

Discerns of Special Education Teachers about Access and Equity in Schools

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Abstract

Majority of children with disabilities are enrolled in special schools under a segregated learning environment. This marginalization hampers the learning process in two ways: first; providing substandard curricular learning activities and second; standardized and uniform instructional approach does not leave room to address the diversified needs of the students with disabilities. As a result, the students remain deprived from a pedagogy that can rightly trigger their learning process. The compromised assessment system further down plays the student achievements. The main objectives of this study were to identify special education teachers' perceptions about inequitable learning opportunities in special education schools, explore the most salient factors affecting the equitable opportunities on student's learning and to propose measures to reduce learning inequities. Quantitative study method was used to collect data from 67 special education teachers working in government special schools in four districts i.e. Lahore, Sheikhpura, Kasur and Nankanasahib through convenient sampling procedure. An instrument was designed on 4 dimensions of equitable learning reported by classroom teachers. Teachers in special education were found sensitive enough to recognize the inequitable learning experiences in schools. Findings of the study revealed that inequity reported by teachers existed in all areas i.e. policy, infrastructure, curriculum & instruction and transition, however, analysis of variance shows that teachers of three disabilities; hearing impairment, visual impairment and physical impairment feel more inequities in education.

Keywords: Inequalities, inclusion, children with disabilities, equitable learning.

Introduction

Inequity in learning is the consequent of inequity in education that refers to unequal, unfair or unjust distribution of various opportunities provided by education system of any state. There may be many reasons of this inequity in special education, for instance, "institutional features of school systems including early streaming,

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regional diversity in expenditure or political engagement, unequal access to education and drop-out rates, or unequal access to different types of providers” (OECD, 2012). According to Jacob and Holsinger (2008) equity is considered as the “social justice ramifications of education in relation to the fairness, justness and impartiality of its distribution at all levels or educational sub-sectors”. These unequal opportunities are created by a number of factors such as physical infrastructure, funding or budgeting, professional and qualified teachers and non-teaching staff, curriculum, assessment, transportation, admission criteria etc. Inequalities in these factors are prevalent affecting further the marginalized segment of society such as persons with disabilities, women, destitute, transgender, migrants, child labors, street children and nomads etc. There is a need to survey the special education teacher’s perceptions about sensitivity towards prevailing inequities in learning opportunities. The focus of this paper is to identify systemic sources of inequalities in special education and to make recommendations to reduce them.

Literature Review

Creating and providing equal learning opportunities for students of all backgrounds is a real challenge for schools that are unequally resourced in terms of well-prepared teachers, materials supplies for instruction, course offerings, and teachers’ pedagogical strategies (Smith, et al., 2013). This unequal distribution of the resources has resulted in inequitable learning opportunities and outcomes for different groups of students (Smith, et al., 2013; Campbell, Hombo, & Mazzeo, 2000; Oaks, et al., 1990). Inequalities, often, are culturally routed whereas some are more technical in nature and can be eliminated through technical solutions. UNESCO (2018) designed a five-dimensional framework to analyze equity in education. These dimensions include; meritocracy, minimum standards, equality of conditions, impartiality, and redistribution.

<i>Meritocracy</i>	Distribution of educational opportunities should be merit based
<i>Minimum Standards</i>	Same educational opportunities for everyone below a certain threshold
<i>Equality of Conditions</i>	Same educational opportunities should be for everyone in the population regardless of circumstances difference
<i>Impartiality</i>	Equal distribution of educational opportunities regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion, language, location, wealth, disability, and other characteristics discrimination
<i>Redistribution</i>	There should be a mechanism for the compensation of initial disadvantage

Figure 1: Five Dimensions of equitable learning. (UNESCO. 2018)

Various forms of social, economic and structural inequalities can only be minimized all over the world if UN member states, global actors and key stake holders

show strong commitment to promote and deliver equitable and quality education for all children (Schuelka, 2013). At international level global efforts are in being made to transform the society by eliminating injustice and inequalities. Launching of Sustainable Development Goals (2015) is the most recent international treaty to address the issue of injustice and inequity of various forms in world that is also ratified by various state members. Both government and non-government agencies of these states are playing their role in eliminating these discriminations gradually (UNESCO, 2016). Pakistan is making rigorous efforts in developing and sustaining equitable educational opportunities for all since its conception. However, political instability and lack of societal attitudes inequity in education is very common and to great extent socially acceptable in our education system (Nidhi, 2013). As far as systemic inequalities are concerned, policies and laws are enacted to address them; however, the social support is not strong enough to make them meaningful. Teacher's sensitivity towards these inequitable learning opportunities plays a pivotal role in sustaining or eliminating these inequitable learning environments. Special education teachers philosophically as well as by actions are trained to live in segregated environments (Hameed & Manzoor, 2016). If the perceptions of these teachers are not sensitive enough to see these inequalities and the damage, they create then it will be difficult to operate through these teachers for more equitable learning opportunities especially in case of children with disabilities who are already victims of social and educational exclusion. Further, an inequality if originated outside the school belongs to cultural, social and economic biases such as poverty accounts for some of the racial disparities in special education placement in American education system (Deborah, 2002). A brief portfolio of the department of special education, Punjab province is presented in Box. Since it was first study of its nature so the concepts and language used this survey are kept familiar to respondents.

Objectives of the Study

The study was intended to:

1. Assess special education teachers' perceptions about various factors of inequitable learning.
2. Compare the teachers' perceptions on the basis of demographics i.e. qualification, age, gender, disabilities and institutions.
3. Identify
4. The most throbbing factors of inequitable learning in special education schools.

Methodology

This was a quantitative study based on survey of special education teachers working in government special schools in four districts i.e. Lahore, Sheikhpura, Kasur and Nankanasahib. Data were collected by using questionnaire from 66 special education teachers working in 13 special schools through survey (Table 2). A Likert Scale type of instrument was designed to collect data on 4 dimensions of inequalities in

learning i.e. policy, infrastructure, curriculum & instruction and transition. Reliability of the instrument was 0.85 (N=38) whereas, factor-wise reliability was; policy: 0.74 (N=11), infrastructure: 0.55 (N= 8), curriculum & instruction: 0.86 (N= 12) and transition: 0.79 (N= 7). Overall, the instrument was found of good quality.

Sample and Sampling Technique

This survey was conducted in four districts of Punjab province namely Lahore, Kasur, Sheikhpura and Nankana Sahib. These four districts constitute Lahore Division; one of the seven divisions of Punjab. Table 1 indicates the distribution of sampled schools in the study. The selection was based on convenience of approach since sampling the whole province needs lots of financial, manpower and time resources. Care, however, was taken to select proportionately representative sample of each district. Table 2 shows the schools across disabilities. Although the number of schools for children with hearing impairment seem over-represented but they are only 3% of the total schools serving this disability.

Table 1
Population distribution

Sr. #	Districts In Lahore Division	No of Tehsils In Each District	No of Institutions In Each District	No of Schools in Sample
1	Lahore	09	18	5
2	Kasur	04	06	3
3	Sheikhpura	05	09	3
4	Nankana sahib	04	04	2

Table 2
Sample distribution

Name of Institute/Tehsil	No of teachers selected in different areas of disabilities					Total
	HIC	VIC	MCC	PHC	SL	
GSES(HIC)-Kasur	6	0	0	0	0	6
GSEC-Chunian, Kasur	2	2	1	1	0	6
GSEC-Rawind, Lahore	1	1	1	1	0	4
GSEC-Nishter town, Lahore	2	0	3	2	0	7
GSEC-Shalimar town, Lahore	0	1	0	0	0	1
GSEC-Wahga town, Lahore	0	1	3	2	0	6
GISL-Lahore	0	0	0	0	5	5
GSEC-Ferozwala, SKP	2	0	3	2	0	7
GSEC-Muridkey, SKP	5	2	2	2	0	11
GSEC- Safdraabd, SKP	0	1	0	0	0	1
GSEC-NankanaSab	4	2	1	1	0	8
GISL-NankanaSab	0	0	0	0	4	4
GSEC-Nanadipur	0	0	0	1	0	1
Total	22(3%)	10(6%)	14(4.25%)	12(5%)	9(5%)	67(6%)

Table 1 shows that sample is fairly distributed in 5 categories of special schools. The percentages within brackets indicate the representation of sample to the population.

Findings of the Study

On the basis of data analyses following findings were drawn.

Table 3

Perceptions of teachers about inequitable learning

Factors	Cut-point	Mean	St. D	t.	Sig.
Policy	33	30.51	5.6	23.65	.000
Infrastructure	24	22.72	3.55	2.95	.004
Curriculum & Instruction	36	34.01	7.14	5.86	.000
Transition	21	20.76	4.45	5.63	.000
Total	114	103.34	12.75	6.84	.000

Table 3 indicates teacher's perception about inequitable learning at special schools. The cut points in column 2 show the level of mean agreement to the factors. The cut point was calculated by multiplying 3 by number of items in the factor. For example, policy factor has 11 items; its cut point is 33. In other words, if mean responses fall below this point, the inequalities are present. One sample t-test is used to see the significant difference between the calculated mean and a cut point already determined. This test was applied to see the overall level of satisfaction and the extent to which it is significantly lower or greater than the cut point. The results indicated that none of the factor significantly equal or greater than the cut point. In other words, special education teachers are not satisfied with the environment in providing equitable learning to all children in special schools of Punjab.

Table 4

Comparison of teacher's perceptions with reference to gender

Factors	Gender	Mean	St.D	t.	Sig.
Policy	Male	30.50	3.47	.006	0.996
	Female	30.51	6.01		
Infrastructure	Male	24.40	2.32	1.64	0.105
	Female	22.42	3.67		
Curriculum & Instruction	Male	34.80	5.18	0.374	0.636
	Female	33.88	7.46		
Transition	Male	20.40	4.22	0.276	0.783
	Female	20.82	4.53		
Total	Male	105.70	8.193	0.631	0.530
	Female	102.93	13.40		

In order to compare the teachers' perception regarding educational inequalities on the basis of gender, independent sample t-test was applied. Independent sample t-test is used to see the significant difference between two independent samples. Results in table 3 indicate that there is no significance difference between male and female teachers on various factors of equitable educational opportunities. Both male and female teachers agreed that learning environment in special education institutions had inequitable learning opportunities for students with special needs.

Table 5

Comparison of teacher's perceptions with reference to disabilities

Factors	F	Sig.
Policy	2.31	0.054
Infrastructure	.55	0.732
Curriculum & Instruction	.39	0.850
Transition	1.76	0.134
Total	.329	0.893

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was performed to compare the perceptions of teachers with reference to 5 disability areas. ANOVA is used when comparison of more than two groups are required. The results of ANOVA in table 5 indicated that there is no significant difference of opinion among special education teachers from various fields on three factors (Infrastructure, Curriculum & Instructions, Transition) of equitable learning opportunities. There is significant difference of opinion among teachers on policy. A Post-hoc multiple comparisons of means on the basis of disabilities indicated a significant difference between following pairs: (the mean of disability with * is higher than the other)

*HIC VS MCC, *HIC VS SL, *PHC VS MCC and *VIC VS SL

Since HIC, VIC, PHC are such disabilities which can be easily accommodated in regular schools, teachers of these disabilities feel the negative effect of segregation as compare to other disabilities.

Table 6

Comparison of teacher's perceptions with reference to qualification

Factors	F	Sig.
Policy	4.53	0.014
Infrastructure	6.603	0.002
Curriculum & Instruction	0.039	0.962
Transition	1.290	0.282
Total	1.944	0.151

Results of ANOVA in table 6 showed that there was no significant difference on two factors i.e. curriculum & instruction and transition whereas a significant

difference was found in other two factors i.e. policy and infrastructure on the basis of teachers' qualification. A Post-Hoc multiple comparisons of means on teachers' qualification regarding policy indicate a significant difference between following pairs: (the mean of qualification with * is higher than other)

*Masters VS M.Phil, *M.Ed VS M.Phil,

A Post-Hoc multiple comparisons of means on teacher's qualification regarding infrastructure indicated a significant difference between following pairs: (the mean of qualification with * is higher than other)

M. Phil VS *M.Ed, M.Phil VS *M.Ed

Discussion

The findings of the study reveal that teachers of special education are well aware of the various forms of equitable learning opportunities. Their perception about different aspects is relevant to the objectives of the study which highlight the education equality and quality as crucial element to fighting economic and gender inequality. Further, the significant difference of opinion on policy is supported with study of (Walker, et al., 2019) in which the findings reported that necessary policy approaches is one of the major factor identified by the teachers in a survey which is pivotal to bring reform of public education system focusing equality and quality education. Similarly, in another other study conducted by (Gorman, et al., 1999) findings revealed teachers as key agents in creating an environment for optimal learning. He says that teachers must present as cultural brokers to minimize the incidence of inequitable learning opportunities caused by rules and expectations of school policies which create a feeling of embarrassment for native learners and leads towards drop out and failure (Gorman, et al., 1999). However, a number of studies show that unequal distribution of resources is linked with economic and cultural biases of the schools e.g.

Conclusion

The study concludes that teachers in special education were sensitive enough to recognize the inequitable learning environment in schools. They reported that inequity existed in all areas i.e. policy, infrastructure, curriculum & instruction and transition. There was no difference of opinion between male and female teachers on four aspects of equitable learning environment. However, teachers from all five categories of institutions agreed on the existence of inequitable infrastructure, curriculum & instruction and transition whereas a difference of opinion was indicated in terms of inequitable school policy i.e. admission criteria, provision of services and open access for all types of disabilities. Teachers' from MC and SL field reported less opportunities for equitable learning than teachers from HI, VI and PH fields. Teachers with M.Phil qualification were more critical towards equitable learning environment than teachers with M.A/M.Ed. It seems likely that a common source of dissatisfaction stemmed from segregated special education schooling.

Recommendations

On the basis of findings and conclusions of the study, following recommendations are made: (1) in order to provide equitable learning opportunities to all children segregated system of education i.e. special education vs general education should be eliminated, (2) learning inequity within special classrooms can be minimized by using UDL (Universal Design of Learning), (3) in order to enable special education teacher to continuously adapt learning environment according to individual needs flexibility in curriculum & instruction and assessment procedures should be allowed, (4) the assessment process needs to be aligned with the national SLOs so that children with special needs can have comparable learning environment and (5) for upwards mobility of children with intellectual disabilities and slow learners on education ladder, these programs should be dovetailed with secondary and tertiary education for smooth transition towards job market.

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BOX 1.

Department of Special Education Punjab (DSE) was established as a separate administrative department in 2004. Prior to that there were only 51 institutions catering 4265 children with disabilities. The definition and classification of disabilities in Pakistan are not strictly according to International Classification of Functioning (WHO, 2008). According to the definition of the DSE Punjab, only five types of disabilities are served in special school. They include hearing impairment, visual impairment, physical impairment, intellectual disability and slow learners. The number of institutions increased from 51 to 293 in last 15 years. These 293 institutions provide educational services to approximately 34000 students with special needs (Govt. of Punjab, 2019). This network of schools has been expended to every Tehsil/ Town in 36 districts of Punjab. All special education centers cater four disabilities. However, there are separate single disability based secondary schools for each disability in most districts along with a primary school for slow learners. In each center teaching staff comprises four senior special education teachers, eight junior special education teachers, a speech therapist and a psychologist. Whereas, in secondary schools the number of teachers varies according to the students' strength. A teacher has to teach multi-grade students simultaneously as number of teachers is not sufficient to teach in a single grade class. This situation is more critical in the area of intellectual disabilities where one teacher has to teach children with varying levels of intellectual challenges. Teacher is also overburdened due to additional duties such as stipend distribution, uniform distribution, dengue eradication campaigns, stock verification and many more along with all curricular and co-curricular activities. Minimum qualification of a teacher for KG level to 10th grade level is Masters of Arts in Special Education. However, there is no provision of subject teachers in special schools / centers. Teacher of one disability area is reluctant to deal with students of disability area. Some of the teachers are B.A with Diploma in Teaching of Deaf (TD). Students with sensory disabilities and physical disabilities are taught reduced and lower level of general education curriculum. Senior teachers of the Deaf use sign language very fluently, however novice teacher face difficulty in using sign language. Similarly, Braille reading with visually impaired students is common among senior teachers of the blind but is rarely use by young teachers. There is a huge diversity within a disability area as students with cerebral palsy (ataxic, spastic), polio, club feet, cleft lip, spina bifida, and others are clubbed together in one classroom. Blind and partially sighted are grouped together. In the same Deaf and hard of hearing study together. Such diverse classrooms create unequitable learning environment. Unavailability of subject teachers substantially reduces the opportunity of optimal learning in a subject area such English, science, Urdu, General Science at secondary level. Due to this limited opportunity of learning students show poor outcomes in their public examinations. Probably this may be a prime reason for not teaching science in any of the secondary special school/ center. Hearing impaired students are compelled to memorize as an image what they see on the board without understanding the language codes. They reproduce these images in their examinations without developing literate thought. Visually impaired students mostly are unequipped and due to less proficiency or practice on gadgets such as Braille, JAWS they produce less than expectations in examinations. The students with physical disability also perform below average with no creativity as they fail to get proper support and motivation. Over all, content teaching is poor. As far learning process of students with intellectual disabilities is concerned the abnormal teacher student ratio is a big shortfall and they whole day passes in managing so many diverse ability students by one teacher in a class. There is huge diversity in this class as students with downs syndrome, micro cephalous, AD/HD, ADD, behavior disorders etc. from childhood to adult age sit together with a lot of sexual and antisocial behaviors (boys and girls together). Curriculum for these students is based on the items taken from developmental goals for 0-6 years age group which is not functional based and outcomes based.