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PH.D. GRADUATES ARE IN SCHOOLS AS K-12 TEACHERS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the experience of Ph.D. graduates as K-12 school teachers in Pakistan. Pakistan is confronting significant challenges in the early and late stages of K-12 education. Therefore, the presence of Ph.D.s in schools can be appreciative regarding quality assurance matters and employment opportunities but create a question mark regarding their future progress and adjustment in the school system. In this current research, the researchers addressed the main themes: How is it possible for a Ph.D. graduate to become a K-12 teacher in a school? How do Ph.D.s think and reflect themselves while teaching as K-12 teachers? The researchers collected the experiences of Ph.D. graduate teachers by interviewing them under the umbrella of phenomenological studies of qualitative research design. Eleven Ph.D. graduate teachers from different schools in Punjab province, Pakistan, were selected as research participants through a snowball sampling technique. The researchers analysed data using phenomenological studies and developed different themes to address Ph.D. graduate teachers' feelings, thinking, and reflections within the school environment. After drawing results and creating conclusions, this study suggested various recommendations for the school education department and stakeholders to improve their policies and working environment to cope with the Ph.D. graduate teachers. The study's implications revealed that the governance system must implement the various provisions concerned with Ph.D. graduate teachers present in schools. These provisions include recognizing their work, financial satisfaction, teacher education sector reforms, and proper utilization in the education system.

Keywords: Ph.D. graduate teachers; School education sector; Phenomenological studies; K-12.

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INTRODUCTION

This transcendental phenomenological study aims to describe the experiences of new Ph.D. graduates as K-12 school teachers in Pakistan. In most K-12 classrooms, science and humanities are presented through a series of textbook facts; many students need to be exposed to practical and scientific methods of inquiry and lose their interest in studies (Rafique et al., 2018). Due to limited opportunities for Ph.D. graduates in universities and other higher education institutes, K-12 institutes are the best places for fresh Ph.D.s to start their careers. Ph.D. is the highest academic degree, and high academic achievement in a person's life symbolizes security for a future career. According to a renewed Pakistani educationist, Shahid (2017), the progress of human civilization is the product of education and the answer to every educational question is ultimately influenced by the philosophy of life. Therefore, primary education is a compulsory and fundamental responsibility of government in every society for the survival of humankind. K-12 (From

Kindergarten to 12th grade) or a basic level of schooling is inevitable for progress in any field of life. The country's school education department fulfils this need of society.

Similarly, the demand for quality K-12 education is high in Pakistan. However, in Pakistan, according to Hussain and Haq (2022), K-12 education and higher education have mostly remained neglected for 75 years. A strong political demand for education has not been created so far. Public institutes, including higher education, are not up to international standards due to insufficient expert teachers, technology, and infrastructure. Political involvement, especially the association of the development of educational institutes with their respective electoral constituencies, is the primary cause of K-12 advancement in Pakistan. For better K-12 education, the school education sector requires teachers of different subjects with academic and pedagogical skills; therefore, being the largest employer in Pakistan, the school education department plays an essential role in accommodating unemployed personnel, including Ph.D. graduates.

Might these three queries add up to a conclusion for this study? How is it compatible for a Ph.D. graduate to become a K-12 teacher? How do Ph.D.s feel being the researcher while teaching as a K-12 teacher? How do Ph.D.s think and reflect themselves while teaching as K-12 teachers? The researchers argue that Ph.D.s can play a significant role in the future of K-12 education in Pakistan, particularly at the high school level. However, during data collection and interviews, Ph.D. teachers highlighted their concerns and challenges being K-12 educators in schools. They were more concerned with the future of their research activities and financial issues because K-12 teachers get lower salaries than higher education jobs. The development in K-12 education has been obsessed with the political development funds and the physical infrastructures in Pakistan. So, the elected political agents show their electoral promises revolve around those recently upgraded institutes and buildings, adding new universities and renovating old buildings just before the new elections. Political commitment is significant and essential for a developmental trajectory; however, the public pressure for the development of K-12 can be gauged from the importance that political representatives assign to education during elections and after being elected to office (Hussain & Haq, 2022). Due to the lack of quality K-12 education and saturation of university graduates, with an alarming increase every year becoming the cause of unemployment among university graduates, including Ph.D.s, the school education department (SED), the largest employer, is playing an essential role in producing employment opportunities. After graduation and a master's level degree, most of the M.A. graduates join this department to start their professional careers. Usually, it's commonly perceived that people improve their qualifications to feel more secure regarding their current position and further opportunities.

Finding a teaching position at school is more accessible than finding a teaching position at a university with the same benefits. According to Wing (2018), more than 2.9 million people in the United States have Ph.D.s and half of them teach at colleges and universities—but most of them work part-time, and less than a quarter of these have tenure-track positions. Moreover, tenure-track opportunities are declining as academia relies more heavily on low-wage, temporary adjuncts. And thousands more graduate students are in the pipeline (Wing, 2018). Another option for fresh Ph.D.s is to join a K-12 institute. Many K-12 schools also offer a modest salary and a healthy environment. With these encouraging options, one can easily continue their research work in university with a school job.

On the other hand, universities are producing more Ph.D.s with fewer jobs. A little judgment can be made, such as if one undergraduate student earns a Ph.D. degree under the supervision of one university faculty member, then the ratio is 1:1. However, the actual current ratio is 8:1 in most of the departments of science and engineering universities in Pakistan. One university faculty member is producing eight Ph.D.s on average in 4 years. Tuhus-Dubrow (2013), in an article, "The repurposed Ph.D.: Finding life after academia," explained the alarming situation regarding the financial careers of Ph.D.s. Though Ph.D. graduates have faced similar challenges for decades; however, the past few years have seen a surge in efforts to connect Ph.D.s with gratifying employment outside academia and even to rethink the purpose of doctoral education.

K-12 Education in Pakistan

K-12 education has remained unattended and mostly neglected since 1947 in Pakistan. During these decades, no government has put a solid political demand for K-12 education and its value for the development of society. Education suffered due to political interventions for personal gains, evident on administrative, ideological, economic, and policy-making levels. According to the Economic Survey of Pakistan reports (2021-22), Pakistan has spent only 1.77 percent of its GDP on education, which unfortunately remained one of the lowest in the South Asian region (Abbasi, 2022). The political victimization of the education sector has wrecked the quality of K-12 education, especially in the government sector. In the last few decades, different governments have made several efforts to counter the issues and challenges in K-12 education in the country, with a significant focus on the students' drop out of schools and Early Childhood Education (ECE). After the 18th amendment was added to the 1973 constitution in 2010, provincial governments became independent in the school education department. Therefore, the local school education departments planned to scale the K-12 education, specifically the CEC, with the help of national and international development agencies and donors as a foundation for the successful K-12 education system in the country. However, the K-12 education sector needs much improvement to meet the national and global challenges.

Pakistan is the 6th most populous country in the world, with more than 212 million people. Pakistan's education system is influenced by religion, specifically Islamic Ideology, and the British education system introduced by Thomas Macaulay for the sub-continent in 1835. So, the Cambridge Assessment International Education (CAIE) and Pakistani school systems are working in the country in parallel. Urdu and English are both mediums used for the mode of education. K-12 is divided into four sections: primary education is for I to V grades, elementary education is for VI to VIII grades, high school is for IX and X grades, and higher secondary is for XI and XII grades. Higher education is offered after the completion of 12 years of schooling. Pakistan is a state with the highest young population in the world; approximately 64% of Pakistanis are now under 30. Pakistan also has the highest number of out-of-school children after Nigeria. According to WENR (World Education News and Reviews), approximately 22.7 million children were out of school in 2017. The ages of these children are between five to sixteen years, which is 44% of this age group. Gender and socioeconomic inequalities are also present there (Hunter, 2020).

There has been no single education system and curriculum for all stakeholders since Pakistan's independence in 1947 to two decades of the 21st century (Imran & Ain, 2019). Instead, four different educational systems are working in the country: the public school system, private school system, religious institutes (*Deeni Madrassa*), and the non-formal education system (Saqib, 2020). All these education systems are based on different curricula and assessment systems. Now, after the 18th amendment was added to the constitution of 1973 Pakistan, the education department has been handed over to provinces. Therefore, most educational set-ups like higher education institutes (HEI), colleges and universities, educational boards (including both General/BISE¹ and Technical Education/TEVTA²), and school education departments lie under the control of the provincial government. After this constitutional amendment, the nation's debate on a single education standard has become more critical. But in the year 2020, the National Curriculum Council (NCC) started work on a "One Nation One curriculum" under the umbrella of the Ministry of Federal Education and professional testing and developed a single national curriculum (SNC) for I to V grades. At the federal level, the National Curriculum Council (NCC) is responsible for making curricula from classes I to XII for the school education department. At the same time, the Higher Education Commission (HEC) is responsible for classes above XII for colleges and universities. The Ministry

¹ Boards of Intermediate and Secondary Education

² Technical Education and Vocational Training Authority

of Federal Education and Professional Testing (MOFT) is not only accountable for federal educational institutions but also takes care of the country's overall education system.

Ph.D. Graduates as K-12 Teachers in Pakistan

Recently, a significant shift in Ph.D. graduates has been witnessed in Pakistan, becoming full-time and interim educators in public and private schools (including primary, elementary, secondary, and higher secondary level schools). In addition, a few of them are also working in administrative positions in schools and colleges. According to SIS (School Information System), 387 Ph.D.s were present in the School Education Department (SED) in the year 2020, which was 0.11 % of the total registered teachers in Punjab, Pakistan (Saqib, 2020). However, this figure increased from 0.11% to 0.13% and 387 to 487 Ph.D. graduate teachers in 2021. In 2022, the figure increased from 0.13% to 0.17%, meaning 590 Ph.D. graduate teachers. Currently, 596 Ph.D. graduate teachers are working in the school education department (School Information System, 2023).

Personnel with a doctorate in any field are generally interested in their area of specialization for research projects. However, they must teach the basic concepts of their related subjects in schools. This study aims to study the insight of highly qualified teachers like Ph.D. graduates working in schools. A doctorate-level person who is also an expert in a specific subject can be a good teacher in school, as most Ph.D.s work as K-12 teachers in the US (Tuhus-Dubrow, 2013). Political party Jamaat-i-Islami (JI) confirmed in the educational reforms manifesto titled "Prosperous Pakistan and Islamic Pakistan" in 2015 that they will hire Ph.D. graduates in schools as K-12 teachers when JI comes to power. JI chief Sirajul Haq said that no political leader or bureaucrat sends their children to government schools; only middle-class and low-income families' children attend these schools. The primary reason for this dilemma is low education standards, including fewer qualified teachers and insufficient facilities. Therefore, one of the primary focuses of this JI manifesto was to appoint Ph.D. graduates as K-12 teachers across the country to upgrade the teaching standards immediately (Haq, 2015). This study would be beneficial to fill the knowledge gaps and help uplift the education system with the policies to induct Ph.D. graduate teachers. Researchers need to empower and develop the education system with the help of research on Ph.D. qualified teachers or in collaboration with Ph.D. graduate teachers working in the school education sector. This will help and support teacher education in developing countries like Pakistan to make the nation prosper.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research design based on a phenomenological approach was selected to study how compatible it is for a Ph.D. graduate to become a K-12 teacher in a school. The focus of phenomenological research design is to analyze the lived experiences and to attain in-depth information insights of Ph.D. graduates present in schools as k-12 teachers. This approach uncovers the research participants' feelings, perceptions, and beliefs (Delve et al., 2022). Phenomenological analysis is the sense of a life experience and the interpretation of life experiences after understanding them (Tuffour, 2017).

Research Participants

The study sample was Ph.D. graduate teachers working in different public schools under the School Education Department (SED) in Punjab, Pakistan. Due to the availability of a specific number of research participants, the researchers used a snowball/ network sampling technique to locate these participants. Cold-calling, chain sampling, chain-referral sampling, and referral sampling are snowball sampling. It is a non-random or non-probability sampling type where researchers aim to approach potential candidates (Stephanie, 2020). This procedure selected eleven Ph.D. graduate k-12 school teachers with different discipline and demographic characteristics. Table 1 shows the participants' contributions during data collection through semi-structured interviews.

Table 1. Ph.D. Graduate K-12 Participants' demographic details.

Characteristics	Details	No. of Participants
Gender Category	Male	09
	Female	02
Age Group	≤40 year	03
	40-50 years	06
	≥50 years	02
Doctoral degree-awarding universities	Public Sector	10
	Private Sector	01
Disciplines	Natural Sciences	03
	Social sciences	05
	Languages and Humanities	03
Experience stages	≤10 year	02
	10 to 20 years	03
	20 to 30 years	05
	≥30 years	01
School classification (Place of Posting)	Higher Secondary Schools	06
	Secondary Schools	04
	Lower secondary Schools	01
Employment Stage	Elementary School Teacher BPS-15	01
	Senior Vernacular BPS-16	01
	Secondary School Teacher BPS-16	01
	Secondary School Educator BPS-16	01
	Secondary School Teacher BPS-17	02
	Officer Grade 1 Equal to BPS-17	02
	Senior Subject Specialist BPS-18	03
Teaching grades	Primary Level (I to V Grades)	00
	Elementary Level (VI to VIII Grades)	04
	Secondary Level (IX to X Grades)	04
	Higher Secondary Level (XI to XII Grades)	03

Table 1 describes the demographic sampling of research participants' gender, age, discipline, institute name, and category regarding their Ph.D. degree. It includes their current school, scale, teaching level, and experience. Most of the participants in this research are Ph.D. teachers from different public schools in Punjab province, Pakistan. These teachers, including both male and female, were from government schools with ages ranging from (30 to 55) years and scales running from (EST-BS-15 to SSS-BS-18 and OG-1). They were teaching classes mostly from VI to XII levels, and their teaching experience ranged from 01 to 35 years.

RESULTS AND DISCUSION

Semi-structured interviews are conducted for data collection from the selected 11 Ph.D. K-12 teachers across Punjab province. This data collection technique relies on asking questions from the targeted population within a predetermined thematic framework. Each interview consisted of 30 minutes with three basic and seven supplementary questions. The primary questions were: How is it possible for a Ph.D. graduate to become a K-12 teacher? How do Ph.D.s feel being the researcher while teaching as a K-12 teacher? How do Ph.D.s think and reflect themselves while teaching as K-12 teachers? These interviews

proved helpful tools for finding the actual story behind the participants' experience and further pursuing in-depth information about the understudied topic. According to Ainsworth (2020), interviews, focused groups, observations, and oral histories are generally used for qualitative data collection. In the present study, the interview method was adopted successfully for data collection. The researcher developed and improved an interview guide by conducting different interviews.

Phenomenological analysis has become very useful in many academic disciplines. Since the desire or appeal from researchers to understand its theoretical framework is evident. Such research emphasized convergence and divergence of the lived experiences of minor participants. Here are two critical aspects for discussion attached to the phenomenological analysis: one is the sense of a life experience, and the other is interpretation after understanding life experiences. The subjective judgment of a researcher is significant because the researcher has to shape the knowledge collected from research participants in the form of data through interviews. Inductive data was collected through interviews by giving an appropriate meaning to the interviewee's experience. These interviews encounter the 'participants' values, beliefs, and experiences through personal reflexivity through self-analysis and self-evaluation during the study. Applying the word 'how' to some phenomenon in its natural setting gives meaning to the insights and life experiences of participants.

Data analysis and interpretation enable a researcher to extract insights from respondents by employing curiosity, open-mindedness, and empathy to listen to 'interviewees' points of view in their natural settings to identify how they feel and experience. Behaviors are shaped by the context of their social, cultural, economic, and historical words. To understand life experience in the existing world, phenomenological analysis strives to find the intentional relationship between the conscious, social, perceptual, and practical experiences by analyzing time and space. Similarly, using personal points of view, experience, and feelings of oneself can be analyzed based on phenomenology to find out the fundamental composition and characteristics of human practical understanding and consciousness. The modern concept of phenomenological analysis is Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which strives to explore, describe, and interpret the sense-making of experiences (Tuffour, 2017).

For this IPA, an interview guide and a list of questions are provided, but it's not a questionnaire. Usually, there is the word 'how' in questions, but no word 'why' is used in it. It has demographic questions as well as interview questions. Probing is also included in the interview guide where it is needed. The statement of questions is as neutral as possible. The focus of the question is not confined but may be based on the different experiences and behaviors, opinions and values, feelings, emotions, knowledge, and observations. In this present study, the more concerning things are experience and feelings. The interview guide used in this research can also be called a phenomenological interview guide because interviews are phenomenological research-based (Roulston, 2018).

The results of the study developed based on interview transcription data, which is further analyzed based on phenomenological analysis of qualitative research design, are given below based on the themes derived from the primary research questions of this study.

Theme 1: Compatibility of Ph.D. graduate as K-12 School Teacher

K-12 Teachers at schools with Ph.D. graduation are becoming common in public and private institutes in Pakistan. Most of the teachers with Ph.D. qualifications were adjusting themselves in schools and wanted to secure their research and faculty positions in higher education institutions in the future. Some of them were stuck in school and needed more motivation. On the other hand, some were observed in the struggle for further research options and applying opportunities present in higher education institutions. One of the female Ph.D. teacher participants with a doctoral degree in the discipline of natural sciences working as a science teacher in a school commented that teaching is entertainment, and researchers get rid of the stress of their studies. Teaching at school level is full of comfort." Higher qualification Ph.D. teachers don't create

a barrier if someone is interested in transferring knowledge. Hundred percent of the achievements of these expectations did not happen in the real world. Ph.D. graduate teachers also have many expectations from their students, colleagues, and heads in the school.

Theme 2: Lived Experiences of Ph.D. graduate teachers within the social environment of the school

School is a social institute and hub between teacher and community relationships (Daha & Imran, 2020). Therefore, a community also existed inside the schools. The teaching-learning process is vital in this community, and interaction with the community participants also matters. One of the male participants, a Ph.D. graduate teacher of social sciences teaching at the lower secondary level, described, "The students' teaching influences of Ph.D. graduate teachers were also realized by the feedback teachers got from their students in schools. However, sometimes it is difficult for lower classes (where students have a low level of a cognitive domain) to express their feedback to teachers." Thus, the presence of Ph.D. graduate teachers in schools can clarify concepts of students' better ways than other teachers. It was also observed by the research participants that students are ready to listen and share their ideas with Ph.D. graduate teachers with more attentive and disciplined behavior.

Theme 3: Thinking and Reflection of Ph.D. Graduate K-12 School Teachers

Most of the Ph.D. graduate teachers explained that they felt confident while teaching in schools, and this will also be helpful for them to complete their research projects at university. They felt content with the financial support of the current school education sector job to move forward in life. On the other hand, some struggle to demand unique pay scales for their identity and survival. Some of the Ph.D. graduate teachers wanted to be reflected as school administrators, curriculum developers, and policymakers in the future. These appointments are helpful for the addition of value in the education system and increase the job satisfaction level of Ph.D. graduate K-12 school teachers. One Ph.D. teacher research participant of age 34 years with a service length of eight years in a school commented that "personality is a self-reflection of one's thinking."

Theme 4: Existed Challenges linked with the Ph.D. graduate k-12 school teachers

Many challenges are facing Ph.D. graduate teachers in day-to-day working activities in schools. Research participants explained that they must work on low-level scales and pay packages. A research participant, a Ph.D. teacher of Humanities working in a school and struggling to demand a particular pay scale, remarked, "People asked them in society what financial benefits they get after completing a Ph.D. graduation degree with spending a lot of expenses and time." Some Ph.D. graduate teachers felt caught in a circle when facing problems in service and welfare-related benefits. Eventually, a sharp decrease in the motivation level continues. Waiting for the conversion of contractual service to a regular one, delay in the promotion to the next grade, and leave approval matters are prevalent challenges faced by all teachers, including Ph.D. graduate teachers. Lack of research aids, funding opportunities, and new job openings in higher education institutions are also challenging for Ph.D. graduate K-12 school teachers. These factors beat the capacity and contentedness of teachers badly, and they feel bonded. One more reason exposed by research participants about the performance of Ph.D.s is that they face difficulties while teaching lower school grades students. In such cases, they are not ready to work (How to teach). However, they excel at school-level work due to financial limitations and fewer options to teach in higher education institutions. Ph.D. graduate teachers are facing a lack of resources as another barrier to implementing innovative ideas in schools to build the conceptual learning of their students (Imran & Almusharraf, 2023a).

Theme 5: Future perspectives linked with the Ph.D. graduate k-12 school teachers

It was also noted while interviewing the research participants that Ph.D. graduate teachers could be helpful and supportive to the system of government, which is the caretaker of the education system. They can help develop and provide teachers with capacity-building programs, planning different exhibitions, curriculum integration, manuscript writing, initiating conferences, and education sector reforms based on research

and development (Imran & Almusharraf, 2023b). Most interviewees are united on the point that managing the maximum usage of Ph.D. graduate teachers working in schools according to their specialties and with substantial wages is necessary.

There is no requirement for research work in school teaching, and no questioning is held about it in an interview for the school teaching recruitment process. However, a teacher can manage the workload and publish a research paper. Nights, weekends, and summers provide support for the research work. K-12 education also supports developing critical thinking and logical inquiry-based learning (Smith, 2020). Suppose teaching jobs in school are a barrier to Ph.D. graduate teachers' growth, then on the contrary. In that case, teaching jobs also inspire and motivate them to research, move forward in life, survive financially, and increase skills with qualifications. Interestingly, teaching jobs in schools feel far better than being an unemployed Ph.D. person. One can imagine the issue of employment in the globe and Pakistan, such as HEC, which decided to spend 70% of its workforce on university research grants and the remaining 30% on equipping institutes (Yousaf & Zaheer, 2021).

CONCLUSIONS

From the above discussion, it is clear that without financial support, no one can complete a higher academic degree, like a Ph.D., especially teachers working in schools. School teaching provides them with essential financial support for both the survival of life and further growth in academic qualification. Every good teacher must attain professional skills with academic qualifications. Concept-based teaching and grooming and motivating learners are required so that a Ph.D. graduate teacher can do this better than other teachers working in schools. Thinking and reflection of Ph.D. graduate teachers affecting the personality development of their students. Higher educational institutions have better environments than schools, but offers of enough research grants, scholarships, and job openings are not appropriate at the national level. Policymakers and the Ph.D. graduate teachers working on the ground level are not on one page.

Finally, Ph.D.s are present in the school education system as teachers. Their presence is creating a minor effect on the system, which will increase in the future because many Ph.D. scholars and school teachers are completing their doctoral research work. 100 Ph.D. school teachers increased in SED (School Education Department) from 2020 to 2021; in 2022, the increase will continue (School Information System, 2022). Many unemployed Ph.D. graduates are also preparing to target the vacancies in the school as a teacher in the subsequent recruitment. 5621 Ph.D.s and more than sixty thousand MS and M.Phil. qualified persons were produced in the last five years by HEC-recognized institutes (Chaudhry, 2016). Their presence affects not only the teaching and learning process but also all aspects of school education, including administration, policies, etc. With their presence, the system will be better academically, but the administration is still facing many problems regarding their adjustment to the system. Now, it's up to the design of governance, specifically the school education department, to determine when and how fast their education system is emerging and leading to Ph.D. graduate teachers.

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