



Stumbling blocks of teachers while supporting the learning of students: Observations from case study research

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Abstract

Teachers can influence the learning of students to a greater extent if encounter manageable challenges whereas they are often trapped with situations that reduce their teaching efficacy to a bare minimum. They fail to address their students' academic and non-academic needs because they fail to notice the expressed needs. This situation stimulates the researcher to explore the challenges encountered by the teachers to support the learning of students. The study employed a qualitative research design and case study method was used to explore the perspectives of the participants. The research population consisted of school administrators, school teachers, and students at secondary schools. Purposive sampling technique was used to choose the sample against the predefined criteria. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews, field notes, and notes from document analysis. Triangulation of the collected data resulted in the development of three themes namely extensive subject outline, managing exceptional and behavioural responses. The findings showed that the teachers are experiencing many challenges such as lengthy syllabi, overcrowded classrooms, demanding assessment structures, additional academic responsibilities, and students' behavioural issues and this is affecting their ability to positively influence the learning of their students. The study suggests that teachers should use their critical thinking skills to analyze their personal and professional challenges and find ways to resolve these issues resulting in creating supportive learning structures in schools for students, and teaching culture for teachers. This study will help school administration understand the barriers faced by teachers in schools and help them find suitable solutions to provide a supportive teaching and learning environment for teachers and students.

Keywords: Challenges, Teachers, Students, Learning support, Secondary schools



Introduction

Quality education is imperative for Pakistani students if they are to be respected for their uniqueness, strengths, and potential to contribute to their personal and national development (Chishti et al., 2011). Students' learning levels are dreadfully low hence improved student learning outcomes have become a key objective of educational reforms in Pakistan as the country lags behind many countries on issues of quality education. Many academics have found that though many teachers have successfully completed their teacher education degrees but they lacked the content knowledge and required pedagogical skills. These studies also found that students fail to demonstrate their command of the content knowledge in different subjects (Aly, 2007; NEMIS, 2018;). Teachers appear to be barely concerned about the learning of their students and their priority is to teach all the topics in the prescribed syllabus, make students memorize them, and reproduce the learned facts and information during the examination process. Consequently, even university degree holders graduate with a deficiency of such skills as reflection, critical thinking, analysis, research, and creativity even though these are highlighted in curriculum learning objectives (Ahmad et al., 2014; Rashid & Mukhtar, 2012).

The education system in Pakistan is exposed to many problems and one of them is the quality and commitment of teachers towards the learning of students (Rashid & Mukhtar, 2012). Research studies report factors such as less engagement of teachers with the students, lack of motivation for teaching, corporal punishment, bullying in classrooms and disruptive behaviour of the students are prevailing in schools at large (Ahmed et al., 2013; Ghazi et al., 2013; Mughal, 2020). The increasing dropouts from schools, students' low attainment in exams, and low self-esteem are not only alarming but also challenge teachers to be committed and dedicated to supporting their students' learning and contributing to cultivating values and competencies needed in a caring society (Ahmad et al., 2013; Naviwala, 2016).

The role of teachers in the education system is that of a catalyst for the accomplishment and achievement of students linking the quality of student learning to the quality of teachers. Though teachers play a significant role in the education system of any country, it is also observed that their problems have increased over time affecting the quality of their teaching and their engagement with students (Rizwan & Khan, 2015).



Significance of the Study

This study attempts to explore the stumbling blocks encountered by teachers to expedite the learning of secondary school students. This study aims to identify the factors affecting classroom teaching and the poor academic performance of students. This study is also conducted to comprehend the classrooms as a workplace environment where teachers could work and perform their primary duties, that is teaching. This study will also find solutions from these stakeholders (students, teachers, and school administration) to the problems faced by these stakeholders affecting their ability to function as an effective learner, teachers and school administration, hoping, that if implemented would result in making the teaching-learning process productive for all stakeholders.

Research Questions

- Two research questions guided this study.
- What are the barriers to caring for the academic learning of students in the school?
- What are the barriers to educating students in school?

Literature Review

Unfamiliarity of teachers with the aims, goals, and objectives of the curriculum of various disciplines for the particular level they teach has created a chasm in the effective implementation of curriculum inhibiting teachers' ability to contribute to students' learning (Saeed et al., 2013). Teachers' lack of orientation towards prescribed textbooks has created confusion which is reflected in their classroom performances and students' least interest in the process of learning. Teachers are expected to teach the prescribed syllabus before examination and students, due to their lack of understanding of the content and pedagogical knowledge and skills resort to reading and preaching the books without considering the vital aspects of teaching and learning such as the development of various skills (communication, analysis, reflection) of students to enhance their knowledge effectively.

Schools' emphasis on academic achievements and standardized test scores has diverted the tendency of teachers from care agents to mechanical professionals. The practices of rigid testing standards, quantification of learning outcomes, and methodologies contributing to achieving good grades do not promote needed dispositions, and compromise caring relationships between teachers and students. Similarly, the practice of rigid academic and assessment policies adopted



by schools with zero-tolerance rules for higher-order thinking skills also becomes a hindrance to the exercise of genuine care (Ayub et al., 2018). The school policies restrict academic and pedagogical freedom, and the rigid structures of schools are built to control students allowing any flexibility for teachers to understand their students' problems and circumstances. Students do not want teachers to be mere instructors as they could get the same from the internet and online tutorials, but students need teachers to instruct and inspire them and develop lifelong learning skills (Williams, 2013).

Teachers face the challenge of setting priorities though they realize their responsibility to care for students' learning and well-being, the conflict arises when many students have similar needs, and owing to time constraints, the teachers find it difficult to fully meet their needs. The large and overcrowded classrooms further increase this challenge for the teachers to prioritize students' learning and their well-being. The dilemma such as 'should teachers be offering little help to all students or focus more on learners with learning difficulties? Or 'should teachers first help those students who approach teachers for help and ignore those who do not approach them for help, both in the academic and non-academic areas? (O'Connor, 2008). Overcrowded and large-sized classrooms become an obstacle in developing caring relations between teachers and students while classes of around thirty students allow teachers and students to form strong bonds based on trust and care. Teachers are challenged to establish and maintain caring relationships with their students because of their teaching and administrative workload, taking extra workload in the form of other assigned responsibilities such as school and board exam duties, break duties, getting involved in social and cultural events of the school and attending different meetings (Bergmark & Allerby, 2006). All this is in addition to their regular teaching and assessment responsibilities making it difficult for teachers to give due attention to their primary duty, that is, teaching and supporting students' holistic development as they spend a significant part of their school duty hours on duties which are unrelated to their primary duty as a school teacher.

A caring environment in schools contributes to students' academic performance and it becomes an essential source of intrinsic motivation for learning. The teachers' modelling of caring attitudes and planning care-embedded educational experiences for the students can foster a culture of care in the classroom (Franklin, 2018). Teachers find it challenging to create a caring environment and at the same time avoid being too involved and interfering in the students' personal lives. Teachers outline the complexities involved in creating a sense of caring and



determining the right way and right amount of caring to be given to the students. While appropriate ways of care could be determined by an individual's professional boundaries as a teacher however the right amount of care remains a challenge for teachers because they are required to maintain an appropriate distance from students to avoid over-involvement with them and to maintain suitable boundaries between their professional and personal lives.

Teachers are expected to document students' conduct and behaviour in the classroom by writing reports. Teachers are challenged to implement the philosophical, sociological, and psychological theories of education that explain the notion of ethics and morality. They deal with students in matters related to ethics, morality, and care using their common-sense approach, relating to their childhood and personal experiences at home and during school days since they are mostly unaware of the theoretical understanding of such issues. Fostering care values and other aspects of moral education goes unplanned, unstructured, spontaneous, and occasional and depends on reactions to situations as they occur in classrooms, schools, and educational settings (Thornberg, 2008). The students seem to be physically and psychologically healthy and have the moral support of parents but their evasive attitude and behaviour towards study become a stumbling block for teachers to support their learning (Arain et al., 2019).

Parents' insufficient involvement in the study of their children becomes a challenge for teachers to keep track of the learning of students because teachers are made responsible for the poor academic performance of students in the examination. There is a lack of awareness on the part of the parents and community that parents and community share an equal part in the personal and academic growth and development of children (Saeed et al., 2013). Teachers frequently face the challenge of contrary values posing ethical dilemmas. For instance, if a student faces family problems affecting his/her learning, should a teacher call the parents and discuss it with him/her/them? Should a teacher get involved in the personal matters of a student's family, even when a parent does not want the teacher to be involved in their family matters? In such situations, parents need to understand that a teacher's professional responsibility is limited to caring for the children's well-being in school, especially their learning.

Teachers' contribution to the education of students though cannot be underestimated but the administration is also responsible for teachers' job satisfaction leading to their good performance through administrative support and appropriate working conditions (Arain et al., 2019). Things



that challenge teachers to put their best in their jobs may include salary, retirement age, retirement benefits, working hours, leave allowances, and lunch and social benefits. Facilities such as the lack of residential accommodation negatively impact the performance of teachers as they cannot afford to rent houses with the salary they receive. The unavailability of official accommodations to teachers also leads to missing many school days and their inability to perform their duties with full attention and satisfaction (Arain et al., 2019).

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has posed many challenges in the teaching and learning processes ranging from the students' living in hostels or shared accommodation and houses, to managing their routines, especially in overcrowded shared accommodation and homes in areas with low or no internet connectivity. A major challenge for teachers is to cater for the students' various learning needs when they are not physically present or taking online classes with many distractions and limitations (Corbera et al., 2020). Hence Paradigm shift from physical teaching to online teaching is challenging for teachers to integrate technology into the teaching-learning processes. Teachers' poor or lack of technological knowledge and skills also prove an impediment to meeting their students' academic and non-academic needs in online learning environment. The skill such as using Google applications (such as Google Classroom, Google Docs, Google Meet, Google PowerPoint, Google Sheets, Google Drive etc.) and other platforms (such as video conferencing applications, Learning Management Systems (such as Moodle, Schoology, Canvas and many other free applications to manage students' learning), and educational applications and websites, contributed to their becoming ineffective in online teaching, learning and managing matters related to students' wellbeing (Khatoon, et., al. 2021). Teachers face multiple challenges to respond to the learning needs of students assigned to their care and this study will highlight some of them observed and experienced by administrators, teachers, and students.

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design and case study method. The case study as research methodology was used for this study because it served as “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity, phenomenon, or social event” (Merriam, 2009, p. 46). Hence challenges faced by teachers, administrators, teachers at secondary schools, and students enrolled in grades nine and ten created the boundaries of this case, making this a bounded system. It is also a case because it explored the “understanding of how people interpret their



experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam, 2009, p.5). The population of the study consisted of six administrators, ten teachers, and thirty students. Purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique was used to select research participants and the appropriate way to seek answers to the questions asked in this study was to select participants to obtain as rich data as possible on the clearly defined topic (Yin, 1994).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, field observations, and document analysis from six administrators, ten teachers, and thirty students of grades nine and ten enrolled in the academic year 2020 – 2021. All participants signed the Informed Consent Form and the researchers ensured that the reporting of the data was anonymous. Data collected from interviews were transcribed and coded because it is considered important to assign “some sort of shorthand designation to various aspects of data to retrieve specific pieces of data” (Merriam, 2009, p.173). Data obtained from various sources was triangulated to capture the shared as well as the individual views of the participants in their contexts. The data was organized under themes and subthemes and the process of triangulation of data also helped to find suitable quotations and extracts responding to the themes. The triangulation of data grouped in different themes and subthemes also helped to select suitable data to be reported in this study that were aligned with the research themes.

Research Findings

The finding of this research was gathered under three themes after the triangulation of data from interview transcripts, field notes, and document analysis.

Theme one: Extensive outline

Teachers are expected to complete the teaching of the prescribed syllabus by the end of the academic year. The teaching of the entire syllabus is crucial for teachers to develop students’ mastery of the specific content and prepare them to take the secondary and higher secondary school certificate examinations. Administrators and teachers consider syllabus completion a hindrance to caring for their students’ learning because, in the race to teach the prescribed content, teachers ignore the higher-order thinking skills (application and creativity) of subject-specific skills of students. Following are some of the sentences said by the Administrators (Admin) and Teachers (Tr) during the interviews:



Admin A:

A lengthy syllabus and its completion within a given time limit is a barrier to care in our school. Resultantly teachers' attitudes becomes non-caring as they focus on completing the syllabus as they are questioned if the syllabus is not completed thus teachers' focus is to finish teaching the content.

Tr B:

Lengthy and fixed syllabus is a barrier to care for the student learning in our school. Sometimes in an academic year, we get five months for teaching, and we have nineteen chapters to complete.

Tr C:

Daily lesson plans of various teachers were seen but yearly, monthly, or weekly planners were not available with the teachers.

Teacher E

The content of the prescribed textbook is in accordance with the needs and interests of the students. It is focused on terms of content learning expectations from students for successful performance in school and board exams.

Admin C

The prescribed syllabus in the form of textbooks seems to be reasonable to be taught in an academic year.

The syllabi is lengthy and teachers' negligence in following the yearly, monthly, and weekly plans results in not completing the syllabi in the allocated time. Teachers might have over-emphasized the teaching of various topics without realizing the time needed to teach other topics. Irrespective of the circumstance, if the syllabi is lengthy, it becomes an obstacle for teachers to support the learning of students leaving them confused between the teaching of content and learning by the students.

Theme two: Managing exceptional.

Teachers are expected to manage exceptions in the form of over-assessment, and overcrowded classrooms. They are believed to be skilled in managing extraordinary situations with the best outcomes. Assessment is an important component of the teaching-learning process. It allows students to evaluate the outcome of teaching-learning to strategize for future activities.

Assessment of student learning is not aimed to overburden students with studies, but it aims to



motivate students to achieve their learning goals (Bhat & Bhat, 2019). One administrator described the assessment of students' learning and restricting it to the content taught is another challenge to work for the overall care of students. Admin C said, "Over assessment is a barrier to care" while Admin B argued that, "overloading teachers with lots of non-teaching tasks is the major hurdle," and an important reason for the poor achievements of students. Admin D said

The school has burdened teachers with many non-teaching tasks and these tasks have taken away the joy of teaching from them. I feel that I had fewer records to make, less paperwork to do, and fewer lessons to plan and teach and this would have made my students to learn, producing better results because I am all focused on students' learning and well-being, taught them in the best way.

Teachers are expected to maintain cumulative records of all of their students' learning and teachers find it difficult to prepare and update these records in overcrowded classes because of other duties assigned to them by the schools. Two teachers considered overcrowded classrooms as barriers to care.

Tr H said,

Overcrowded classrooms are a barrier to caring for students and their learning in my school. I remember well that last year I had fifty students and this year I have fifty-six or fifty-seven students in my class. There is no space to walk around and monitor students and address their particular problems while completing their classwork. The overcrowded classroom makes it very difficult to give individual attention to students and help them understand the topic, complete the classwork, and perform the science experiments.

Tr E said,

The classrooms are packed with students. There is very little space in the classroom for me to move around while I am reaching, I cannot reach out to students to assist them as they are completing the classwork or the assigned work in class. My classroom do not allow students to engage in group activities and students struggle to work in groups. This classroom's physical space, results in killing the purpose of group activity which is designed for students to learn the content.

Teaching is best transmitted and effective learning is acquired with balanced activities in the schools if students constantly experience and witness teaching and learning environments that



hinder their learning, and this also fails to develop in them the ability to balance situations in a real-life dilemma. Overcrowded classrooms make it a nightmare for teachers to respond to the individual learning needs of students.

Theme three: Behavioural responses (teacher/student)

Teachers' attitudes towards the teaching and learning process, beliefs, personality traits and teaching competence have an impact on the learning of students. Parents, teachers, and students play an important role in the academic life of secondary school students to acquire subject-specific knowledge and skills. The findings showed that students' learning is equally dependent on the behaviour of the teachers and students as one administrator highlighted teachers' behaviour towards students as an obstacle to caring for their learning. Admin D said, "the temperament of a teacher is also a barrier to care for students' learning in our school. Once a child was sitting in the classroom, the teacher shouted at the child and hit that child too," while Admin F added another example explaining teachers' non-caring behaviour towards the academic growth of students. He said

What parents and children sometimes feel is that teachers hold grudges toward their students for quite a long time and that is a barrier to being concerned about the learning of students. Parents have shared with me that teachers pleasantly speak to them, and the parent was hurt when the teacher told the child that he would get a 'C' grade because the parents shared their concern about the teacher with the school administrator. So, this is a barrier in caring for a child when teachers hold a grudge against students because of any complaint that the children or their parents have, and these complaints are communicated to parents.

The participants of this study (students) associated teacher behaviour with their response in using various instructional strategies in teaching and explaining the content-related misconceptions of students and addressing students' queries. Student Y said, "teachers who have the knowledge of the content but cannot explain it to the students are a barrier to care," while Student K expressed it as

Teachers don't teach nicely, experienced teachers are not there, teachers are not selected after checking their teaching expertise and experience. It is not good if students ask a question to the teacher and the teacher is unable to respond to the students and says I



don't know the answer, so do it yourself, it is not good. It's important to recruit properly trained teachers.

The above-mentioned statements are an indication that students are keen observers and very critical in analyzing the performance of their teachers in the classroom and they relate teachers as caring if they respond satisfactorily to their learning needs while adapting student-center teaching strategies and satisfactorily responding to their queries and misconceptions.

Seven students considered their behaviour towards learning to be challenging for teachers to keep them focused, alert, motivated, and engaged in the class as teachers teach. Student G presented it as “the behaviour of naughty students towards teachers becomes one of the barriers to care in my class because these students make troubles for teachers in the classroom and teachers find it difficult to teach with care.” Student A said, “barriers to care in our school are students who make noise in the classroom, miss classes, and hoot in the class as teachers teach.” Another student put it as “students annoy teachers by not completing assigned tasks on time and this behaviour of students becomes a barrier to care for their learning.” (St. L).

Garza et al., (2014) believe that caring teachers expect students to exhibit appropriate behaviour during the teaching-learning process because students' learning is dependent on their teachers' disposition to teaching and their classroom behaviours. The students will excel in their academics if their teachers plan and teach their lessons in a learning-conducive schools and classrooms. Whereas, if students show disruptive behaviour in class, they tend to affect not just theirs but also their peers' learning (Suleman et., al. 2012).

Discussion and Analysis

The teachers in the school were found to be equipped with the academic and professional qualifications to teach secondary school students. Teachers were encouraged and supported to avail continuous professional development opportunities offered by the school and other organizations to upgrade their content knowledge and pedagogical skills. Regardless of academic and professional competence, teaching of the prescribed syllabus in the scheduled academic calendar remained an obstacle for them to assist students with the acquisition of subject-specific knowledge, skills, and attitudes. The content outline of the syllabus did not seem long to be taught in an academic year, but administrators and teachers considered it long as they struggled to teach it within the scheduled timeframe. Some of the factors responsible for this could be teachers' competency to manage time for the implementation of their yearly, monthly,



weekly, and daily teaching plans. The unexpected events such as school closures owing to unpredicted incidents such as heavy rainfall, heat waves, severe summers and winters, and prolonged absenteeism for personal reasons also contribute to this. Celebration of social, cultural, and religious festivals and the annual sports day turns out to be demanding for teachers as they are expected to compromise on their teaching time to facilitate students' active participation in the co-curricular activities planned by the school. The schools stopped teaching for a week twice a year, each year giving a week to students to prepare for the midyear and annual exams and another ten days to five to ten days consequently squeezing teaching time from regular teaching hours. Therefore, schools need to consider the adjustment of various teaching, learning, and assessment-related activities in a way that teaching of the syllabus is not compromised by unforeseen circumstances (Engster & Hamington, 2015; Arian et al., 2019). The physical environment of the school seemed to be healthy, safe, and protective with adequate resources and facilities such as well-equipped classrooms, the presence of adequate instructional materials, clean water supply, electricity supply, classroom maintenance, space and furniture availability, adequate library and computer labs to support the learning of students (Arain, et., al. 2019). However, class size is another element that becomes a stumbling block for effective teaching and learning. Evidence from field notes, document analysis, and interview transcripts suggested that over-populated classrooms with student numbers ranging from forty-five to fifty proved a challenge to teachers to address their students' learning and academic needs. Hence teachers encountered situations where they had to leave the students unattended and confused about the content-specific quarries. Teaching large-sized classrooms becomes demanding for teachers to maintain students' focus in teaching-learning activities as they get easily distracted, if not attended by the teacher, and indulge in activities that divert their or their peers' focus from learning activities (Ayub et al., 2018; Suleman, et., al. 2012).

The teaching efficiency of teachers is related to their workload and the overburdened teachers gradually lose the tendency to teach with love, care, affection, and dedication. The teachers' performance is measured against the criteria of the number of students passing the secondary and higher secondary schools. The teachers wish to contribute to their students' lives and successes, and they would like the school administration to support them in their work. The school administration also wishes to influence the learning of students and also support their socio-emotional development and wellbeing but due to cooperation from their teachers, they say that



they could not achieve it. The list of academic and non-academic activities seemed to be never-ending, such as class tests, weekly tests, monthly tests, midterm examinations and preliminary examinations, sports, and other national and cultural events, this also affects teachers and students to do the primary job, that is, teaching (Rabin, 2014; Khatoon, et., al. 2021).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of the study state that the learning of secondary school students enrolled in the pre-medical group is hampered due to lengthy syllabus, over-assessment, over-burdened teachers, over-crowded classrooms, and behaviour of teachers towards teaching and that of students towards learning. It is evident from the findings that the research participants' awareness of stumbling blocks for teachers could be generalized to all schools, whether public or private in Pakistan. This attitude of not addressing the problems and trying to find a resolution is transferred among the students, teachers, and administrators. This cultivates among students an attitude to accept situations as they have a minimal tendency to question and critically analyze the situations and circumstances. Therefore, various stakeholders in education need to develop a critical approach to identify the impediments and barriers to supporting the learning of students and find ways to remove the barriers. Hence it is required that all stakeholders, the teachers, parents, administration, and students analyze their situations, and identify how different forces such as physical, social, emotional, cultural, psychological, financial, and technological factors, influence the teaching-learning processes in schools and affecting their workplace, and their classrooms.

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