LOOKING OUT AND LOOKING IN: EXPLORING A CASE OF STUDENT TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS ABOUT THE CURRICULUM CONTENT OF DISTANCE TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAM AT ONE GENERAL UNIVERSITY IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract:

Objectives: This study was aimed to assess quantitatively and qualitatively the students' perceptions of the clarity of objectives for the selected course content in the distance teacher education program at university level, to compare the perceptions of students towards selection and organization of curriculum content with regards of their enrolled distance learning teacher education program at university level and to explore the perceptions of Student teachers' gratification towards the proportion of theory and practice in the curriculum with regards to the gender. **Materials and Methods:** A mixed methods study design was adopted. As a whole, 200 participants were selected randomly for survey. Four focus group discussions were conducted with the participants of the study. Because the investigation was about education problems and the participants also belonged to the education department, they were aware of the technicalities and seriousness of the problem. **Results:** Out of total one hundred eight seven (187) students (93.5%) returned the completed questionnaire. The overall mean score was 3.627 indicating "more positive than negative perceptions". M.Phil students had positive perceptions towards selection and organization of curriculum content in distance learning teacher education programs at university level than B.Ed, M.Ed and M.A students. Male students were more positive than females towards gratification about the proportion of theory and practice in the curriculum. **Conclusions:** It is important to assess the students' perceptions of curriculum objectives of their teacher

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training program. There is a need to improve the content of teacher education institutions according to levels of interest and maturity of student teachers. There is also a need to shift the focus of content from theory to practice. Quality of distance teacher educators needs to be addressed.

Keywords: students' perceptions, distance teacher education, mixed method, content selection

1. Introduction

Teaching is the process of delivering academic instructions to students in an institution of learning. It can also be defined as practical act of teachers which students should follow to do themselves in future and to make them to think critically (Hornby, 2006). Therefore, teachers are predictable to mold their coaching to rally the pupil's echelon and utilize their each day practice understandings and doings to facilitate them learn (Hamdan & Hajooj, 2006). Academically and resourcefully capable educators are probable to contribute a lot of their time and endeavor to build up and strengthen their pupils' creative thinking. This generates in their learners optimistic approach towards what is being trained, established and demonstrated in spite of its confrontations. Jahin and Alexander (2006) stressed that capable and proficient instructors have significant responsibilities to participate in influential their state's progress and opulence.

These statements have been propped up by Bisher (2005) who argued that teachers are vital regardless of new expansions in edification such as up to date teaching aids to smooth the progress of the teaching and learning practice. They play significant roles of cooperating and converse with their pupils.

These responsibilities are essential since they help in assuring the attainment of suitable results. This is auxiliary exemplified by Al-magableh (2010) who described that a well-trained teacher can endorse and abridge knowledge for learners taking into account their diverse communal and cultural environments and individual variations. It is therefore expected for teacher educators to focus on prospective teachers' pre-service training program. Education is the practice through which a country holistically develops its individuals and the tutor, as a communal engineer, silhouettes the providence of the succeeding cohorts towards the preferred trend (Khan & Islam, 2015). The preparation of new teachers is a major research issue that continues (as it has for several decades) to receive considerable attention and to promote many discussions.

"The major hope in preparing exemplary teachers for the twenty-first century lies in designing innovative, high-quality programs that are based on relevant research and best practices."

(Goodlad, 1999, p.56)

1.1. Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study was to understand the curriculum offered in the distance teacher education programs in Pakistan at university level in particular, and to figure out the circumstances of teacher education system in general.

The objectives of the study were to judge the university students' perceptions about:

1. The clarity of objectives for the selected course content in the distance teacher education program at university level.
2. To compare the perceptions of students towards selection and organization of curriculum content with regards of their enrolled distance learning teacher education program at university level.
3. To explore the perceptions of Student teachers' gratification towards the proportion of theory and practice in the curriculum with regards to the gender.

1.2. Context of the study

The university in which this research has been done is situated in the eastern region of Punjab province Pakistan. It was raised from college to university level in October, 2002. This university was also in top ten General Universities category since 2010, which was initiated by Higher Education Commission of Pakistan, Ministry of Education, Pakistan on ''Quality and Research Based''. There were two reasons for choosing this university. First, the researcher has been graduated from directorate of distance learning of this university in 2014, so the investigation was easy and suitable for researcher. Second, the investigated university is a General University at Large category, which offers teacher education programs at different levels through Distance education since 2012.

The researcher chose the Prospective teacher as participants of the study. This study is an endeavor to fill the gap. Oliva recommended that the students of high school or above are mature enough to give their opinion about the curriculum (1992:110). She also admitted that they can help and affect the decisions of curriculum developers. The perceptions of students can help the curriculum experts to know how they perceive the curriculum (Oliva 1992:112). The perceptions of students will not only provide the feedback about the current curriculum but also they can be taken as a

baseline for a needs assessment in developing new curriculum content or in improving the current one. So in this study the researcher tried to discern the perception of university students about the curriculum content according to selection and organization criteria already established by the researchers and curriculum experts. The participants belonged to M.Phil, M.A. M.Ed and B.Ed classes; the focus of the study was teacher education programs.

2. Literature review

"Effective teachers constitute a valuable human resource for schools, one that needs to be treasured and supported" (Darling-Hammond, 2003, p. 7. At present, the importance of effective teaching is increasing day by day (Darling-Hammond 2006).

Effective teaching needs effective teachers. It is obvious that the better teachers have a significant role in affecting the learners' achievement (Education Commission of States 2007).

"The Development of a nation depends upon the development of its citizens. The development of its citizens depends upon the development of their education; the development of their education depends upon the development of their teachers."

(Ibrahim, 1997)

"The quality of education is directly related to the quality of instruction in the classroom. The teacher is considered the most crucial factor in implementing all education reforms at the grassroots level. It is a fact that the academic qualifications, knowledge of the subject matter, competence and skills of teaching and the commitment of the teacher have effective impact on the teaching-learning process. Recognizing the deteriorating quality of education at various levels, efforts need to be intensified to accord adequate priority to the effectiveness of teacher education programs and professional development of the in-service teachers in the country"

(GOP, NEP, 1998-2010)

Teacher is the nucleus of the entire instructive system and the most noteworthy fountain to convey essential and creative modifications in the teaching-learning practice. All-round efforts are desirable to generate insightful and creative educators who are holistically qualified through a continuing professional development process. The reality remains that teachers are the driving force of modification, as they renovate and improve the whole learning configuration through incorporated and pioneering

looms in their classrooms. Professional development of a teacher is as essential as provisions for living. As a body without soul it is invalid, so teacher lacking enviable education is invalid (Khan & Islam 2015).Researchers are agreed on how we can prepare good teachers (Smith 2005). A lot of literature describes the content and elements of a good teacher education program and curriculum (Darling-Hammond 2006; Kennedy 2005; Korthagen 2004).

A teacher training syllabus that consists of distinct courses rather than an incorporated curriculum plan can hinder candidates' capability to learn the intricacies of instruction and transform them to put into practice. One useful loom to syllabus design is Bruner's (1977) spiral curriculum where basic ideas are accessible in a spiral, iterative manner. A curriculum as it develops should revisit these vital ideas frequently, edifice upon them until the learners has clutches each proposal that integrated with them (Darling Hammond, et al., 2005). Houston (1990) stated, *"If teacher education institutions are to succeed in providing prospective teachers with skills and knowledge needed for effective performance… the experiences provided in the classroom must correspond to the goals established for the entire teacher education program"* (p. 516).

Houston found that a gap exists between what student teachers have studied and what should be studied. He stated that *"…there are major gaps in what has been studied and in recommendations regarding what should be studied about the teacher education process"* (p. 25). Goodlad, 1999, stated 14 elements for teacher preparation programs to meet with the challenges of preparing exemplary beginner teachers including, clear goals stated as outcomes, giving direction to curricular and instructional decision and experiences. Relevance to the situations those are likely to be confronted by future teachers. Pedagogical content knowledge that provides candidates with collection of teaching strategies and theories underlying each, which are connected to the discipline and ways of knowing (pp. 51-52).

Ducharme *et al*. (2007) have been reported that the main challenges for preliminary teacher education in the twenty-first century in Pakistan included determining the most advantageous equilibrium amid theory and practice in the syllabus of teacher education in numerous and changeable situations in which it is offered. The eminences of educators produced in any institution consistently depend upon the curriculum offered to them during their preparation stage. Mbajiorgu and Reid (2006) stated curriculum should be set in language which is easy to get to the learners, circumventing the use of avoidable expressions and submission vigilant explanation of terms where the usual appropriate denotation can cause puzzlement; rooted in expressions of endeavors which seek to build up intangible considerate rather than recollect of information and required appraisals which are incorporated into the

syllabus and reveals rationale of curriculum, that should be decisive as well as cumulative focused on understanding rather than just recalling and, for thinking rather than memorization. There are numerous ways to assess the curriculum, more than a few of these could usually be used in mixture: dialogue with class comfortable discussions or comments of individual learner, interviews with assessment forms, observation in class, video-tape of own teaching, documents analysis, performance test questionnaire, self-assessment written test (Stufflebeam, 2001).

3. Methods

A mixed methods study design was adopted. The scope of the study encompassed the M.Phil, M.A. M.Ed and B.Ed programs of the Directorate of Distance Learning education department.

3.1. Participants

Total 200 participants were selected, to whom the survey has been distributed. Eight participants did not respond and five questionnaires were discarded due incomplete response. In total, 187 participants responded to the survey with a response rate of 93.5%. The number of male participants was 88 (47.1%) while that of female participants was 99 (52.9%). The participants of focused groups were not included in this total number. There were 119 participants included from the B.Ed classes, 14 from M.Ed, 27 from M.A and 27 from M.Phil class. The students of the first, second and the third semester were selected from the classes. Among the total participants, the ages ranged between 20 and 29 years (87.7%), which comprised 164 students, while 13 participants were aged between 30 and 39 years, which comprised almost 7% of total and was the second largest age group. Hence, we can say that more than 87% of the participants belonged to 20–29 age group. This age can be considered mature enough to understand educational problems and respond appropriately. Because the investigation was about education problems and the participants also belonged to the education department, they were aware of the technicalities and seriousness of the problem. Among the remaining participants 9 (4.8%) were between 40-49 years and that of only one participant was above 50 years.

3.2. Data collection and analysis

A mixed method design was exercised for the study, it spotlights on gathering, investigating, and integrating both quantitative and qualitative data in a sole study or sequence of researches. Its vital idea is that the application of quantitative and

qualitative approaches, in mixture, provides improved understanding of research problems than either approach alone (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Quantitative data was collected by administering a questionnaire and qualitative data was gathered by adopting a focus group technique. The research instrument for collecting qualitative data was the focus group. Four focus group discussions were conducted with the participants of the study. One focus group was held with Mphil class, while with the MA/M.Ed, one focus group discussions was administered and two focus groups were held with B.Ed class; focus groups were included with the fresh students, sophomores, and the juniors. Every focus group consisted of eight to ten participants. All the ethical considerations in the research had been taken into account while doing the research. The focus group discussions were held with the help of a Faculty member from Directorate of Distance Learning of concerned university. The participants were told to express their ideas freely and openly. They were convinced that different people's ideas may be diverse but at the same time, every person's idea may be correct in its own place and context. The participants were also asked to keep the different ideas of discussion. They were told that their discussions would be recorded for study purposes. The researcher recorded every discussion. After every discussion, the recordings were transcribed. General themes were identified from the data and codes were assigned to the information. After coding, the data were analyzed systematically and findings and conclusions were drawn.

Questionnaires are widely used for study purposes (McMillan 2004; Fraenkel & Wallen 2000). Their administration is very easy and they are easily understandable by the respondents (McMillan 2004:157). For these reasons, the researchers administered self-tailored questionnaires for the study. The Likert Scale form of the questionnaire was employed for its suitability during the study. At first, the scale was piloted and then refined according to the feedback of pilot testing. The last draft, consisting of 23 items (with one open-ended question) was finalized for the study. The five points rating scale was used.

The options for the statements were: strongly disagree, agree neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree. The reliability of the instrument was 0.79. The total items in the scale were 23 when it was finalized for administration (excluding questions about demographic information). The questionnaire delivered to the participants for their response.

The questionnaire was administered by the researcher himself with the help of some of friends. The researcher was able to do the job smoothly and the presence of the friends was helped in communicating with the participants. All the questionnaires were collected by the researcher within two days during face to face sessions of said

programs. Only eight respondents did not respond while five questionnaires were discarded. When the data collection process was completed, the data were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive Statistics

Table: 1: Demographic characteristics

Variables	N	Percentage
Gender		
Male	88	47.1
Female	99	52.9
Age		
20-29	164	87.7
30-39	13	7
40-49	9	4.8
Above50	1	0.5
Program Enrolled		
B.Ed	119	63.6
M.A	14	7.5
M.Ed	27	14.4
M.Phil	27	14.4
Academic Qualification		
B.A	17	9.1
B.Sc	18	9.6
M.A	58	31
M.Sc	94	50.3
Profession		
Teaching	80	42.8
Student	107	57.2
Teaching Experience		
1-4	59	31.6
5-9	15	8
10-14	1	0.5
Above 15	8	4.3
No	104	55.6

Table 2: Perceptions score towards the clarity of objectives for the selected course content in the distance teacher education programs at university level

		Minimum	Maximum
Item Means	3.627	2.898	4.027

As shown in Table 2, the score ranges from 2.898 to 4.027 with a mean of 3.627 indicating that perceptions towards the clarity of objectives were generally positive.

Table 3: ANOVA results for Students teacher' Perceptions towards selection and organization of curriculum content in distance learning teacher education programs at university level

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	19.865	3	6.622	37.923	.000
Within Groups	31.953	183	.175		
Total	51.818	186			

As shown in Table 3, there were significant differences in the perceptions of students of their learning environment according to the programs they enrolled [F (3, 31.953) = 37.923, p =<0.001].Post hoc test (Tukey's HSD) was carried out to find out where the differences lay. The results are shown in the table below

Table 4: Post Hoc test (Tukey's HSD) to find out differences

(I) Programme Enrolled	(J) Programme Enrolled	Mean Difference (I-J)	Sig.
	M.Ed	-.197	.341
B.Ed	M.A	-.094	.715
	M.Phil	-.946*	.000
	B.Ed	.197	.341
M.Ed	M.A	.103	.877
	M.Phil	-.749*	.000
	B.Ed	.094	.715
M.A	M.Ed	-.103	.877
	M.Phil	-.852*	.000
	B.Ed	.946*	.000
M.Phil	M.Ed	.749*	.000
	M.A	.852*	.000

*The mean difference is significant at 0.05 level

According to table, there was significant difference in perceptions between B.Ed and M.Phil students (p<.001). Similarly, a significant difference was found between M.Ed and M.phil students (p<.001) and M.A and M.phil students (p<.001). However, there was no significant difference among B.Ed, Med. M.A students (p>.05). This result meant

that M.Phil students had positive perceptions M.Phil towards selection and organization of curriculum content in distance learning teacher education programs at university level.

Table 5: Differences in Perceptions among male a and female respondents towards the proportion of theory and practice in the curriculum

Gender	N	Mean	SD	DF	T	Sig
M	88	1.98	1.222	185	2.039	0.043
F	99	1.64	1.064			

The result in Table 5 showed that there was significant differences in perceptions of males and females towards gratification about the proportion of theory and practice in the curriculum, males were more positive (M = 1.98, SD = 1.222) and females (M = 1.64, SD = 1.064), [t (185) = 2.039, P = 0.043, two tailed]. Male student-teachers had more favorable perceptions about proportion of theory and practice than their female counterparts.

4.2. Qualitative findings
Qualitative findings consisted of two parts, namely open ended and focus group discussion. Different important themes emerged from careful analysis of the data.

A. Open ended question findings
Qualitative findings were drawn from open ended question "*what do you think should be done to make the Curriculum Content better*?" are following:

The most frequent responses suggested by students were content should be according to modern needs and the second most frequent suggestion was about the variety of courses. The participants suggested that there should be a large variety of courses so that they could select the courses of their own choice. B.Ed, M.Ed, M.A students strongly recommended that teacher educators teaching them are retired or temporary from other universities, so they are unable to deliver curriculum content which created misunderstanding about curriculum. Most of the B.Ed student responded level of curriculum is very difficult, it should be reduced and study guides should be including understanding curriculum terminologies. Only M.Phil students did not recommended anything for the betterment of curriculum.

B. Focus group discussions findings
Objectives precision: There is no clarity about the objectives of different subjects.

"We have a little bit awareness about the objectives but have no clear understanding. Only few teachers gave us an idea about objective in the first lesson on very first day."

(Response of a B.Ed focused group)

It was found that the students are even ignorant of the importance of the knowledge about the goals. They thought that it is same whether they know or do not know about the goals.

"Whether we know the objective or don't know it is same for us because the teaching of teacher is not clear to us and we are also not serious for classes because we don't care about it. I think the teachers have only general rough understanding of objectives and not clear about every objective of curriculum."

(Response of a B.Ed focused group)

"Even views given by one of the respondents were the most attention-grabbing: To know about the objectives is not the responsibility of students, rather it is the responsibility of the teachers and some of the teachers themselves not clear about the objectives."

(Response of aM.Phil focused group)

Content Selection: The selection of content is not according to the psychological needs of the students. The prospective teachers thought that this content was too difficult for them to grasp the meanings and to understand them.

"Some of the content is really hard for us especially there are a lot of theories and it is too difficult to understand the theories; so boring and burdensome, really boring. I think there should be fewer theories because too many theories make the course too much tiresome."

(Responses of B.Ed/M.Ed/MA focused groups)

The selection of content is according to the psychological needs of the students.

"The prospective teachers thought that this content was not difficult for them to grasp the meanings and to understand them. Some of the content is really easy for us."

(Response of M.Phil focused group)

Cross-Curricular Skills: communiqué is vital to the entire curriculum. Students should be able to converse in organize to expand as persons, to articulate themselves

communally, expressively and physically, to connect with others and to contribute as component of civilization.

> *"The prospective teachers thought that content was not able to produce cross curricular skills. No one particularly thought us about cross curricular skill, we do not exactly know about co-curricular skills. I think there should be proper guidance about the importance and need of co-curricular skills."*
>
> (Response of an M.Ed/M.A focused group)

Insufficiency of choices for selecting courses: More choices for selections fulfill the individual needs of the students. As we know, psychologically every student is an individual personality and his/her psychological needs are also different, so we should provide as many choices to the students as we can.

> *"I am not really interested in some of the courses. For me these are so dull and boring … you asked me why I chose those subjects; actually, I have no option. There are only less options to select the courses so I have to select these course, if not what could I choice?"*
>
> (Response of a Mphil focused group)

Proportion of theory and practice: An appropriate proportion between theory and practice is crucial for a successful teacher education program, but in the case of this university, all the participants except M.Phil students had agreed that the practical aspect had been marginalized during the courses. An increased proportion of practice was most frequent suggestion furthered by the survey respondents.

> *"There are lots of boring theories while practical skills are too small. I really don't like theories; theories are dry and hard to learn.*
>
> (Response of a focused group)

The respondents recommended that both the number of pedagogy periods should be increased.

> *"The courses about how to teach should be more and the frequency of periods for the practice and pedagogy courses should be increased only twice in a week   is   too   short period."*
>
> (Response of a focused group)

The focused group results were approximately the similar as that of the questionnaire with little differences, that during the focused group the respondents gave more thorough and clear answers. They were frank in articulating their judgments.

5. Discussion and conclusions

To better serve the needs of the students, it is important to examine the perceptions of student teachers on their teacher education program experiences (W. Pettway, 2006). It is also important to identify the support and resources teachers need from these programs. However, teachers' voices are rarely included or validated (Rigden, 1996). The teaching profession is an important profession which is the backbone of the educational system for every nation. In the teaching profession the perceptions of prospective teachers is of great significance. The present study investigated and compared the perceptions of the student teachers of B.Ed, M.Ed, M.A and M.Phil offered through distance learning in a well know general university in Pakistan.

The first objective of study was the clarity of objectives for the selected content in the distance teacher education program at university level. Results imply that the perceptions of prospective teachers towards the clarity of objectives for the selected content teaching profession were generally positive. This result is consistent with the findings of many previous studies for example Nicole & Macfarlane-Dick (2006), Sadler (1989); Black & William (1998).

The second objective of the study was to compare the perceptions of students towards selection and organization of curriculum content with regards their enrolled distance learning teacher education program at university level. The post Hoc comparison test indicated that the mean score of M.Phil student was the highest followed by M.A, M.Ed and B.ed students. This result is consistent with the findings of Hunkins (1993); Geis (1996), Laursen 2007. But B.Ed students were less positive perceptions so this is the voice of student teachers who are the main stakeholders of a teacher education system. This resulted consistent with Chen and Mu (2010) and (Song 2007).

T-test was applied to verify the third objective to explore the perceptions of Student teachers' gratification towards the proportion of theory and practice in the curriculum with regards to the gender. These findings seem to agree with Husen and Postlethwaite (1991). Result is also consistent with Laursen (2007), Zanting et al. (2003); Gore and Gitlin (2004); Hascher et al. (2004) studies.

The findings of this study are subject to two limitations. First, the data apply only to the 187 prospective teachers who attended four different programs in university. Second, the findings cannot be generalized; this is not because this particular university in Pakistan is different from other universities. The particular research university was chosen because the researcher graduated from there. Despite limited generalizability, this study represents an attempt to understand student teachers' perceptions of their curriculum content in terms. The results from this study identified areas of strengths and weaknesses within teacher education programs students' perspectives.

One important component of teachers' learning to teach comes from their teacher education experiences in teacher education institutions (Darling-Hammond & Bartaz, 2007). The role of the teacher is to suggest through experience, and his or her own understanding, a route that would be most successful for students'. Teacher education must, therefore, create necessary awareness among teachers about their new roles and responsibilities (Rajput *et al*, 2005). Perceptions of teachers are important to evaluate education programs of teaching effectiveness (Darling-Hammond & Wise, 1985). The present study investigated and compared the perceptions of the students of distance teacher education programs about the curriculum content of Distance Teacher Education Programs of different level such as students of B.Ed, M.Ed, M.A, and M.Phil.

1. The present study found that prospective teachers have generally positive perceptions towards the clarity of objectives about their teacher education program.
2. There is a statistically significant difference between B.Ed, M.Ed, M.A and M.Phil students towards selection and organization of curriculum content. M.Phil students were more positive and B.Ed students were less positive.
3. There is a statistically significant difference between male and female student teachers' perception of theory and practice in teacher education program, males were more positive than females.
4. Quality of teacher educators who are teaching them is not good, mostly are retired or temporary from other universities, so they are unable to deliver curriculum content which created misunderstanding about curriculum.

6. Recommendations

In view of the conclusions, the following recommendations were made;
1. A comparative study on distance and institutional based programs should be done regarding perceptions of Curriculum Content in different universities in Pakistan.

2. A study should be carried out on the role of distance teacher educators in mentoring distance student teachers.

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