

The Impact of Overpopulated Classroom: Teacher Responses and Educational Consequences

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates teachers' lived experiences and approaches for handling overpopulated classrooms. It also aims to examine the effects of overcrowding on student-teacher relationships and learning. Using semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions, data was collected to address key research questions about challenges and coping strategies. Findings revealed that overpopulated classrooms create highly stressful classroom environments for teachers due to factors such as limited space, increased workload, and behavioral issues. Despite these challenges, teachers employed various professional skills and strategies to manage their classrooms effectively. The findings highlight the significant impact of overcrowding on both teaching process, focusing the need for interventions to support educators and improve classroom conditions. This research contributes to understanding how teachers cope with large-sized class and its educational consequences.

Keywords: Classroom Overpopulation, Teacher Responses, Educational Consequences, Class Size, Education Quality

INTRODUCTION

In today's era of fast digital and global connectivity, the field of education is experiencing a profound transformation. The ease of access to information and the accelerating pace of technological progress allows students to obtain virtually any knowledge with just a click. However, to thrive in this dynamic environment, students must not only access information but also possess the 21st century skills to critically analyze, examine relevance and validity, and translate the data they encounter. This underscores

the significance of quality education in schools. Students must be prepared to participate actively in a technologically driven society and respond to global issues such as cybersecurity, climate change, public health, digital privacy, and water scarcity, in order to succeed in the 21st-century workforce. This places a crucial liability on secondary school teachers to nurture the next generation of scientists (Al-Imarah, et. al, 2020).

Classroom overcrowding has become a significant challenge in Pakistan, driven by multiple factors such as the reduction in school fees, high population growth, international initiatives fostering universal education, and demographic shifts (Benbow et al., 2007; Blatchford et al., 2020). With a population growth rate of 2.6 percent yearly and an average household size of 6.2 members, the educational infrastructure is under immense pressure, contributing to increasing class sizes (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2023). These conditions place great strain on teaching resources and hinder teachers' capabilities to offer individualized attention, conduct hands-on experiences, and promote an environment that assists critical thinking and active learning. Such challenges can highly impact the quality of education. In overpopulated classrooms, limited space and resources may hinder the delivery of interactive, practical, and engaging teaching (UNESCO, 2010). To effectively comprehend how overcrowding impacts students' learning outcome in classrooms, it is vital to inquire about the nature of classroom interactions, specifically between teachers and students (Ijaiya, 1999). As students move to higher grades in Punjab, Pakistan, the system of education reflects declining completion rates; from 67 percent at the primary level to 57% at the middle school, nearly 40 percent at the secondary level, and only 30 percent at the senior secondary (Pakistan (Punjab) Education, Fact Sheets, 2022). Although various international research has investigated the impact of class size on student performance, their findings are often inconsistent due to variations in societal and contextual factors.

Within the scope of secondary school education, this paper aims to fulfil that gap by conducting a comprehensive literature review, exploring and assessing teachers lived experiences, observing classroom practices, and reflecting on students' perspectives. Paper explores how teacher-student bond impacts teaching-learning process in overpopulated classrooms in Punjab, Pakistan. Additionally, it reveals not only the constraints faced by the secondary school teachers but also identify practical approaches and strategies to eliminate the negative effects of large-sized classes. This research paper seeks to contribute purposeful insights to enhance education practices at the secondary level, both within Pakistan and in similar educational contexts globally.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Student-teacher bond encompasses the good communication and interaction dynamics within an educational environment. This bond includes verbal communication, feedback, and interpersonal connections that influence students' educational experiences. As positive student-teacher relationships promote higher academic engagement, increased motivation, enhanced performance, and stronger socio-emotional development (Salem-al-amarat, et. al, 2011). Conversely, poor interaction can contribute to student disengagement with the topic, reduced academic achievement, and behavioral challenges (Ahmed et al., 2006) in crowded educational settings. Finally, students' learning includes the process through which they acquire, retain, and use knowledge, skills, and capabilities. This process impacts by factors such as teaching methods, teacher excellency, student engagement and motivation, and the overall learning environment (Amarat, et al., 2011). Students who are engaged and motivated tend to show attentiveness, focus, and participate actively in learning activities. Well-organized teaching approaches, meaningful engagement strategies, and student autonomy; all enhance both interaction and academic performances (Asodike, et al., 2016). Much research has shown that when teacher-student bond is characterized by trust, respect, and support, they achieve better learning outcomes (Carlson et al., 2000).

On the other hand, inadequate teacher support and ineffective communication can have a negative influence on student performance and increase dropout rates (Furrer & Skinner, 2003).

The term ‘overpopulated classroom’ lacking a clear, agreed-upon definition. According to Muthusamy and Nirashnee (2015, cited in Ayub et al., 2018), the term is often used interchangeably with large-sized classrooms in academic discussions. Also, Nemrah in 2001 points out that small-sized classrooms are typically connected to enhanced academic performance, as they permit teachers to deliver more personalized attention, thereby enhancing the overall teaching quality.

The existing literature addresses the current situation of education within overpopulated classrooms at the secondary level. Given the increasing reliance on critical thinking, inquiry-based learning, and problem-solving skills are essential to identify effective avenues for supporting the well-being of students. The objective of this literature review is to take an overview of the past and current work done in the field of education with reference to overpopulated classrooms at the secondary level for coping.

Review literature also discusses the content focus, teaching methods, tools, and values regarding overpopulated classrooms. Emphasis is placed on the structure of the education system from early childhood to higher secondary levels as to how large-sized classrooms impacts student-teacher relationships and students’ learning in secondary schools. To know about student-teacher bond and its effect on learning in overpopulated classrooms, the socio-cultural theory of Vygotsky gives a structured framework (Moreno, 2010). Vygotsky’s concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978) revealed the gap between what learners can do independently and what they can acquire with guidance, which is specifically relevant when students’ attention is limited. Previous studies offer mixed findings on class size effects like the Tennessee STAR Project, a study in the United States in 1980, investigated class sizes from kindergarten to 3rd grade (Benbow, 2007; Blatchford et al., 2020). Findings revealed that small-sized classes — limited to 17 students—led to considerable enhancement in reading and mathematics performance. However, the study faced criticism with regard to finance and the generalizability of its findings to broader educational contexts.

The STAR Project found that gains in academic achievement were observed in both reading and mathematics, and the positive impacts increased with the number of years learners spent in small classes up to 17 (Benbow, 2007; Blatchford et al., 2020). The findings of the Project suggested that minimizing the class sizes, especially in the range of 13-17 students, could lead toward improved academic achievement and long-term benefits, especially for students facing economic disadvantages. The positive impacts persisted even after a few years, with greater benefits observed for disadvantaged students. More students graduating, achieving honors, and decreased dropout rates were observed in smaller classes. However, it is essential to consider the criticisms and limitations of the study, including allocation of funds and the generalizability of findings to a broader educational context.

Objectives

1. To explore teachers' experiences and strategies in managing overpopulated classrooms.
2. To examine the effects of overpopulated classrooms on student-teacher interactions and student learning.

Research Questions

1. How do teachers experience and manage the challenges of overpopulated classrooms, and what strategies do they adopt?
2. What are the effects of overpopulated classrooms on student-teacher interactions and students’ learning outcomes?

Significance of Study

The significance of overpopulated classrooms lies in their potential to shed light on the difficulties faced by both students and teachers. It seeks to create awareness and encourage action among students, teachers, school leaders, administrators, principals, and government officials, towards understanding and addressing these pressing issues. By incorporating the ideas and decisions of the key stakeholders, the current research offers a well-rounded understanding of the multifaceted dynamics that exist in overpopulated classrooms. It will eventually benefit educators and students along with all the stakeholders by gaining insight into practical strategies designed to tackle the challenges of large-sized classrooms. By assessing the opinions of both students and teachers, the current paper contributes valuable insights into the growing body of literature on the educational quality at the secondary level and offers suggestions to enhance classroom learning environments. Again, research findings may also support decision-making by offering strategies, professional practices and frameworks to address the implications of overpopulated classrooms. In doing so, it aims to promote positive transformation in the educational quality at the secondary level in Pakistan.

METHODOLOGY

The comprehensive approach undertaken to explore the experiences faced by the teachers and their students at the secondary school level, in navigating the complexities of overpopulated classrooms. The paradigm of ontology emphasis the understanding of the nature of reality within overpopulated classrooms by exploring the lived experiences, opinions, and interactions of teachers and students (Cohen et al., 2011; Gay et al., 2012). Also, the paradigm of epistemology assesses how knowledge about these lived experiences is acquired, investigating how teachers and students Observe, evaluate, and understand their classroom realities (Gay et al., 2012; Wiersma, 2000). The interpretive paradigm focuses on understanding the subjective realities of teachers and students in overpopulated classrooms through rich qualitative data gathered via interviews and observations (Ikediaskhi, 2012; Gay et al., 2012). The selected techniques align with this paradigm, enabling exploration of respondents' experiences, opinions, and coping approaches, and permitting the researcher to evaluate their personal meanings. By adopting this strategy, the paper acknowledged the significance of understanding the subjective experiences of secondary school teachers and students in overpopulated classrooms. The paper prioritizes the emotions and opinions of secondary school teachers and students, providing valuable insights into their unique challenges in overpopulated classrooms, recognizing them as the experts of their own experiences. Therefore, research has the potential to inform educational practices and highlights areas for improvement in teacher-student interactions as well as contribute to the enhancement of student learning in secondary school education.

According to the statistics, Lahore has a total of around 350 Government High Schools for boys & girls; registered with the Board of Intermediate and Secondary Education, Lahore, handles and looks after the administration of secondary education in the area. The total number of targeted students enrolled is approximately 350 thousand and the number of targeted teachers is more than nine thousand in 2020 of the study. Purposive sampling technique was employed to select a sample (Gay et al, 2012; Cohen et al. 2011; Wiersma, 2000). In this technique, the researcher deliberately selected participants who provided valuable insights into the topic. The criteria for selection of respondents depends on the school performance in matriculation exams. The sample included 2 teachers each from high-performing, moderate-performing and low-performing secondary schools registered with BISE, Lahore. The schools with overpopulated classrooms will be chosen and those facing challenges in managing such classrooms. Teachers were selected based on their experience in teaching at the secondary level in overpopulated classrooms. Therefore, a total of 6 secondary school teachers will be selected for the sample.

The interview method was used as a data collection tool to provide rich and appropriate data, to respond to the research questions and to give a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under investigation.

Interview consisted of semi-structured open-ended items designed to investigate the areas directly related to the research questions (Cohen et al., 2011; Gay et al, 2012; Wiersma, 2000). Interview questions were based on student-teacher relationship and students' Learning. It was conducted at the location and at a time convenient for the respondents. Before conducting the interview, the consent was obtained from each teacher. Information regarding the purpose and process of the interview. With the respondents' consent, the interview was recorded ensuring all responses and interactions are accurately captured for later analysis. Also, a brief profile description of participants was compiled.

Ethical considerations were upheld throughout the research process to protect the rights of the participants involved (Cohen et al., 2011; Werisma, 2000). Respondents will be treated with respect for their privacy and confidentiality that the data collected will only be accessible to authorized people. Both teachers and students were provided with clear and understandable information about the objectives, procedures, potential risks and benefits.

Table 1: Profile of teachers who participated in the research.

Teachers' Name	Gender	Age	Class	Class size	Qualifications	Teaching Experience
Teacher 1	Female	45	9	69	M.Ed	13
Teacher 2	Female	51	9	71	M.Ed	20
Teacher 3	Female	39	10	76	Mphil	18
Teacher 4	Female	37	10	65	Mphil	12
Teacher 5	Female	44	9	74	Mphil	17
Teacher 6	Female	36	9	77	M.Ed	15

In view of the qualitative aspect of this study, semi-structured open-ended questionnaire was selected as data generation approaches.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The data analysis was adopted using a thematic analysis strategy. According to (Braun & Clarke, 2006), it is a tool to define, analyze, and report themes within the data which captures something significant and purposeful about the research questions.

Systematic examination of collected data to reveal underlying trends and insights was done through N-Vivo, which is a comprehensive software package designed for qualitative data analysis.

RESULTS

RQ1: Teachers experience stress in overpopulated classrooms

This research investigated teachers' experiences in overpopulated classrooms. Results revealed that overcrowded environments of classrooms are highly stressful for teachers (Mutisya, 2020; Muthusamy, 2015; Shah & Inamullah, 2012; Yelkpiri et al., 2012). Challenges can highly impact the education quality such as limited space, safety and privacy risks, minimal teacher-student bond, behavioral issues, and heavy workload (Asadullah, 2005; Muthusamy, 2015), often leading to noise and poor students' involvement. One of the teachers said, *"There's no space and so, six students share a bench meant for*

three.” Others noted mental exhaustion: “I’m constantly anxious and have no support,” and “I do check papers at home, which affects my family time.”

These experiences pointed out how overpopulated classrooms lead to stress and reduced teaching effectiveness. Teachers made efforts to maintain discipline, deliver quality lessons, and balance their personal life. Overall, overcrowded classrooms negatively impact both teacher well-being, teaching quality and less job satisfaction.

RQ2: Various Complex Factors Behind Teachers' Stress and emotional strain in Overpopulated Classrooms

Teachers shared that overpopulated classrooms led to constant stress and emotional strain because of lack of resources, support, poor infrastructure, and large-sized classrooms. Issues like insufficient instructional materials, lack of finance, and weak policy enforcement added to the pressure on them. They felt unprepared, unsupported by the administration, and forced to improvise, making engaging and effective teaching difficult.

RQ3: Educators' Strategies for Managing and Handling Overpopulated Classrooms

This question investigated how teachers were coping with the congested classrooms. They reported using a mix of classroom handling approaches, such as conducting outdoor activities to minimize noise and disturbance, besides giving rewards, and using collaborative work to simplify teaching. Some expressed structured and well-planned lesson planning to maintain student involvement to avoid disruptive behavior. Others said they implement simple rules, addressed small discipline and behavioral issues, and used motivational methods like praise or reward. While a few noted using corporal punishment or heavy assignments to keep them busy, others mentioned the significance of maintaining a calm attitude and understanding learners' challenges, acknowledging that many students have minimum choices from school.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings indicated that the teachers encounter various challenges in overpopulated classrooms. Despite difficult circumstances such as poor infrastructure, limited finance and lack of resources, they still are struggling to manage their classrooms (Donnelly, 2019; Fatima, Mushtaq, & Fatima, 2019; Hachem & Mayor, 2019; Khanare, 2009; Marais, 2016; Muthusamy, 2015). The study findings also focus on the potential of even small changes to positively impact students' psychosocial well-being (Donald & Lolwana, 2006; Donnelly, 2019; Hachem & Mayor, 2019; Marais, 2016; Muthusamy, 2015). It also indicates the causes behind teachers lived experiences and pointed out that many continue to show consistency and optimism despite the stress. Creemers (2008) stated, teachers are change agents of educational change, yet well-planned support is still required for sustainable progress. He further exclaimed that they are already familiar with overpopulated situations, using coping methods and show a powerful role in educational transformation. This research shows that teachers find such classrooms very stressful. Although there are many factors that cause these difficult conditions, they often handle or manage them with their professional skills. Since such improvements and actions can reduce or minimize overcrowding in classrooms, these are essential to enhance teaching and learning process.

This research showed that schools can use numerous approaches to assist teachers cope and enhance performance in such overpopulated environments. For instance, some teachers use flexible collaborative work to help students while managing overcrowding. Others creatively improvise teaching resources to keep them engaged and motivated (Marais, 2016; Muthusamy, 2015; West & Meler, 2020). However, the use of corporal punishment is not recommended. Also, lessons should not be too long in such

environments to focus more on working with several groups. Keeping students busy from the beginning of each lesson is essential for effective classroom management (Kriegel, n.d.; West & Meler, 2020).

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