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Confronting Reality: Pre-Service Teachers' Lived Experiences of Teaching Practicum in Sialkot

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Abstract: The study is based on an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the experiences of pre-service teachers undertaking a mandatory teaching practicum in Pakistan. Five pre-service teachers were enrolled in in-depth semi-structured interviews to give a portrait of their daily lives and struggles, and how they dealt with the struggles. Five themes of group experiences were found in the transcripts, which were theory-practice disjuncture, managing large classes, resource constraints, manoeuvring mentoring relationships, and managing workload stress. The main reason why the participants were deeply distressed by the thought of having to apply the pedagogical philosophies of the university in the classrooms where access to resources is minimal, there is constant overcrowding, and mentoring is unreliable. These findings show how teacher education in Pakistan shapes how pre-service teachers understand hardship as they construct professional identities in constrained conditions. This study can be valuable to the practicum research regarding identifying the challenges in resource-constrained scenarios, and the research implications of enhancing teacher education curriculum, strengthening the mentoring system, and enhancing the institutional support system in Pakistan, as well as in other emerging educational settings.

Key Words: Pre-Service Teacher Education, Teaching Practicum Challenges, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Resource-Constrained Classrooms, Mentoring Relationships

Introduction

Teacher practicum is a crucial practice shift in teacher training as it presents a challenge to student teachers, as they are forced to find a balance between classroom realities and theoretical knowledge (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Zeichner, 2012). This intensive phase can be seen as professionalisation, where enrolment is expected of the novice to combine pedagogical knowledge with practical skills and to navigate institutional cultures, mentor relationships, and student diversity (Korthagen et al., 2001). When applied to Pakistani pre-service teachers, practicum experiences become more complicated as a result of structural, cultural, and institutional factors that make the context more distinct compared to those in resource-intensive educational systems (Flores, 2020; Ronfeldt, 2015). It is generally accepted that student teaching is a tense, developing stage that can predetermine the way a teacher will be perceived and, probably, the way the teacher will be able to work for a long time (Allen & Wright, 2014; Gravett & Ramsaroop, 2017).

Teachers are the most crucial professionals in any education system because their quality determines the education system's quality (Shulman, 2005). Education programs across the globe pay much attention to training the next generation of educators, and teaching practicum is the most important point when theory comes in contact with practice (Flores, 2020; Zeichner, 2012). It is an intense practice that allows pre-service teachers to implement knowledge acquired at the university in practical classroom situations, practice pedagogical roles, and create professional identities

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under the mentorship of mentor teachers and university supervisors. However, the shift from a normalised school environment to unpredictable classroom experiences can often be very difficult, and international studies have described the consistent barriers as challenges in classroom management, lapses in theory-practice relationships, and workload demands (Pillen et al., 2013).

The challenges are compounded by the fact that Pakistan has a very distinct educational environment. The schools in Pakistan have systemic problems, such as large classes often consisting of more than 50 students, a severe lack of teaching resources, extensive differences in the needs of students with no or limited aid, and the inflexible organisation of institutions (Halai & Durrani, 2018). The quality and consistency of mentorship are fluctuating and rather low, and most Pakistani pre-service teachers feel isolated and insufficient. Although existing studies on Pakistani research focus on general issues facing teachers, more in-depth qualitative studies focusing on the subjective experiences of pre-service teachers during practicum are few.

The recent literature has largely focused on surveys and quantitative research approaches, not investigating the particular phenomenological aspects of novice teachers' experiences in Pakistan (Durrani & Halai, 2018).

This paper fills this gap by using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to understand how 5 Pakistani pre-service teachers interpret barriers in the practice of their required mandatory first teaching experience. The focus on lived experience and the way meaning is created has given IPA a unique opportunity to elucidate the subtle, contextualised issues that inform teacher growth when teaching in a resource-constrained context (Smith et al., 2021). The study contributes to theory through true experience and contributes to better teacher training curricula, mentoring frameworks, and policy provisions that can produce better-trained and flexible teachers in the future.

Literature Review

The Critical Role of Teaching Practicum

Teacher practicum is considered the keystone of teacher training worldwide and is the critical period during which pre-service teachers start to leave their theoretical study and practice in their own classrooms (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Zeichner, 2010). Teaching competencies, forming a professional identity, assisting in reflective practice, and evaluating aptitude in teaching careers are a few of the objectives of this immersive experience (Flores, 2020). Ideally, a practicum is a planned apprenticeship offering a well-organised initiation into the intricacies of education under the support of seasoned mentors and university supervisors (Ronfeldt & Reininger, 2012; Shulman, 2005). However, it is undeniable that student teaching is a challenging and highly stressful time for pre-service teachers in various educational systems (Allen & Wright, 2014). These difficulties are critical to comprehend how the teacher preparation process can be enhanced and how novice teachers can be assisted throughout this initial stage (Mergler & Tangen, 2010).

Global Perspectives on Pre-Service Teacher Challenges

Global studies have shown that pre-service teachers face various challenges during their practicum. The most common is the gap between theory and practice, that is, the disparity between pedagogical principles taught at the university and real-life situations in classrooms (Korthagen et al., 2001). The resulting disjunction creates a sense of unpreparedness and disillusionment, especially when the school practice does not match the university's teaching (Grossman et al., 2009). Another important point of stress appears to be classroom management, particularly in cases such as the management of diverse or large classes, disruptions, and the establishment of routines when the teacher lacks the experience that novice teachers have (Evertson & Weinstein, 2013; Mergler & Tangen, 2010).

The quality of mentoring and supervision has far-reaching implications for practicum experiences. The issues that student teachers must face regularly include multiple feedback between school mentors and university supervisors, insufficient guidance, personal differences, or the mentor being too occupied to offer valuable guidance. Other problems relate to coping with school culture, overwhelming workload, differentiation of instructions to diverse learners, and effective assessment techniques (Daniels et al., 2013; Pillen et al., 2013; Trent, 2011). These barriers have an adverse

effect on the well-being, confidence, and pedagogical performance of pre-service teachers (Izadinia, 2014; Valencia et al., 2009).

Teacher Education and Practicum in Pakistan

Pakistani teacher education faces both universal and context-specific challenges. The education system, especially the governmental one, has to struggle with poor facilities, inadequate teaching resources, and insufficient access to technology (Commission, 2014; Halai & Durrani, 2018). These shortcomings limit the practice of teaching and make classroom life difficult. The high number of students in the classroom, which is not rare, cripples the possibility of applying student-centred strategies suggested by teacher-training courses.

The quality of teacher training programmes in Pakistan is also quite different, which influences the preparedness of pre-service teachers. Issues of curriculum-practice compatibility, pedagogical efficiency, and institutional ability to deliver satisfactory practicum assistance and supervision remain. Numerous schools still have underdeveloped mentoring systems, where mentors are usually chosen without detailed training and time to give useful advice or motivation. Poor links between universities and placement schools can lead to poor supervision and support. Cultural beliefs about authority and hierarchy only make the relations between mentors and their mentees, as well as administrators and their student teachers, more complex.

Although prior Pakistani studies cover the motivation of teachers and educational issues in general, they do not specifically look at pre-service teacher practicum challenges through a qualitative and phenomenologically covered study. Most available studies operate on a survey or descriptive design, without sufficient exploration of what lies behind the surfaces of the study in terms of deeper experiential aspects and theory creation on the part of the participants.

Synthesis and Study Rationale

Literature on student teaching practices in Pakistan and globally records the literature as problematic because the theories are practice-related, the classes are difficult to manage, and mentoring is not always of good quality. These are further complicated by the scarcity of resources in Pakistan, large classes, irregular training, and different school settings. However, few studies have examined the subjective experiences, perceptions, and real-time navigation of such barriers by Pakistani pre-service teachers. The current study uses Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to investigate the challenges of Pakistani student teachers during their practicum, creating context-sensitive theory which can subsequently be used to improve teacher education programmes, mentor teachers, and develop support systems in Pakistan.

Methodology

Philosophical Underpinnings and Rationale

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a qualitative research approach based on phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography, which allows for the study of the lived experiences of participants within their socio-cultural background (Smith et al., 2021). IPA emphasises meaning making, concerned not only with ways in which experience is phenomenologically described but also hermeneutically construed by the participants and researchers. The idiographic commitment of the approach focuses on the identification of detailed analysis of specific cases, then deciding on convergence and divergence among the participants (Smith et al., 2021). New tendencies in IPA emphasise contextual sensitivity, the reflexivity of the researchers, and so-called double hermeneutics: researchers understand the participants as they understand their experiences. The subjective experience and meaning construction, which is explored through this methodology, make it especially suitable for investigating pre-service teacher practicum issues in which individual interpretation and setting interact significantly to define the development of the professional side.

Research Design

In this research, an emergent, inductive, and iterative qualitative design based on IPA was chosen to examine pre-service teachers' practicum experiences. The study entailed an in depth semi-structured study of 5 pre-service teachers on compulsory practicum in public and private sector institutions in Punjab, Pakistan. Purposeful sampling helped to

have placement context, and program type diversity, as suggested by Smith et al. (2021). The sample size corresponded to the idiographic obligation of IPA without restricting the data on the identification of experiential patterns and their deviations (Smith et al., 2021).

Participants

The research population included pre-service teachers enrolled in different teacher education institutions in Punjab, Pakistan, who were undergoing a compulsory teaching practicum during the Fall Semester 2024. This sample was reduced to 8 participants by applying a purposeful sampling typical of qualitative research (Smith et al., 2021). The sampling consisted of participants meeting definite criteria: They were currently receiving teacher education in identified programs, were actively involved in their teaching practicum in the identified school and were willing to describe their experiences in detail. Participants in the selection process were selected with diversity in terms of type of program, and characteristics of the school of placement to maintain breadth of experience.

Data Collection

The researcher used interviews to collect rich narrative data (Smith et al., 2021). To create the semi-structured interview guide, the research questions, initial literature analysis, open-ended questions, and probes referring to the practicum experiences, perceived challenges, coping strategies, support systems, and teaching reflection were included. Questions were developed dynamically, whereby participants were free to drive discussions on aspects they considered critical. The guide was developed through an iterative approach owing to the consistent analysis, and the changing design reflects the emergent design of IPA (Smith et al., 2021).

Interviews were also conducted individually at places that were convenient and comfortable for the interviewees, and privacy had to be maintained. Interviews were tape-recorded with the consent of the participants and took approximately 45-75 minutes. The interviews were transcribed verbatim immediately after the session to enable timely analysis. Field notes were intended to provide context (observations) and non-verbal communication in and/or after interviews. In addition, extensive analytical memos were composed during the research process, which also played an important role as a tracking code and category development, as well as conceptualisation and miscellaneous reflection (Smith et al., 2021).

Data Analysis

The analysis of data consisted of systematic IPA steps with the constant comparative method being used throughout (Smith et al., 2021). The analysis process began during preliminary interviews, and the information obtained informed the refinement of the interview guides and theoretical sampling methodologies. This iterative process continued until theoretical saturation was attained. The analysis process comprised several steps.

Reading and Re-reading: The transcripts were read and re-read several times to immerse and familiarise us with them and take notes on first impressions and trends (Smith et al., 2021).

Preliminary Observation: Segment-by-segment (line-by-line) analysis revealed experiential statements, descriptions, language, and conceptual senses. There were three types of comments: descriptive (paying attention to content), linguistic (studying the use of language), and conceptual (asking about other meanings) (Smith et al., 2021).

Forming Experiential Statements: First notes were referred to as brief phrases of psychological content, yet they were based on the words of the first participants. This entailed inductive abstraction or discerning patterns and relationships (Smith et al., 2021).

Finding Relationships between the Themes: Theme emergent analysis was performed to determine relationships that could be identified, and groups of similar themes were clustered with the mention of convergence and divergence. This led to the support of personal experiential themes (Smith et al., 2021).

The next case was analysed ideographically in relation to the next transcripts, with each case being considered separately and other themes being open to development (Smith et al., 2021).

Seeking Patterns within Cases (Group Experiential Themes): Cross-case analysis revealed concerning recurrent patterns despite preserving idiographic specificity as well as observing divergence after analysing all the transcripts separately (Smith et al., 2021).

Throughout, the demands of double hermeneutic reflexivity were pursued, and memoing note-taking was extensively performed to record the interpretive choice and positionality of the researcher. Periodic peer debriefing sessions with study participants were conducted to increase coding reliability (Smith et al., 2021).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were thoroughly observed. Institutional approval was obtained from the institution before data collection. Participating teacher education institution provided the necessary permissions. The study participants provided voluntary informed consent after being thoroughly informed about the purpose of the study, its processes, possible risks and benefits, and their rights, including the right to withdraw from the study without any penalty (Smith et al., 2021).

All transcripts, notes, and publications were anonymised using pseudonyms. Information used to identify particular persons, schools, or institutions was left out or masked. Audio recordings and transcripts were saved on password-protected devices and stored in secure places. Data destruction will be performed according to the institution's policy once the study is completed. The sensitivity of the discussion on the challenges was recognised in the form of observant interviewing practices, where the participants were reminded that they could skip questions or terminate interviews if they were not comfortable. We did not use deception at any point (Smith et al., 2021).

Findings

Research found five Group Experiential Themes that represented the full nature of the experienced lives of pre-service teachers during their practicum: Theory-Practice Disjuncture, Managing Large Classes, Resource Constraints, Navigating Mentoring Relationships, and Handling Workload Stress. Every theme is accompanied by illustrative quotes showing the phenomenological richness and descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual commentary wherever necessary.

Theory-Practice Disjuncture

Participants overwhelmingly agreed that they saw very sharp differences between pedagogical ideals and school realities between universities and schools. Such dislocation became a source of immense frustration and career disenchantment. One participant said: "In the university we study student-centred learning, inquiry-based projects, group work but in a classroom of 50, with minimal space, no access to a lab half the time, and little resources available, it is difficult to do so." The quote implies contradiction and frustration, adding to the perception of professional impotence in the face of systematic limitations.

Another participant expressed this tension more explicitly:

Teaching methods are limited to textbooks and blackboards. The ideal learning methods taught in real classrooms are different. In many cases, we retreated to conventional lecturing so that we could manage the classroom and deliver lessons.

This participant emphasised the need to change to didactic techniques back not by intention but as an inevitable adaptation to the situation. The expression, "retreated to," implies recognition of that as pedagogically regressive but practically inevitable. Conceptually, this is an identity conflict between the trained reform-minded teacher and the traditional teacher's contextual realities that are being pushed.

One particular occasion where the theory-practice gap was made very apparent is in adopting new methodologies. According to one of the participants, "The issue of transferring the instructional abilities in the university to the classroom is distinct following the disjuncture between theory and practice." It is a basic declaration of words that conceals other frustrations. The construction becomes inexpressive (the problem of applying): this is the deprivation of the aspect of agency of the participant and structural incompetence.

The interviewees talked of being caught in between rival systems of accountability. One noted:

A mentor can suggest learning by memorising to pass the content within a short time. However, one of our supervisors would prefer that we use the discovery method of teaching, which is time consuming but a supervisor would like us to teach using the discovery method, which is time-consuming.

This disparity is disorienting and concerning. In most cases, the individual attempts to involve the supervisor, particularly when he or she is on a school visit. However, they may have to change or compromise to manage daily activities and achieve the expectations of their mentor. It is a balancing act.

The balancing act of the phrase is a summary of the precarious positioning of the professional. The participants have to be performative in meeting the expectations of the university supervisors regarding the reform during observation and adopt the traditional ways of the mentor to survive in the daily world. This negotiation is a form of two-fold accountability, which involves emotional work and code-switching strategic implementation between pedagogical selves.

The theory-practice gap produces a feeling of inappropriateness and impostor syndrome. Participants internalised the gap in such a way that it was identity failure and not structural constraints by posing questions about the validity of their teaching in failing to apply methodologies taught at the university.

Managing Large Classes

Class size was another recurring stressor and a critical barrier to differentiated instruction. Participants recounted a regular occurrence of classes surpassing 48 to 52 students, with one stating, "Grade 6 English class has about 48 students, and Grade 7 Science class has 52 students. These classes are large. There are always students who are willing to learn, and some students are not motivated to learn and have problems at home, where they would not be able to concentrate on learning." This exemplifies heterogeneity (large number) in conceptually complex situations where multiple needs, academic, motivational, and socio-emotional, are grouped together to make it difficult to intervene with pedagogical simplifiers.

Management of large classes was daunting. One participant stated:

In class, all the students are chattering in the background, and they are easily distracted. Here is a good example: The other week, when we had a science experiment, where some students in the background were arguing about a pencil, I was explaining the science experiment. This disrupted the entire lesson.

The words disrupted, and the whole class suggests that behavioural problems in crowded places can spread, as the little events lead to major disruptions in the instruction. That particular word in arguing about a pencil is quite specific in emphasising the fact that trifles will upset the whole lesson when the teacher-to-student ratios prove to be unsustainable. This reading can be intuitively experienced phenomenologically to demonstrate how the continuity of teaching is easily disrupted in classrooms filled with students.

Big classes made it virtually unfeasible to offer personalised attention. One participant deplored, "It is difficult to accommodate the various learning needs of all the students in the classroom since not all students possess sharp minds. Others are slow learners, who require time to complete the syllabus, since these students are unable to learn in a lesson a day."

Although the term sharp mind is drawn on a deficit thinking that might have been picked up in an institutional discourse, the problem behind it is real, as to how to support diverse learners where structural conditions are against differentiation. The quote shows the tension in an internalised form amid the idealistic goals of inclusion and the practicality of exclusion.

The physical and emotional burnout of leading large groups was explained by another participant as follows:

Extremely challenging. It has almost 50 students, and it is hardly possible to provide individual attention. Not all students understand ideas that are presented in one go; some require repetition and explanation

of ideas in various ways. I would also walk around to check on students, yet I could not cover them all within 40 minutes.

This quotation depicts how impossible responsive teaching is in terms of time and space. Pedagogical ideals are overcome by realities, even when the best intentions and efforts are applied. The term cannot reach everyone effectively, has literal (physical movement) and metaphorical implications (pedagogical connection) as it illustrates the principle of finding ways in which overcrowding fundamentally undermines teacher-student relationships.

Participants reported coming up with coping mechanisms such as the selection of seats, student monitors, and using the entire-class delivery of instruction regardless of the pedagogical shortcomings. These adaptations were, however, felt as compromises and not solutions, and this kept the feeling of professional inadequacy or incapacity to implement learner-centred approaches.

Resource Constraints

A persistent barrier was created because of the shortage of the teaching materials in schools, thus limiting the range of instructional possibilities for preservice teachers. Participants were working under conditions devoid of basic supplies. One of them was that the scarcity of resources certainly impacts teaching.

Classes have blackboards and chalk, and the chalk often runs out. Textbooks are not provided to students, and many charts, models, and visual aids are not available. While this is a normalisation of resource deprivation, descriptive commentary:

Even the most basic resources, such as chalk, are mentioned as missing. This paucity influences pedagogical options, and it ends up defaulting to verbal-based instruction despite the specific learning topic or goals.

The scarcity of resources was especially severe in science teaching, where practical demonstrations were all but unattainable:

The school has no proper science laboratory and only a few outdated pieces of equipment. Teachers attempt to compensate by preparing materials, which is expensive and time-consuming. This hinders the ability of teachers to make lessons entertaining and practical.

The term “hinder” the ability refers to structural constraints that a person cannot affect. The genius of the teacher, in personal funding and work of producing the materials, is, on the one hand, an agreeable fact, but is recognised to be unsustainable and short-lived, both with regard to finances and time. This results in the transfer of costs to individual teachers, which increases their workload and results in insufficient focus on the need for pedagogy.

Participants defined improvisation as a survival strategy. One participant said, “I make my own drawings or carry pictures, but it is expensive and time-consuming. It certainly influences my teaching because I cannot create lessons that are as engaging and practical as I would desire them to be.” This unveils the obscured economy of education in underfunded institutions, with individual spending filling the gaps created by institutions. Pre-service teachers with no consistent income bear the financial burden, especially since it poses socio-economic obstacles to competent teaching.

There was virtually no access to technology. Participants said:

I possess chalk, a blackboard, and a duster, etc., in my school. They are, however, not sufficient as there are no lab facilities to be used in support of practical work, e.g., computers or multimedia facilities.

The absence of computers and multimedia in the 21st-century classroom is more than an inconvenience; it is also a structural exclusion of opportunities in modern pedagogy and a deposition of digital literacy.

A shortage of resources influenced the quality of teaching and the development of professional identity. The interviewees were left in a state of strain between their perception of modern, innovative teachers and the traditional didactic methodology's lack of resources. One reflected:

They are very, very limited. As I told you, a blackboard, chalk--we sometimes run out of chalk. Students possess textbooks, although not all of them. The school does not provide charts, models, or visual aids.

Frustration intensity is brought out through the use of very, very limited. The participant's catalogue of missing resources serves as a phenomenological representation of pedagogical deprivation when it comes to the presence of a voice, text, and chalk.

Managing Mentoring Relationships

The experiences of mentoring were found to be extremely fluctuating and supportive or perfunctory. Most participants referred to generalisations by their mentors but not to particular pedagogical advice. One of them indicated,

My mentor teacher is very experienced, and she is kind. She showed me the school programs and provided me with a syllabus outline. She occasionally attends my lessons. Her advice is more general in most cases, such as being confident or ensuring that they are quiet.

The statements be confident and make sure they are quiet are platitudes and not strategies that can be implemented. Even though the mentors have goodwill, they are so busy that they cannot offer enough support to the interns, other than orienting them to the procedure and generic reinforcement, which is facilitated by the lack of background preparation in mentoring.

Feedback was infrequent and formal. One of the participants replied,

Formal feedback, perhaps once every week, following an observation. At times, unofficial conversations occurred in the staffroom. Her experience with classroom control tips is useful as feedback or a way to handle the administrative side of the school. It is less useful among specialised instructional techniques or new approaches.

This shows that mentoring is centred on classroom management and institutional navigation, which are legitimate issues, and inadequately preparing to pre-service teachers to meet the practicum goal of pedagogical development.

The greatest problem with mentoring was contradictory mentoring by school mentors and university supervisors. A participant stated that this was professionally disorienting.

Sometimes, yes. For example, my mentor would say to follow a more direct, rote-learning method of a subject to ensure that the syllabus is covered within the shortest time possible, whereas my supervisor would propose more discovery learning, which takes longer. This can be somewhat confusing. I tend to follow what the supervisor proposes, particularly when the supervisor is observing, only to have to make some adjustments or take a moderate position to comply with the realities of the day and the expectations of the mentor. It's a balancing act.

This bargaining among standards is a twofold accountability that must be adjusted pragmatically and must make use of emotional work. The word, especially when "supervisor observing," turns out to be the expression of a performative dimension, that is, to perform the reform pedagogy in order to please supervisors and revert to traditional practices to survive practically. Although it is an adaptive strategy, this strategic inauthenticity might be detrimental to the development of the real pedagogue and professional integrity.

Some participants explained very little mentoring. One of them said, "My mentor teacher was very kind. She assisted me in creating an ideal teaching planner. She is extremely busy; therefore, I do not converse with her on a deep level." The contrast between being kind and not talking with her deeply is typical of a dynamic between the good-intentioned, burdened mentors who were unable to substantially support her. Pre-service teachers are afraid to press busy mentors hard enough to make them feel that they are imposing issues instead of the required professional development. University supervision, which was more pedagogically oriented, was found to be infrequent. One of them said:

One of my university supervisors has so far visited me twice in the six weeks during my time here. The supervision was only provided once or twice in a semester, which posed a dire limitation to the chances of constant guidance and formative feedback.

The disconnect between universities and placement schools was an institutional disconnect that put the pre-service teachers in a position where they had to figure out a lot on their own.

Mentoring was experienced positively, but in fewer instances, it was transformative. Those who received extensive critical feedback said that their professional development was accelerated. However, the most common mentoring pattern, general encouragement, rarely used feedback, and conflicting, put a significant number of the participants down to inadequate support in their most formative stage of their professional lives.

Handling Workload Stress

The workload proved to be chronically overwhelming, including lesson planning, teaching, assessment, administrative work, and, frequently, unpleasant surprises. According to a participant,

Workload took too much time, with some saying that planners require too much time, especially when new materials are needed. When it comes to teaching and marking papers for a high number of students, the work is infinite. Can it be handled? Yes, sometimes I get overwhelmed, but I do my best to stay organised.

The phrase “I do my best to stay organised” is indicative of resilience but not resolution; even though people cope with the stress, the stress still occurs. The balance between control and overload is the main swing in challenging emotional experiences typical of an inexperienced professional.

Planning was especially time-consuming. One of the participants elaborated:

It is the biggest challenge adjusting the lesson to such a big and heterogeneous group, how to design activities that would suit both quick learners and those who require assistance. Also, the search or development of the correct resources consumes a lot of time in the planning process.

This statement brings out planning as entailing not only pedagogical design but also material production, a doubling of labour in the face of institutional resource shortage.

With large classes, the assessment load was terrible. A participant explained: “The thing is that I have to mark so many notebooks... it seems that it will never end. Having classes of more than 50 and teaching several sections makes it mathematically and fiscally daunting.” Another participant reflected on this:

To be frank, this is overwhelming in most cases. The planning process is time-consuming and involves the development of resources on its own. Then, teaching, then marking notebooks of so many students... it seems the work is unlimited. Manageable? Today, yes, tomorrow I feel like I go down a bit, drowning. I try to organise my work.

The drowning simile is a very significant way of expressing the emotional aspect of the workload, not just to be busy, but to drown as well as be able to keep their head above water. This phenomenological narrative illuminates the threat of workload to the quality of education, health and sustainability of the teacher.

They were very strong and adaptable, even to the workload pressure. The strategies they developed to cope with these challenges involved prioritisation, peer support, family emotional support, and spiritual practices. One of the participants stated:

It is helpful to talk to my family and friends. We have a WhatsApp group of my university classmates, and we share our frustrations and little successes. First, it is sometimes enough to take a short break, listen to music, or take a walk and clear my head... And prayer supports my strength.

There are numerous coping resources, as shown in this quote, such as networks of social support, interim relief strategies, and spiritual centrality, that allow individuals to continue functioning despite chronic stress.

However, the sustainability of such personal coping measures is unclear. Strategically, personal resilience requires institutional solutions to structural issues, and the participants were aware of the insufficiency of the former to resolve them.

Discussion

The results affirm and broaden international studies of challenges faced by pre-service teachers during practicum but highlight context-specific aspects in Pakistan. The theory-practice gap reported in this case is reflective of research in other parts of the world (Korthagen et al., 2001; Zeichner, 2012), but presupposes a high level of intensity in situations that are resource-constrained and in which structural conditions make university-based reform pedagogies practically non-existent (Halai & Durrani, 2018). This gap is not experienced by Pakistani pre-service teachers as a pedagogical challenge alone, but as an identity crisis, a conflict between the reform-oriented teacher identities that they are taught in universities and the traditional teacher role realities they must face in the context of the changing realities.

A large class size, which is known to be a challenge worldwide (Evertson & Weinstein, 2013; 2010ler & Tangen, 2010), is taken to extremes in Pakistani schools, where teaching is fundamentally changed into management of a huge group instead of relationship practices. Classes of over 50 students can no longer be taught individually; classes may not be taught individually due to the limitations of a normal period, and classrooms may no longer be student centric. This transfers the problem in the domain of skills acquisition to structural impossibility and has far-reaching consequences for the design of teacher education processes.

The limits of resources recorded in this section go beyond the normal accounts recorded in the international literature. Although schools worldwide are constrained in terms of resources, the fact that teaching materials in many Pakistani schools are limited to chalk and blackboards is a qualitatively different constraint. This is the primary effect that may influence pedagogical possibilities; it predestines instruction to the verbal one, irrespective of the material studied, learning outcomes, or educational principles (Halai & Durrani, 2018). The same hidden economy, where the teachers themselves finance the classroom materials, shifts the institutional costs onto the most hard-pressed individuals, putting socio-economic obstacles in the way of successful teaching.

Procedural guidance on how to do things is often generic encouragement, which reflects the weakness of the mentoring system (Hobson et al., 2009). However, this indicates a dire lack of alignment between schools and universities and the need to invest in mentor training. The compounded messages of school mentors and university supervisors create especially complex problem expectations of weak dual accountability, where pre-service teachers are otherwise obliged to generate reform pedagogies based on performance-based observations and pragmatic performance-based approaches of daily survival. Although this is a form of strategic inauthenticity that is adaptive, it may compromise the development of true pedagogies and professionalism.

The emotional element of the teaching process, dealing with stress, frustration, and responsibility to various stakeholders, has emerged as an unattended factor in Pakistani teacher education reformation. Emotional labour has become an acknowledged aspect of teaching in the global scholarly community (Izadinia, 2014; Pillen et al., 2013), and the Pakistani circumstances exacerbate it due to the lack of resources, overcrowding, and poor support systems. The fact that the participants turned to peer networks and informal coping mechanisms indicates resourcefulness and institutional ineptitude. Although peer solidarity provides high-quality emotional nourishment, it does not provide sufficient support to replace the well-established structures of the institution, professional counselling tools, and manageable workload conditions.

Theoretical implications revolve around the interpretation of pre-service teacher development as one largely conditioned by material circumstances rather than individual inclinations or program excellence. Research in teacher education has begun to pay more attention to context (Flores, 2020; Zeichner, 2012), although results in this area

highlight the qualitative differences in resource limitations on developmental potential. When there is an acute shortage of resources, pre-service teacher education becomes less focused on polishing the pedagogy and, instead, induces trainees to resourcefully struggle to survive, be creative under pressure, and progressively mediate their professional identities between the best practice and reality on the ground.

Practical implications indicate that a multi-level intervention is required. The teacher education curriculum should be honest about the resource constraints that graduates will face, which includes teaching both ideal pedagogies and strategies to adapt to resource constraints. In schools, mentoring schemes need extensive growth in place of mentor training, mentoring time, and systems that drive school-university networking. Politically, chronic resource shortages and overcrowding are requirements for significant reform of pedagogy. Asking pre-service teachers to use learner-centred pedagogies in a classroom with 50 students as tools would equate to failing and disappointing this particular teacher.

Conclusion

Pakistani pre-service teachers encounter a complex set of issues in action, due to the high number of students in classes, lack of resources, poor inadequate, conflicting pedagogical demands, and excessive workload in their practicum. Their lived experiences, as interpreted by the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, display the adaptive strategies, emotional resilience, and new professional identities developed in difficult situations. The findings, rather than being expressed as passive subjects of circumstance, help understand the active sense-making, creative problem-solving, and supportive networks they can engage with to continue, even in the face of the structural obstacles.

However, individual strengths should not mask the structural limitations that require systematic policy changes. The theory-practice gap results not from encountering flaws in the programs, but rather in the lack of fit between reform-based teacher education and traditionally structured and resource-starved schools. To bridge this gap, it is necessary to focus on the underlying causes of the situation, which are long-term underfunding, overcrowding, or ineffective mentoring systems, instead of permitting individual adaptation to balance out structural limitations such as underfunding.

To improve teacher education, we must invest in the systemic improvement of resources, serious mentoring, and genuine curricular exposure to contextual realities. Educational training of teachers should equip them to face situations that they will meet in real life and not some idealised situation. This requires instruction in reform pedagogies and adaptive practices in limited environments, which recognise the existence of tension between ideals and reality.

The accounts of phenomenology recorded above explain avenues for policymakers, teacher educators, and professionals who have endeavoured to improve the quality of teaching in Pakistani schools. These demand political goodwill to combat institutional resource base gaps, organisational determination to build mentoring facilities, and programmatic boldness to equip teachers with honesty in their roles of tackling the forthcoming challenges that they will encounter. Through this multi-tiered, long-term intervention, Pakistan will be able to build a teaching force that achieves the educational vision of its children.

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