



Policy Perspective of Special Education Teachers Regarding Quality of Work Life

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Abstract

The study aimed to explore policy-related factors that affect the quality of teachers' work lives in special education schools through teachers' perspectives. Quality of teachers' work life is defined as the overall well-being, satisfaction, and fulfillment that individuals experience in their work environment. The study used a qualitative approach involving the phenomenological design, which focused on the lived experiences of the participants about the phenomenon. The study involved 15 senior special education teachers who were purposefully sampled to collect the data through in-depth semi-structured interviews to measure the quality of work life in special education schools in Punjab. The study explored different factors such as class environment, supportive administration policy, professional development, collaborative work culture, recognition and appreciation of teachers' efforts, emotional support and self-care, and parent and community involvement that affected the quality of work life of special education teachers. The study further also identified different policy measures required to be taken, such as updating the quality of teacher preparation programs, incentives for teachers, professional development, inclusive school policies, and career pathways and advancement opportunities for improving the quality of teachers' work lives. The given study also added suggestions.

Keywords: Quality of Work Life of Teachers, Recognition, Emotional Support, Policy Measures, Special Education

1. Introduction

Quality of work life (QWL) therefore is the psychological state of the worker with regard to the totality of intra organizational experience. It is a broad concept that encompasses several characteristics of the working experience that influence workers' views regarding the quality of the work environment (Leitao et al., 2019). QWL is the view that employees have of support and value they are receiving from their organization. The evidence presented in the study proves that by enhancing the quality of the work lives of employees, the institutions pay for the work culture, support relationships, as well as employ well-developed human resource development programs that are essential in achieving the company's goals and objectives (Hillier et al., 2005). QWL of teachers has been interlinked with various constructs such as job satisfaction (Ramawickrama et al., 2017), motivation (Baleghizadeh & Gordani, 2012), productivity (Horst et al., 2014), health (Almalki et al., 2012), job security (Lopez-Martinez et al., 2021), and wellbeing (Pandey & Tripathi, 2018; Rathi, 2009). While there is a plethora of research on linking the QWL of general teachers, it is equally significant to understand the factors that affect the QWL of the teachers working in special education institutions. Special education is the practice of teaching students in a way that accommodates their individual and group needs, differences, and disabilities through involving planned and systematically monitored arrangements of teaching procedures, equipment, and material. In Pakistan, the Special Education Department of the Government of Punjab has been functioning for decades to provide quality education to children enrolled in special education schools. More than 118 institutions are working under the Special Education Department in Punjab, who provides teaching training to deal with children who are visually impaired, mentally challenged, hearing impaired, physically disabled, and slow learners. The federal and provincial governments have taken various policy initiatives to promote quality teaching at these schools. For example, the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities 2002 aimed at ensuring the rights and welfare of persons with disabilities, increasing access to education, and providing healthcare-related services. Further, the National Plan of Action for Persons with Disabilities 2016 outlined strategies and actions to promote the rights and inclusion of persons with disabilities in various sectors.

There is a plethora of research in an international context that provides detailed findings regarding the factors that affect teachers' quality of work life, such as necessary training (Massey & Strong, 2023), inclusive school policies (Abrol, 2023), community engagement (Khadija, 2022), and professional development opportunities for teachers (Chacha & Tangi, 2023; Jabeen, Ali & Ahmad, 2023). The special education policies in Pakistan, however, have been less focused on identifying factors that affect teacher quality. This study is an endeavor to get the perspectives of those teachers who have been associated with special education for more than 20 years. It is hoped that their perspectives might deliver a profounder understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

1.1. Research Questions

1. What are the factors that affect the quality of work life of teachers in special education schools?
2. What are some of the policy measures that need to be taken by policymakers to improve the quality of the work life of teachers in special education schools in Punjab?

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2. Literature Review

A large number of studies have been conducted on measuring the quality of work life of teachers working in special education contexts around the globe. For example, Al-Zboon et al. (2015) examined the quality level of teachers' work life in special education schools by collecting data from special education teachers. The study revealed the average level of QWL of special education teachers in which administrators and colleagues were rated at the highest level by teachers. In contrast, participation in decision-making was rated at the lowest level. Moreover, it was established that due to gender differences and level of education of the teachers, there are no significant differences in the QWL of the teachers in the special education schools.

Other studies, such as those of Fatima and Sahibzada (2012), on the other hand engaged in identifying the factors influencing QWL at the school level, with regards to teachers. Respondents of the study were school teachers and data was collected through quantitative method, whereby a self-developed questionnaire was administered on the teachers. The research findings showed that the QWL of teachers is quite connected to other factors like colleague support, job resources, and administrative support. The study has also revealed that coworker support, admin support, received help, as well as barriers including dependent care interferes with the gender disparity of teachers' QWL differently at the school level thus the policy makers need to factor these to improve the QWL of teachers in the special education schools.

From the study of Arif and Ilyas (2013), the several dimensions that influenced the QWL of the teachers were identified. The study adopted the quantitative research approach as a means of collecting the data. This study therefore found out that work, school environment and relation with other people are the elements with the highest direct impact on the QWL of teachers. Even though some serious drawbacks were pointed out by the study as to the impact made to formal education for children with special needs, this work supposed that to influence the quality of teachers' work lives, the policymakers should consider the factors provided to raise the efficiency level of institutions. As for the factors that determine the QWL of the teachers, the study of Bharathi and colleagues (2011) explicates it. Three main factors included in their list covers provision of professional development, job satisfaction, and working conditions that influence teachers' QWL. The information gathered from the teachers involved the use of questionnaires. The findings of the study were that QWL correlated positively with professional development, job satisfaction and working conditions. Therefore if the above factors were taken into consideration it was evident that the quality of teachers' work life could be largely attributed to the learners most especially those with learning difficulties.

In another study, Naderlou and Yaghmaei (2014) examine the qualitative aspects of teachers' work life situation educating students in exceptional schools. The kind of study designed for the research was a qualitative one, and in the data collection process, the content analysis method was adopted, and purposive sampling techniques were used. In the study, the construct was measured with the help of seven key factors of QWL of teachers, namely: interaction with learners, communication, promotion and job involvement, policy and job position, job barriers, job satisfaction and job performance. Based on the findings, the QWL of teachers was not satisfactory and needed to be at a higher level, and the authors of the paper recommended that policymakers need to prepare a new agenda to optimize the QWL of teachers in these exceptional schools.

Together, Organiza (2016) looked at how teachers' work lives affect their motivation, which is crucial for improving performance in special education institutions. Data for the descriptive study project was gathered from teachers using questionnaires. In order for motivated instructors to teach in special education schools, they must have a high-quality work life. This paper demonstrated the relationship that exists between the quality of teachers' work lives and their motivation. According to the study, improving teachers' QWL is the most effective approach to raise their motivation, particularly in special education settings. Bozgeyikli (2018) looked into the possibility that a teacher's quality of work life is correlated with whether or not their psychological needs met in special education institutions. Teachers were asked to complete a descriptive survey in order to get the data. Furthermore, the study demonstrated the recognition of the psychological requirements of the educators, who believed that relationships, autonomy, and dominance were the precursors to their quality of work life (QWL) in special education settings. Furthermore, the study recommended that in order to enhance the quality of teachers' work lives, particular emphasis should be given to meeting their psychological needs, since this may have a major impact on the standard of instruction in special education schools.

In this research, Abdullah and colleagues examined the relationship between teachers' resilience in special education settings and their work-life balance. The study used quantitative research methods, and teachers' responses to questionnaires were used to collect data. The study's significance was that the quality of the work-school environment is crucial for teachers' sustainability, their ability to cope with stress, and their ability to manage crises in special education schools. Both of the factors were strongly correlated. Furthermore, more research showed that improved performance of instructors in these special education schools is largely dependent on the quality of their working environment. Foteini et al. (2020) looked at special education facilities in Greece, concentrating on the quality of work life of the instructors. With the use of the instructors' scale, the descriptive survey was used in this study to gather data. Thus, all the three facets of QWL of teachers including burnout, job-satisfaction, and stress were reported to be above average in special education schools. Thus, the study

recommended that in order to enhance the QWL of teachers and get the necessary outcomes and outputs for these students of special education schools, their job satisfaction should be at the highest level; burnout and stress at the lowest level.

Umma et al. (2020) further discussed the existent literature on the determinants of quality teachers' work-life by measuring three factors; workload, social support, and childcare in a study. A survey was used to collect information from the teachers on QWL, and it was discovered that workload and childcare have a negative relationship with QWL of teachers. On the other hand, the cross tabulation analysis showed that there was a significant positive relationship between social support and teachers' work life quality. Furthermore, it has also been established that these three factors imparted the QWL of special school teachers. However, this study was carried out at the primary school level; the study nonetheless provides insight to special education schools in order to optimize the QWL of teachers in teaching disabled students. Hence, in the following analysis, QWL of teachers in the educational sector is considered critically important as they highlight the possible directions to rectify the problems or investigate ways to create a better working environment and commitment among the teachers. Ibrahim et al. (2023) explored that both the QWL of teachers and organizational commitment are interlinked and suggested that through improving the QWL of teachers, their commitment level can be maximized. In another study, Woulfin and Jones (2021) also revealed that the professional development of teachers can be maximized through the QWL of teachers. Khadija (2022) explored that QWL of teachers enhances their motivation and commitment, which is essential for the provision of quality education to learners.

Alanazi (2023) conducted a mixed-method study in which findings revealed that professional development training programs positively impacted inclusive teaching techniques. The results highlight the need to encourage critical thinking and inclusive teaching strategies in order to meet the needs of learners in the classroom. Critical thinking has been focused on in different studies in the Pakistani context regarding education policy documents (Jamil et al., 2024a; 2024b), national textbooks (Jamil et al., 2024a; 2024b), teachers' perceptions and practices (Jamil & Muhammad, 2019; Jamil et al., 2021a, 2021b). In another study, Feng and Sass (2013) investigated how in-service and pre-service training affect teachers' capacity to encourage academic success in children with disabilities. The findings of the study indicated that special education-certified teachers of disabled children achieve more in reading and arithmetic than equivalent pupils with non-certified teachers. Based on this research-based evidence, it was necessary to investigate the factors of QWL in Pakistan special education schools to get a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. This study was conducted to fill this gap.

3. Methodology

It was a qualitative research study that included a phenomenological study design. Phenomenology is the philosophical study of objectivity and takes reality as the experience of subjectivity. It focuses on the lived experiences of the participants regarding the phenomenon. The study involved 15 senior special education teachers who were purposefully sampled to collect data in order to gain an in-depth exploration and understanding of the phenomena related to their quality of work life in special education schools in Punjab. These teachers have been serving for more than 20 years in special education schools in the region of the province of Punjab and have been involved in special education policy-related discussions at different forums. The researchers developed the interview guide based on the two overarching research questions given above. Each interview lasted for almost 35 minutes. Ethical factors such as consent, data confidentiality, and data security were given careful consideration. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, data were validated through member checks, and thematic analysis was conducted to get themes from the data. The findings of the study have been reported based on the themes that emerged from the data.

4. Findings

Research Question: 1: What are the factors that affect the quality of work life of teachers in special education schools??

The following themes emerged from the data.

4.1. Physical Set of Classroom Environment

The first theme that emerged from the data was related to setting the physical environment of the classroom. The majority of the participants stated that a physically supported classroom impacts the quality of teachers' work; if the rooms are furnished with the required resources along with safety measures, it will affect teachers' ability to use teaching-related tools with great care and effectiveness. Participant 1 stated:

The physical set-up of the classroom gives ample space for the teachers to organize their lessons with more care; in such an environment that is encouraging to learning, the teacher can use high-quality lesson material, which is technology-savvy.

Another respondent stated:

The important thing is that the physical setting of the classroom environment is available for a teacher to create a high-quality learning environment for the students. It all depends on the facilities.

4.2. Supportive Administration Policy

The respondents were of the view that teachers look for supportive administrative policies. The majority of the respondents highlighted the need for a supportive administration policy. Supportive management is a key factor in providing a high-quality learning environment. Respondent A stated:

Role of school and district administration is very crucial in increase quality of teachers' work. Teachers most of the time looks for specialized support and resources to address diverse needs of the students. If there is supportive administration who value and prioritize the wellbeing of their teachers, then teachers will be able to produce high quality teaching.

4.3. On-going Professional Development Opportunities

Almost all participants stressed providing ongoing professional development opportunities to the teachers to help them learn new teaching methods to be abreast with the changing world and continue producing high-quality teaching. Respondent C stated:

The quality of work life depends how teachers feel privileged to make decision regarding their work at school; if teachers are free to utilize their abilities and maximum utilization of the resources, they will be able to change and update the nature of their work. Continuous professional development is a strong indicator of improving quality of their working life.

4.4. Collaborative Work Culture

The fourth theme from the data was related to collaborative work culture. The data provided evidence that teachers need a work culture where they can collaborate with their colleagues, special education professionals, therapists, and parents to foster a sense of support and belongingness. A respondent insisted that:

Collaboration is a significant factor; it provides opportunities for sharing ideas, problem-solving, and mutual support, which can enhance quality of the work, job satisfaction, and performance effectiveness in special education settings.

4.5. Recognition and Appreciation of Teachers' Efforts

Appreciation and recognition of teachers' efforts was the fifth significant factor that emerged from the data. All of the respondents agreed that they need recognition of their efforts. One respondent stated:

Do you think that teachers can enjoy quality of their work life in special education setting without being recognized? I must say that recognition of teachers' efforts and contributions boosts morale and job satisfaction of teachers. If the unique challenges and successes are acknowledged in special education, it will reinforce teachers' sense of value and purpose of their lives.

4.6. Emotional Support and Self-care

Dealing with special students is not an easy job. Continuous moral and emotional support from the authorities is required to motivate teachers to work in that challenging environment. Respondent D stated:

It is obvious that school environment in special education schools is very different from general schools. Teachers in special education schools often deal with challenging behaviors, emotional stressors, and demanding situations due to diverse needs of the students. There are various factors such as access to emotional support, counselling services, and opportunities for self-care which are crucial and essential for maintaining mental health, well-being, and quality of their work life. Therefore, providing resources and encouragement for self-care practices can help prevent burnout, promote resilience among teachers, and enjoy high quality of work life.

4.7. Parent and Community Involvement

Finally, community engagement and parental involvement were key factors affecting the quality of teachers' working lives. Most respondents agreed that community engagement gives teachers a sense of strong bonds and relationships among them. A respondent stated:

Positive relationships with parents and other community members such as school councils enhance the quality of work life for teachers. If teachers are able to collaborate with parents, involve them in the education related matters, and build partnerships with community members, it will help them create a supportive network in building trust among themselves. It will impact teachers' life at the work place.

Research Question: 2: What are some of the policy measures that need to be taken by policymakers to improve the quality of the work life of teachers in special education schools in Punjab?

4.8. Update Quality of Teacher Preparation Programs

The first theme that emerged from the data regarding policy measures required by the policymakers was related to updating and enhancing the quality of teacher preparation programs. All participants agreed that it was highly important to update the quality of teacher education programs that will result in improving teachers' quality of teaching, and resultantly, they will feel empowered and enjoy a high-quality life at the workplace. For example, respondent H stated:

The QWL of a teacher is linked with the quality of teacher education programs. If the teachers are able to learn latest teaching methods and use of latest technology, they will be able to feel more satisfied about their teaching. They will receive positive feedback from their students on learning. The teachers will feel privileged at work place; will enjoy job satisfaction, and pleasant quality of work.

4.9. Incentives for Special Education Teachers

The second theme rested with the idea of incentives for special education teachers. The respondents demanded incentives for raising the QWL of the teachers, such as the respondent. A stated:

Undoubtedly, pay plays a crucial role in providing teacher services; but, in order to draw exceptional candidates to the special education area, they ought to receive financial incentives like salary bonuses, loan forgiveness programs, or scholarships. Additionally, providing incentives for seasoned educators to obtain additional training and certification in special education gives them the chance to work harder and raise student accomplishment. That's important part of teachers' life. It will affect their work life quality.

4.10. Professional Development

The participants insisted on increasing the number of professional development opportunities for the teachers. Participant C stated:

The government and district authorities should take radical measures to increase the number of professional development opportunities for the teachers. Such policies need to be implemented that require and support ongoing professional development for teachers in special education schools. So, for example, this may include funding for workshops, conferences, and courses focused on evidence-based practices, assistive technologies, and behavioral interventions. Further, trainings related to using latest teaching methodologies are important for raising quality of teaching. Teachers will learn from these activities, improve their teaching, demonstrate high-quality teachings, and satisfied about their work life conditions.

4.11. Inclusive School Policies

Another theme was increasing inclusive school policies and practices in all schools. The respondents believed that inclusive education practices would be more beneficial for teachers to lead high-quality work life. For example, a respondent stated:

It is noticeable that the policies regarding inclusivity are needed at the time. The need of expanding inclusive education opportunities—where special education teachers and students collaborate with general education students and teachers is emphasized in international policies. As a result, the government must create and implement laws that support inclusive teaching methods in all Pakistani schools. Additionally, it is necessary to make sure that special education instructors have access to resources to support inclusive classrooms, opportunities to interact with general education teachers, and participation in co-teaching models. It will help teachers in the special education field to enjoy a high-quality life work life at their workplace.

4.12. Career Pathways and Advancement Opportunities

Finally, the respondents agreed to create career pathways and advancement opportunities for special education teachers. Most respondents focused on developing career pathways so that teachers are promoted to higher job grades and enjoy a high quality of work life. A respondent stated:

If teachers know their promotion and career opportunities, they will focus on developing pathways to succeed. This could include opportunities for leadership roles, specialized endorsements or certifications, and pathways to transition into administrative positions within special education departments.

5. Discussion

The study revealed that the different factors such as a physical set of class environment, supportive administration policy, ongoing professional development opportunities, collaborative work culture, recognition and appreciation of teachers' efforts, emotional support and self-care, and parent and community involvement affected the QWL of special education teachers and also in line with multiple of studies (Bharathi et al., 2011; Foteini et al., 2020; Naderlou & Yaghmaei, 2014; Umma et al., 2020). Further, the study also explored that policy measures such as update quality of teacher preparation programs, incentives for teachers, professional development, inclusive school policies, and career pathways and advancement opportunities are essential to be taken for the improvement of QWL of teachers in special education schools which is also confirmed by different previous studies (Fatima & Sahibzada, 2012; Ibrahim et al., 2023; Khadija, 2022; Woulfin & Jones, 2021).

The study found that a physically supported classroom impacts the quality of teachers' work; if the rooms are furnished with the required resources and safety measures, it will affect teachers' ability to use teaching-related tools with great care and effectiveness. There were various studies also confirmed that the physical classroom environment mainly contributes to maximizing the overall QWL of teachers and student learning in special education schools (Bharathi et al., 2011; Naderlou & Yaghmaei, 2014; Umma et al., 2020; Ali, Shah & Ahmad, 2023; Dilshad, Shah & Ahmad, 2023).

The study endorsed the need for a supportive administration policy as supportive management is a key factor in providing a high-quality learning environment, which is also in line with various research (Al-Zboon et al., 2015; Fatima & Sahibzada, 2012; Khadija, 2022; Imran et al., 2023) Further, the study also explored that by providing ongoing professional development opportunity to the teachers, it might help them to learn new methods of teaching so that they can abreast with the changing world, and continue producing high-quality teaching, the same idea that professional development maximizes the QWL of teachers was also revealed by the different studies (Bharathi et al., 2011; Feng & Sass, 2013; Woulfin & Jones, 2021).

The study also confirmed that teachers need a work culture where they can collaborate with their colleagues, special education professionals, therapists, and parents to foster a sense of support and belongingness, similar explorations were made in various studies (Khadija, 2022; Woulfin & Jones, 2021). Recognition and appreciation of teachers' efforts were also significant factors in maximizing the quality of teachers' work life in special education schools and are also in line with different studies (Bozgeyikli, 2018; Foteini et al., 2020).

The study explored the fact that dealing with special students is a challenging job. Continuous moral and emotional support from the authorities is required to motivate teachers to work in that challenging environment. Various studies also confirmed that by providing moral and emotional support to teachers of disabled students, their QWL might be improved (Ibrahim et al., 2023; Umma et al., 2020; Khoso, Oad & Ahmad, 2023). Finally, in this study, community engagement and parental involvement were found to be a key factor that affects the quality of teachers working life in special education schools, as community engagement gives teachers a sense of strong bond and relationship among them; similar findings were also revealed through various studies (Arif & Ilyas, 2013; Fatima & Sahibzada, 2012; Umma et al., 2020; Haider, Ahmad & Ali, 2024).

The study also discussed the many policy actions that must be implemented in order to raise special education teachers' quality of work life. Research indicates that improving the caliber of programs for preparing teachers to teach will have a positive impact on their ability to impart knowledge and skills, as well as their sense of empowerment and satisfaction in their careers. Various research studies were conducted per the given study (Alanazi, 2023; Feng & Sass, 2013; Woulfin & Jones, 2021; Ahmad et al., 2023). Further, it has also been revealed that incentives are essential for raising the QWL of teachers of disabled students, which is also in line with multiple studies (Bharathi et al., 2011; Foteini et al., 2020; Naderlou & Yaghmaei, 2014).

The study addressed the need to increase the number of professional development opportunities for teachers, as multiple studies also found that effective development training programs are required to enhance the QWL of teachers in special education schools (Bharathi et al., 2011; Feng & Sass, 2013; Thomas, Khan, & Ahmad, 2022; Naeem, Ali & Ahmed, 2022). Another policy measure was also identified in the study about inclusive education practices, which will be more beneficial for teachers to lead high-quality work lives (Ibrahim et al., 2023; Woulfin & Jones, 2021; Aslam, Iqbal & Ahmed, 2022).

Ultimately, the study concluded that teachers emphasize the establishment of career paths and opportunities for promotion. This ensures that teachers are able to progress to better employment positions and experience a superior work environment. This finding is supported by various other studies (Bharathi et al., 2011; Foteini et al., 2020; Ali et al., 2023). In summary, the study identified important characteristics that can enhance the quality of work life (QWL) for special education teachers. Additionally, it highlighted specific policy initiatives that policymakers can priorities in order to improve the QWL of teachers in special education schools.

6. Recommendations

The study revealed that the different factors such as the physical set of the class environment, supportive administration policy, ongoing professional development opportunities, collaborative work culture, recognition and appreciation of teachers' efforts, emotional support and self-care, and parent and community involvement is impacted by the QWL for the teachers of special education. Therefore, the study suggested that policymakers and district authorities should ensure compliance with these factors to improve the QWL of teachers in special education schools. Further, the study also explored that different policy measures are essential, such as updating the quality of teacher training sessions, teacher incentives, professional development of educators, inclusive school policies, and career pathways and advancement opportunities. Therefore, the study also recommended that policymakers consider these initiatives to improve the QWL of teachers in special education schools in Pakistan.

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