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Prevalence of Disability Categories in Special Education: A Potential Barrier to Inclusive Education and Islamic Perspective

** Dr. Nadia Gilani*

*** Dr. Syed Abdul Waheed*

****Dr. Muhammad Zaid Lakhvi*

*Assistant Professor, Department of Teacher Education, Faculty of Education, University of Okara, Punjab, Pakistan

**Assistant Professor, Department of Educational Research & Assessment, Faculty of Education, University of Okara, Punjab, Pakistan

***Assistant Professor, Department of Islamic Studies, University of Okara, Punjab, Pakistan.

Abstract

Pakistan faces long-standing challenges in introducing new trends in every sector of the education system. Policies and practices suggest that the special education system in Pakistan seems to be organized around pre-determined pervasive categories of disability that tends to hinder the process of inclusion in Pakistani. Some practices reveal a slight shift to inclusive education; nevertheless, most of these were pilot projects launched for initiation of inclusion. The present study aims to analyze the prevalence of disability categories as a potential barrier to inclusive education in view of the existing body of literature in education and Islamic perspective. It draws implications on the inclusion of children with disability in mainstream education of Pakistan. Though, labels and categories permeate education system as a potential barrier to inclusive education, yet, literature propounds that there is a promising likelihood for the initiation of inclusive education provided the persistence in practicing Islamic values and patience to wait for the outcomes of planned projects is ascertained. Thus, despite many obstacles to introducing inclusive education, there is evidence of positive attitude and efforts to build up a world of mainstreaming where one can grow up to one's utmost potential.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Disability categories, Special Education, Mainstream education, Islamic Education, Pakistan.

Introduction

Providing equal educational prospects for all the citizens has become a challenging task for the countries all over the world as a result of global educational movements and initiatives. To keep up the global

commitment, inclusive education has become a vital part in national education policies (Thakur & Abbas, 2017). Inclusion means bringing change in regular educational institutions to respond to the varied needs of all the children with special needs along with students without special needs. In this way, it helps reducing the gap by giving equal opportunity of participation to differently abled people in main stream education system (Behlol, 2011).

Bartolo (2010) found that there are hardly 2 percent children from the special needs background who attend a formal school whereas more than 30 percent children remain out of the school. Also, there are 20 percent people from the poorest community of the world who have a specific disability (Tahir & Khan, 2010). Surprisingly, more than 90 percent children with some type of disability from the underdeveloped countries do not go to school. The adults who suffer from a disability are lower than 3 percent and the females with disabilities are even lower than 1 percent.

At the time of inception of Pakistan in 1947, three schools were working for special children in the areas of visual impairment and deafness (Bushra & Rukhsana, 2012). Since then, the need and importance of special education has been realized in various policies at different times. Especially; National Policy for Rehabilitation of the Disabled (1986), The National Policy for Special Education (1999), and National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (2002), National Education Policy (2009) have focused on the emerging issues and practices for educating children with disabilities. However, historical background of special education development in Pakistan suggests that categories and labels in the discipline have prevailed so far that represents stereotype thinking of the stakeholders and a potential barrier to inclusion. It is noticed that special education system in Pakistan has been organized around four pre-determined categories of disability: Mental disability, visual impairment, hearing impairment and physical disability (Saba, 2012). Further, more than 177 institutions of special education are working in Pakistan to educate or rehabilitate children with these disabilities or similar.

National Policy for Rehabilitation of the Disabled (1986) seems to suggest special education system based on the categories of the disabled persons and provision of the services accordingly. In order to implement the proposed program for the rehabilitation of the disabled, five various categories of disabilities were pointed out namely; mental disability, visual impairment, hearing impairment, physical disability and multiple disabilities. The National Policy for Special Education (1999)

emphasized rights, empowerment and organizing special facilities to educate, train and rehabilitate the children with these disabilities. Less or more similarly, National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (2002) based its program-planning on Pakistan Census Report (1998) which portrayed major disabilities in terms of the main categories such as physically handicapped (19%), intellectually/mentally handicapped (14%), hearing impairments (7%), visual impairments (9%), multiple disabilities (8%) and disabilities with unknown causes and not classified (43%). Subsequently, Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA, 2002) also reported categories of the children with disabilities in Pakistan in a similar fashion with updated figures in percentage. Describing the analysis made by Gillian Fulcher in 1989, Bhatti (2007) argues that the dominant influence of bureaucracy in legislation of special education has resulted into unjust labelization of children as ‘disabled’ even for those who had minor issues.

This argument raises the question if labeling and categorizing children with special needs restrict them for inclusion in mainstream education in Pakistan and what is the perspective of Islam about it. The present research review of the literature on education focused on the prevailing system of special education in Pakistan and how it is promoting categorizing children into specific domains such as physically handicapped, intellectually/mentally handicapped, hearing impairments and visual impairments. The existing body of literature is reviewed to examine how the inclusion can be promoted discouraging such categories in view of the arguments from the education and Islamic literature.

Prevailing Situation

The disability categories in Pakistan are driving force for most of the actions and procedures in policy and practice. In Pakistan, religious institutions were historically the main providers for services to persons with disabilities (Singal, 2016). Bhatti (2007) argues that Ministry of Social Welfare and Special Education has “established Special Education Centers for all categories of disabilities and challenges faced by the children in various parts of Pakistan. Under the existing structure, there are more than 60 special education centers for visually impaired and overall 300 special education centers for all disabilities” (p.3). Nonetheless, it seems that steps were taken for inclusion after having realized in National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (2002) that inclusion is a key feature for the children with learning disabilities to shift from the present exclusion system. On the other hand, initiatives for inclusion were taken on a small-scale level, as pilot projects (Bhatti

(2007). Such a pilot project by Sight Saver International (2002-2003) suggested the possibility of blind students to include in mainstream schools with a little support. Similarly, the pilot project entitled: "Piloting an approach for social inclusion in Islamabad, 2004-2006" was launched to foresee the challenges of inclusion if implemented more widely. It has been noticed by Singal (2016) that Government of Pakistan has not paid the desired level of attention towards the people with special needs even in the National Education Policy (2009).

Although they faced problems, a number of children categorized as physically/orthopedically handicapped pupils, are studying at different levels of education in mainstream system as their disability do not significantly hinder their educational process (Hussain, Bashir, Naseerud-Din, Butt, Akhtar & Inamullah, 2011). Nevertheless, a large number of children with severe disabilities are still waiting at the door of general stream for inclusion into these institutions to come out of the boundaries of the disability categories. In a report, National Consultation on Inclusive Education (2006) claimed that "all key stakeholders gained a greater understanding of how to influence the development of an inclusive approach to education" (p.12). However, Bhatti (2007) explained that this determination could not come into practice due to absence of a policy for implementation by the Ministry of Education. In addition, parents and teachers of disabled children were reluctant to associate their children to traditional disability category system which was prevailing in the special education system in the country that strictly prohibited inclusion. He, further states that "organizations of deaf people tend to argue that deaf children have to be educated separately in order to guarantee their right to education in the medium of sign language and access to deaf culture" (p. 17). These examples imply that students, parents and teachers' unsupportive attitude to integrate their children into main stream education is one of the main barriers for introducing the new system.

On the other hand, Hussain (2008), who is a deaf girl, condemned the attitude of the people in Pakistan who often label the persons like her as "deaf and dumb". It is a common practice of the comparatively 'low educated' people in Pakistan to assign labels and offensive nicknames according to physical appearance of a person if one has a distinguishing feature of one's organ, color, height or any disability. It creates an impression of discrimination, humiliation and social segregation among such persons and it is because the people are ignorant of the teachings of Islam and Qur'an.

Allah Almighty has forbidden such practice very clearly and strictly in the Holy Qur'an. Allah Almighty says, "O you who have believed, let not a people ridicule [another] people; perhaps they may be better than them; nor let women ridicule [other] women; perhaps they may be better than them. And do not insult one another and do not call each other by [offensive] nicknames. Wretched is the name of disobedience after [one's] faith. And whoever does not repent - then it is those who are the wrongdoers" Al-Qur'an (49:11) and He said, "Woe to every scorner and mocker" Al-Qur'an (104:1). According to a Hadith verse (49:11) was revealed when Holy Prophet (ﷺ) was told by some companions that every person in Madina has two or three (offensive nicknames) names and when anyone is called with these, he gets angry (Musnad Ahmad, 18314). How a practical discrimination and segregation of a disable person could be allowed in an Islamic society when even such label or name is strongly prohibited that can cause a sense of inferiority, exclusion or annoyance.

Another Hadith reveals how Islam cares for sentiments of the people having some sort of physical deficiency or disability, "Narrated Aisha (RA), Ummul Mu'minin: I said to the Prophet (ﷺ): It is enough for you in Safiyyah that she is such and such (the other version than Musaddad's has:) meaning that she was short-statured. He replied; You have said a word which would change the sea if it were mixed in it" (Sunan Abi Dawud, 4875). Noble words of the Holy Prophet (ﷺ) are a clear depiction of the fact that Islam never allows to discuss the disability of any person in a way that could cause feeling of difference and realization of less advantaged from normal people.

Hussain (2008) added that parents of such children argue that their children should learn how to speak and talk rather than using sign language by teachers in the class. This tendency to shift from traditional labels and medical view of disability indicates a desire for inclusive and cultural model of disability contrasting to those examples cited above. But it has been observed that there is repulsion to this trend also. Describing the case of children with hearing impairment, Aziz and Iqbal (2008) concluded that most of the teachers assumed that children with hearing impairment could not be taught in mainstream system as they were unable to learn basic skills of reading, writing and mathematics as compared to their regular counterparts. Moreover, parents of children without disability do not seem to accept inclusion of special children in the mainstream.

These were examples regarding some of the categories of disabilities emphasized in special education system of Pakistan and

attitudes of children, parents and their teachers. It has been observed that most of the decisions such as setting up special education institution for a specific disability, establishing specific teacher training institute and appointment of the teachers accordingly, assessment techniques, curriculum, methods of teaching, and equipment required have been based exclusively on specific category of disability segregating special education from the mainstream.

Hurisa Guvercin (2008) writes that Islam opposes prejudice against and exclusion of any group of people. The Qur'an addresses all of humanity in this way: "O mankind, we created you from a single [pair] of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other [not that you may despise each other]. Verily the most honored of you in the sight of Allah is [he who is] the most righteous of you. And God has full knowledge and is well acquainted [with all things]" (49:13). In this revelation, God explores for us that He created us from one man and one woman meaning that we are all equal and that all human beings are created through the same process, not in a manner in which some are created better than others.

The strategies and methods developed for the inclusion of people with special education needs in mainstream education directly or indirectly reflect the underlying principles of Islam for inclusion of such persons in the society as active citizens and member of the community. In order to understand these concepts of inclusion many examples from Qur'an and the life of Holy Prophet Muhammad may be produced. For instance, Abdullah ibn Maktum a blind companion of the Prophet Muhammad, was one of the first persons who embraced Islam. He was a passionate companion who was keen to learn Qur'an by heart and had devotedly engaged himself with Prophet Muhammad. He was appointed as "Muezzin" (one who calls Muslims to offer prayer) and many times as in charge of Medina in the absence of Prophet. This shows how Islamic values and teaching of Islam has encouraged people with disabilities to have a leading role in the society without any discrimination and segregation from the society.

There is another example of the same companion Abdullah ibn umm Maktum. When Holy Prophet was busy in preaching chiefs of Quraish, he came searching the Holy Prophet being a blind person he could not judge the situation and asked any question about teachings of Islam. The Holy Prophet took it as an inappropriate behavior in presence of the notables. Allah Almighty revealed Suah Abas in favor of the blind person seeking knowledge in presence of the prestigious people and reprimanded the Holy Prophet for his disliking the interruption of a blind

person. Allah Almighty said, “The Prophet frowned and turned away. Because there came to him the blind man, [interrupting]. But what would make you perceive, [O Muhammad], that perhaps he might be purified. Or be reminded and the remembrance would benefit him? As for he who thinks himself without need, to him you give attention. And not upon you [is any blame] if he will not be purified. But as for he who came to you striving [for knowledge] While he fears [Allah], From him you are distracted. No! Indeed, these verses are a reminder; So, whoever wills may remember it.” Al-Qur’an (80:1-12)

Ibn Umm Maktoum did not care about losing his sight, so he participated in the battle of Al-Qadisiyah under the leadership of Saad bin Abi Waqqas, and stood leaning on the arm of a Muslim rising to a high rate, shouting: “Pay the brigade to me, for I am blind I cannot flee, and establish me between the two rows.” He dissuaded him from his intention, shouting and demanding a general, until he received the blessing of martyrdom in this battle. We have another example in the great companion Abdul Rahman bin Auf, one of the ten persons promised for granting heaven, where he was injured in the battle of one of several injuries throughout his body, one of which caused a permanent limping in his leg, and the other dropped his folds and left a clear impact on his pronunciation, so with that he continues to give charity and does not isolate himself from the society.

We have a role model in many scholars and righteous people, as many of us do not know that the jurist Ata bin Abi Rabah was black, lame, and paralyzed, but he was referred to in the fatwa during the seasons of Hajj, and many of us do not know that the great scholar Ibn Al-Atheer is the author of the book “The Fundamentals” (11 volumes) and the book “The End in Gharib Hadith” (4 volumes), it was a seat that could not be raised, and many of us did not know that Muhammad ibn Sirin, one of the followers of the disciples, was deaf, and despite this difficulty, his biography is full of knowledge and meeting, and keenness on halal in trade

The prevailing system of specific categories can be observed in the country. Many special education centers, which address a special category of disability, have been established throughout the country. For example, in Islamabad capital territory (ICT), some of the institutions are: National Special Education Centre for Hearing Impaired Children, National Special Education Centre for Mentally Retarded Children, National Special Education Centre for Visually Handicapped Children, National Training Centre For Special Persons, and National Mobility and Independence Training Centre.

In order to recruit teachers in these institutes, Nabeel (2009) states that special teacher training institutes and departments of universities, for instance, department of special education, Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU) has been training teachers in specialized fields of physical disability, intellectual disability, visual impairment, hearing impairment and learning disability as well as in the area of inclusive education. Similarly, teacher training institutes for teachers specialized in these categories have been established in all the provinces of Pakistan. Apart from this, there are some examples of educational institutes that indicate a shift to inclusion but most of them were pilot projects experimented to initiate inclusive education.

Caceres, Awan, Nabeel, Majeed, and Mindes (2010) state that “because Pakistani policy makers have not reached a consensus toward inclusive education, Pakistan’s national policy does not advocate for it” (p. 3). Agreeing with this statement, UNICEF (2003) report on Examples of Inclusive Education in Pakistan, argues that “no serious movement has so far surfaced in the country for inclusive education. The present system is of ordinary schools and special schools working in isolation, striving independently for improvement and identity” (p. 4). In addition, the implementation of provisions of Education Policies in Pakistan is inconsistency and lacks political will and rigor (Waheed, 2012). Yet, based on the experiences of project on inclusive education in Pakistan; Caceres, et al. (2010) report that there is encouraging possibility of inclusive education in Pakistan, provided appropriate resources and sufficient support is managed altogether.

Prospects for Inclusion

Despite the fact that efforts were made to improve the conditions of children with disabilities, confining them into boxes of categories and labels implies that old notion that disability lies within the child and it is by God, still dominates in different parts of the country especially in disadvantaged rural areas where people are ignorant of the matter that education system in the country and learning environment of the schools need improvements for appropriate education of their children. Awareness of new trends in educating children with disability is need of the hour. The parents and teachers should be given orientation on teachings and values of Islam on including children with disability into mainstream education.

There should be a comprehensive campaign to educate the people about the inevitability of the inclusive education on the basis of Islamic teachings and empirical evidences from the golden Islamic era. Being a Muslim majority country, people get more impressed from divine and

ideological arguments. Religious scholars and Imams of Masajid must be equipped with such knowledge and information through workshops so that they could guide and convince the people for inclusive approach towards the children with special needs. Islamic perspective must be included in curriculum of the teachers training courses to realize the teachers that inclusive education is not only their professional duty but their religious duty as well. Inclusive education should be a topic of debate in all educational institutes to spread awareness among the students to change their attitude towards such people of the society inside and outside of the educational institutions.

It is quite difficult for illiterate persons in a developing country like Pakistan to give them orientation on the emerging approaches in the field. However, by creating awareness, a problem can be perceived reasonably and defined well which is a key to think on a right direction, action, and for related practices to be designed (Hollenweger, 2014). Thus, attitude of children, parents, teachers, bureaucracy, school heads and other stakeholders of education needs to be shaped for welcoming interventions in the field and their smooth functioning for better outcomes. The door of Ijtihad always remains open in Islamic Shariah for the betterment of common people. Remaining in the limits of teachings of Islam new ideas and strategies can be practiced for the better results.

Categories are considered to be building blocks of knowledge for the sake of conceptualization and understanding (Hollenweger, 2014), but thinking beyond the building blocks would open new horizons in theory and practice to build up new and perplex knowledge for coping with emerging situation in diverse perspectives. In Pakistan, children with disability need to be viewed in accordance with their situation and contextual perspective for their comprehensive understanding, knowledge and for the solution of their problems. Prevailing traditional disability categories have prohibited the contextual view of child's situation because most decisions are based on one-dimensional perception of his /her disability category. Moreover, practitioners' attitude, beliefs and expectations are affected by categories held in the system (Hurwitz, Elliott, & Branden, 2007).

In order to bring reforms in the system, Hollenweger (2014) argues that International Classification of Functioning (ICF) is more advanced information system for understanding children with disability in situational setting and in their cultural and environmental contexts. She elaborates that "its hierarchical and multidimensional structure is grounded in a bio-psycho-social understanding of human functioning and

aligned to bring the situation of persons into focus – rather than their characteristics” (p. 515). Therefore, this type of classification can assist in introducing new culture of thinking beyond the ‘person’ to his socio-cultural background and environment for his multidimensional understanding and ultimately development in various aspects which is dire need of special education system in Pakistan. In a society where superstitions overcome, unawareness among parents prevails, inappropriate attitude become hurdle for intervention, mishandling of the situation spoils the life of children, misconception of disability results into malpractice and people sympathize and look down upon disable persons; there is need to bring reforms with more humanist approach to deal with problems of the mankind.

It is, therefore, hard time to take some practical measures for developing awareness among parents, teachers and other stakeholders of special education to make them think beyond the categories and labels of disability to put the problem well in order to build up more complex knowledge to assist in assessing learning disabilities appropriately (Hollenweger, 2014). Although, it is frequently mentioned in the literature that Pakistan is a developing country that lacks resources but there are countries who have taken initiatives vigorously for changing the fate of their young disable children and youth in spite of poor economic conditions. In addition, persistence and patience had played most significant role in carrying out a program or plan to achieve desired outcomes when introducing an innovation or new intervention in special education.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the literature and subsequent reflections, it is recommended that a humanist and socio-cultural perspective about children with disability should be promoted by thinking, planning and implementing the policies designed beyond the categories and labels which are assigned for the ‘understanding and education’ of these children. The institutions established separately for each disability category should be turned into the inclusive education institution and the teachers working there should be trained to cope with the emerging challenges of inclusion and pedagogy. On the other hand, there should be free access to children with disability to nearby mainstream schools and teachers therein should be trained for education of all the children studying simultaneously at one place. The human and material resources should be exchanged and shared between traditional special education institutions and mainstream schools to maintain equity and harmony among all the institutions with greater collaboration.

The educational programs on pre-service teacher training has an essential role to produce effective and efficient teachers for initiating and promoting inclusive education in Pakistan. It has been noticed that the prevailing system of producing such teachers for inclusive education has not be successful. These teachers should be professionally trained to meet the challenges of teaching children with special needs in mainstream education. The opportunities to include such children in the mainstream should also be increased. (Hameed & Manzoor, 2016; Thakur & Abbas, 2017)

The teachers of children with specific disability should train teachers working in mainstream system and vice versa. Thus, the two-separate system of education should work together under the umbrella of a uniform education system for all children provided special needs of the children are met appropriately. The traditional nomenclature of special education institutions should be changed to label off the category system of disability at all levels. A small centre should be established within each school to address the challenges of children with severe disability or learning disability; however, they should not be isolated. Training should be given to master trainers in both areas of education; special education and inclusive education, to further train the teachers working under the 'new' uniform system of education.

It has been noted from the Islamic perspective, that discriminating and excluding people from the mainstream was discouraged and such people had been dealt with equality, fair play and justice to eliminate inferiority among them and to enable them include in the society as active and responsible citizens. Hollenweger (2014) has rightly described about prevailing conditions in most of the countries: "unfortunately, labels and nomenclatures still permeate education systems at all levels creating barriers against the advancement of inclusive education" (p. 514), but hopes, efforts, expectations, and desires are always there for building up a better world around us.

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