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### PERCEPTION OF TEACHERS ABOUT THEIR ROLE AS ‘CULTURAL WORKERS’: A CASE STUDY OF KALLAR SYEDAN

*Ms. Misbah Kanwal<sup>1</sup>, Ms. Aneeqa Ansari<sup>2</sup>, Dr. Ishrat Siddiqa Lodhi<sup>3</sup>, Ms. Nadia Atta<sup>4</sup>,  
Ms. Maria Nida<sup>5</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>MPhil Scholar, Department of Sociology, Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi

<sup>2</sup>Lecturer, Department of Sociology, Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi

<sup>3</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Education, Fatima Jinnah Women University,  
Rawalpindi

<sup>4</sup>MPhil Sociology, Pir Mehr Ali Shah Arid Agriculture University, Rawalpindi

<sup>5</sup>MS English Literature, Foundation University, Rawalpindi

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#### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the perception and understanding of the teachers about a ‘multicultural classroom’. The objectives were: to find out the understanding of teachers about a ‘Multicultural Classroom’; and to explore their understanding about their own classes as ‘Multicultural’. Qualitative research method has been adopted, in which four in-depth interviews, from the teachers of the ‘only’ primary public school in Kallar Syedan were conducted. Description of findings are based on three themes where the first theme is ‘Teacher’s inadequate understanding of the term “Teacher as a Cultural Worker”’. Teachers lack the understanding of the term ‘multicultural classroom’, and they also lack the sense of responsibility of being a ‘Cultural Worker’. The second theme is ‘Teacher’s perception of the classroom’ where they perceive their classes as ‘multicultural’ but with an underdeveloped understanding. The third theme is ‘The choice of their examples’ which shows that the examples are not chosen while keeping in mind the sensitive diversity of the class. They cannot give them examples from intersections of diversity due to their lack of knowledge. In the findings, it was evident that discussing sensitive topics about multicultural education in a small group format was helpful and could be a helpful tool for making positive changes with

multicultural education in the future. My study reiterated that more multicultural-based training is necessary for practicing teachers.

## INTRODUCTION

Education is a term that has various definitions. Every individual express education based on their past needs and experiences. For example, for a student, it is acquirement of knowledge. For a teacher, it is interpretation of education, for creating a well-groomed human being and a healthier society. (Irénée , 2021)

In Pakistan, the education system in general is distributed into six stages: Preschool (from the age of 3 to 5 years), Primary (grade one to five), Middle (grade six to eight), High (grade 9th and 10th, leads to the Secondary School Certificate or SSC), Intermediate (grades 11th and 12th, leads to a Higher Secondary School Certificate or HSSC), and higher education, university programs that leads to undergraduate and graduate degrees. (Sana, 2021)

The primary languages in Pakistan are English, Urdu. The literacy rate according to (2017) is (59.13%) where there are (71.12%) males and (46.47%) females. Total enrollment is (32.33%) where enrollment in primary schools is (67.57%), while the enrollment in secondary (43.82%) and in post-secondary school is (14.85%). (Akthar, 2021)

We build our identities on the framework of culture. Each individual follows culture, and most of the times multiple cultures build an individual's identity. While being in the classroom, talking about cultural diversity, we have to look at cultural transformations that have been ignored in history or have been marginalized. There is diversity in Pakistan, but it is missing in the curriculum. There are some common problems in the improvement of education system and advancement of literacy. (Soumya & Arulsamy 2020)

For instance, there is lack of proper planning in Pakistan, social limitations, gender gap, low cost of education, war on terror, funds for education in times of poverty, law and order situation, natural disasters, budgetary constraints, lack of access to education, poor quality, and issues of governance. (Soumya & Arulsamy 2020)

In such situations, the role of a teacher is to stimulate, influence, inspire and educate students differently. A student can be of different age group and from any cultural background but the teacher works through a range of various subjects which they can bring to a student's life with the help of current innovative and communicating skills. (Soumya & Arulsamy 2020)

As a Cultural Worker, a teacher can bring different people close to each other. This involves many different factors: race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, ability, age, religious belief, or political opinion. These all aspects work together to bring everyone together with acceptance. (Soumya & Arulsamy 2020)

This study was conducted in a small rural area of Pakistan called Kallar Syedan. It deals with multicultural education, and a multicultural classroom. This study was conducted in the only primary public school in Kallar Syedan. Many students having different cultural backgrounds come here from nearby villages. The school has diversity and so does the classes. The in-depth interviews were conducted from the teachers of Primary school in Kallar Syedan.

Cultural heritage appears most conspicuously in SDG11 “to protect the world's cultural and natural heritage” and more subliminally in SDG 4 on Education. (UNESCO, 2015) This study addresses the SDG 4 i-e ‘Quality Education’, which aims at providing equal reach to education for all, to eradicate inequalities and inequities of education. (UNESCO, 2015)

In a community, public schools play primary role in learning. In general, schools provide the basics of skills, knowledge, and socialize us. It shows that the social and cultural factors are influence by school. While the public schools are driven by the political, social, cultural and economic conditions of a particular state. (Kampen, 2020)

Socially, the public schools teach socialization and communication skills. These skills contribute to the healthy future relationship of students with their communities. Culturally, the schooling effects the cultural impacts, e.g. the impacts on their ability to learn that may be connected to their religion, ethnicity, nationality, language, or geographic regions and the identities of the teachers. Politically, the public schools are funded and controlled by the government. The political contexts influence schooling through power structure of the governments. Economically, the condition of the family of a student can influence largely on his or her learning. Diversified economic backgrounds in a classroom is used as a key element to reduce status complexity among students by the teachers, by giving them economically sensitive examples from society and religion as well. (Kampen, 2020)

### ***Problem Statement***

Pakistan is a country with diverse cultural, ethnic, language, religious groups. In a Pakistani classroom, there are students from different cultures, ethnicities, religions, sectarian, languages, and economic backgrounds that make a multicultural classroom. The teachers, who hold the power in the class, have their own backgrounds. In the Pakistani context, there have been studies on multiculturalism, but not much has been found in terms of Freire’s term “Teacher as a Cultural Worker” in the Pakistani context. For a class to be comfortable with who they are and who the people around them are, an understanding of this term, by the teachers, is important so that they are sensitive and make the students sensitive towards diversity. The gap that the literature shows is about teachers’ understanding of the term and how they incorporate it in their ‘multicultural’ classrooms.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

These reviews deal with some of the nuances of a multicultural and diverse classroom. These reviews examine the perception of teachers and their understanding about multicultural education and multicultural classroom. Moreover, the literature presents different point of views of researchers related to the term "Teacher as a Cultural Worker."

Mahler (1977) explains the viewpoint of sociological education, where he introduces two special terminologies for education. He expresses that education is sometime a 'process' and most of the time a 'system'. Moreover, he clarifies that often, education 'system' reflects the inherent relationships between the societal groups and the communities. The structure and functions of the institutes run efficiently through the 'processes of education. Education provides an open system that improves the capacity of the individuals working in these structures.

Banks' (2001) analyses the effects of learning through the uneven opportunities and resources. He supports a multicultural education system that aims to tackle the inequalities in learning. Banks sees multicultural education as a process that can lead to transformation of education. This transformation will be based on even opportunities and resources, thus improving the learning without discrimination.

Guttmann (1999) emphasizes the right to respect and freedom for both, the teacher and the students. The teacher and the student both deserve these rights, which can only be practiced in a system of democratic education. The researcher refers to the fact that often, teachers teach their students about the predominant views, and lessens the relation of the students with the examples being shared. To promote multicultural and democratic classrooms, the teacher must teach and give examples from different facets of one's life e.g. religion, ethnicity, gender, race and class and respect the views and points of views of all students.

Marri (2005) defined in her study that teacher's only focus on ethnic and cultural diversity in place of other practices of diversity. She suggests that firstly, the teachers need to improve their own learning method and understand about cultural diversity. She also emphasizes the importance of critical thinking skills for the teachers to teach with various approaches in their classrooms. Moreover, she refers that there should be suitable time to exercise and execute different relatable task and activities. With the help of these activities, students can be more self-aware and can use their potential in productive ways in the class as well as outside it. She believes that by adopting these methods, and by involving the students in the discourse of diversity will bring a positive change in the classrooms.

Young (2005) maintains that the teachers and the curriculum need to be in connection. The teachers should be able to make the curriculum relatable to themselves and their students. The whole curriculum should be a process of self-awareness and identification, for the students, coming from different cultural backgrounds.

Ahlquist & Gorski (2011), both, analyze the curriculum developed on the basis of dominant history. Their analysis shows that there is a clear discrimination that is reinforced in our education system in the modern society. If we want to transfer our culture, customs, norms and values to the next generation, we have to design our curriculum in a way that is multidisciplinary and multicultural. We also need to create a student friendly environment in the classroom with the help of multicultural education.

### *Significance of Study*

The teachers in Public Schools come from diverse backgrounds. This study is significant for the teachers and students in understanding the background in a single classroom. This study has the potential to contribute for the acceptability and tolerance for the students, in a classroom, who come from different backgrounds with their cultural diversity. This study is also very significant in curriculum planning, as the teachers can design their curriculum accordingly, and further design their daily lesson plans while keeping in mind their responsibility of a 'cultural worker', It will encourage the teachers to eliminate inequalities of education in a 'multicultural classroom'. This study will enhance scientific knowledge in the field of Sociology and Education, and in academia for a better understanding of society with the lens of education. The study is also significant for policy makers. This study is significant especially for practicing teachers and their perceptions on 'multicultural classrooms' because the realization and responsibility are essential for transformational education in schools with diverse backgrounds.

### *Research Questions*

- What do the teachers understand by the term "Teacher as a Cultural Worker"?
- How do the teachers perceive their classes as multicultural?

### **METHODOLOGY**

The study is qualitative in nature in which public school teachers from the only primary public school in Kallar Syedan were interviewed. Total sample was comprised of four female teachers of the primary school in Kallar Syedan (this was the total number of teachers in the school), District Rawalpindi. Primary data collection technique was used in this research. In-Depth interviews were conducted. Data collection took few days for the accomplishment of the interviews. Interview guide was cross checked and approved by an expert from the education department. With the consent of respondents, the interviews were conducted and recorded, by taking all ethical considerations into account. Since the study has been conducted during the time of Covid-19, and schools were closed for a certain period of time; the interviews were conducted on phone.

### **RESULTS & DISCUSSION**

The data was transcribed, analyzed and then categorized into themes with the help of coding. As a result, three main themes emerged related to the understanding of the term, 'Teacher as a Cultural Worker', by the teachers and

its application in their classrooms. The first theme is, 'Teacher's inadequate understanding of term "Teacher as a Cultural Worker"'. The second theme is, 'Teacher's perception of the classroom'. The third theme is, 'Examples chosen by the teachers. The themes are discussed in detail in the following text.

### ***Teacher's Inadequate Understanding of Term "Teacher as A Cultural Worker"***

Multiculturalism is defined differently by different people. So, a single definition was not expected by the respondents. Whatever understanding the teachers had, influenced their answers. On the basis of the given information through the data collection process, the responses were reviewed and analyzed. It was concluded that the teachers may have some understanding of the term 'multiculturalism', but they lack the understanding of the term 'Teacher as a Cultural Worker'. One of the respondents said that it was not in her earlier part of her life that she understood the term 'multiculturalism', it was later on, in her life; yet she never completely felt the responsibility of being a 'Cultural worker'. Most of the participants shared that they were willing to teach through new methods, but perceiving themselves as 'Cultural Workers' was not something that stood out for them. They felt it was just a normal class with students '*from different religious and ethnic backgrounds*'. They never felt that this place demanded the teachers to be more socially active, and intellectually aware while designing and teaching the curriculum. One of the respondents said that even if they would develop such an understanding of their class, the school administration would not allow them to break the hegemony of the old ways of teaching where finishing the curriculum and avoiding the social realities of the students is a practice.

### ***Teacher's Perception of The Classroom***

The perception of teachers', as most of the teachers responded, resonated with a lack of perception to perceive their class/es as multicultural. The things that were apparent to them were either the economic status of a student (because of the outer appearance e.g. not buying new shoes, or not wearing a new uniform), or the religious background. It was the only primary school in Kallar Syedan, and students from different ethnic, linguistic, sectarian, economic, and religious backgrounds would attend the class, but the teachers were unable to see through beyond a couple of layers. Through the process of probing, the teachers started realizing how important it is to build connection with the students beyond the mere academic layer of the class, through the community engagement. For example, one of the teachers, resonating with McLaren's (2001) work, commented in her realization, '*we have to build connections with parents by involving parents is an effective approach to provide a multicultural classroom environment to their students*'. The reason for not wearing the lens through which they can perceive their classes as 'multicultural' comes with their lack of sense of responsibility to perceive themselves as 'Cultural Workers'.

Another teacher was disturbed about the unwilling behavior of parents towards the education of their children. Many students belong families who only speak

their regional and mother tongues fluently, and cannot understand any other language and not even write in any other language which is an enormous barrier among them. Teachers are not perceiving these classes as 'multicultural' as they assume that the students are in their growing stage but their parents are not involved in their children's education, growth and development. It was evident that the instructors are struggling to use multicultural-based lessons in their classrooms and they are not receiving support from the administration. If they have support and a little drive from the administration, they can improve the way how they impart multicultural education to classroom.

### *Examples Chosen by The Teachers*

Keeping in mind the above mentioned two themes, the lack of teacher's understanding indicates the lack of multicultural education in their curriculum. Most of the teachers admitted that they never thought about sharing examples from the contexts of the students. For example, one of the teachers mentioned that she found difficulty while giving religiously relevant examples. The school does not offer a separate course for any non-Muslim community students, and then the responsibility comes on the shoulders of the teachers. One of the teachers mentioned that *'I think there should be books related to the religion of other students (referring to the non-Muslim students), so they learn their religion better'*. It is unfortunately true that the school curriculum does not offer the teachers much liberty, but this is where the job of a 'Cultural Worker' starts from. Similar stance is supported by the literature where Uphoff (2001) expresses, in his study, about multicultural education in the light of religion. He observed that there were public schools in United States which were dominated by the views of Protestants in the past. On the other hand, United States was turning out to be religiously diversified. Pakistan is religiously diverse to some extent, but it is generally not talked about as one of the teachers mentioned, *'In my class I always do formal talks about religion and try to avoid going in in-depth dialogues'*. It is not only about religion, but also ethnicities; the teachers said that they never used any other example except for the ones mentioned in the book.

One of the teachers told that her students would use demeaning language for other students at times, for example making fun on the basis of color and/or ethnicity, shaming on the basis of religion, but when she was asked if she used any technique to cope up with this, she said they would either shut those students up, or just ask them to not to do so as it was bad. Giving examples that inculcate respect for diversity has not been their priority in their classrooms. Teachers told that they follow the dominant ideology, and this is what they transfer directly or indirectly because this has been the cycle since they were a student, *hamne bhe ese he parha hai, ham beh ese he parha rahay hain, 'we have studies this way, and this is how we are teaching'*.

### **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

This study is concluding that the teachers are not satisfied with the system of primary school of Kallar Syedan. All the participants of this study became interested to know about 'multicultural education' and they also wanted to

teach their students through multicultural education, but they did not have any idea on how to start. The participant teachers wanted to get support and training from their administration to make their classes more respectful towards multiculturalism. After knowing the perception of the participants through the interviews, this study explores that the element of multicultural education was missing in the minds of the teachers, as they were teaching the diversified classes but were unaware of this fact. To conclude, we can say that their inadequate understanding of the term “Teacher as a Cultural Worker” is the key to the problem. Furthermore, their view of the classroom is that they do not perceive their classes as a multicultural classroom and thus the choice of their examples is also very insensitive towards their classes’ diversity. They cannot give the students examples from cultural and religious context due to their lack of knowledge, and lack of sense of responsibility of a ‘Cultural Worker’. Administrative pressure about completion of syllabus, lack of staff, and time is also some of the main problems that do not let their attention go towards the social aspect of the class. Regardless of all the above-mentioned problems, the teachers need to learn about their duty as a ‘cultural worker’ in the society with proper training and guidelines. The multicultural education has many layers, but with this realization, the participants of the study who are the primary school teachers of Kallar Syedan are willing to create a culturally diverse classroom with the implementation of multicultural education.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- The government should introduce new curriculum that contains examples and activities plans according to the culture and customs to create multicultural education.
- Before recruitment government should need to give them training that how they can create a multicultural classroom and can create relations with culture and society.
- In future studies, there is a need to conduct focus group discussions including male teachers with different cultural background.
- In future studies, from high schools and university teachers should also be taken into account

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