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Promoting Inclusion of Students with Disabilities through Equitable Classroom Practices

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education has been recognized globally as a right of persons with disabilities since the early 19th century. Equitable classroom practice are considered essential element to satisfy the needs of students with disabilities in regular setting. The main purpose of this study was to explore the use of equitable classroom practices to meet the diverse needs of students with disabilities by their teachers and to facilitate their inclusion at the Universities of the Punjab. A mixed –method research design was used to conduct the study. The population of the study comprised of teachers teaching in general sector Universities of the Punjab province and students with different disabilities. A total number of 58 university teachers and their 38 students with disabilities (20=visual impairment, 10 =physical impairment, 8 =hearing impairment) were selected from 7 public sector Universities through purposive sampling technique. Only those teachers selected who were teaching to students with disabilities since last three years at least one subject. Two different types of instruments, a structured questionnaire and a semi-structured questionnaire in a flexible fashion were used for data collection. Both of the instruments got validated after piloting. Cronbach alpha was used to estimate reliability. The content and construct validity of the structured questionnaire estimated through experts related to the inclusive education. The quantitative portion of the data analyzed through IBM version 22, with the help of non-para metric statistical analysis. Qualitative data analyzed through thematic analysis. The four border themes appeared from in-depth interviews of the students. Majority of the teachers expressed knowledge to deal students with disabilities, adaptation in content, availability of aides for SWDs and lack of adapted material as main challenges to equitable classroom practices. The study recommended use of equitable classroom practices as an obligatory element for the inclusion of persons with disabilities at university level.

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1. Introduction

The concept of equitable classroom practices based on the broader concept of equity in education. Equity in education is associated with access to academic resources, quality and transmission of knowledge in a way to compensate for the inequalities that exists inside academic institutions. Equity involves giving everyone the specific tools that they need to experience success. In the classroom context, equity is embracing rather than shy away from the unique backgrounds, identities, and experiences of individual students (Galindo & Sanders, 2019) which they brought with them. Furthermore, it focuses on provision of educational facilities to all students according to their needs and without focusing on their social status, race, gender, cultural and language disparities (Deppeler, Loreman, & Smith, 2015).

Teaching at university level is a challenging task due to the presences of vast diversity of the students. Presence of students with different disabilities has made this task most challenging. It's not only transfer of knowledge, rather, it is transforming the variety of knowledge to the variety of students (Mulnix, Eleanor, Vandegrift & Chaudhury, 2016) in a manner to satisfy all. These practices are not possible if they are not independent of institution and classroom specifics (Forlin, 2012). Teachers at university level have to focus on strengths and needs of students with disabilities for equitable classroom practices (Goddard, Goddard & Kim, 2015; Gilham & Tompkins, 2016).

Equitable classroom practices are the vital tool for the university teachers to fight against the existing inequalities and segregation. Due to the limitations in their certain abilities, students with disabilities are providing with restricted learning experiences by the academic institutions. In case of equitable classroom practices, the chances of experiencing success of such students are more. It allows students to perform according to their individual abilities and became the part of an inclusive classroom. Equitable practices let students with disabilities to perform as much as they can, resultantly satisfy their educational needs (Rebecca & Chory-Assad, 2002). With such an emphasis on equitable practices in education, it is important that teachers know how they can foster and promote equitable practices seamlessly into their instruction and classroom procedures. Many of these strategies fall under "best practices" 'strategies that most teachers utilize intuitively every day. Teachers have to put some extra efforts to make sure that equitable classroom practices are the vanguard of their teaching and learning.

Education empowers and creates ability among the individuals and the societies to utilize their human capabilities for social and economic development (Machin & Vignoles, 2018). Education is a fundamental right and everyone is entitled to it (Willems & Vernimmen, 2018). For this, the development of a widely accessible quality and equitable education system is a critical requirement. The ideology of Pakistan professes to promote these ideals through providing equal and equitable educational opportunities in the Pakistani public sector Universities. Recently, Pakistan has signed the Sustainable Development Goals Agenda 2030 shows the country's promise to strive for equitable quality education and lifelong learning for persons with disabilities.

In Pakistan, there are many factors of lagging behind in the field of education including the neglect of quality education for persons with disabilities. Which makes the 14% of total population (WHO, 2020). Increment in the educational status of persons with disabilities cannot be achieved without promoting equity in the academic institutions country wide. To meet this challenge, public sector Universities have adapted an inclusive policy and reserved 5 % seats for the admission of students with disabilities. In this scenario, the universities teachers are facing many challenges due to the growing number of persons with disabilities in their classrooms (Cele & Menon, 2006).

Exploring the role of teachers of various Universities of Punjab, in using and promoting equitable classroom practices within the institutions may prove to be a significant contribution in developing and burgeoning inclusive culture. Hence, the study will explore and highlight the role of teachers in developing a culture of inclusion in university campuses through equitable classroom practices for further developing inclusive community in Pakistan.

The objectives of this study were to:

- Examine the status of equitable classroom practices by the university teachers to meet the needs of students with disabilities.
- Explore the strategies used by the university teachers to address the language, communication and literacy needs of their students with disabilities.
- Getting insight into students understanding on equitable classroom practices being facilitator of inclusive education.

Following will be questions of the study.

- Are the university teachers using equitable classroom practices to meet the needs of students with disabilities studying at the Universities of the Punjab?
- What type of the strategies university teachers are using to address the language, communication and literacy needs of students with disabilities?
- How do students with different disabilities perceived about equitable classroom practices as facilitator of inclusive education?

2. Literature Review

Higher education is at an important crossroad. Enrollment of students in the public sector institutions are increasing at a rapid rate with the increase and growth in population. While the culture and structures of higher education institutions remain slow to change (Gibb, Haskins, & Robertson, 2013). As the students and learners who make up the academic diversity along social identities of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability, and other lines, deep-seated inequity remains (Cele, & Menon, 2006). Skelton and Kigamwa (2013) have conceptualized equitable education in terms of representation of educational practices, policies, curricula, resources and institutional cultures of all students as far as access and participation in high quality learning experiences, without any difference.

Possibly, no society can ever reach total equality in the educational performance of every individual, due to the fact that differences in learning outcomes may depend on disparities in ability and motivation, the types of contexts one comes from and the type of resources one has (Pekrun, Lichtenfeld, Marsh, Murayama, & Goetz, 2017). Perhaps any society may bring out maximum from its students through applying the concept of equitable practices in their classrooms. Use of flexible curriculum, norm referenced assessment, culturally responsive teaching (CRT), high impact' pedagogical practices (Smith & Williams, 2017), alternative communication techniques and differentiated instructions are essential practices to bring equity in classroom practices (Banks & Banks, 2019).

2.1 Understanding Students with Disability (SWD) studying at Universities.

In Pakistan, access to higher education for SWDs started in the year 1985. Teaching students with different disabilities at higher education involves an understanding of the philosophical, political, pedagogical, and contextual factors which either facilitates or impedes access and involvement of students with disabilities. However, access to higher education for SWDs in regular Universities is still somewhat restricted. There are numerous barriers existing in the Universities which are preventing

equitable access to quality education for people with disabilities (Syed, & Ozbilgin, 2019).

2.2 Equitable practices and inclusion of students with disabilities

Inclusive education is one feature of the rights-based quality education (Gilham, & Tompkins, 2016). It believes on responding positively to the individual learning needs and capabilities of all children. Inclusive education places the duty of modification on the education system rather than the student. Inclusion vigorously works to ensure that every child, irrespective of gender, ability, religion, nationality or other characteristics, is reinforced to expressively participate and learn together with her peers and develop to her full potential (Arkorful, et al., 2019).

Placement of students with disabilities along with normal peers have raised some problems including discrimination by their peers and teachers. The phenomena of discrimination and stigmatization of persons with disabilities existing in educational institutions (Gorard and Smith, 2010). Teacher is the main actor of classroom praxis. Teachers' use of equitable classroom practices in higher education will provide solutions to multiple interconnected problems related to students with disabilities. According to Sengupta, Blessinger, Hoffman and Makhanya (2019), a classroom with equitable practices has enormous positive impacts on learner where every student get opportunity to learn, regardless of their differences/deficiencies and get benefits from the learning process. It also promote inclusive classroom and Universities. The challenge of inclusivity can be met by ensuring the university teachers about the classrooms as spaces in which every learner will feel wanted and will get equal opportunities of learning.

3. Theoretical framework of the study

The framework of this study is conceived on the basis of theories strive for equitable classroom practices and inclusive education. In particular, the theory of equity suggested by Meuret (2002). He has conceptualized equitable education in terms of educational practices, policies, curricula, resources, access and participation in high quality learning experience without any differences. Whereas, the notion of meeting the individual needs of students with disabilities on equal and equitable grounds has promoted the idea of equitable and inclusive education.

4. Future impacts of the study

The study assumes that an insight can be gained about classroom equitable practice. The study will provide guidelines to take initiatives for equitable classroom practices for creating the environment of inclusiveness. The study has potential to draw some practical guidelines for policy makers, administrators of higher education to plan and implement required changes to make higher education institutions more fair and equitable for the students with disabilities as far as educational practices are concerned.

The study is also productive for the university teachers in terms of understanding the reasons of inequitable classroom practices that has been causing segregation and a culture of marginalization for the students with disabilities in the country.

5. Methodology and procedure of the study

A mixed method (Quan & Qual) approach was used to conduct this study.

5.1 Population and sample of the Study

In this study, the teachers from all general Universities were the population of this study. Purposive sampling technique was used for selecting the teachers and students to conduct this study.

The sample of the study was selected into two steps; at first the researcher conducted the survey in the 09 divisions of Punjab to identify the Universities where students with disabilities are enrolled and getting educational services. Secondly, 58 teachers and their 38 students (20=Visual impairment, 10 =Physical impairment, 8 =Hearing impairment) with different disabilities were selected by using purposive sampling technique from the 7 public sector Universities.

5.2 Instruments of the study

Two different types of instruments were developed and used to conduct the study.

- A close- ended questionnaire for university teachers to assess equitable classroom practices (QAECP). On the basis of literature review and hypothetical framework, a close ended questionnaire was developed and used to explore and assess the equitable classroom practices used by the teachers of Universities. Likert type scale was used to mark the responses of teachers against each item.
- An interview protocol for students with disabilities (IPSWD). An interview protocol comprised of semi-structured questions in a flexible, open ended fashion was developed to take the expressions of the students with disabilities on equitable classroom practices in inclusive classrooms.

5.3 Reliability and validity of the instruments

Reliability of the both instruments was estimated after the pilot testing in one public sector University of Lahore Chronbach alpha was used to check the reliability of structured instrument. Whereas the content and construct validity was estimated by taking the opinion of experts in the field of inclusive education. In addition to piloting, the validity of open ended interview protocol is estimated through experts' opinion and by taking help from literature review.

5.4 Data collection

Data was collected through both close ended and open ended semi-structured questionnaires. The close ended questionnaires filled up from the university teachers. The qualitative portion of data was collected from the students with disabilities through interview conduction studying at different Universities of the Punjab. An informed consent has been taken from the students before interview conduction. Researcher use sign language for interview of students with hearing impairment. While in case of visually impaired students, the interviews were tape recorded and notes were taken too. It took three months to collect the data from various universities situated at Punjab.

5.5 Data Analysis

Data collected from teachers was subjected to quantitative data analysis with the help of SPSS. The Qualitative portion of data was analyzed and assigned codes after many readings by applying the constant comparative method of data analysis (Creswell,2007).Data collected from the interviews of the students were transcribed, edited and assigned different descriptive codes, which were confirmed and modified throughout the analyses. After coding the data, the categories were developed. Based on these categories 4 different and distinctive themes have emerged. These themes helped researchers to gain deeper insight of data while answering the research questions.

6. Major findings of the study.

To answer the first question of the study, mean and standard deviations were calculated through IBM version22.The data is presented in following table.

Table.No.1: Mean and SD of responses of University teachers on use of equitable classroom practices.
N=58

Sr. No	Statement	Mean	SD
1	I give eye contact to all students of my class.	1.69	.467
2	I call all students by their names in the classroom.	1.45	1.157
3	I use proximity with all students of my class	1.45	1.157
4	I think all students are equally capable of learning.	2.62	1.152
5	Through my body language I make students feel equal importance.	2.21	.874
6	I arrange the classroom to facilitate discussions with SWDs.*	3.52	1.657
7	I use variety of visual aids to accommodate needs of all students.	2.76	1.467
8	I give equal respect to SWDs belongs to different family back grounds.	2.03	1.059
9	I use some words from students' heritage language during talk.	2.43	1.546
10	I value students' individual differences.	2.93	1.485
11	I make heterogeneous groups of students.	2.21	.874
12	I am aware of needs of students with disabilities.	3.41	1.545

*SWD=students with disabilities

The above table shows that arranging the classrooms to facilitate the discussions with SWDs (Mean =3.52), awareness on needs of SWDs (Mean=3.41), considering all students equally important (Mean=2.62), giving value to individual differences of the students (Mean=2.93), using words from their heritage language (Mean=2.43) and using variety of visual aids (Mean=2.76) shows that a good number of university teachers are using equitable practices for students with disabilities.

Table No. 2: Strategies used by University teachers for equitable classroom practices.

Sr. No	Statements	Mean	SD
1.	I build class community to facilitate inclusion of SWDs	3.52	1.657
2.	I use peer tutoring to facilitate students with disabilities	2.76	1.467
3.	I adapt the content for SWDs	2.03	1.059
4.	I show flexibility in time assign to SWDs	2.43	1.546
5.	I assign students tasks according to their abilities	2.93	1.485
6.	I adapt difficulty level of assignments for SWDs	2.80	1.529
7.	I accommodate difficulty level of language for SWDs	2.80	1.529
8.	I use variety of communication modes to meet needs of SWDs	2.21	.874
9.	I give equal time to all students of my class	2.78	1.390
10.	I take the help of technological resources to meet the needs of SWDs	2.47	1.318
11.	I provide the assistants for notes taking to PWDs	1.45	1.157
12.	I allow family members of SWDs to assist them in their mobility	2.58	1.465
13.	I use clarifying techniques to increase access in learning for SWDs	2.62	1.152
14.	I use probing techniques to increase access in learning	1.45	1.157
15.	I provide writer/sign language interpreter to PWSs	1.69	.467
16.	I adapt physical environment of the classroom to increase the access of SWDs.	3.41	1.545
17.	I listen all students' views in my classroom	3.52	1.657
18.	I gives value to the intellectual differences of SWDs.	3.41	1.545
19.	I create open dialogue in classroom	2.93	1.485
20.	I avoid gender disparity	3.27	1.400

The above table shows that building classroom as community (Mean=3.52), listening all students (Mean=3.52), adapting physical environment (Mean=3.41), valuing intellectual differences (Mean=3.41), avoiding from gender disparity (Mean=3.27), use of clarifying techniques (M=2.62), adapting difficulty level of the content (2.80), allowing permission to the family member to help SWDs during class time (2.58) emerged as prominent strategies for equitable classroom practices by the majority university teachers in Punjab.

Table No.3: Showing teachers opinion on equitable practices and inclusion

Sr. No.	Statements	Mean	SD
1.	Equitable classroom practices flourish inclusion of SWDs	3.49	1.431
2.	Giving value to the students' differences promotes inclusion.	3.85	1.080
3.	Participation by all students in class discussion promotes inclusion	4.93	5.258
4.	Sharing of students ideas freely promotes inclusion	4.46	.625
5.	Students feeling as productive members promotes inclusion	4.20	.805
6.	Considering students disabilities as class strength promotes inclusion	4.93	5.258

The above table shows that majority teachers are considering that using equitable classroom practices promotes inclusion in the classroom. Participation by all students in classroom discussion and considering students disabilities as their strengths are rated most effective strategies to bring equity and inclusion in the classrooms (Mean=4.93).

7. Findings based on the interviews of students with disabilities (SWDs).

From the interviews of the students four major themes emerged; competence, valuing differences, forming inclusive culture and adaptable curricula. The brief description of all four themes have presented below.

Theme.1: Competence.

The students with disabilities believed that equitable classroom practices require primarily considering students with disabilities equally capable and competent like normal/general students. The chunks taken from students interview is presented in following table.

Table 6: Students' expressions reflecting their views.

Excerpts	Codes	Categories (Sub-themes)
<i>Students No. 1: Talking about equitable practices seems easy but in practical it requires a lot. The primary element in dealing students with different disabilities is considering them equally capable. Believing in their abilities.</i>	Considering students with disabilities equally capable Believing on Students	Believing in students with disabilities Theme Competence

Theme 2: Valuing differences

Students with disabilities have expressed that teachers should not consider us persons with deficiencies, rather they need to focus on our abilities. Fairness in teaching requires giving value, accepting and using the differences of students to them part of mainstream students communities.

Table No 7: Students expressions reflecting their views on valuing difference.

Excerpts	Codes	Categories (Sub-themes)
<i>Student: Talking about equitable classroom practices seems easy, but the primary element for equitable teaching practices knows about students' individual differences and needs and utilizes their differences, giving them value.</i>	knowing students differences equitable practices requires understanding students differences Valuing students differences	Understanding students with disabilities Theme Valuing differences

Theme 3: Adaptable curricula

The 3rd theme emerged from students interview was adaptable curriculum and instructional strategies. The chunk from one of the student with hearing impairment is presented in following table.

Table No. 8: Students' reflections on adaptable curricula

Excerpts	Codes	Categories (Sub-themes)
<i>Student: I use hearing aid to listen teachers' lecture but I also need explanation of contentor a curriculum which is adapted according to our needs ,so we can learn with all</i>	Use of assistive technology Need easy content Need alternative instructions Changeable curriculum	Student centered curriculum

The students with disabilities studying in Universities expressed that talking about equitable classroom practices requires an adaptable and extended core curriculum which can compensate our limitations and utilize our strengths. A curriculum with common learning objectives would sustain our inclusion in the Universities.

Theme 4: Forming inclusive culture

Table 9: Students' reflections on forming inclusive culture.

Excerpts	Codes	Categories (Sub-themes)
<i>Students: Equitable practices in classroom are very tough task to be achieved, changes at massive level are required,...as there is lack of equitable practices in overall society.</i>	Tough task to achieve Existence of inequitable practices in society Change in culture	Changing society

All of the students with disabilities opined that we cannot achieve equal rights, until the change in our existing culture of inequalities and inequities. To build the culture of equitable and inclusive practices, change in our society and mindset is essential element.

8. Discussion on major findings of the study

The Article 24 of UNCRPD has become the global basis for enhancing the inclusion persons with disabilities in the regular institutions (Hunt, 2019). Recently the goal 4 of SDGs has expressly calls for equitable and inclusive learning practices for children and youth with disabilities (Arkorful, et al.,2019). In this connection, this study has been designed to see the equitable classroom practice by the teachers in the context of our local Universities in the Punjab.

Equal respect, valuing students' individual differences, making heterogeneous groups of students and showing acceptance to all students, maintaining proximity are certain noticeable indicators shows use of equitable practices by teachers of our Universities. This is inconformity with the findings of research studies conducted by Saphier (2017) and Arrington -English (2020). However very few numbers of teachers have stated that giving eye contact and calling all students by their name adds in equitable classroom practices and promote inclusion. Whereas, the study conducted by Atta & Ayaz (2014) has highlighted that maintaining eye contact and calling students with their names make them feel valued and inclusive part of the classroom (Bucholz & Sheffler, 2009).

The major challenges pointed out by the students with disabilities to bring equitable practices and inclusion are identifying students differences (Zorzi, 2020), knowledge to deal students with disabilities, adaptation in content, provision of aide for SWDs and lack of adapted material. The teachers of different Universities have pointed out embracing diversity (Baglieri, 2017), involving them in classroom dialogues and getting benefits from students differences fosters both equity and inclusion at university level. The study conducted by Juvonen et al. (2019) have explored that curbing students' individual difference result in their social segregation.

The study come up with the point that use of multiple communication strategies (Mitchell & Sutherland, 2020), adapting time, creating accessibility, clarifying techniques and respecting intellectual identity of students with disabilities (Ehlinger, & Ropers, 2020) as most common strategies used by the university teachers to deal students fairly. However, provision of sign language interpreter and writers has not been provided in majority of the Universities of the Punjab. Beside the fact that use of sign language interpreter for students with hearing impairment (Snoddon & Murray, 2019) and use of writers for students with visual impairment (Lamichhane, 2017) are necessary for equitable practices.

The in-depth interviews of the students with different disabilities helped the researcher to explore the research problem through multiple ways. The first theme "*competence*" reflects that equitable classroom practices requires considering SWDs being competent and able-bodied persons rather incapable (Gibson, 2012) by their teachers. Students further expressed the importance of valuing their difference for equitable classroom practices (Ainscow, Dyson, Goldrick, & West, 2013) as it impacts on their educational performance too (Jordan, Glenn & McGhie-Richmond, 2010). Only considering students with disabilities competent is not enough, indeed valuing and cherishing their individual difference promotes the equity and inclusion in classrooms, expressed by the students.

The theme "*forming inclusive culture*", has given the practical strategy to bring equitable practices a reality through change in the overall culture (Abildina, Belgibayeva, Assakayeva, Beisenbekova & Kabdrgalinova, 2020) of the universities and society. Requiring an equitable classroom culture needs fair play by the all stake holders of academia.

Need of adaptable curriculum has highlighted by the students to provide education according to the needs of all students. (Sengupta, Blessinger, Hoffman, & Makhanya, 2019) including equity pedagogy and use of assistive technology (Ahmad, 2015).

9. Conclusion

As per the findings brought from this study, use of equitable classroom practices are considered fundamental for inclusion of persons with different abilities/disabilities. However, the teachers of inclusive classrooms needs a support system from the administration in form of resources, materials, helping staff, training and authority to modify the syllabus and assessment procedures according to the

needs of students with disabilities. Being the most educated class of society, teachers of Universities ought to strive for an equitable education system to reduce the phenomena of segregation and thus promote inclusion.

10. Recommendations

The study recommended a need to train the teachers on use of different methods to observe equitable classroom practices for persons with disabilities. In addition to training, teachers should be involved in policy making process at all levels of education.

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