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Intersectional Challenges and Support Systems: Understanding Marginalized Student's Experiences in Public Sector Universities in Islamabad, Pakistan

Abstract

In the current world, the experiences within campus environments play a pivotal role in shaping the learner's cognitive and developmental experiences. Much research is already being conducted regarding the challenges faced by students in public universities, such as academic difficulties, mental health issues, and campus safety concerns; however, it does not delve into how these challenges manifest differently for various marginalized groups, including those from rural areas, minority ethnicities, and low-income backgrounds. This research proposal aims to investigate the experiences of marginalized student groups within the campus environment of a public sector university located in the Federal Capital of Pakistan. The research, thereby using a qualitative method in which interviews will analyze the experiences faced by marginalized students in depth using Interactional Narrative Analysis. By synthesizing findings, the research will offer actionable recommendations for policy, practice, and future research aimed at fostering inclusivity, equity, and student success within the public sector university.

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Intersectional Challenges and Support Systems: Understanding Marginalized Student's Experiences in Public Sector Universities in Islamabad, Pakistan

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Contents

Abstract

In the current world, the experiences within campus environments play a pivotal role in shaping the learner's cognitive and developmental experiences. Much research is already being conducted regarding the challenges faced by students in public universities, such as academic difficulties, mental health issues, and campus safety concerns; however, it does not delve into how these challenges manifest differently for various marginalized groups, including those from rural areas, minority ethnicities, and low-income backgrounds. This research proposal aims to investigate the experiences of marginalized student groups within the campus environment of a public sector university located in the Federal Capital of Pakistan. The research, thereby using a qualitative method in which interviews will analyze the experiences faced by marginalized students in depth using Interactional Narrative Analysis. By synthesizing findings, the research will offer actionable recommendations for policy, practice, and future research aimed at fostering inclusivity, equity, and student success within the public sector university.

Keywords:

Marginalized Student Groups, Campus Environment, Public Sector University, Federal Capital of Pakistan, Qualitative Approach

Introduction

Since Pakistan gained independence in 1947, the country is still relatively young, and higher education there is still in its infancy. The higher education system of Pakistan has grown significantly during the past 20 years, both in terms of finance and accountability (HEIs) (Khwaja, Zafar, & Faize, 2021). Educational setting refers to situations and events in classrooms, departments, faculties, and institutions, both physical and psychosocial. The kind of environment in education is very crucial when it comes to defining

the success or failure of any institution (Lizzio, Wilson, & Simons, 2010).

Attending a university in a metropolitan city like Islamabad presents unique challenges and opportunities for students. As the capital city, Islamabad attracts students from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and regions of the country, creating a melting pot of experiences. Understanding the dynamics of campus life in this context is essential for enhancing the overall student experience and fostering an inclusive and supportive learning environment. In the context of Pakistani public universities, where social and institutional hierarchies often go unquestioned, intersectionality helps in critically unpacking how structural inequalities manifest in academic and social settings. This study seeks to bridge the gap in the literature by offering a context-sensitive understanding of marginalized students' lived experiences and the institutional mechanisms that either support or fail them.

In the world of higher education, the experiences of students inside and outside campus environments have a critical role to play in their academic progress, their personal development, and general health and living standards. Appropriating not just educational aspects but also integrating campus life, both learning and developmentally, becomes paramount for institutions that are building campuses that are enabling and inclusive. The article of research is intended to investigate the students' experiences of different community aspects and lives inside the campus of a public sector university situated in the Federal Capital of Pakistan. In so doing, this research addresses the need for an inclusive approach in understanding the factors that impact university life in the Federal Capital of Pakistan, by highlighting the student experiences that are underscored in this process.

Literature Review

Understanding the Status of higher education in Pakistan's public institutions is crucial to comprehend its dynamics, and the impacts higher education has on students' intellectual and personal development. A recent study explored the academic experiences of undergraduate students at public universities in Pakistan. Students are likely to encounter common challenges, including large class sizes, limited accessibility to resources, and

obsolete teaching methods that significantly damage the students' in-class performance and overall academic experience (Safdar, 2020).

Furthermore, depression affects the academic performance of university students in different ways, the most notable being disinterest, poor performance, distractions from doing the assigned tasks, and sleep disturbances. Studies conducted in Pakistan over the last few days have revealed that the number of undergraduates who experience symptoms of depression is high, with about 44.02% of total undergraduate students falling under the category of female (Ghayas et al. 2014). The fact that women are disproportionately affected by mental health concerns in the school setting exemplifies the necessity of gender-responsive approaches in addressing mental health issues among students (Owais, 2008).

In addition to mental health concerns, previous research underscores the role of institutional culture in exacerbating marginalization. These experiences contribute to a sense of alienation and decreased self-worth. In the Pakistani context, very few empirical studies have explored how institutionalized norms, teacher attitudes, and peer group dynamics contribute to marginalization. Incorporating these dimensions is essential to developing inclusive and responsive educational policies.

The effects of depression on academic performance are clear; students experience compromised learning outcomes, lower grades, and a drop in engagement in activities. Some of the symptoms, such as lack of interest, social withdrawal, and difficulty concentrating, are symptoms of depression, which worsens the underachievement cycle; hence, the negative impact of depression on students ' educational trajectory is affected.

The feeling of being judged, the social stigmatization, and the worries around confidentiality keep students from unveiling the problems they are facing or taking advantage of mental health resources. The Internet is a source of a lot of knowledge, and searching for it is quite convenient and faster (Shabir et al., 2015b). The ability to get as much data as needed to quench the thirst for knowledge is among the factors that enhance engagement and satisfaction. Choosing the right medium is an option that translates to gaining access to relevant data. The same experience was found in the universities in the

country of Pakistan, where almost all students use internet resources for their educational purposes and socializing relationships (Safdar & Khan, 2020). The point that is worrying is that the internet is involved in every aspect of our lives. The cultural changes may have positive and negative influences on students' educational progress and their personality (Iqbal et al., 2016). Various aspects of the general attitude of the university campus will shape students' lives in public sector universities. The research scrutinized the campus security and safety for the students of Pakistan.

The results of their research stated that inadequate security measures, campus violence, and harassment created a negative space for students' wellness and safety on campus. Although there exists a big body of work on public university students' experiences in Pakistan, it has some sizable lacunae in comparing the roles in shaping these experiences among different factors (Ahmad & Rehman, 2019). Although findings of the past literature centered on academic challenges, social interactions, extracurricular activities, or campus environment in isolation, contemporary researchers advocate for multidimensional studies that encompass all aspects of students' everyday lives. While the existing literature undoubtedly offers a lot of useful insights into a wide range of diverse student life in public sector university education in Pakistan, there is a marked research deficit in the area of the role of marginalized student groups in addressing these challenges.

At-risk groups comprising people living in the countryside, minority ethnicities, and the poorer among us might be faced with some specific challenges that might be untouched in the present literature. The existing literature contributes to a better understanding of the situations marginalized student populations find themselves in, but more research needs to be done in the areas where the understanding is lacking, and appropriate evidence-based strategies for supporting academic and personal development for marginalized students need to be developed.

Problem Statement

Despite endeavors to advance inclusiveness and variety in higher education, there persists an insufficiency of thorough research concentrating particularly on the interconnected dynamics of campus life for scholars originating from rural regions, marginalized ethnic groups, and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. This gap hinders the development of targeted interventions and evidence-based strategies aimed at addressing the specific needs and barriers faced by marginalized students, thereby limiting their opportunities for academic success and personal growth within the university setting. Furthermore, it also deep delves into the support system such students receive or did not receive while attaining Higher Education Therefore, there is a pressing need to investigate and explore the multifaceted experiences of marginalized student populations within the campus environment, to inform policy, practice, and institutional initiatives aimed at fostering inclusive, equitable, and supportive university communities.

Research Questions

1. How do cultural differences impact the academic performance, mental health, and overall university experience of marginalized student groups in Pakistan's higher education institutions?
2. How do intersectional identities, such as being both female and belonging to a marginalized ethnic group, influence the educational experiences and outcomes of students in public universities?
3. What role do socio-economic constraints play in shaping the educational trajectories and outcomes of marginalized students in public universities?
4. What role did Support System plays to overcome such barriers that influences the experiences of students in public sector Universities in Federal Capital of Pakistan?

Research Objectives

1. To investigate that how cultural differences impact the academic performance, mental health, and overall university experience of marginalized student groups in the higher education institutions of Pakistan.
2. To analyze in what sense intersectional identities, such as being both female and belonging to a marginalized ethnic group,

influence the educational experiences and outcomes of students in public universities.

3. To identify the role of socio-economic constraints in shaping the educational trajectories and outcomes of marginalized students in public universities

4. To investigate the role of Support System to overcome such barriers that influences the experiences of students in public sector Universities in Federal Capital of Pakistan.

Significance of the Research

The purpose of this research is to conduct a thorough exploration of the occurrences, hurdles, and impediments faced by marginalized student cohorts within the educational milieu of a public sector university in the Federal Capital of Pakistan. Additionally, it aims to evaluate the role of Support systems, accessibility, efficacy, and consequences of campus amenities and assistance programs, and to propose empirically grounded tactics and interventions directed towards addressing the necessities and barriers identified among marginalized student communities. It tackles the dearth of empirical information on the experiences of marginalized students in Pakistan's capital city's public higher education system. The results can assist in creating more inclusive initiatives and alert policymakers and university administrators to the weaknesses in support systems.

Research Methodology

This relates to the objective of developing insight into the reality construction/formation processes and the views/interpretations of specific excluded groups of students in relation to campus space.

This study was a social constructivist in nature and involved an attempt at inquiry regarding the analysis of experiences, perceptions, and challenges of marginalized students. Social constructivism explains that knowledge is constructed by individuals as they interact with the social environment and cultural artifacts. Social constructivism is a post-positivistic research philosophy that challenges the positivistic ideology of an objective world that exists independent of human perception (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). This relates to the objective of developing insight into the reality construction processes and the

interpretations of specific marginalized groups of students in relation to campus space.

Data Collection

The study applied the narrative methodology by using rich descriptions from the sampled students, marginalized students (Riessman, 2007). A qualitative method was used to gather data to obtain a deeper understanding of the participants' actual experiences. Interview data were generated with the help of qualitative interviews with marginalized students to properly look at their experiences. A list of semi-structured interview questions was developed based on the literature reviewed on the experiences of students in academic and campus settings. The sample consisted of two students representing marginalized students from public sector universities in Islamabad. This was purposeful because the research aim was to capture such students and to have a representation in academic institutions. Moreover, participants were given a prospective summary of the study.

The core concept of Reissman's (2007) Interactional data analysis was used for coding the data, focusing on the interests in storytelling as being essentially about a process of accounting which gives emphasis on the way in which the meaning is created collaboratively by the teller and the listener. It requires that all transcripts of the conversation include all the participants, and it is even better when the paralinguistic features of interaction are considered as well.

Priori codes were derived from literature; Some of the new codes (like 'educational experience', 'socio-economic constraints, 'Cultural barriers', and 'Support Systems') emerged as the study proceeded. Such emergent codes are quite informative as they identify specific circumstances in Campus life among marginalized students at the Public Sector University of Pakistan. There are many such narratives, and the current study aims to focus on one of them. The narrative analysis was used to develop themes from the data to construct the narratives.

Certain limitations are inherent in this study. First, to begin with, it should be noted that, like any other qualitative research, we do not make claims to generalized findings. One of the reasons is that we restricted ourselves to research universities in

Islamabad only in order to have manageable data and at least a relatively similar context. Economic challenges that students experience today are highly specific to the local context; thus, this study is likely to experience generalizability problems elsewhere.

Analysis and Findings

The narrative analysis of the study yielded a number of themes that we explain and illustrate by sketching out our participants' trajectories: the accidental Socio-Economic Challenges, Academic Challenges, and support system they did or did not receive; the most urgent issues faced by marginalized students at Campus Life in higher education of Pakistan, and implications to overcome the obstacles.

The student's narrative follows a clear structure, beginning with an introduction to their background and community, followed by the challenges faced, and their efforts to overcome those challenges. This structure allows the interviewer and audience to understand the context and the stakes involved. Questions were open-ended, allowing the students to share their story in their own words and at their own pace. This interactive dynamic creates a supportive environment for the student to share their experiences authentically.

Socio-Economic Challenges

Throughout the narrative, the students depict themselves as individuals who were persistently seeking higher education, though facing numerous socio-economic challenges. As such, they build their identity as a member of a persecuted social group that experiences discrimination and poverty. This positioning identifies their issues, which have not only economic but also cultural roots.

Various socioeconomic factors act as major barriers for the marginalized group students in public universities where the students have limited access and inability to achieve in the academic setups due to financial woes such as paying tuition fees, quality accommodation, books and other necessary materials for learning that sometimes puts pressure on the students leading to work for multiple offices to earn survival needs or be burdened by heavy loans.

For instance, asking a girl about the socio-economic barriers she faced while pursuing her higher education, she replied: "Of course... The first problem was poverty: we were poor, and so was everyone around us. My father and mother used to work as laborers and earn meager wages to sustain the family, so there were no financial resources to support my education beyond high school. Moreover, there exist certain customs in my community that discourage female children from seeking education beyond a specified stage."

Moreover, the student outlines the barriers associated with poverty, which forced her to search for scholarships, aid, and employment to pay for education. She also stands for cultural obstacles in her community that forced girls not to study further, and thus necessitated the need to educate them on the issue.

Cultural Differences

Being a student of marginalized areas in Pakistani higher education has many possible challenges that interfere with learning, such as the language issue and the lack of capability to think critically, which can become extremely obstructive.

The student represents themselves as a 'vulnerable' group of people, highlighting their challenges of oppression. In an interview, the recounting of the student's experience with the university system and his collision with it, the student constructs an identity that is both resilient and vulnerable. This duality conveys the fact that their experience is both heroic and tragic; it highlights the tremendous courage it takes to survive such conditions while showing that it also entails a deep sense of loss and despair.

For instance, when required to elaborate on how cultural differences influence the academic achievement, mental health, and overall university experience of marginalized student populations? The student replied: The key cultural factors are very important but may pose several challenges for marginalized students. For example, some of the students come from families with conservative views that cannot encourage critical thinking and are afraid to openly express themselves through discussions. Besides, there can be a conflict in the norms and cultural expectations they are used to and the university environment, which may result

in students succumbing to stress and further mental illnesses."

The consistency of the student's narrative also demonstrates logical sequencing, where the challenges are first introduced when the student begins attending the university and then proceeds to discuss the strategy that is employed to deal with these challenges. With the help of this structure, it is easier to highlight difficulties that arise and how they were solved.

These cultural gaps are magnified in a diverse educational space where institutional expectations are often set by dominant groups. Marginalized students may feel pressure to assimilate into dominant cultural norms, causing cultural dissonance. Drawing on Hofstede's dimensions of culture, these students may experience a clash between collectivist family expectations and the individualistic demands of academia. Bridging this gap requires inclusive pedagogical practices and culturally sensitive support systems.

Intersectional Identities

The existing intersectional identities among the learners, like being a woman from a disadvantaged ethnic group, exacerbate the discrimination, sense of belonging, and access to institutional resources in public universities. This negative influence of students' gender and ethnic identities strongly overlaps and is expressed in such areas as students' poorer quality of learning and retention, increased dropout rates, and negative effects of college experiences on the mental health of these vulnerable students in comparison to that of privileged peers.

Additionally, Crenshaw's intersectionality theory illustrates that these identities do not function independently but intersect to produce distinct experiences of marginalization. For instance, a female student from a rural background may experience both gender-based discrimination and linguistic barriers, which are not adequately addressed by generalized student support programs. Therefore, policy interventions must recognize these layered vulnerabilities rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all solution.

Support Systems

It is important to identify support systems that can be useful to marginalized students, that will assist them to continue with their studies and pass. The interview pays much attention to the role of support systems in the educational career opportunities of marginalized students. The students acknowledge 'family, professors, and mentors' for their help in sustaining the given endurance and achievement.

On asking one student, she replied: It later turned out that my family had always been my greatest supporter, even though they were at first opposed to my decision. They supported my decisions and saw the efforts I was making at the same time. Thirdly, I discovered several supportive professors and mentors in the university who recognized my potential and hence assured me that they would assist me in actualizing it."

Implications and Conclusion

The study adds value to the qualitative exploration of experiences of marginalized groups of students in a public sector university located in the Federal Capital of Pakistan and its campus environment. By applying the Interactional Narrative Analysis, the study manages to demonstrate a complex picture of the obstacles that these students face, and they come to the same conclusion in the form of socio-economic barriers or diversity-related issues and intersectional identities. The narratives from the chosen students reflect their capacity to overcome obstacles and explain how they are supported by those around them in their academic journeys.

The implications from this study reflect the direction to address the needs of the underprivileged learners through directed policies and concrete actions in classrooms. Developing more financial aid opportunities, providing important psychological and counseling resources, and increasing cultural sensitivity at colleges within Pakistan would all make post-secondary education much more inclusive and fairer. Today, campus environment leaders should create an atmosphere of understanding and help marginalized students meet challenges and succeed on their academic and personal journey.

Finally, this research can support the fact that a higher education system can only be made more inclusive and equitable by meeting the needs of the marginalized student groups. This way, universities will not only be promoting the academic excellence

and general welfare of these students but also striving to add to a fairer society.

Recommendations

1. Inclusive Policy Development: Universities should formulate policies that specifically address the needs of marginalized students, including mental health support, financial aid, and anti-discrimination frameworks.

2. Sensitization Workshops: Regular training and awareness programs should be held for faculty, staff, and students to promote inclusivity and discourage bias or discrimination.

3. Dedicated Support Units: Establishment of dedicated support units or liaison officers for marginalized communities can serve as a bridge between administration and affected students.

4. Student Representation: Ensure that marginalized groups are represented in student councils and decision-making bodies to voice their concerns and contribute to institutional reforms.

5. Accessibility Improvements: Improve physical and academic accessibility for students with disabilities or those facing language .

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