
PRIMARY SPECIAL EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN WITH VISION IMPAIRMENT IN PAKISTAN: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

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ABSTRACT

Present study is an effort to draw a picture of the past, present and future of primary special education for children with vision impairment in Pakistan in views of institutional heads. It is a qualitative research by nature and structured interview protocol was administered for it. The sample consisted of 27 heads of special education institutions including 16 males and 11 females working in the field of vision impairment selected randomly from four zones of the Punjab province. A validated self-developed interview guide was applied for structured interviews. Some interviews were conducted in person but many interviews were taken by phone calls due to COVID-19 lockdown. Data were analyzed by percentages of responses and using thematic analysis technique. Data revealed that most of the objectives behind the start of primary special education for children with vision impairment (CWVI) were realistic and achievable. However, objectives were achieved partially according to the majority of heads prevailing instructional practices were unsatisfactory. Implemented curriculum neither meets the unique learning needs of students nor curricular standards. Its basic reason was the shortage of desired resources and poor take care of available resources. Study recommended that sufficient financial, human and material resources should be provided to all special education institutions. Proper

take care and utilization of existing resources should be assured. Instructional practices and implemented curriculum should be improved by effective teacher training programs and proper implementation of Early Childhood Curriculum (ECC).

KEYWORDS

Primary Special Education, Children with Vision Impairment, COVID-19

INTRODUCTION

No institution or organization can flourish without visionary, affective and dynamic leadership. Particularly the educational institutions which play the important obligation of nation building and attainment of educational goals have significant relationship between school leadership and student's achievements as Choi and Gi narrated that Leadership can perform many significant things to strengthen an academic program and probably to boost up learners performance. (Choi & Gi, 2017). In the same way heads of education institutions perform their role as leader, guide and facilitator for whole staff to attain the predetermined organizational goals. As Kapur (2019) stated that in academic organizations, the principles, school administrators and managers are considered as school authorities. As the team leaders they facilitate and supervise the sub ordinates effectively to perform their own duties, and to attain the assigned targets, they make them able to resolve everyday problems to take beneficial and productive initiatives similarly to maintain pleasant environmental situations which could be support to accomplish educational aims.

Special education is an important and sensitive domain in the field of education. It deals to explore, develop, polish and sustain the abilities of children with special needs. Several legislations were formulated under the Umbrella of UNO to protect and assure the equality based quality education for persons with special needs. UN convention on human rights 1948, UN convention against the discrimination in education 1960, and UN convention on the rights of the child 1989, Salamanca statement 1994, EFA flagships 2000 and sustainable development goals 2017 were some important initiatives taken by UNO in this regard. As UN convention on the rights of persons with disabilities reveals by its article 24, representatives of signatory governments will confirm the provision of inclusive education programs at each level and opportunities for fruitful learning to kids with different abilities (UN, 2006).

Each country has a history about the development of special education in its particular environment. Similarly government of Pakistan took many serious steps for the growth of special education from time to time. The first organized and comprehensive effort was made by government of Pakistan In 1981 to sustain the persons with special needs by a presidential ordinance named "The Disabled Persons' Employment and Rehabilitation Ordinance, 1981". In the same way national policy for person with

disabilities 2002 was another significant effort to support and promote the special education in Pakistan it covers almost all necessary areas to rehabilitate the person with disabilities. Policy gave useful guidelines and suggested adequate lines of action for uplift of special education in Pakistan (GOP, 2002). Punjab special education policy (2020) was another mild stone towards the destination of effective special education services. Policy narrates its vision in this way to develop SPED as a fully capable and efficient department engaged in successfully providing educational opportunities for all children with special educational needs to realize their potential to become productive members of society. Policy elaborated that total 160 special education centers for various disabilities and 18 special education schools for children with vision impairment are working all over the Punjab (GOP, 2020).

But in spite of all these arrangements and efforts many studies reported the poor provision of special education in Pakistan. As Hafeez (2019) reported that yet the state of special education is not satisfactory of Pakistan. There is less than 5% of disabled population which has access to special education facilities. In the same way Parveen, Yousaf, and Ajaib (2020) revealed that the specialized facilities were limited. It also found that students with visual impairment lacked support from the school administration.

As it is narrated above that heads of educational institutions usually the most qualified and experienced personnel's among their whole staff therefore they have in-depth and updated knowledge about the field. That is why a comprehensive effort was made to know the past, present and future of special education in Pakistan according to the opinions of field experts (heads of special education institutions) by this study. In this way the study has a significant and unique status in the existing body of knowledge.

LITERATURE REVIEW

After independence, Pakistan had to face some serious challenges, due to which no proper emphasis was given to special education and even education. At the first time, in its report, the Commission on National Education (1959) highlighted the importance of special education. After that the Education Policy (1972) and the National Policy and Implementation Program (1979) gave some importance to this sector. The same was also reflected in different medium-term (five-year) plans. This was felt more seriously when the Directorate General of Special Education, Islamabad formulated a draft National Policy for Special Education in 1986 (Ahmed & Yousaf, 2011).

After it National policy for persons with disability (2002) elaborated mission statement in this way Optimal development of person with disabilities for the realization of full potential in all walks of life, especially in the area of health, education, social economic

and vocational needs for the fulfillment of their present as well as future requirements (GOP, 2002). Similarly under the term ‘special needs education’, the trend is to shift the focus from disability categories towards building the capacity of the schools and providing needed support services (Khan, 2006).

Moreover national education policy (2017) announced that the target of participation rate of special children has been fixed as 50% by 2025. Besides, creating inclusive learning environment in 50% existing formal education institutions at all levels allocation of 5% of education budget for Special Education; provision of modern technologies and teaching learning aids; transport facilities for all the special education institutions; in-service training and staff development of faculty and management of Special Education Institutions; provision of basic facilities and services for inclusive education; and training and sensitization of general education teacher regarding inclusive education (GOP, 2017).

In spite of all these efforts to promote special education in Pakistan many studies reflected the other side of picture as Hafeez (2019) stated that although Pakistan is signatory to a number of international commitments about rehabilitation of disabled persons. But rehabilitation of disabled population of Pakistan is on least priority list of the government: both federal and provincial.

Punjab Special Education Policy (2020) made the situation analysis in this way the UN estimates that 98 per cent of children with disabilities in developing countries do not attend school. In the Punjab, the proportion of male children identified with disabilities in private schools is higher, “suggesting that parents are more likely to be willing to invest in their son’s education whether or not they have a disability. Improvements in service delivery for children with special educational needs would require significantly larger budgetary commitments than is presently the case (GOP, 2020).

Pakistan is struggling to mainstream its Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) that constitute 15 percent of its population, according to the World Health Organization estimates. Over the past seven decades, a uniform national definition could not be framed as successive governments kept changing the meaning of disability. After the 18th Amendment, provinces failed to frame a definition of disability in conformity with the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disability 2006, which Pakistan ratified on May 2011(Khan, 2019).

In the same scenario, Negassa and Dea (2017) discloses some bitter realities about the education of children with vision impairment. in this way student with vision impairment have not been successfully included due to insufficient teaching materials and resources. Teachers have not been regularly using appropriate teaching strategies

for effective and successful inclusion of SVI. Limited knowledge in adapting teaching materials, gaps in understanding the nature of visual impairments, lack of training on Braille reading and writing. Furthermore, limited knowledge to link the expanded core curriculum with what the subject teachers teach and lack of adequate budget have been identified as challenges.

Furthermore Sapp and Hatlen, (2010) supported Nagessa and Dea, (2017) in this way although teachers consider the Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC) critical for students' success, they do not provide their students adequate instruction based on principles of the ECC.

At the same time several studies purposed many useful strategies to improve the situation about academic rehabilitation of children with vision impairment as Malik (2020) shared that daily diaries as a way of communication, increasing parent-teacher interaction, provision of parental assistance and parent-teacher meetings are the strategies to solve communication barriers between parents and teachers of VIL in Pakistan. In addition another study suggested that with the active participation of teachers can play a remarkable role in providing visually impaired children with provision of an effective learning environment to help them in adjusting in their families (Malik, Kalthom, Nor, & Ahmad, 2018).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To know the fundamental objectives behind the start of special education at primary level in Pakistan.
2. To understand the vision and mission behind the establishment of primary special education for children with vision impairment at individual and institutional level.
3. To judge the achievement rate regarding pre-determined objectives of primary level special education for children with vision impairment.
4. To identify the areas of improvement in existing primary level special education practices for further reforms.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Which were the fundamental objectives behind the start of special education at primary level in Pakistan?
2. What were the vision and mission behind the establishment of primary special education for children with vision impairment at individual and institutional level?
3. What is the achievement rate regarding pre-determined objectives of primary level special education for children with vision impairment?
4. In which areas further reforms are required about existing special education practices for children with vision impairment?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study was initiated to know the progress of special education for children with vision impairment particularly at primary level. It was a qualitative research by nature. Therefore a qualitative interview protocol was applied to collect the detailed data from 27 heads of special education institutions about the past, present and future of primary special education for children with vision impairment in Pakistan as Gay (2012) narrated that the interview is a well-planned communication in which an individual retrieves knowledge from else. Researcher attains such data by interview which is not achievable by observation because observation only offers knowledge about present phenomenon. In fact this research is a part of a broad evaluation study which principal author conducted as his doctoral dissertation.

Sample of study

The simple random sampling technique was carried out to choose the sample of the study. At first the province of Punjab was divided in four zones by drawing one vertical and one horizontal line from the central point at the map of Punjab. Than 15% heads of special Education institutions were taken randomly from each zone. Total 27 heads of special education institutions including 16 male and 11 female were taken randomly from all over the Punjab.

Instruments of the study

The interview protocol was developed for heads of special education institutions which was consisted of two sections; First section has six queries about demographic characteristics of heads while second section comprised seven questions about foundations of special education and effectiveness of prevailing practices as well as provisions. Interview protocol was validated by the panel of five experts who had vast experience in the field of vision impairment. Three interviews were conducted initially as pilot testing whereas structured interview guide was revised and items were restated in the light of expert's opinion. Finally 7 items were included in interview guide.

Data collection

Principal author conducted and recorded some interviews from heads of special education institutions by his personal meeting but many other interviews were taken by telephonic conversation/ recorded calls due to corona lockdown after prior permission. However the interview guide was same in both kinds of interviews.

DATA ANALYSIS

Descriptive statistics were applied by calculating percentages of responses. Similarly thematic analysis technique was carried out to analyze the interviews received information was coded, de-coded and interpreted than 7 major themes were derived.

RESULTS

Demographics characteristics of informants

Total 27 interviews were taken from heads. The majority of informants/heads of special education institutions were male 16 (59.25%) while 11 (40.75%) interviewed heads were female.

The majority of informants had masters' qualification 15 (55.55%), Moreover 7 (25.92%) informants were having M.Phil. in Special Education, 2 informants (7.40%) had M.Phil. in other subject, and Similarly 3 (11.11%) informants were Ph.D. Scholars. A large number of informants 13 (48.14%) had experience as heads of special education institutions between 0-10 years, Moreover 9 (33.33%) informants had experience as heads of special education institutions between 11-20 years, Similarly 5 (18.51%) informants had experience as heads of special education institutions between 21-30 years

A considerable number of informants 7 (25.92%) had experience in the field of visual impairment between 0-10 years, Moreover a large number of informants 14 (51.85%) had experience in the field of visual impairment between 11-20 years,

Results of thematic analysis

Theme-1: The key objectives behind the development of Special Education Institutions

A considerable number of informants 10 (37.04%) reported that key objective behind the start of Special Education was rehabilitation of PWDs.

Similarly 8 (29.62%) informants stated that that the key objective behind the start of Special Education was to provide quality education to PWDs.

In the same way 7 (25.92%) informants said that the key objective behind the start of Special Education was to give the PWDs independent and productive life.

Theme-2: Specific objectives of Primary Special Education Program for CWVI

Majority of informants 12 (44.44%) demonstrated that the Specific objective of Primary Special Education for CWVI is to explore the potentials of CWVI and to determine their life goals.

On the other hand 9 (33.33%) informants said that specific objective of primary Special Education for CWVI is to teach them daily living skills, orientation and mobility and vocational training.

Similarly 8 (29.62%) informants reported that specific objective of primary Special Education for CWVI is to teach them Braille reading and writing. Moreover to teach them social and communicational skills.

Theme-3: The vision and mission of Special Education institution

A big amount of informants 18 (66.67%) asserted that the vision and mission of their Special Education institutions is to make the CWVI independent, productive, respectable, self-sufficient and beneficial members of society by optimum development of their potentials with quality, equality based, accessible and need based education, personality grooming, rehabilitation, mobility, daily living skills, vocational skills and communication training and to give them equal respect and acceptance in society so that they can confidently perform their assigned roles like non-disabled people and live a dynamic and well established life.

At the same time 1 (3.70%) informant stated his vision and mission in this way that the vision of my institution is to develop the basic learning skills like reading, writing mathematics and Braille of CWVI at maximum level so that it would be a foundation for acquiring new knowledge and skills in multiple domains and our mission is to establish a model Special Education institution by the collection of services of various skilled persons.

In the same way 1 (3.70%) informant told that the vision of my institution is that CWVI not only pass their examination but they can be able to become top of the merit in their discipline.

Theme-4: The achievement rate of pre-determined objectives by primary Special Education institutions for CWVI

A large number of informants 10 (37.04%) revealed that the Special Education institutions working for CWVI are overall successful in Pakistan. They felt that in spite of various challenges and disturbing factors Special Education institutions have accomplished 70 to 80% of their pre-determined objectives.

On the other side one third of total informants 9 (33.33%) reported that only the 40 to 50% of pre-determined objectives were accomplished by Special Education institutions.

Furthermore 3 (11.11%) informants demonstrated that only 20 to 30% of objectives of Special Education institutions were achieved due to the multi-dimensional barriers and restrictions.

In the same scenario 2 (7.40%) informants gave their opinions in this way that the objectives of primary Special Education for CWVI achieved at individual level but could not achieved at departmental level.

Theme-5: Appropriateness of prevailing instructional practices

A large number of informants 13 (48.15%) expressed that the existing instructional practices in Govt. Special Education institutions for CWVI are inappropriate and unsatisfactory. These instructional practices must be changed.

However 7 (25.92%) informants stated that most of the teachers and institutions are doing well at their level but still we are not getting desired results.

At the same time 7 (25.92%) informants reflected the optimistic view of same picture, they said that in spite of all challenges prevailing instructional practices are good and satisfactory. They revealed that prevailing instructional practices are 70% appropriate. It's not 100% because we have not so much facilities.

Theme-6: Effectiveness of existing curriculum in the light of student's needs and international standards

The heavy majority of informants 20 (74%) clearly asserted that the existing curriculum implemented for CWVI studying at primary level does not fulfill the unique learning needs of students.

In the same way the majority of informants 17 (62.96%) revealed that existing curriculum at primary level for CWVI does not meet international curricular standards because the expanded core curriculum which is most important for the education of CWVI all over the world is still less focused and ignored area in this curriculum.

Theme-7: Barriers to restrict the effectiveness of primary special education program for CWVI (Areas of improvement)

The heavy majority of informants 15 (55.55%) emphasized that the effectiveness of primary special education program is severely damaged due to the alarming lack of various resources like instructional material, , lack of modern technology, accessible computer lab and library for VI, lack of need based assistive devices, Montessori kits, AV aids, low vision aids, necessary material relevant to Braille particularly (Perkin machines), Braille books and vocational training equipment in most of the special education institutions of Punjab due to the lack of funding or other managerial issues. In the same way 4 (14.81%) informants reported that in many special education institutions instructional material, low vision devices, Perkin machines, mobility devices, Montessori kits, and vocational training equipment are available but these are usually out of order due to lack of proper care and unavailability of suitable and competent professionals who can effectively use these things.

Moreover 3 (11.11%) informants said that a large number of special education schools are established in rented buildings and those buildings are not disabled friendly.

Furthermore 10 (37.04%) informants shared their opinions a large number of special education institutions situated in Tehsils have no vocational teachers for children with visual impairment.

DISCUSSION

On the base of results it can be said that current study has significant association to many previous researches in multiple dimensions. As present study reported that the objective behind the special education could not be achieved at satisfactory level. In

same context Majoka and Khan (2017), elaborated that educational objectives were not achieved in Pakistan due to certain reasons. Moreover present study identified many gaps and flaws in existing special education practices and provisions these findings endorsed the results derived from Ahmad and Khan (2012) who narrated that The educational and rehabilitation services provided to disabled children were not worth mentioning in Pakistan (Ahmed & Yousaf, 2011). In the same side this study reported that the implemented curriculum for CWVI does not meet the unique learning needs of learners similarly international curriculum standards this finding agrees with Jahanzaib, Fatima and Nayab (2022), who elaborated that several benchmarks, competencies, and Student Learning Outcomes are difficult to achieve for Children with Vision Impairment, especially for visually handicapped or intensively low vision students, due to their vision related limitations and a scarcity of adequate and desired assistive technology at special school system.

This study also expressed that expanded core curriculum is a neglected area in implemented curriculum for CWVI at primary level Sapp and Hatlen (2010) revealed the same reality in this way although teachers consider the Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC) critical for students' success, they do not provide their students adequate instruction based on principles of the ECC.

The key objectives behind the start of primary special education for children with vision impairment were realistic, fruitful and achievable like to prepare the CWVI for productive and independent life by rehabilitation and quality education, to make them expert in basic learning skills and other essential abilities (expanded core curriculum) etc. The vision and mission at institutional and individual level were also effective, motivating and broad range as optimum development of hidden potentialities having CWVI. The predetermined objectives of primary special education for CWVI were accomplished to some extent but not completely. The existing instructional practices for CWVI at primary level were inappropriate less effective and unsatisfactory. So they are notable to get the desired results. Similarly the existing curriculum for CWVI at primary level was not fulfilling the unique learning needs of students. Moreover it did not meet the international curricular standards due to the less focus on expanded core curriculum which is most important for the education of CWVI all over the world.

Study reveals that the effectiveness of primary special education program is severely damaged due to the alarming lack of various resources like purposely build buildings, instructional material, lack of modern technology, accessible computer lab and library for VI, lack of need based assistive devices, Montessori kits, AV aids, low vision aids, necessary material relevant to Braille particularly (Perkin machines), Braille books and vocational training equipment in most of the special education institutions of Punjab due to the shortage of funds or different managerial issues. Special education teachers

were less trained in core academic areas and skills related with ECC. Most of them had low level of passion and motivation. Available assistive device were not being utilized effectively due to carelessness of school management and shortage of experts. In addition vocational teachers are only available for CWVI in special education schools and devolved complexes which are few in numbers however special education centers are deprived from them in spite of their majority.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The well planned, constant and organized efforts should be made to fulfill the key objectives behind the primary special education for CWVI. All special education institutions and their leadership should be provided sufficient human, financial and material resources to attain their vision and mission. Purposely build building and need based assistive technology with their competent experts should be assured for all special education institutions. The effective check and balance system should be established to evaluate the proper use of available resources. More useful instructional practices should be adopted in special education institutions for optimum development of CWVI. The all components of expended core curriculum should be implemented for CWVI in special education institutions. Moreover adequate, professional and behavioral trainings should be provided to teachers from time to time.

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