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PEDAGOGICAL INNOVATION FOR SUSTAINABLE EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY OF TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAMS IN PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

Achieving sustainable quality education in Pakistan is a critical challenge. This decisive challenge is central to Sustainable Development Goal 4, which is named Quality Education. The study's main aim was to employ a qualitative single-case design to explore the role of higher education at the University in attaining ESD in Pakistan. This single case study investigated how pedagogical innovations impact the quality of education. Data was collected through twenty semi-structured interviews and three focus group discussions with teachers, administrators and students from a public university of Punjab. This study used an evaluative case study design. The results revealed that fostering immersive learning strategies and pedagogical inclusivity significantly enhanced the students' engagement and learning outcomes. Targeted teacher-training programs improved instructional quality in attaining ESD quality. Additionally, the introduction of innovative assessment methods provided a more holistic evaluation of student performance. Recommendations include pursuing curriculum reforms to embed these innovations and strengthening institutional support for community engagement. The case study's visions align with SDG-4 and suggest that pedagogical innovations can improve inclusive, high-quality education in resource-constrained situations.

Keywords: *Pedagogy, innovations, ESD, sustainability, qualitative case study.*

Introduction

The global transformation of educational systems has become progressively more essential in meeting societal demands, aligning with international commitments, and achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Sustainable Development Goal 4 aims to "*ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all".* Achieving this target requires developing open access to education; thus, we can improve its quality. Worldwide, policy makers and teachers are prioritizing inclusivity, equity, and innovation in teaching. To meet diverse learners' needs, we should prepare youth for rapid societal changes.

In Pakistan, these priorities are particularly challenging because of the enduring educational challenges. Resource-constrained contexts should find creative solutions to overcome limited funding, infrastructure gaps, and capacity shortfalls to deliver sustainable and high-quality education (Ali, 2024). As a result, there is a growing recognition that pedagogical innovations from new teaching methodologies to reforming assessments can play a pivotal role in improving educational outcomes and moving countries closer to the SDG4 targets (Vindigni, 2024).

One of the core challenges in providing inclusive education is catering to learners' diverse needs. Inclusive education has become a cornerstone of global education reform, grounded in the principle that every child has the right to learn alongside their peers, regardless of ability or background (Saif et al., 2024; Muhammad et al., 2024). International declarations since the 1990s, such as UNESCO's Salamanca Statement, have urged governments to adopt inclusive schooling as a standard practice. This approach emphasizes welcoming all learners, including those with disabilities, from marginalized communities, or with different learning styles, into mainstream classrooms with appropriate support. Modern pedagogical tools and approaches make it increasingly feasible to differentiate instruction and accommodate varied needs, thereby helping all students to thrive (Huang et al., 2024).

Assistive technologies and multilingual resources enable students with disabilities and

diverse linguistic backgrounds to access the curriculum. Such personalized and adaptive strategies not only enhance accessibility but also foster a classroom environment in which every student feels valued and supported. Research indicates that inclusive pedagogies can improve academic and social outcomes for students with and without special needs (Ali, 2024).

Many teachers have not received training in inclusive teaching methods and feel unconfident about managing diverse classrooms (Cretu & Morandau, 2020). Societal attitudes can also pose barriers to the value of inclusion that persists among some parents and educators. Educational authorities and parents may consider inclusive learning an unnecessary challenge even though research demonstrates its importance (Vindigni, 2024). Moreover, inadequate funding and weak policy enforcement have reduced the implementation of inclusive education programs, leading to uneven regional progress. These gaps highlight the need for more accessible and accessible models of inclusive pedagogy that can be implemented in low-resource settings. Nonetheless, there are promising signs: initiatives leveraging community support and low-cost technologies have begun to show that even resource-constrained schools can move toward greater inclusivity (Huang et al., 2024).

Continuous teacher training and professional development are vital for sustaining high-quality, student-centered education (Abbas et al., 2021; Naveed et al., 2022). Teachers are the center of any educational reform; innovative curricula or pedagogical models only succeed if teachers have the skills and mindset to implement them effectively (Ali, 2024). Globally, effective teacher development programs emphasize active, ongoing learning for teachers, aligning with Target 4.c of SDG4, which calls for substantially increasing the supply of qualified teachers. Contemporary teacher education theory advocates practical, collaborative, and reflective training. Educators benefit from engaging in experiential learning during their training, much like their students do; opportunities such as teaching practica, simulations, and peer learning communities allow teachers to apply new methods in realistic settings and reflect on their experiences. However, teacher training in Pakistan has historically faced significant shortcomings. Pre-service education programs often focus on rote theoretical knowledge at the expense of practical classroom skills (Jamil et al., 2024).

Encouraging a culture of lifelong learning is another crucial element in promoting quality sustainable education. In the context of rapid technological change and evolving job markets, individuals must be prepared to learn and adapt continuously. Formal schooling alone cannot equip students with the knowledge and skills they need throughout their careers or civic lives. Therefore, a quality education system instils in learners the motivation and ability to pursue lifelong learning and holistic development (Ahmad et al., 2025), seek out new knowledge, promote twenty-first century and twenty-first century skills (Azmat et al., 2021; Jamil, Mehmood et al., 2024; Naseer et al., 2022) and engage in personal development beyond the classroom (Westheimer, 2020). Many countries have initiatives such as community learning centers, evening adult classes, and online courses to reach those who missed education or need new skills. In Pakistan, where the adult literacy rate is approximately 60%, lifelong learning programs are vital for social inclusion and economic empowerment. Government and non-governmental organizations have undertaken literacy campaigns for women, technical and vocational education and training (TVET) centers (Pirzada et al., 2023) for youth, and the Allama Iqbal Open University's distance learning programs to extend learning opportunities to millions of Pakistanis outside the formal education system.

Objectives of the Study

1. To evaluate the effectiveness of innovative pedagogical practices at higher educational institutions in Pakistan.
2. To assess the role of innovative assessment methods and immersive learning environments in promoting lifelong learning in attaining quality Education for Sustainable Development.

Literature Review

The term "innovative teaching methodologies" encompasses a range of student-centered instructional approaches designed to engage learners and actively improve learning outcomes. These methodologies draw on constructivist learning theories, such as Vygotsky's socio-constructivism, which highlights the role of social interaction and scaffolding in learning, and Kolb's experiential learning cycle, which emphasizes learning through experience and reflection (Vygotsky, 1978; Kolb, 2014). In contrast to traditional lecture-based instruction, innovative pedagogies require students to participate, collaborate and think critically (Jamil, Mehmood et al., 2024).

Active learning is a unifying principle underlying many of these methods. Collaborative learning not only enhances comprehension but also develops interpersonal and communication skills that are essential in the 21st century. Flipped classrooms represent a blend of technological (Jamil, Aslam et al., 2024) and pedagogical innovations. In a flipped model, direct content delivery (e.g., lectures) is shifted out of class time, often through video lectures or readings assigned as homework, and class time is devoted to interactive exercises, discussions, or problem-solving that apply the content. Studies of flipped classrooms have generally reported improvements in student engagement and, in many cases, academic performance, if students complete the preparatory work and teachers use class time effectively. This model proved particularly useful during the COVID-19 pandemic, when educators worldwide had to rely on remote and in-person instructions. Some Pakistani universities and schools that adopted elements of the flipped approach (out-of-class video lessons combined with in-class practice) found that students were more active participants in learning when classes resumed than before. However, challenges such as uneven access to technology had to be managed.

Recent studies have emphasized the importance of adaptive teaching methods that cater to different student abilities, creating a more inclusive learning environment (Ainscow, 2020). Techniques such as differentiated instruction and personalized learning pathways have improved engagement and academic outcomes for diverse learners (Tomlinson, 2017).

These approaches involve tailoring content, processes, or learning products according to student readiness and interests – for example, varying the difficulty of tasks, offering assignment choices, or using both visual and auditory teaching materials. By meeting students at their current level and through their preferred learning modes, teachers can help students progress more effectively. However, research indicates that implementation of inclusive practices remains inconsistent, particularly in developing countries with limited resources and training for inclusion (Tran et al., 2020). In many low-income contexts, schools struggle with large class sizes, insufficient special education expertise, and a lack of assistive devices, making it challenging to support students with special needs in general education classrooms. Pakistan exemplifies these difficulties: while the country's education policies endorse inclusion in principle, ground-level practice often lags.

In Punjab, Pakistan most schools lack basic accommodations, such as wheelchair access, specialized learning materials, or teacher aides for students with disabilities. Without such support, even well-intentioned teachers may be unable to meet the needs

of children with visual, hearing, cognitive, or mobility impairments in their classes. Attitudinal barriers also impede progress beyond physical and instructional resources. Cultural stigma around disability remains prevalent; some parents and educators view children with disabilities as incapable of learning or worry that inclusive education will slow down the class size. As a result, there is resistance to mainstreaming these students. A study (Kamran & Bano, 2023) found that children with disabilities in Pakistan are still broadly educated in segregated special schools, reflecting weak enforcement of inclusive education policies. This suggests that more substantial political commitment and straightforward implementation frameworks are required to translate policies into action. Despite these obstacles, encouraging developments and success stories point toward solutions. NGO-led programs in some regions have trained cohorts of master teachers in inclusive pedagogy, who then mentor other teachers on strategies such as co-teaching and peer tutoring to support special-needs students in regular classes. Technology is also emerging as an ally for inclusivity. For example, low-cost assistive educational software and mobile applications are used to help students with learning difficulties or to provide sign language support for deaf learners (Kamran & Bano, 2023). These innovations and community engagement initiatives illustrate that progress is possible even within existing constraints.

ESD also involves practicing what is preached; schools and universities are encouraged to model sustainability through their operations and campus culture (often called the "whole-institution approach" to ESD). This could mean starting school recycling programs, energy-saving campaigns, or community service requirements focused on developmental issues. Such initiatives turn educational institutions into living laboratories for sustainability, where students learn by doing and observe the impact of collective action. For instance, a school that sets up a rainwater harvesting system benefits from water conservation and provides a real-life case study for students to learn about science and civic responsibility.

Pakistan's education system has only recently begun to incorporate ESD in a structured manner. On the policy front, the SDG-4 national strategy and the Education Policy Framework 2018 emphasize concepts like "education for sustainable development" and "global citizenship education," aligning with Target 4.7 of SDG4, which calls for all learners to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development. However, much of the implementation is nascent. A few universities (such as those in the Pakistan Higher Education Network for Sustainable Development) have partnered with UNESCO to infuse sustainability into their curricula and campus practices. At the school level, non-governmental initiatives, such as the School Sustainability Project by WWF-Pakistan, have worked with a handful of schools to introduce environmental clubs and teacher training on eco-friendly practices. These are promising starts, but the systematic integration of ESD across the vast education network remains a goal for the future.

Research Methodology

The paradigm of the current study was interpretive in nature. The methodology used was qualitative, with a case study as the research design type (Creswell, 2007) as cited by Diana et al., (2021). The design was a single case study to discover the drivers of the quality of teacher education and ESD at a public sector university in Punjab. Through purposive sampling and in-depth qualitative data collection, this study captured the nuanced perspectives of key stakeholders, educators, administrators, and students across primary, secondary, and tertiary levels.

Data collection included 20 in-depth semi-structured interviews with selected educators,

administrators, and students, alongside three focus group discussions with approximately eight participants each. This approach facilitated a rich dialogical exchange, allowing participants to share detailed personal experiences, challenges, and perspectives on the effectiveness of innovative teaching methods in fostering inclusivity and enhancing student engagement. The case study design also allows for contextual analysis within specific educational environments, particularly those in resource-limited settings, highlighting barriers to implementation, such as technological limitations, lack of professional training, and inadequate policy support. The data were analyzed using Atkinson's (2002) model for case study research data analysis. Nine participants were encouraged to share their perceptions to explore the drivers of Education for Sustainable Development in Teacher Education Programs of the university.

Results & Findings

1. The depicted result shows that 51 % of male and 49% of female respondents participated in this qualitative case study to explore the drivers behind Education for Sustainable Development in the Teacher Education Programs at the University. It was concluded that the male participants were more significant than the female participants.
2. This qualitative case study examined four age groups of respondents to examine the drivers of Education for Sustainable Development in Teacher Education Programs. The age group of 20–30 years comprised 25% of the participants, the age group of 31-40 years participants were 37.5% of the participants, there were no participants from the age group of 41-50 years, and the 51-60 years age group comprised 37.5% of the participants. It was concluded that participants aged 31-41 years were more engaged in teaching ESD courses at the University.
3. This qualitative case study analyzed four ranking groups of respondents to examine drivers of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in the Teacher Education Programs at the University. The lecturer participants were 37.5%; the participants from assistant professors accounted for 37.5%, while there were no professors and 37.5% were associate professors. It was concluded that the participant, an Associate Professor, had the least participation in teaching ESD courses at the University.
4. Participants with less than 5 years of experience accounted for 25%, 6-10 years' experience was 25%, 10-15 years' experience was 12.5%, 15–20 years' experience was 12.5%, 20-25 years' experience was 12.5%, and finally, above 25 years' experience was 12.5%. It was concluded that the experienced participants taught the ESD courses at the University.
5. Qualitative data were analyzed using the Atkinson (2002) case study data analysis model. The model consisted of four significant steps: creating a data repository, codes, and coding process (initial codes, expanded codes, and rationalized codes), original propositions, and final propositions.

Data collected through in-depth interviews and focus groups were analyzed using thematic analysis, allowing for the identification of recurring themes, patterns, and insights related to innovative pedagogical practices. This method involved coding the participants' responses, organizing the codes into themes, and interpreting these themes within the context of sustainable, inclusive, and quality education goals. Each analysis step was iterative, ensuring that the emerging themes aligned with the study's objectives. The participants reported that *innovative teaching practices* significantly improved student engagement and accessibility to quality education. A few respondents noted that,

especially technology, limited resources restricted the full implementation of these pedagogical methods. Participants from resource-constrained institutions emphasized that inclusive practices are prioritized. The lack of supportive infrastructure and adaptive tools for students with disabilities is a significant challenge. One of the participants narrated in the following way.

I believe that Education is vital to move society towards sustainability. At UE prospective teachers do not only get a theoretical understanding of ESD but also get the opportunities to involve in such activities such as health care programs, environmental awareness/action-based activities that may contribute to the sustainable development of the society. Almost in the majority of the classes, students are engaged in sustainability-related discussions. I usually prefer my students to depict the sustainability principles through posters and then encourage them to have a showcase of them at a wider level. (P-2)

Teachers across different educational levels conveyed the *need for continuous professional development.* The training focused on new pedagogical and teaching skills. Some reported that institutions offer workshops and seminars, but many educators felt that the training was insufficient.

The data revealed positive conclusions regarding the *implementation of formative assessment practices.* Project-based evaluations and peer reviews encourage critical thinking and collaboration.

According to the participants, *learning environments*, such as interactive classrooms, significantly boosted student motivation. They suggested that administrators and educators should provide institutional support to sustain innovative practices. Moreover Participant 1 described in the following words:

Although we cannot measure the exact number of ESD practices the good thing is that in UE a noticeable concern can be seen regarding ESD. Even though most of the prospective teachers are unaware of the term sustainable development but it is observed that they have been practicing the concepts and actions because the root is in our beliefs and faith. As far as the subject is concerned, the main aim is to prepare those skillful teachers who can promote the value system regarding the three pillars (social, environment, economical) and support and promote a more sustainable future for our generation. I used different instructional techniques like assigning them different topics to explore the current practices. Sometimes health debates, videos and lectures etc., like anybody else, we as a teacher sometimes face lack of resources, lack of interest from the administration, and less involvement from the side of students. unavailability of material. No doubt the University of Education is doing great in terms of ESD.

Lack of policy support and funding in resource allocation were mentioned as significant barriers. Participants from lower-resourced institutions are in favor of the absence of dedicated budgets and strategic planning for sustainable educational practices, limiting their ability to maintain these initiatives.

Of course, many constraints hinder my plans of integrating sustainable values into teaching and learning. Most common is the pressure to cover the course content

within the stipulated time. In terms of environmental and social dimensions the department ensures the best practices which involve strict cleanliness policy and plantation etc.

Discussion & Conclusion

The results of this study highlight the pedagogical innovations (Tariq et al., 2019) in creating sustainable and quality education at the University. The findings also reveal notable challenges in implementing resource-constrained settings. Teachers highlighted the need for continuous, practical professional development to effectively integrate innovative practices, emphasizing that current training tends to be theoretical and lacks real-world applicability. Moreover, while formative and student-centered assessments foster critical thinking (Naseer et al., 2022) and personalized feedback, these methods demand additional time and resources, which many institutions struggle to provide them. Immersive learning environments enhance engagement and experiential learning; however, budgetary constraints necessitate creative, low-cost alternatives to advanced technological tools. These findings suggest that excellent institutional support, targeted training, and scalable and context-specific strategies are essential for achieving a sustainable and inclusive education system.

Recommendations

The following are some significant recommendations based on the findings:

1. There is a desperate need to inaugurate virtual courses and online programs to educate teachers and the community so that they can understand the concept and importance of Education for Sustainable Development and endorse this concept to their surroundings.
2. Social awareness may be a part of Sustainable Development; people should know the essential and practical needs and the utilization of Education for Sustainable Development.
3. Humans might be aware of their survival and how to be more efficient and effective members of society to make their planet safe and healthy for themselves and future generations.
4. Educators should be trained in inclusive education methods and culturally responsive pedagogy, ensuring that classrooms and materials accommodate all learners.
5. Establish regular professional development programs for faculty, focusing on modern pedagogical skills (e.g., student-centered and blended learning). Such capacity building should be an ongoing process that enables teachers to innovate and improve continuously.
6. Build capacity within the university's administration to uphold academic standards.
7. Extend the university's reach beyond traditional degree programs to foster lifelong learning in the community. This could include offering evening and weekend classes, online courses, and adult education or skills certificate programs.

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