabus is one of the deciding factors for setting up the learning goals for students (Afridi et al., 2020). Reducing the syllabus content may ease the burden for teachers and school students; however, it has to be done carefully, as it may lead to a compromise on learning outcomes. According to the findings of the study conducted by Sandhu and Qamar (2019), reducing the content of the syllabus leads to compromised learning outcomes for students and creates significant gaps in their knowledge. A study by Jackson (2019) concluded that reduction in the content of the syllabus limits the opportunities for students to develop critical skills, problem-solving techniques, and application-based learning.

School teachers perceived the reduced syllabus that needs to be covered in a limited time period as a double-edged sword. Teachers assume that if the standard syllabus of any grade is reduced, students lack an in-depth understanding of the fundamental concepts (Abudu, 2015). A study by Kamal and Illiyan (2021) concluded that teachers felt stressed and had to work under pressure when they were asked to complete the syllabus in a time period shorter than usual. Teachers' point of view was that, because of the limited time, students cannot engage in meaningful discussions, and it becomes hard for them to foster critical thinking, which affects their learning outcomes (Nurhayati, et al., 2018). Maulimora (2019) argues that school teachers express feelings of inadequacy and burnout when they are not given enough time to complete the syllabus.

The theoretical framework underpinning this research study is the Learning Environment, Learning Processes, and Learning Outcomes (LEPO) model proposed by Phillips, McNaught, and Kennedy (2010). This framework also permits the investigation of factors such as learning outcomes in connection with the learning environment, necessary for students to carry out their routine within a given time frame for study with peace of mind (Wong et al., 2021). The research, guided by the LEPO framework, revealed that a positive learning environment was strongly associated with improved learning outcomes, whereas a tense environment can make the learning process stressful for students, leading to a loss of learning (Nouh et al., 2016; Ezeala & Moleki, 2018).

3. Methodology

For this qualitative research, a multi-stage sampling technique was employed. In the first phase, three zones, Gulberg, Allama Iqbal Town, and Samanabad, were selected from a total of ten zones (Government of Punjab, 2021) using purposive sampling. There are 361 higher secondary and secondary schools across all ten zones in Lahore city, where 10,545 teachers instruct students from grade 6 to 12 (School Education Department, 2021). However, the exact number of teachers teaching grade 10 during Covid-19 is unavailable.

The inclusion criteria for teachers in the study were that they must have been regular grade 10 teachers for at least one to two years and must have taught during the Covid-19 pandemic. Snowball sampling was employed, utilizing teachers' networks to ensure that selected teachers met the research criteria. This approach was appropriate for achieving the qualitative research objectives, which focused on obtaining in-depth insights rather than statistical generalization. A sample size of 127 teachers was achieved based on the principle of data saturation, which was sufficient to ensure the necessary analytical depth.

3.1 Data Collection

To conduct semi-structured interviews, a questionnaire consisting of 19 items was prepared. Interviews were recorded using a SONY Digital Voice Recorder, and each interview lasted for almost 50 minutes. Before conducting the interviews, participants in the study were informed in writing that the data would be used purely for research purposes and that they could withdraw from the interview process at any time with no questions asked. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim for analysis.

3.2 Ethical Considerations

Written ethical permission was granted by the School Education Department, Government of Punjab, at the request of the researchers conducting this study. Moreover, authorization was obtained from the respective schools' headmasters/headmistresses after the teachers expressed their interest in participating in the research. Grade 10 teachers from government schools participated voluntarily, with the option to withdraw from the interview at any time. They were informed that the data collected from the interviews would be used solely for research purposes, with pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

4. Results and Discussion

From 43 schools, 127 teachers teaching various subjects to grade 10, shared their perspectives on the effect of the Smart Syllabus and reduced school hours due to COVID-19 during semi-structured interviews. As shown in figure 1, data collected from these interviews (2,413 responses) were analyzed using NVivo 13, and three major themes were identified: Disruptive Routine, Learning Loss, and Mental Stress. The results of this research are presented in relation to the identified themes and sub-themes, supported by direct and indirect quotations from the teachers' interviews.

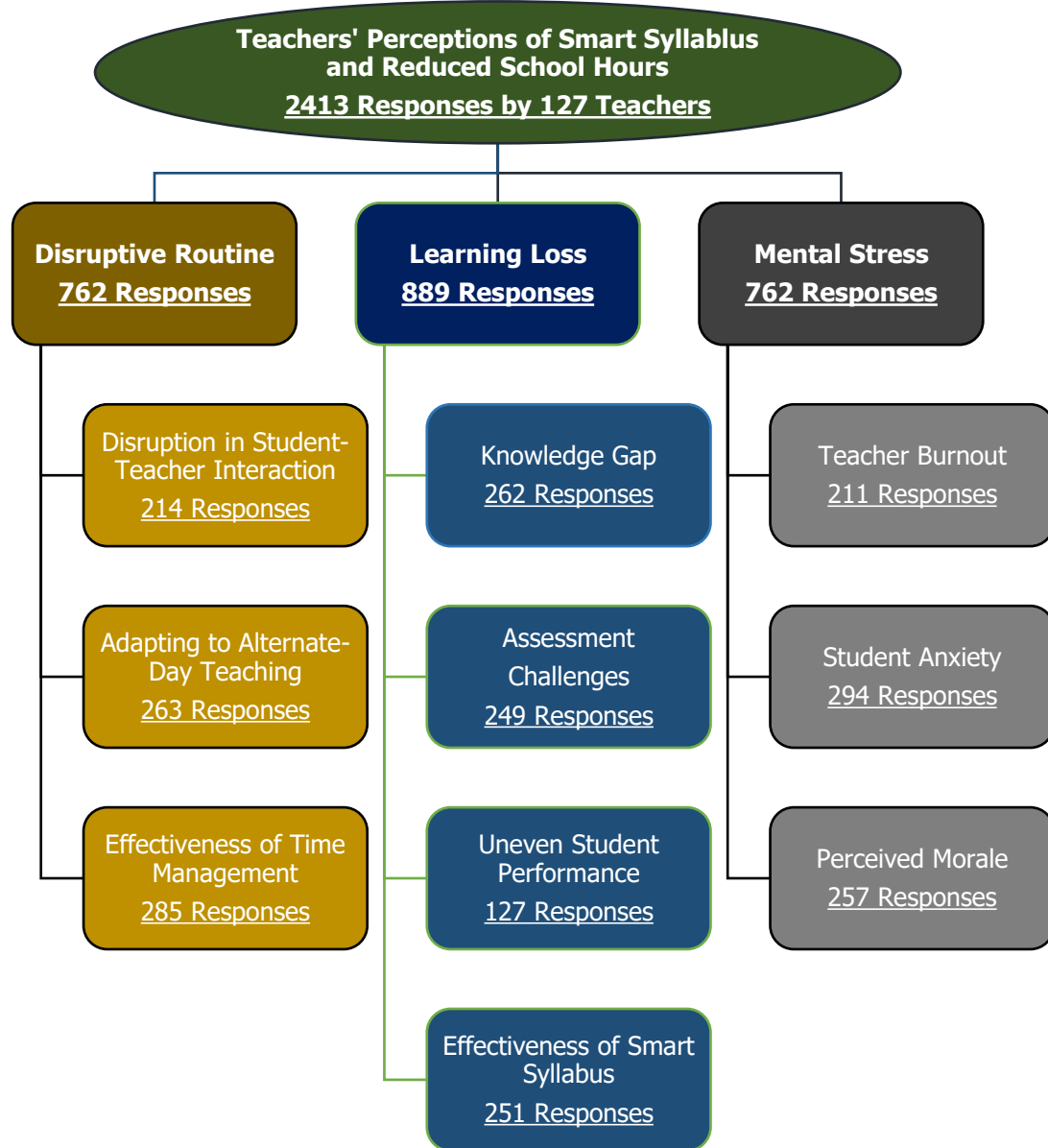
4.1 Disruptive Routine

Things have been evolving rapidly with the Coronavirus outbreak, and the government of Pakistan implemented a 'reduced school hours' strategy, allowing students to enter the premises of the school on alternate days. When teachers were asked, "What challenges do you face when teaching students on alternate days?", teachers such as Laiba, Muneeb, Noor, and Zain responded that students' routines were disrupted, which negatively impacted their performance. Teachers pointed out that the strategy of alternate days was difficult to manage for themselves as well as for most students. Seema said, *"It's really hard for the students to maintain their rhythm in studies because the teacher-student interaction is disrupted due to classes on alternate days."*

When asked, "How did the alternate-day schedule impact your ability to cover essential topics effectively?", the majority of the teachers expressed concerns that they had missed so many essential topics so far. The response by Aziz, *"Students tend to be lazy and do not pay attention to their studies,"* was aligned with those of Zaheer, Muneeb, and Yousuf. Nusrat stressed that, *"We had taken up the challenge of keeping the students as well as ourselves motivated and focused, but because of the hectic routine, I witnessed burnout and stress among my colleagues very often."*

When responding to the question, "How do you perceive the strategy of reduced school hours in terms of managing classroom time?", many teachers gave similar responses. Danial, Sadia, and Bilal hinted that this might be a good strategy to prevent the Coronavirus from spreading, but for the teachers, it was very challenging and they felt burdened. Mujtaba stated that, *"Students do not take it seriously,"* and Afsheen complained that, *"The number of absentees is increasing day by day."* While answering the question, "What adjustments did you make in your daily routine to accommodate the new schedule?", Ali, Sitwat, Qasim, and Irfan said that they had reduced the syllabus to make quick assessments. On the other hand, Magdalene and Waleed complained that they had to spend extra hours to prepare for the class lectures and assessments.

Figure No 1: Meta Themes/Sub-Themes Derived from Teachers' Interviews Coded in NVivo 13
Teachers shared different perspectives on the question, "Were there any administrative



challenges in managing alternate-day classes or the smart syllabus?”. Some teachers complained about the teachers’ availability for each class. They were of the view that teachers were restricted by the schools’ management from taking leaves, as it would become very difficult to complete the given syllabus. Several teachers, specifically Maria, Alishba, Huzaifa, and Ans, stated that one of the biggest challenges was to ensure that students and their parents were aware of their scheduled days for classes. When discussing the disruptive routine prompted by the question, “How did the disruption of routines affect your ability to maintain a balanced work-life dynamic?”, teachers tended to share a similar viewpoint. All the teachers expressed concerns regarding their health, as they felt they were working round the clock to first prepare the lessons and then deliver them effectively. Shakaib expressed, “*I could manage well some days; however, eventually it became overwhelming.*” Gul Naz stated, “*Teaching alternate groups disrupted my personal life.*”

4.2 Learning Loss

Responses to the question “How would you describe students’ academic performance while studying under reduced school hours?” revealed different patterns among teachers. A shared concern of the teachers was that the majority of the students underperformed because key concepts could not be fully grasped due to limited instructional time. Hina stated, *“Low performing students struggled to keep up,”* while Salah expressed, *“Students have missed a lot because of reduced school hours, and that may lead to long-term effects.”*

While talking about the smart syllabus driven by the question, “What outcomes have you observed from teaching the smart syllabus in the context of reduced school hours?”, teachers shared diverse perspectives. Sarmad, Faiqa, Wasim, and Subhan, along with several other teachers, were of the opinion that the strategy of ‘Smart Syllabus’ and ‘Reduced School Hours’ has widened the gap significantly in student performance. Tauseef stressed, *“Only a few students in the class could adapt to the strategy, but many others seem lost.”* Isra responded to the same question, stating, *“According to my observation, only 10% of students could perform well, and they were those whose parents were helping them in studies at home.”* Iqra was of the view, *“Smart syllabus was a good thing, but the number of hours at school were insufficient, specifically for slow learners.”*

Teachers expressed their worries when answering the question, “What specific concepts do you think students missed due to the smart syllabus?”. Several teachers believed that many foundational concepts were omitted from the ‘Smart Syllabus’ of Mathematics and Science subjects such as Physics, Chemistry, Biology, and Computer Science. Ahmad mentioned, *“Practical activities were minimized in science subjects,”* and Seerat expressed, *“Problem-solving exercises in math were skipped in the Smart Syllabus.”* There was a consensus among teachers that neglecting practical subjects such as physical education and hands-on experiments left the students with only theoretical knowledge, with **no** real-time understanding of the concepts.

The question “How effective do you feel the smart syllabus was in mitigating potential learning losses?” elicited a common concern among teachers that the ‘Smart Syllabus’ could not fully mitigate the learning losses. Sohail made a point, *“The Smart syllabus was just for surface-level learning,”* and Rabia said, *“It was partially effective.”* Nazia, Neelofar, and Seerat agreed on the point that teachers were able to complete the syllabus on time, but students missed critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Several teachers expressed that the majority of the students had to struggle with assessments when they were asked, “How did students respond to assessments based on the reduced syllabus?” A significant number of teachers agreed that because of the time constraints, students had to rely on rote learning to meet the expectations and obtain the required marks in assessments. Zeenat responded in a very different manner while saying, *“Students did not perform well in assessments, and it was not their fault because they did not have time for revisions and practice.”*

All the teachers responded “yes” when asked the question, “Did you notice any differences in students’ understanding and retention of concepts compared to pre-lockdown times?” All the teachers had a consensus that students forget the concepts taught in class much more quickly than before. Faria confirmed, saying, *“We are unable to offer students the opportunity to discuss the learned concepts in groups as they usually used to, so they can’t grasp the concepts effectively.”* Asma, Nosheed, Saim, and Riaz were of the view, *“Their understanding of different concepts is shallower than before the lockdown.”* In response to the question, “What strategies did you use to compensate for the reduced teaching time and learning loss?” teachers elaborated on various approaches. Ifat, a science teacher, stated, *“I prepare assessments that are more focused on core concepts instead of covering lengthy descriptions,”* and Saud also aligned with her statement, *“I use smaller assessments, but the performance of many students is yet inconsistent.”*

4.3 Mental Stress

When asked, “How did the alternate-day schedule and reduced school hours affect your mental well-being?”, teachers expressed similar opinions on the impacts. Sana responded, *“Reduced school hours increased the stress level instead of adding some ease for us,”* and Waqas stated, *“The strategy of reduced school hours left me and my colleagues feeling drained by the end of each day.”* The majority of the teachers’ responses were aligned with Sana and Waqas, and they were of the view that ‘Reduced School Hours’ could be an attractive term for the students, but for the teachers, it was a nightmare. Some of the teachers, like Naseema, Shakaib, and Tahir, pointed out that due to the implementation of ‘Reduced School Hours’ along with ‘Smart Syllabus,’ both teachers and students experienced an immense level of stress.

When talking about symptoms of stress among students in response to the question, “Did you notice any signs of stress or anxiety among your students due to the disrupted routine?”, teachers shared dissimilar sentiments. Some teachers, like Rahat, Rizwan, and Nabeeha, did not see particular signs of anxiety or stress; however, they were less motivated during the school hours as compared to pre-lockdown. On the other hand, Areeba, Bilal, Seerat, Ahmad, and some other teachers noted that low-performing students appeared to be much more stressed.

In discussing the measures taken for the mental well-being of teachers and students, as prompted by the question, “What measures did you or your school take to address mental stress among teachers and students during this period?”, teachers offered varied insights. Teachers such as Sofia, Neelofar, and Abbas mentioned that their school management encouraged the staff as well as students to communicate openly, but ultimately, they did not do anything concrete to address their issues. Some teachers reported that their school management allowed for flexible deadlines for assignments and feedback, which added some relief for the teachers. *“Some informative sessions were conducted for the encouragement of staff and students, but our workload remained the same,”* Saqlain reported.

4.4 Analysis

The sub-themes identified from the teachers’ responses under each meta-theme are briefly discussed in this section.

4.4.1 Impact of Disrupted Routine

For the meta-theme 'Disruptive Routine,' based on the teachers' responses, it was divided into three sub-themes: 'Disruption in Student-Teacher Interaction,' 'Adapting to Alternate-Day Teaching,' and 'Effectiveness of Time Management'.

Learning outcomes were impacted noticeably because of the disrupted student-teacher interaction due to the implementation of the alternate-day teaching schedule. There was a variation in the perceptions of teachers, as some of them blamed the students for disengagement, whereas others pointed out broader systemic issues such as disruption in the classroom interaction itself. Though all the teachers could adapt to the new routine of the alternate-day teaching system, some embraced it as an unavoidable compromise, whereas others considered it another professional burden. Under the new schedule of classes, teachers consistently complained that their personal lives were disrupted due to their professional obligations.

The results of this research reveal consistency among the teachers who acknowledged the challenges in adapting to alternate-day class schedules and those who struggled to engage students to cover essential material. However, the teachers' perspectives differ: some adapted to the new routine, though against their will, calling it an unescapable measure, whereas others described it as a source of immense stress to which they could never fully adapt. Hence, the findings of the current research indicate varying degrees of adaptability and resilience among the teachers, causing an uneven impact of the new routine on their personal as well as professional lives.

4.4.2 Learning Loss Due to Smart Syllabus and Reduced School Hours

There was strong agreement among teachers regarding the negative impact of reduced hours and the smart syllabus on knowledge retention, assessment outcomes, and the widening performance gap. However, opinions differed on strategies to address these challenges. While some teachers adapted by focusing on core concepts in their assessments, others struggled to implement effective compensatory measures due to systemic constraints. A consistent concern was the inadequacy of the smart syllabus in fostering critical thinking and problem-solving skills, though some teachers acknowledged its utility in meeting basic instructional goals within a limited time.

4.4.3 Impact of Hectic Routine on Mental Well-being

There was a consensus among teachers regarding the increased stress and burnout caused by the reduced school hours, suggesting a uniform experience of mental strain. However, opinions on student anxiety differed, with some teachers observing severe stress among low-performing students, while others noted only mild disengagement. Similarly, perceptions of school efforts to address mental health were varied. While some teachers appreciated measures like flexible deadlines, most felt these actions were insufficient, which contrasted with claims of open communication and encouragement. These differing views reflect the varying levels of institutional support and individual resilience across schools.

5. Conclusion

This research study aimed to analyze teachers' perceptions of the challenges associated with reduced school hours and the impact of the smart syllabus on grade 10 students' performance in government schools in Lahore during the Covid-19 pandemic. The findings indicated varying levels of resilience and adaptability among teachers to the consequence of government's novel strategy, which influenced their ability to manage both professional obligations and personal lives effectively. This research concluded that reduced school hours and the smart syllabus contributed to learning loss and widened the performance gap among students. These findings highlighted the uneven impact of systemic changes on teachers' and students' mental well-being, shaped by varying levels of institutional support. This study emphasized the critical need for systemic reforms and enhanced support mechanisms to mitigate the challenges posed by reduced school hours and the smart syllabus. The current research recommends that educational stakeholders work towards creating a more resilient and inclusive learning environment by addressing the identified gaps and leveraging the insights gained.

5.1 Implications for Policy and Practice

1. Education policymakers should consider introducing structured remedial programs and differentiated teaching strategies to address the widening performance gaps and ensure that foundational knowledge is effectively reinforced in novel circumstances such as the Covid-19 pandemic.
2. Schools should implement targeted mental health support programs and offer workload management strategies to alleviate stress and burnout among teachers, addressing the challenges posed by disruptions such as those experienced during Covid-19. This could include reducing administrative tasks and providing additional teaching resources.
3. Systemic improvements are necessary to make schools more resilient to future disruptions. This includes better training for teachers on handling alternative teaching methods and developing adaptable curricula that balance efficiency with conceptual depth.

5.2 Recommendations for Future Research

Further research is needed to evaluate the long-term effects of the smart syllabus and alternate-day teaching on student performance and teacher well-being. Furthermore, exploring the perspectives of students and parents could provide a more holistic understanding of the impact of these measures.

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