Exploring Challenges to Social Adaptability Among Students with Special Educational Needs in Government Colleges, Batkhela, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT:

This study explored challenges in social adaptability experienced by students having special needs in government college Batkhela of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan. The ability to adapt to social environments is an important factor for students' educational participation, interpersonal relationships, involvement in the classroom, and adjustment to school. But students with special needs may experience extra challenges that impede them in making a successful social adjustment in mainstream school settings. The study used a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach and collected data from 20 participants through purposive sampling Semi-structured interviews were employed to collect data and themed analysis was used to analyze data.

The findings indicated that there were several interrelated challenges to students' social adaptability. The main challenges faced were related to language, transportation, lack of trained teaching staff, no individual academic attention, poor financial resources, social stigma, peer exclusion, inaccessible physical facilities, and lack of disability support and assistive technologies. The study also revealed that students with hearing, visual, speech, physical and learning impairments were excluded not only because of their impairments, but because of the lack of inclusive policies, and adaptive teaching practices in educational institutions.

The study finds that the social adaptability issues of special needs students in Batkhela are a complex issue and are rooted in institutional, social and infrastructural barriers. The results

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underscore the importance of adopting inclusive educational policies, creating accessible educational facilities, training special education teachers, using assistive technologies and raising awareness about inclusive education to facilitate equality of participation and social inclusion in educational institutions. The study offers valuable information to policy makers, educators, and educational administrators who want to foster inclusive and supportive school environment for students with SEN.

Keywords: Social Adaptability, Students with Special Needs, Inclusive Education, Government Colleges, Batkhela, Qualitative Study.

Introduction:

The concept of adaptation has been widely studied across both natural and social sciences. In the social sciences, adaptation is seen as a process in which people adjust to their social surroundings and sustain good relationships in society. Social adaptation therefore is defined as the capacity of an individual or a group to come into balance with their environment in ways that allow for personal development, social inclusion and wellness. Ogbiewu (2009) defines social adaptation as the behavior adjustment to fit the social context and to ensure healthy relationships with others. Social adaptation also has a crucial significance in educational settings where students face various social situations, social interactions, learning demands and institutional structures. Students continually interface with new environments, communicate effectively, form friendships, and deal with social pressures. Adaptation to the social context has positive implications for academic involvement, self-confidence, emotional adjustment, and achievement (Tinto, 2012). Students with special educational needs may face further barriers, however, that make this adjustment and integration process difficult.

Students with special needs are confronted with special social, educational and environmental challenges which directly impact their ability to adapt socially within the mainstream education system. Hearing, visual, speech, mobility or learning disabilities can cause communication barriers, limited participation opportunities, social isolation, stigma and discrimination. These difficulties are exacerbated when there are inadequate infrastructures, teachers, assistive technologies, and peer supports within educational institutions. In 1990, Oliver proposed a social model of disability which views disability not as resulting only from physical or mental impairments, but as a result of social and institutional environments that do not meet the needs of people. In this sense, inaccessible education systems develop barriers which hinder students' social involvement and adjustment.

Supportive learning contexts have been evidenced to be crucial in favouring students' social adaptation over time. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), in their research, found that college entry students face significant social and academic changes which call for appropriate adjustment abilities. Also, Cuseo (2007) noted that positive social integration and peer support has a great impact on the educational experiences and satisfaction of students. The role of social inclusion is even more significant for students with special educational needs as their meaningful relationships with peers, teachers and institutional systems boost their confidence, sense of belonging and active engagement in educational life.

Previous research in Pakistan has pointed towards role of institutional, cultural and psychological factors on the educational experiences of the students. According to Ayub et al. (2021) language barriers, cultural differences and educational stress all have a significant impact on student adjustment in academic environments. Ahmad, Gul and Zeb (2024) also

highlighted that academic stress and institutional pressures have a negative impact on student's educational performance and psychological health. Likewise, Gul and Khilji (2021) emphasized the need for a responsive educational system which would cater to the learning and social needs of students. The studies of Bukhari et al. (2021; 2022) also show that the role of institutional management, educational sustainability and supportive learning environments is very important for students' educational experiences and participation (Gul, Tahir, & Ishfaq, 2023).

Although there has been an increasing focus on the inclusion of these students in Pakistan, they are still experiencing significant educational and social challenges, especially in rural and underdeveloped areas. Government colleges in areas like Batkhela are lacking many of the infrastructure, disability support services, specialized teacher, assistive learning technologies and inclusive teaching practices that are necessary to support students with disabilities. Consequently, students with special needs might find it hard to participate in class, communicate, interact with peers and accept them into a social group (Ahmad, Gul, & Kashif, 2022). Their problems are accentuated by social stigma and negative attitudes, which restrict their educational and social development opportunities.

Most of the literature in the field of social adaptation has addressed the problem of general students in general or the educational situation in urban settings and little research has been conducted on the experiences of students with special needs in rural education colleges. Moreover, there is lack of awareness about the impact of institutional barriers, peer relationships, teacher attitudes, economic conditions and cultural factors on the social adaptability of the special needs students of Batkhela (Gul, Ahmad, Tahir, & Ishfaq, 2022). This lack of understanding is an important gap that calls for explicit studies of the everyday experiences and adaptation difficulties of these students in mainstream college settings.

The aim of the present study is, therefore, to find out about the social adaptability of students with special needs in government's college of Batkhela. The study aims to offer meaningful insights that could contribute to developing more inclusive, accessible and supportive learning spaces for students with special needs within educational institutions, educational policy makers, and educational communities (Zhou, Gul, & Tufail, 2022; Salameh, Akhtar, & Gul, 2022). It is critical to know about student sociability of special needs students since social adjustment plays a significant role in their participation in education, self-esteem, social interactions, and academic achievement. Familiarizing oneself with the challenges to social adaptation can help develop inclusive policies and practices in education, better institutional practices and supportive learning environments that can lead to equitable learning opportunities for all students.

Methodology

The current study was qualitative research with phenomenological approach to explore the social adaptability of special needs students studying in government colleges of Batkhela, KPK, Pakistan. A qualitative approach was chosen because the study sought to explore the lived experiences, perceptions, feelings and social issues of students in their context of learning. The selected colleges consisted of both male and female government colleges that provide intermediate education. The choice of Batkhela was made due to its being a rural and comparatively less developed educational environment where students with special needs do not get adequate educational and institutional support.

The participants in the study were selected using purposive sampling. The sample comprised of 20 students with special needs studying in the intermediate colleges. The main research method employed was semi structured interviews. All study participants were given permission by the relevant college administrations. The purpose of the research was explained to the participants and informed consent was obtained before the

interviews. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the collected data. Interview transcripts were read and reviewed carefully, looking for patterns, concepts and meanings. Data were systematically coded and similar codes were combined into more general themes and sub-themes of social adaptability.

Results

There are many challenges faced by intermediate students at both girl's and boys' colleges of Batkhela which or categorized below:

Language Barrier: Switching from Pashto to Urdu Medium

The transition from the Pashto medium school education to Urdu medium college education was one of the most commonly mentioned issues by all the participants. Students reported that they were confused in lectures, could not understand and explain their thoughts in Urdu (the main medium of instruction in the colleges surveyed).

This language barrier was found to have rippling impact on academic performance and self-confidence. The two obstacles of learning a new language and a new learning environment posed to students with special needs, especially those who are hard of hearing or struggle with processing information, were not adequately met by institutional facilities.

Inadequate Transportation Facilities

Transportation was a key structural barrier particularly for children living in villages far from Batkhela. A number of participants said they had to walk long distances or use expensive and infrequent public transport. Extended travel times negatively impacted student focus, attendance, and engagement in school. One of the participants stated that, *I spend more than an hour every day to get to college, and when I get there, I'm tired, my mind is not fresh. How can I concentrate on what the teacher is saying?*

Where students with physically disabling impairments were concerned, the lack of accessible and adapted transport was an even more debilitating barrier – especially for students with special needs who were also included in this study. No institutional changes were made to accommodate ramps, accessible vehicles or route changes were in place.

Lack of teaching staff and individual attention

One major institutional challenge was in the skilled teaching staff. Students referred to 'big classes' led by a few teachers with little chance for any individual feedback, mentoring or academic support. Participants stated that one teacher have more than fifty students in a class; when he finished the lecture, he went away and there was no time to ask a question.

This institutional challenge is further strengthened by a pedagogical tendency of teachers, as reported by majority of the participants, to focus mainly on students performing good in class, and pay less attention to low performing students or mostly they engaged their high performing students to take care of low performing students. Like one of the students stated that, *"The teachers always paid attention to the high-achieving students, the ones that sat in the front row and answered quickly; I used to sit quietly and feel that my presence wasn't important neither I have the courage to ask question from teacher".*

This discriminatory process was especially detrimental to students with special needs, those who need more not less individual attention. Lack of trained special education teachers and classroom support assistants is indicative of the overall lack of provision for inclusive education in the public education sector in KPK (Government of KPK, Education Sector Plan 2015-2020).

Financial Constraints

Students were reporting financial constraints as a common problem, which impacted their ability to buy textbooks, stationery and additional learning materials. Some students spoke of the lack of funds to get private tuition (which it was widely believed was essential to pass board exams in view of the quality of classroom teaching). Likely a participant stated that,

My father was on a daily wage, sometimes there was money, sometimes there was not, I couldn't buy all my books, I would borrow from my classmates or share, it was embarrassing, but I couldn't afford to buy them all.

The use of assistive technology – like hearing aids, magnifying devices or special learning materials are not affordable for the majority of low-income families in Batkhela. If such tools are not made available to these students through the institution, they are essentially denied equal access to education.

Inclusive infrastructure

There is a total lack of inclusive infrastructure. Inclusive infrastructure is completely absent.

All surveyed institutions had none of the forms of disability-inclusive infrastructure. There were no facilities or accommodations for students with physical disabilities, such as ramps, accessible washrooms, tactile paving, elevators, or reserved seating. This is a basic breach of national policy of Pakistan for persons with disabilities (2002) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which was ratified by Pakistan in 2011. A physically impaired students stated that,

I use a walking stick because of a leg, and the ground is slippery during rainy seasons – I have fallen more than once, nobody assisted me – and there is no railing or ramp – I am afraid every single day just getting to my classroom.

The physical inaccessibility of the campus not only limits mobility but also has a strong message of institutionalization that tells students with disabilities that they are not expected, welcomed, or valued in these academic environments.

No Special Education Teachers/Support Personnel

All three colleges students reported no trained special education teacher, learning support assistant or disability coordinator. Students with the hearing, visual, intellectual or learning disabilities were not enrolled in classes where they had any individualized education plan (IEP), assistive support or modified assessment. One of low eye sighted student stated that,

"I had weak eyesight, the board was far and could not read what the teacher wrote on it – I asked to be seated in front but they said there was no space – nobody gave me any special help – I felt like I was learning blind".

The absence of trained special education teachers is particularly alarming for the UNESCO Salamanca Statement (1994) in which Pakistan is a signatory, explicitly mandates that inclusive schools must provide individualized support to all learners with special needs. The difference between the policies and the realities in Batkhela is significant and not being met.

Stigma, Social Exclusion, and Peer Attitudes

Students who were visually disabled, had speech difficulties and/or learning difficulties reported that they felt social stigma, mockery and being excluded from peer groups. In several cases these negative dynamics were worsened by the lack of intervention by teaching staff and/or the lack of a culture of inclusion.A male student with speech impairment said,

"I have a problem in my speech, I stammer; when I tried to answer in class, some of the students laughed, the teacher said nothing and after that I stopped participating. I still go to college but I do not speak anymore".

The impact of the prolonged stigma is well documented in the special education literature. There is a correlation between existing social exclusion and reduced academic self-efficacy, increased risk of school dropout, and long-term psychological damage (Ainscow, 2005; Norwich, 2008). If the teachers fail to inform them and there is no proper educational program for the stigmatization of students with special needs, these experiences will continue to gradually push students out of the mainstream education system in Pakistan.

Lack of Assistive Technology and Adapted Learning Materials

Within the institutions surveyed, there was no assistive technology (large print, hearing loops, screen reader or braille materials) available in any of the institutions. The inclusion of students with special needs is expected to be in the same instructional content and methods as the other

students, making equitable participation virtually impossible. Likely one of the students said that,

I have a hearing problem; teacher speaks in the front of the large room; I can't hear well; I try to lip-read but it is difficult in Urdu, I copy what my classmate writes, but sometimes do not understand what I copy, passing time, not learning".

Lack of government funding for inclusive education and general lack of awareness among administrators that assistive support is a right not an option contributes to the systematic unavailability of assistive technology in public institutions.

Discussion

The results showed a multi-layered and compounded challenges experienced by students with special educational needs in Batkhela's intermediate colleges. Their problems are not just extensions of the problems that the typical student has, but qualitatively different and much worse; they are generated by the compounding of general institutional barriers and the complete lack of disability specific supports.

The most specific challenge special needs experiences is the complete lack of the infrastructure of inclusive education in all the institutions surveyed. There were no ramps, accessible washrooms, tactile guides or reserved seating. There were no trained special education teachers, learning support assistants or disability coordinators employed. There was no Individual Education Plans (IEPs). There were no assistive technologies such as braille materials, hearing loops or enlarged print available. These challenges show that its existence not is not just a gap in capacity but a systemic failure of institutional responsibility and obligation. In 2011, Pakistan endorsed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which under Article 24, commits the state governing bodies to developing an inclusive education system at all levels. The National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (2002) of Pakistan also calls for accessibility of the institutions and suitable education provision. The lack of such measures in Batkhela's government colleges is a clear violation of these promises, and is indicative of the continuing disconnect between promises made in policies and what is actually done at the ground level, which is well documented in the research on inclusive education in South Asia (Singal, 2008; Miles & Singal, 2010). A key document on inclusive education that emphasizes the importance of adapting to the needs of all children, not making children adjust to a particular institutional model, is the UNESCO Salamanca Statement 1994 endorsed by Pakistan. The evidence from Batkhela is the exact opposite of this principle.

Students with physical, visually, hearing, cognitive and learning disabilities are taught in common educational setting, and given the expectation of success or failure, in silence. These findings can be explained using Oliver's (1990) social model of disability. The social model is the difference between impairment (the physical or cognitive difference that an individual has) and disability (the disadvantage that the environment gives to the person due to the lack of accommodation). In this sense the students in this study are not disabled by their disabilities, they are disabled by lack of institutional access, pedagogical flexibility and social inequalities. It is the environment, not the student, that needs to be changed, so changing the environment is the right thing to do.

The stigmatization and social discrimination experienced by students with speech and language impairments, visibility disabilities and learning difficulties also contribute to the substantial deprivation that is already high. Ainscow (2005) and Norwich (2008) both measure the cumulative negative impact of social exclusion in education, which is correlated directly with reduced academic self-efficacy, identity loss and increased dropout rates. If teachers do not step in to stop peers from mocking one another, as several students reported, they inadvertently contribute to an atmosphere of exclusion, and make it a place of psychological harm rather than learning. It is also not something that can be added to the regular

classroom, but a rethinking of pedagogy, as Florian and Linklater (2010) explain: inclusive pedagogy is not a modification of normal teaching, but a new way of thinking about pedagogy itself, a way that makes from the beginning.

Conclusion:

This study aimed to analyze the challenges of students having special educational needs studying in the Government colleges of Batkhela, KPK. The research has resulted in a rich and layered description of the academic, social, institutional, personal and familial challenges that students encounter while striving for secondary school education in a resource-poor and rural setting in Pakistan. The most pressing contribution of the study is to the situation of students whose needs are special. The results clearly illustrate that these students are not just experiencing more of the same problems as other students are, they are encountering qualitatively different problems stemming from the combination of general institutional failure and lack of any disability-specific support. The physical surroundings are not accessible. There are no trained staff to offer individual support. These findings highlight the need to assist Batkhela institutions in addressing these obstacles to provide equitable access to education. Overall, these problems emphasize the importance of comprehensive support systems to ensure students' academic performance and well-being at Batkhela institutions.

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