

TEACHER'S PERCEPTIONS OF FUNCTIONAL CURRICULUM FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

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ABSTRACT

The current research investigated the perceptions of special education teachers regarding the use of functional curriculum with children who have special needs in Faisalabad District in Pakistan. The research design used was a quantitative descriptive research design whereas data were collected by the use of a self-developed questionnaire that was administered to a conveniently selected sample of 66 special education teachers. Analysis of data was done using descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation). The results showed that there were exceedingly positive teacher attitudes towards functional curriculum. Teachers strongly believed that students should be able to work independently ($M = 4.52, SD = 0.53$), and students should be prepared to work in society ($M = 4.45, SD = 0.56$), which should be facilitated by the practical skills. On the same note, the role of functional curriculum regarding social interaction and peer participation ($M = 4.45, SD = 0.50$), confidence in managing daily activities ($M = 4.39, SD = 0.52$), and acquisition of meaningful life skills ($M = 4.41, SD = 0.53$) had high values of the mean scores. Functional curriculum was also valued by teachers the same as the academic one ($M = 4.32, SD = 0.53$). Even with these positive perceptions, there were implementation issues which were eminent. Poor training proved to be of high priority with the mean score significantly low ($M = 1.95, SD = 1.14$), whilst lack of sufficient resources and time were reported to be a major obstacle ($M = 4.29, SD = 0.58$). In general, the findings provide evidence of a high level of teacher support of functional curriculum and critical shortcomings in the facility of training and institutional supporting conditions, which reflect the necessity of specific professional development and allocation of resources to ensure the successful implementation.

Keywords: Special education, functional curriculum, teachers' perceptions, life skills and children with disabilities.

INTRODUCTION

The functional curriculum is designed in such a way that it provides children with all types of needs with practical world skills that will help them socialize, live independently and routinely. Conventional curriculum emphasizes on fixed and standardized parameters which does not solve the needs of all students, particularly those with disabilities. Unlike the traditional learning programs, the functional curriculum emphasizes on functional skills such as personal care, social engagement, communicational skills, budgeting skills, occupational skills and community interaction. This model is particularly relevant with children with cognitive and developmental deficiencies, as it is aimed at facilitating their quality of life and training them to participate in society (Brown, 2018) It is the perception of the teacher that is crucial in the successful implementation of a functional curriculum. The teachers are on the

frontline of putting these ways to classrooms and their perceptions regarding its effects, problems, and benefits affect the teaching methods and learning results (Fullan,2007; Ee & Soh,2005).

Although the importance of functional and life-skills-based curricula in the education of children with special needs is increasingly being emphasized internationally, there is only a little empirical data on the topic in developing nations, especially Pakistan. The available research in Pakistan is more concerned with the conventional academic education, little attention is given to teacher's perceptions, readiness, and situational issues associated with the application of the functional curriculum methods. Further, there is little information regarding how instructors understand the effectiveness of functional curriculum with regard to independent living, social engagement and day living skills among learners with disabilities. Therefore, the present study aims to bridge this gap by systematically exploring special education teachers' perceptions of the functional curriculum, its perceived benefits, and the challenges associated with its implementation within the Pakistani educational context.

REVIEW LITERATURE

Most researches into teacher's perception of functional curriculum for learners with diverse learning needs indicate overall positive perceptions. However, they also identify severe problems in the implementation of those perceptions. A study targeting 471 Ethiopian primary school teachers reported that most of them had favorable perceptions toward flexible curriculum approaches. Modifications in instructional strategies, content and assessment are described as flexible curriculum for children with special needs. However, some teachers poorly conceptualized the adapted strategies (Kabtyimer & Zhao, 2024). In a study regarding the knowledge of adapted curriculum regarding students with moderate physical disability among the primary teachers of Pakistan, similar findings emerged. The teachers had average knowledge regarding the accommodation but basic knowledge regarding the modification. Hence, there emerged a need for continuous training and development for the teachers. (Nawaz & Fazil, 2023).

A study found special education teacher's viewpoints on functional curriculum for students with cognitive disabilities. The teachers in this study demonstrated the importance of these skills in facilitating learners' transition into adulthood. However, actual classroom implementation remained generally limited (Park, 2019). In this direction, scholars have also emphasized that the special curriculum in systematic special education will play a critical role in the social integration of children and their participation in societies. Still, limited resources, teacher preparedness, and learning support hinder good implementation of the curriculum (Malik & Abdul Manaf, 2015). A few more studies support these trends quite well. Functional and life skills training are perceived as highly significant by teachers. However, heavy workloads and lack of administrative support prevent this from being implemented in natural environments (Alharbi, 2022). Community-based functional instruction research states that teachers consider the functional approach important and value the hands-on learning approach for young children with developmental disabilities. Yet they feel frustrated when planning, material preparation, and continuous collaboration with the families become too much to bear (Rahman et al., 2021). In India, educators believed functional curriculum made much difference in gaining independence. Yet their training was inadequate.

Besides, there was a scarcity of practical experience in using functional teaching approaches. This reduced their confidence level in conducting functional teaching (Kumar & Singh, 2020). A systematic review has highlighted that teachers generally supported functional approaches to learning which seem humanized. These approaches combine practical applications and self-discipline by learners. After all positive perceptions of special education

teachers regarding functional curriculum yet its implementation depends highly on the accessibility of training and school facilities (Yeo, 2023). These studies indicate teachers believe functional curriculum builds life skills, independence, and social participation of children. Yet, it is not applied to real life due to a lack of training, resources, or schools that support them. But teachers' positive perceptions and willingness toward the functional approach mean that support and guidance can go a long way to make such programs change the lives of children.

Although previous studies consistently report positive teacher perceptions regarding functional curriculum and life-skills instruction, a recurring concern across contexts is inadequate teacher training, limited resources, and insufficient institutional support. Furthermore, most existing research originates from developed or neighboring countries, limiting its contextual relevance to Pakistan. There is a notable lack of district-level empirical studies examining teachers' perceptions of functional curriculum within Pakistani special education settings. Consequently, this study seeks to contribute context-specific evidence by examining teachers' perspectives, perceived effectiveness, and implementation challenges of functional curriculum for children with special needs in District Faisalabad.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative descriptive research design to explore teachers' perceptions of the functional curriculum for children with special needs.

Population and Sample

The target population included all special education teachers working in government special education institutions of District Faisalabad. A total of 66 special educators from Faisalabad, Jaranwala, and Tandlianwala were selected using convenience sampling, due to accessibility and time constraints.

Data Collection Instrument

Data were collected using a self-developed questionnaire based on relevant literature, focusing on teachers' perceptions of the importance, effectiveness, and implementation challenges of the functional curriculum. The instrument consisted of closed-ended statements measured on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Prior to data collection, the questionnaire was reviewed by subject experts to ensure content relevance and clarity.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques, including mean and standard deviation, to summarize teachers' responses and identify overall perception trends.

RESULTS

Table 1

Demographic Information of Respondents

| Items | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---------------------|----|---------|---------|------|----------------|
| Age | 66 | 1 | 4 | 2.02 | 0.774 |
| Gender | 66 | 1 | 2 | 1.74 | 0.441 |
| Students Disability | 66 | 1 | 5 | 2.09 | 1.422 |
| Teacher Experience | 66 | 1 | 4 | 2.06 | 0.802 |

Note. The table presents the demographic characteristics of 66 respondents. The mean age value of 2.02 indicates that most participants were in the second age category (as per the coding

scheme). Gender analysis shows a mean of 1.74, suggesting a slightly higher proportion of one gender among the respondents. The students' disability type reported by teachers has a mean of 2.09, reflecting that most teachers work with a range of disability categories. Teacher experience has a mean of 2.06, indicating that the majority of respondents possess moderate teaching experience in special education settings. The standard deviations show some variability in age, disability types, and experience among the participants.

Table 2

Perceptions Regarding Functional Curriculum

| Items | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|--|----|---------|---------|------|----------------|
| Functional curriculum plays an important role in the education of students with special needs. | 66 | 4 | 5 | 4.44 | 0.500 |
| I find that functional curriculum activities help students develop confidence in managing everyday tasks | 66 | 3 | 5 | 4.39 | 0.523 |
| I find that practical skills are essential for students independent functioning | 66 | 3 | 5 | 4.52 | 0.533 |
| Implementing functional curriculum supports student's readiness for social participation | 66 | 3 | 5 | 4.45 | 0.560 |
| Functional curriculum helps learners with diverse needs acquire meaningful life skills | 66 | 3 | 5 | 4.41 | 0.526 |
| Functional curriculum is as valuable as the academic curriculum for students with special needs | 66 | 3 | 5 | 4.32 | 0.531 |
| Functional curriculum contributes to improve social interaction and peer participation among students | 66 | 4 | 5 | 4.45 | 0.502 |

Note. Table 2 shows perceptions of teachers associated with functional curriculum to students with special needs. The findings show that there was an overall positive attitude towards functional curriculum amongst special education teachers. The large mean score of the items of the perception shows high agreement between that the functional curriculum is important in improving the student's independence as well as confidence in being able to handle the daily activities and gain meaningful skills in life. In particular, educators unanimously stated that practical abilities were necessary to make students operate independently ($M = 4.52$, $SD = 0.53$), and functional curriculum helped students to be prepared to social functioning ($M = 4.45$, $SD = 0.56$). On the same note, the role played by functional curriculum in enhancing social interaction and peer involvement was also strongly supported ($M = 4.45$, $SD = 0.50$). It was also found that teachers valued functional curriculum as the same value as academic curriculum to students with special needs ($M = 4.32$, $SD = 0.53$), and its role in comprehensive learning development. On the whole, the standard deviation values included in the items are relatively low, indicating consistency in the responses of the teachers, which may indicate that they share the vision of the importance of functional curriculum in the special education establishment. These results illustrate that there is a considerable agreement among the teachers on the educational and social advantages of functional curriculum in the context of learners with diverse needs.

Table 3

Teachers' Perceptions of Implementation Challenges and Support Factors Related to Functional Curriculum (N = 66)

| Items | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---|----|---------|---------|------|----------------|
| Functional skills should be regularly integrated into daily classroom activities | 66 | 3 | 5 | 4.38 | 0.548 |
| I find that students benefit more from functional curriculum as compared to traditional curriculum | 66 | 1 | 5 | 4.03 | 0.784 |
| The training available to me is adequate for effective implementation of the functional curriculum | 66 | 1 | 5 | 1.95 | 1.143 |
| Limited resources and time make it difficult for me to effectively implement functional curriculum | 66 | 3 | 5 | 4.29 | 0.576 |
| Collaboration with professionals and school administrators enhances the implementation of the functional curriculum | 66 | 3 | 5 | 4.18 | 0.461 |
| Functional curriculum provides me more holistic understanding of a student's capabilities | 66 | 3 | 5 | 4.21 | 0.512 |
| Technology can support and strengthen the delivery of functional curriculum activities | 66 | 3 | 5 | 4.29 | 0.519 |
| Valid N (listwise) | 66 | | | | |

Note. Table 3 describes the views of teachers on the implementation of functional curriculum by providing insight on facilitating factors, as well as the challenges that currently exist. The study results have shown that there is a high level of agreement that functional skills are to be incorporated in the daily classroom instruction ($M = 4.38$, $SD = 0.55$) which means that the teachers have been aware of the need of incorporating functional learning in the day-to-day classroom instruction. The perceived effectiveness of functional curriculum in meeting the practical and developmental needs of learners was also supported by the teachers who also thought that students were better served by functional curriculum than traditional curriculum ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 0.78$). Although these perceptions are positive, the results also show clearly that there are some major hurdles to implementation. It is worth noting that teachers indicated that they did not receive proper training to execute functional curriculum as denoted by very low mean score ($M = 1.95$, $SD = 1.14$). Also, the lack of resources, time pressures were also pointed out as one of the significant obstacles ($M = 4.29$, $SD = 0.58$). On the other hand, the cooperation with professionals and school administrators was viewed as one of the main support mechanisms that help to improve implementation ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 0.46$). The teachers further recognized that, functional curriculum offers a more holistic view of capabilities of the students ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 0.51$) and that technology is able to support and reinforce implementation of functional curriculum activities ($M = 4.29$, $SD = 0.52$). The results indicate that even though teachers are vehement in favor of integration and the advantages of the functional curriculum, the success of such implementation is heavily reliant on sufficient training, institutional support, and availability of resources.

DISCUSSION

The current research involved the investigations of the perception of the special education teachers regarding the functional curriculum of children with special needs in the

District Faisalabad, Pakistan. The results suggest that there is a high agreement on the observance of functional curriculum by the teachers especially in fostering independence, social involvement, and life skills that have a sense. The outcomes can be explained by the fact that international literature highlights the pivotal role of functional and life-skills-oriented teaching in enhancing the quality of life of disabled learners (Brown, 2018; Park, 2019).

In this research, teachers vehemently supported the fact that students should have practical skills that help them to operate independently and lead a normal life. The overall scores of independences, confidence when dealing with daily life tasks and acquisition of meaningful life skills are great, this implies that teachers view functional curriculum as an important aspect of holistic education. This result is in line with the study by Kumar and Singh (2020), who found that teachers considered functional curriculum to help learners with intellectual and developmental disabilities develop autonomy and self-reliance. On the same note, Rahman et al. (2021) noted that functional instruction promotes participation in real-life contexts and improves the functioning capabilities of learners in the community.

The results also showed that teachers regarded functional curriculum as being as useful as academic curriculum to children with special needs. Such perception is an indication of the change in the traditional academic-oriented models to more inclusive and learner-based educational strategies. The fact that past research has shown that excessive focus on academic achievement usually discriminates against students with disabilities has been demonstrated, and functional curriculum focuses on the practical skills needed to live independently and integrate into society (Malik and Abdul Manaf, 2015; Yeo, 2023). The current research supports the idea that functional and academic curricula are complementary and not competent elements of special education.

The teachers too were firm believers in the role of functional curriculum when it comes to the enhancement of social interaction and peer participation. This observation is corroborated by the previous studies suggesting that functional and life-skills instruction lead to the improvement of communication, social competence, and peer interaction among learners with special needs (Alharbi, 2022; Park, 2019). Activities that involve functional learning, especially those integrated in the daily routine, give the students chances of practicing social behaviors in real sense, thus, enable them to be included and participate in school and community settings.

Although there were good perceptions, the research found challenges that were of great concern in implementation of functional curriculum. The greatest source of reported barriers was insufficient teacher training with a significantly low mean score. This observation is not new to countries in developing situations, and numerous studies have found the lack of professional development as one of the key barriers to successful curriculum execution (Nawaz and Fazil, 2023; Kabtyimer and Zhao, 2024). Teachers might be having positive attitudes towards functional approaches, but due to limited training, they are unable to design, implement and assess functional learning activities.

There were also limited resources and time limitations, which were seen as a major challenge. Other researches have expressed similar concerns, as inadequate support of the functional curriculum was impeded by the absence of instructional materials, excessive workload, and the lack of administrative support (Alharbi, 2022; Malik and Abdul Manaf, 2015). These constraints of the system indicate that effective practice of functional curriculum needs not only the commitment of teachers but also the support of the institution and policy level.

The results also emphasize how collaboration with schools' leaders and other professionals is important towards enhancing the functional implementation of the curriculum.

Teachers have accepted collaborative practices as a way to have a more comprehensive view of the abilities of students and facilitate an effective instructional planning. This is in line with Fullan (2007), who said that collective work, joint responsibility, and facilitative leadership are some of the ingredients of sustainable change in education. Moreover, the fact that teachers have positive views about the application of technology implies that it can be used to enhance functional curriculum implementation, especially in dealing with resource constraints and provision of individualized learning.

On the whole, the discussion reveals that there is a significant discrepancy between teachers being positive about functional curriculum and the classroom realities. Although the teachers are conscious of the importance of functional curriculum in fostering independence and social participation, lack of sufficient training, resources and institutional support are all major impediments. These results support the systemic change, such as special professional development programs, better resource allocation, and functional curriculum policy integration within special education systems in Pakistan.

CONCLUSION

The current research concludes that in the view of special education teachers in Pakistan, functional curriculum plays a critical role towards promoting the development of independence, social integration as well as meaningful life skills on children with special needs. Even though, the attitude of teachers towards functional curriculum is overwhelmingly positive, the lack of training, resources, and institutional support holds back its correct implementation. These challenges need to be addressed with the help of specific professional development, better resource distribution, and support on a policy level to make the best out of functional curriculum and improve the services of special education in Pakistan.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Professional development activities ought to be conducted regularly to ensure that the teachers are more proficient and confident in the implementation of practical strategies of functional curriculum.
2. Effective implementation of the curriculum requires increased collaboration between teachers, administrators, therapists, and support staff.
3. Educational administrations must make sure to provide proper distribution of learning resources, time and technology to facilitate delivery of functional curriculum.
4. Pakistan must incorporate functional elements of curriculum in its special education policies and in its teacher education programs.

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