

Teaching Practices and Learning Issues: A Qualitative Study of University Students

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ABSTRACT

This research study explored the experiences of students' learning issues and their impact on academics using qualitative approach. Eight in-depth interviews with students from various disciplines of private universities of Pakistan were conducted. The study explored the experiences of students about teachers' teaching methodology and behavior, factors which hinder learning and engagement in class, impact of learning issues on students' academics and their mental and psychological wellbeing. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to analyze the data. The major themes derived from participants' interviews were; poor teaching pedagogy and unprofessionalism, lack of feedback on assessments, repercussions of teachers' unprofessional behaviors and students' coping strategies to address their academic issues. This study will help the institutions by identifying the specific factors related to teachers' pedagogy and professionalism to create conducive learning environment for students in classroom. *Keywords: perceptions, teaching practices, learning, interviews, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are a variety of factors that affect students' learning in classroom. The relationships that teachers form with their students play a significant role in the academic development of students. According to Downey, a student and teachers connection quality will influence how much they learn in the classroom (2008). The great deal of literature includes a variety of research types that have been conducted to examine how teachers and students interact and how that interaction affects learning in past three decades. According to reliable data (Brophy-Herb, Lee, Nievar, & Stollak, 2007), the nature and quality of teachers' interactions with students significantly affects their learning. There are several factors related to teachers' teaching methodology and relationship with students in class has effect on students' learning.

Teachers are more independent because they control the classroom environment. Their inattentiveness, tardiness, and boredom cause difficulties for students. It's important to review classroom information, but repeating the verbatim can bore students. In a lecture or auditorium situation, the teacher uses the authoritative style to conduct a protracted, one-way discussion about a previously given subject while the students take notes and memorize information. Because there's little to no student participation, it's impossible to address each student's needs. According to Hamre & Pianta (2006), good student-teacher interactions are a great resource for students. They contend that having a good working connection with a teacher enables students to complete assignments independently because they are confident that the teacher will identify and address any issues that may emerge. According to research on classroom quality characteristics, instructors' attitudes and beliefs toward students are crucial determinants in predicting how well a student will learn (Pianta, LaParo, Payne, Cox, & Bradley, 2002). The way a teacher interacts with his or her students on a personal level can have a big impact on the students. Untrained teachers (unprepared lectures) acting aggressively like sarcasm with students, these negative teacher habits cause students to fear and dislike their topic (Kearney & Plax, 1992).

Excessive workload, poor course preparation, and a dull curriculum contribute to high dropout rates. Moore et al. (2018) showed a correlation between course difficulty and dropout intentions. Several students leave the program because of the workload. To the best of researcher's knowledge, there is less research being done on factors related to teachers' teaching style and their interaction with students and their impact by using qualitative approach. The findings of the study will help educational institutes to give trainings to teachers on improving pedagogy styles and their professionalism. This will further help teachers to overcome the learning issues of students.

METHOD

Research design

A qualitative research approach was used to better comprehend students' experiences of learning issues.

Sample

On the basis of the inclusion criteria, total 8 participants (4 male, 4 female) from different departments of semester 1 to semester 8 of private universities were chosen. Considering the inclusion requirements were:

Participants who reported issues with teachers’ teaching methodology and learning issues.

Participants who had experience of dropping of more than 2 courses due to ineffective teaching and unprofessional behavior of teachers.

Assessment tools

Qualitative interview

This study used a semi-structured interview as an assessment tool. The questionnaire specifically created was initially based on 20 questions, changed, and finally a questionnaire with 10 questions was created and used for the interview.

Procedure

Participants were recruited by placing advertisements across the university. The researcher gave the consenting individuals an orientation regarding the purpose of research. Informed consent was taken from the participants before the start of the interviews. The interviews were tape-recorded and later, transcribed. The data was transcribed for data analysis.

RESULTS

The semi-structured student interviews were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Due to the students' shared subjective experiences and views, it was the most appropriate type of analysis

Table 4.2

| Major themes | Sub-themes |
|---|---|
| Teaching pedagogy and professionalism | Teachers aren’t enthusiastic in class Boring lecture/ No interactive learning Don’t address learning issues Don’t encourage questions Lack of professional ethics |
| Lack of feedback on assessments | Feedback isn’t prompt Feedback how to improve work isn’t provided Instructors test what I memorize rather what I have learnt |
| Repercussions of Teacher’s unprofessional Behaviors | Poor grades Favoritism Injustice in assigning grades/ marks Frustration and tension Change in attitude Loss of interest in academics |
| Coping Strategies to manage learning issues | Avoiding style Decisions to dropout |

Teaching and Professionalism:

In this construct the findings have indicated that teachers lack enough knowledge, skills and enthusiasm about the subject. Participant P2 said, “*Course allocation isn’t being done according to expertise.*” The atmosphere of classes isn’t conducive for learning which leads to fear of asking questions in students. The participant P4 reported that, *they are being humiliated and mocked by instructors on their questions.* Furthermore, their teaching methodology is based on outdated pedagogy; they don’t incorporate the latest trends and innovative ideas to make the lecture interesting. Instructors don’t make an effort to develop interest of students in their respective courses. Their main focus is to cover course contents. According to students, teachers are not fair and biased towards them. Students feel that their professors either keep them engaged in what they have to say or just deliver what they want to say to them, regardless of whether or not the students comprehend what they are saying.

The teaching assessment of teachers and whether or not they are enthusiastic about what they are teaching was also explored. Participant P5 shared that, “*the excitement of teachers piques the interest of learners and jump starts their desire to acquire new knowledge*”. Because of this, they were able to determine whether or not they had presented their lecture in its entirety, and it also assisted them in determining what information students had retained

from his or her lecture. According to students, teachers are not fair and biased towards them. Students believe professors should be fair and impartial by treating all students the same. Students expressed that not having impartiality and unfairness may be inferred from the fact that teachers don't treat all of their students in the same manner. The majority of students have shown to have a high preference for interactive learning. Participant P3 said, *"this is because interactive learning enables teachers to give engaging lectures, which students are therefore able to comprehend more readily; also, because of interactive learning, students do not experience any feelings of reluctance while inquiring about anything"*.

Lack of Feedback on Assessments

In this construct the findings have indicated that students find huge difference between what they are being taught and what they are tested in lab tasks, assignments, quizzes and mid/final term. Difference in theory and exams makes them frustrated. They find lab tasks entirely different than what they learn in theory classes. Students believe that emphasis is given on theory but not on comprehension of topic. Participant P7 reported, *"They don't learn critical and analytical skills in exams"*. Participant P2 said, *"My ability to remember things has been evaluated by the instructors"*. The only thing that my instructors are concerned with is determining whether or not I have retained the information that they have presented to me. Instructors don't provide the timely feedback on their work and this result in repeating their mistakes in finals.

It has been noted that marking and the arrangements aren't fair. According to the feedback of respondents, this figure demonstrates that a significant proportion of students are required to finish their work on time. Participant P6 said, *I was needed significant feedback in order to assist me in enhancing my work*. Participant P5 said, *"I have never been given a lot of input, which has allowed me to improve the quality of my work"*.

Repercussions of Teacher's Unprofessional Behavior

Students find instructors uncooperative and non-empathetic. Students complained about harsh attitude of teachers. Participant P1 said, *"In beginning of the semester, they proudly tell in classes that they have failed more than half of the students in previous semester. This attitude makes us very stressed out"*. Furthermore, they stated that teachers have been demotivating them from the first semester when they needed their help and cooperation more. According to students, teachers consider these teachers as very strict having tough personalities because of their degrading remarks on students. Students believe that teachers have attitude problem. Participant P7 reported, *"Students are forced to think many times before visiting their office. They are afraid to ask their support"*. Teachers explicitly ask them to transfer to other institutes.

Results show that students are not satisfied with workload. They believe that they are overburdened with course work. Participant P5 shared, *"Lab tasks, assignments, and quizzes don't spare them to enjoy university life"*. This thing is affecting their social and personal life to large extent. Students are unsatisfied with the deadlines of lab tasks. Participant P3 said, *"Unrealistic deadlines makes /us more frustrated and we feel like giving up on everything"*. It has been noted that some students are very sensitive and learning issues and conflicts with teachers makes them very much upset. Some students become very much frustrated and aggressive. Participant P8 stated, *"I feel too much aggression towards teachers"*.

Coping Strategies to Manage Issues:

Students also shared that how they handle issues related to ineffective teaching and teachers' unprofessional attitude. They mentioned that they are forced to behave in a way which they don't want especially avoidance as a very common way to avoid teacher. Participant P1 reported his way of handling issues, *"Sometimes I avoid certain teacher because addressing issues with them or seeking solution doesn't work"*. Students think it's better to avoid than confront a teacher about their issues. It has been noted that some students start avoiding any type of class participation. Some students don't feel like taking class of that teacher. In this regard participant P6 reported, *"When I know I won't understand lecture it makes me to not to take class."* Some students prefer to understand the topic from their friends or classmates rather from teachers. Participant P3 reported, *"I never understand the topic being taught from my teacher so I have to request my friends to give to make me understand the topic"*. Some extreme measures were also taken by few students who understand that they can't handle learning issues on their own. Participant P5 said, *"I drop that course of that particular teacher where I don't find any solution for my learning issues"*.

DISCUSSION

This research examined the perception of students towards teachers' teaching methodology and resultant issues related to teaching and learning. The main objective of this qualitative research was to investigate the factors related to learning issues of students and their impact on academics. A major theme derived from the study is related to teachers' pedagogy and professionalism. The relationship of teachers was not supportive and cooperative relationship with students in class. Participants believed that teacher student relationship changes gradually from school to university level. The nature of this relationship changes from school to college (Crosnoe, Johnson, & Elder, 2004). P1 said, "At university level teacher student relationship should be very nice relation which I don't have." Participants share good relationship with teachers, furthermore, there appeared to be a sense that some participants don't have supportive, friendly and nice interpersonal relationship with teachers. Other participant said (P3), "They never help us solve our confusions." Teachers don't make themselves available for their study related problems outside the class too. According to participants, supportive relationship helps to maintain student's interest in academics. Effective teachers make close bond with students as being friendly, concerned and have empathy for their students. Several studies have been done on relationships between teachers and students and how they influence students. Among these qualities for effective relationship are affection (Coudray, 1995; Poenaru & Sava, 1998) and warm attitude of teachers (Elmore & Lapointe, 1975).

The participants had major concern that teachers must answer their questions properly, must be rated according to their efforts and treated equally. According to Weimer (2013) questions are powerful in learning process because they are created by student and driven by student's curiosity. Gall (1984) stated that teachers find students' queries troubling and sometimes for them these questions aren't type of questions an expert teacher would like to hear. For participants questioning is the great source of learning. Effective teachers, according to Robertson (1996), engage students by using questioning strategies to give them the impression that their participation does matter by extending respect and answering their queries. It's important to always give students the impression that their comments are welcome and, when appropriate, valued (Robertson, 1996). The theoretical framework of the study was to find out the factors which give rise to learning issues and teachers' unprofessional-ism. In this regard, the analysis showed that teachers' non attitude in class has been found cause of learning issues for students. This non serious attitude accompanied not being enthusiastic about lecture delivery, use of mobile phone in class. Teachers found to be behaved more non-professionally. This nonprofessional attitude includes use of mobile phone in class. As ringing of mobile phone becomes source of distraction for students. This point has also been explored by many researchers. According to Campbell and Russo (2003) the use of mobile phone in classroom is considered nuisance as students have this complaint that they get distracted by ringing of mobile phone during the lecture. Wei and Leung (1999) found that use of mobile phone in classrooms shouldn't be acceptable.

Other source which has been found the major reason of conflicts for students was lack of professional ethics of teacher. Nonprofessional teachers want that student's show admiration for them. "I do not like to visit teachers' office." The reason of this teacher's attitude is that they get personal tasks done from students. One of the participant complained that one of her teachers that teachers get checked papers from CRs (class representatives). Other element which shows teacher' lack of professionalism is that they expect students to praise them this way they get biased towards those students who don't praise and admire them. This trait of teacher becomes most likely cause of students' dispute with teachers. This thing doesn't become the direct source of conflict but hurt and make them angry.

Lack of feedback on assessments is another major source of learning issues for students. This includes Feedback isn't prompt, Feedback how to improve work isn't provided and Instructors test what I memorize rather what I learnt. Regarding semester work conflict derives from timeliness of return of assignments. Participants reported that students want detailed feedback by from teachers on every activity. Moreover, other reasons that submitting assignments late or missing assignments. Participants suggested that exceptions should be made for students who have some genuine reason of not submitting it on the scheduled date. Some participants expressed that they have conflict over the weightage of assignments. In addition to this, conflict happens more frequently over grades. Dispute mainly happens when a student believes that the grade is inaccurate or unjustified, the student may have dispute over the final course's grade. Other situation where there is miscalculation of grade points which includes mistaken entries and missing records. Participant 3 reported, "She used to claim that we had in correct record. I fought with her and I think that is why she changed my grade to B. I told her that I have all the record for it."

Teacher's biased attitude as one of the major sources of conflicts. Students at university level are more careful and vigilant about how they are being treated by teachers. According to them teacher behave biased towards certain students. P1 reported, "Even, if the quality of paper is the same. They still don't give you equal marks, so

sometimes some teachers do behave biased.” Price (2007) stated that teacher bias can have an effect on grading because grading is subjective by nature. He further, elaborated that it doesn’t mean that teachers give grades to students they like but teachers do consider student’s past performances while grading. It also means that if student gets C grade in paper a teacher may be inclined to give C grade in next paper too. This is what happens to A grade students. According to Dee (2007), teachers favour students of the same gender when assigning grades. Other researches also confirm this point as in Sweden teacher biases have been found out in grading using an experimental design (Hinnerich, Hoglin & Johanneson, 2011). Previous literature suggests that students have this perception that teachers get biased when it comes to grading. When they know that their grades will be given by a female teacher, male students lessen their efforts because they think a female teacher will grade them more harshly. On the contrary, female students have this perception that male teachers give them good grades. (Price, 2007).

An important theme to emerge from the students’ accounts was impact of conflicts. Student teacher conflicts profoundly affect students and one of the serious effects of these conflicts is that students get tensed and frustrated. They appear to be discouraged and helpless. This frustration has been noticed from mild to severe. Some participants have been found using antidepressants to deal stress which occurs in result of some serious conflict with teacher. Participant P1 said, *“I am unable to explain how students get disheartened.”* Male students of have been found more tensed over biased attitude of teachers. This frustration and tension affect their studies too. Sometimes students because of frustrations students get less interested in studies. They give up on making efforts to excel in studies. Other reactions including not giving proper attention to teacher during lecture, P2 reported, *“She is teaching in this semester too, but it doesn’t bother me as much now because we believe that grades would be awarded like before. Therefore, I am not exerting much effort.”*

Another impact of conflicts is that students get less interested in studies. According to West (1994), teachers have a significant impact on students’ perceptions of learning, either promoting or impeding it. Extensive studies provide evidence that teacher’s behavior is correlated with students learning gains (Rosenshine & Furst 1973). One of the key elements influencing student learning, is teacher attitude (Shah, 2002). Healthy teacher-student interactions have a major favourable effect on students’ academic achievement. According to Mohanty and Pani (1979), low-achieving pupils’ educational growth is negatively impacted by teachers’ discriminating attitudes ((Brattesani, Weinstein & Marshall, 1984). One other effect of these conflicts has been noticed is that students change their attitude toward teachers. Male students of both public sector universities reported that their attitude becomes mischievous towards teachers as revenge. Sometimes they lash out to compensate their hurt feelings. Some participants have reported that when they have anger on particular teacher who they faced conflict with they are less interested in taking lectures of that teacher.

The last major theme was about the students’ strategies of managing conflicts with teachers. According to Hellriegel and Slocum (1996) conflict management is specific type of work consisting of interventions undertaken by person to reduce or increase conflict. In this regard students both sector universities have been found to manage conflicts by use of effective communication and adopting avoidance style of conflict management. University students of both sectors have been using avoidance as primary way of dealing conflicts and disputes with teachers. *“So, my main method of handling disagreements with such teachers is to avoid them. I don’t want any argumentation.”* When a dispute is heated students prefer to walk away from that situation and not getting in disagreement prevents them to escalate the situation. According to one participant, it is smart decision on his part to avoid the conflict.

Other strategy to resolve conflicts used by participants was effective communication. Participant P8 commented regarding the importance of communication style in these words, *“Even if you are having problems with a teacher, try to stay positive when you speak to them. It will surely work out. Our body language and expression also matter a lot. Language alone does not matter. They both have to go together.”* Many researchers suggested that communication is fundamental part of managing conflicts (Hickson & McCroskey, 1991; Trombly, Comer, & Villamil, 2002). Several researches have focused on communicating effectively for conflict resolution and managing conflicts. Communication skills include body language, tone of voice, and the capacity to pay attention to what others are saying (Anderson, 2004; Robertson, 1996; Lowman, 1995).

CONCLUSION

The study aimed to find out students’ experiences of learning and impact of this issue on their academics. The major themes and sub themes were explored using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. The findings from the study have showed that teachers’ ineffective teaching pedagogy affect the learning of students. Their unprofessional attitudes and lack of feedback on how to improve work further exacerbate the issues of students and hence affect their relationship with teachers. Outcome of these issues are being demonstrated in the form of poor grades, frustration and tension, and not taking interest in studies. Students manage these issues by not confronting that

teacher and some of the students choose to drop that course. The goal of this study was to help instructors need to use cooperative learning. Instructors need to emphasize on active learning instead of theory in class. This can be achieved by giving them activities which will maintain their attention too. Instructors need to impart analytical, critical and creative thinking in students.

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