

Overcrowded Classroom: Challenges for Elementary School Teachers

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Abstract: This qualitative study investigated the challenges elementary school teachers face in District Mardan in overcrowded classrooms. A case study design was chosen for this study. The sample consisted of eight elementary school educators, (participants) with the highest enrollment across the entire school. An interpretive research design was applied, gathering participants' insights through interviews. Participants were chosen using convenience sampling, and data was collected via observation and semi-structured interviews, with the questions developed based on literature and expert reviews, four classes were observed at the elementary level. Data analysis was done through thematic analysis. The findings highlight various challenges, pedagogical difficulties, less interaction between teachers and students, workload, participation of students in different activities, problems of student management, and limitation of resources in elementary schools. The study suggests targeted teaching; the use of digital tools like educational apps, the conduction of quick assessments, and a resource-sharing system are the best techniques to overcome these challenges.

Keywords: Overcrowded Classrooms, Interpretive Research Design, Pedagogical Difficulties, Student Management



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Introduction

Teaching at the elementary school level is a fulfilling yet challenging job that lays the groundwork for a child's educational and personal development. Although teachers play a crucial role, they encounter various obstacles that impede their ability to deliver high-quality education. A major challenge is the issue of overcrowded classrooms. Handling a high volume of students makes it challenging for teachers to provide individualized attention, meet each student's unique learning needs, and uphold discipline. Differential Needs of Students The pupils in elementary school come from a wide range of backgrounds and skill levels. Different learning styles, special education needs, and behavioral issues require teachers to modify their teaching strategies, which can be daunting without the right assistance (Minaz et al., 2024). The global recognition of limited educational opportunities represents a violation of fundamental human rights, highlighting the engagement in economic and political exclusion of many from meaningful engagement in economic, political, and social spheres (Cavallaro & Brewer, 2008; Minaz et al., 2024). One of the major educational objective established in 2015 was to ensure universal access to basic education. Effective teaching relies on providing balanced attention and instruction, which becomes increasingly challenging as class sizes increase. Larger classes hinder teachers' effectiveness and their understanding of individual student needs, resulting in a significant portion of time spent managing behavioral issues and conflicts. Even experienced educators find it difficult to handle overcrowded classrooms.

Research conducted in Pakistan indicates that teaching is often unsustainable in overcrowded classrooms, where teachers face numerous challenges related to management, discipline, and assessment (Khan et al., 2017). As Ijaiya's (1999) studied in Africa also found that overcrowded classrooms adversely affect the fulfillment of instructional goals,

teacher-student relationships, and the overall efficacy of teaching and learning. Unfortunately, overcrowding remains a significant issue within Pakistan's educational landscape, likely to continue as such.

Stough and Montague (2014) indicate that teachers in overcrowded classrooms struggle to monitor student behavior effectively, which significantly affects classroom management. As Onwu and Stoffel (2005) noted that overcrowded conditions impose several limitations on teachers, including limited space to move throughout the classroom. Fewer opportunities for active participation from all students in the learning process. An overwhelming instructional workload that hinders personalization, insufficient chances to cater to individual student needs in areas like autonomy, curiosity, motivation, self-discipline, safety, and socialization. As studies by Norris (2003), teachers in the U.S. utilize valuable class time to manage conflicts and alleviate tensions, which detracts from actual learning. This adverse classroom environment hampers educational progress. An example of this can be seen in a New York City school with 3,000 students, where overcrowding resulted in a dropout rate of 66%.

Objectives

1. To examine how primary school teachers' work completion and instructional effectiveness are affected by time constraints.
2. To investigate how inadequate teaching resources affect instructional practices and elementary school students' learning results.
3. To investigate how their enormous workloads impact primary school teachers' capacity to sustain instructional quality and give each student unique attention.

Research Questions

1. How do educators in primary schools deal with the difficulties of juggling busy schedules with giving each pupil individualized attention?
2. How does a lack of resources affect the teaching and learning process at the primary school level?
3. How do time constraints affect primary school teachers' capacity to carry out their professional obligations and provide quality instruction?

Problem Statement

The issue of overcrowded classrooms in elementary education is increasingly problematic for many school systems, creating considerable difficulties for teachers and students alike. With a high number of students per teacher, teachers frequently find it hard to give personalized attention, maintain discipline, and achieve effective learning results. These obstacles can degrade the quality of education, influence teacher effectiveness, and negatively affect students' academic success. Although overcrowded classrooms are common, there is a lack of qualitative research examining the experiences of teachers and their coping strategies. Approaches in such settings, especially in elementary education, were the focus of this study. It aimed to fill the existing gap by exploring teachers' firsthand experiences and viewpoints, offering insights into the difficulties they encountered and possible solutions to enhance classroom management and learning environments. This study aims to determine how educators' views and experiences are affected by overcrowded classrooms. Teachers face several difficulties as a result of overcrowding, such as diminished instructional efficacy, trouble controlling classroom dynamics, and insufficient customized attention. Developing effective tactics and learning in crowded classrooms requires an understanding of teachers' challenges.

Study's Significance

The relevance of the problem under study Most of the time, more teachers' problems become the topics of discussion and that is why this is a special study as it provides a deeper understanding of the barriers that interfere with their preferred pedagogical approaches, job satisfaction, and career progression. Considering and assessing these efforts will help the study broaden understanding of the issues of high-density, inadequate facilities, diversity of learners, and workload? This case study will not only highlight the areas that need improvement but also assist the teachers, school heads, and policymakers in devising strategies that enhance the teaching and learning process. Addressing these



concerns, elementary education systems will be more effective in general, assist teachers in providing quality education, and improve learners' performance.

Literature Review

This literature review aims to explore the current studies on crowded classrooms, focusing on teachers' challenges at the elementary level. Teaching in overcrowded classrooms presents significant challenges (Mahmood et al., 2022). It is difficult for the teacher to focus on each student while delivering lessons. Additionally, maintaining discipline and continuing with educational activities becomes increasingly hard in such crowded settings. This issue is particularly prevalent among teachers in developing countries (Minaz et al., 2024). Overcrowded classrooms require greater effort and attention from teachers, which significantly raises their workload and reduces the amount of time spent on instruction (Marzano, & Marzano, 2003). In India, it is common for teachers to handle classes of 50 students or more. They report that they typically lose 15 minutes of class time just for taking attendance. The remaining time is often spent on managing behavior to foster a suitable teaching environment (Osai et al. 2021). Similarly, teachers in Malawi and Uganda have noted that they manage classes of up to 100 students. The presence of numerous underage and overage students in elementary schools makes effective teaching in such overcrowded classes nearly impossible (Kremer et al., 2013). The difficulties posed by overcrowded classrooms are particularly severe in Pakistani public schools. The average ratio of teachers to students exceeds 80 students per teacher. However, in some cases, actual class sizes can be even larger (Mbiti, 2016). In the regions of Ghotki and Tharparkar and within Sindh province, the student-to-teacher ratio is the highest, at 47 students per teacher (Mujahid, & Noman 2015). There are discrepancies in the reported student-to-teacher ratios; school principals in Punjab indicate that the reality is 60 to 70 students per teacher, rather than the stated 35 students to one teacher. According to reports by officials, Pakistani teachers find it hard to carry out their work effectively as they teach large classes which makes it hard for them to offer individual attention to their learners. In some situations, teachers might employ physical punishment as a way to control the student's behavior in class (Batool, & Shah, 2018).

Challenges caused by overcrowded classrooms are reported around the world. For example, overcrowding is now a major concern for schools and teachers in the United States (Osai et al., 2021). In addition, overcrowded classrooms exist in some African countries, such as South Africa Kenya, and Nigeria (Mutisya, 2020; Onwu & Stoffels, 2005). According to Shamaki (2015), student performance across different subjects is closely linked to the classroom environment. Consequently, research from various developing African nations, including Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Uganda, has demonstrated a correlation between class size and student achievement. (Onwu & Stoffels, 2005; Mutisya, 2020). In Mwanza, Siperto (2018) reported that classroom overcrowding is an increasing and ongoing problem that obstructs effective teaching and learning. Siperto observed that the student numbers in the classes she examined exceeded the limited capacity of the classrooms. She found that the teacher-to-student ratio ranged from 1:80 to 1:90 in all schools studied, making it challenging for teachers to implement effective teaching strategies.

The researcher also noted that teachers felt so overwhelmed that they struggled to move around the classroom. Similar to Siperto's findings in Mutisya, (2020) released a study in Kenya where the free primary education initiative led to excessively crowded classrooms, complicating the execution of learner-centered approaches by teachers. Mutisya lamented that while most classrooms were designed to accommodate 45 students, they instead housed 80-90, exceeding the limits outlined by the Ministry of Education. Consequently, this situation undermined both teacher-student and student-student interactions during classroom activities, negatively affecting their academic performance. Even though Gatti (2018) mentioned that large classes come with considerable disadvantages, like strained student-teacher relationships and a restricted range of teaching strategies, it has been noted that smaller classes still yield superior results despite varying interpretations from researchers on the class size and student achievement relationship. Furthermore, the effectiveness of instructional practices was observed to be compromised. In his connection with the students however (Ajayi et al., 2017). found that class size is a key indicator of the educational system's effectiveness, as teaching tends to be less efficient in larger classes. Students and teachers may find it challenging to move around during lessons if there is inadequate space. Some studies indicate discrepancies



in class sizes and student-teacher ratios (Ruffina Esther & Anastecia, 2018). Unlike the teacher-student ratio which accounts for all enrolled students within the overall academic environment, a strong student-teacher relationship fosters a positive and supportive school atmosphere, allowing students to engage in learning activities efficiently and achieve successful academic results.

Methodology of the Study

The research methodology encompasses various approaches that utilize multiple techniques to tackle the research questions. The study underscores the value of employing different research methods to enhance one another. Amerson (2011) indicated that these methods are globally relevant and systematic, aiming for objectivity, which implies that well-structured and actively applied research methodologies are essential for improving the reliability of findings. This study is positioned within an interpretive framework. According to Eyisi (2016), this framework focuses on people's value-based attitudes. This research was designed as a case study to offer an in-depth understanding of the topic within its natural context and to recognize its complexities Amerson, (2011). An elementary public school in District Mardan was selected for the study. A convenience sampling technique was chosen for this study. According to Farrokhi et al. (2012), a sample that consists of participants who are easily available is called convenience sampling.

Respondents of the Study

This study involved the observation of five classes with the participation of eight teachers, who were chosen based on having the highest number of students in their classes.

Table 1

Teacher Profile

TOC: A	41	F/Male	B.A + CT	21 Years	13 Years
TOC: B	37	F/Male	PhD + CT	11 Years	5 Years
TOC: C	36+	F/Male	PhD + B.Ed	2 Years	6 Years
TOC: D	25	F/Male	M.Sc + M.Phil.	3 Years	2 Years
TOC: E	30	F/Male	M.A + B.Ed	8 Years	2 Years
TOC: F	39	F/Male	PTC	10 years	7 Years
TOC: G	30	F/Male	B.Ed	9 Years	6 Years
TOC: H	42	F/Male	M.Ed + M.Phil.	9 Years	6 Years

The data suggests that eight teachers shared their insights regarding their experiences with overcrowded classrooms at an elementary public school in the Mardan district. The data was coded and the codes were allotted and shortened as (TOC) teacher of overcrowded classroom.

Data Generation

According to Cresswell (2013) that accurate data is essential for research. He pointed out that data creation is challenging research phase requiring collecting relevant information. In this study observation and an interview were used as data collection tools.

Analysis of Data

The method employed for data analysis is thematic analysis. As defined by (Braun, & Clarke, 2006) this technique involves identifying, exploring, and summarizing recurring patterns (themes) within the data. A theme represents a patterned response or meaning that is significant to the data to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke (2006) outline six stages of thematic analysis: familiarizing oneself with the data, coding, identifying themes, evaluating themes, defining and labeling the themes, and compiling the findings in writing.



Challenges of Managing Overcrowded Classroom

Table 2

Themes	Subthemes
I. Specified Challenges associated with students	I. Insufficient personalized attention II. Challenges concerning discipline and student behavior
II. Challenges arising from resource limitations	I. Limited instructional time II. Deficiency in teaching resources
III. Difficulties in assessment and feedback	I. Challenges in individualized assessment II. Limited time available for providing feedback

Teachers encounter several key difficulties when overseeing a large number of students in a single classroom.

Insufficient Personalized Attention

All participating educators indicated that the foremost challenge in overcrowded classrooms is giving individual attention to students. Teachers at EPS noted that a significant amount of time is spent on classroom management, leaving little opportunity for personalized attention. They further explained that it's challenging to track each student's activities, which negatively affects student performance. This lack of individualized support leads to a decrease in students' interest in the lessons.

Regarding the management of large groups, TOC: A commented:

When dealing with numerous students in one classroom, the primary struggle is offering the individualized attention needed for those who require it.

TOC: B responded that

The biggest challenge I faced was providing individual support and attention in the classroom.

TOC: C

My main challenge has been effective teaching alongside giving individual attention. Additionally,

TOC:D

That individual attention is significantly hindered by overcrowded conditions. Similarly,

TOC: F: G: H *has the same responses*

Observations confirmed that the lack of individual attention led to students appearing bored and disengaged, indicating a clear reflection of teachers' concerns about managing large classes.

Challenges of Managing Crowded Classrooms

Teachers struggled to interact effectively with students due to overcrowded classrooms. Those who needed personalized attention were often overlooked. Feedback from teachers indicated a lack of connection with their students. Observations confirmed that there were very few interactions between teachers and students at EPS Mardan. Other research has similarly shown that overcrowded classrooms lead to limited teacher-student engagement. According to Gibbs and Jenkins (1992), crowded classes result in minimal interaction between learners and instructors. Van Amerom (2005) also noted that students' experiences are diminished in such environments. The overcrowding and lack of individual attention have contributed to a decline in student engagement and participation in various activities. Engagement and participation of students are significant challenges in overcrowded classrooms. Teachers at EPS Mardan mentioned that catering to individual needs while fostering student involvement is particularly time-consuming in these settings. Additionally, literature and other studies suggest that in large classes, fostering student engagement and participation is nearly impossible.

Teacher responded: TOC: B: that:

As student numbers increase, maintaining focus, engagement, and discipline becomes more challenging, potentially disrupting the class atmosphere.

TOC: C stated that:

It is difficult to engage students and encourage participation in overcrowded classrooms.



TOC: E: Another teacher stated that:

Overcrowding diminishes student engagement and participation, leading to a decrease in their motivation.

TOC: A: H: F: G provided a similar perspective

Along with individual attention student participation is also challenging.

During observation, the observer observed that during class it was challenging for a teacher to engage each student and participate in each activity although the teacher had tried his best to do so from teacher responses it is most challenging for teachers to engage each student, and due to this disengagement and mis participation discipline and management issues arises.

Challenges Concerning Discipline and Student Behavior

Discipline and management challenges are common in overcrowded classrooms. It is difficult to maintain individual attention in crowded classes noise levels are often high which in turn reduces students' engagement in lessons, thus more frequent issues of behavior created. Teacher's at EPS described that most of their teaching time is spent solving discipline and management issues which have a bad impact on overall student performance. It also leads to less structured lessons and low structured lessons and low academic scores some statements of teachers at EPS Mardan are as under.

TOC:D: Responded that:

Among other challenges, one challenge is classroom management and discipline. Normal classes accommodate 40 students but here the size exceeds the student-teacher ratio which is up to 80 which is difficult to manage and maintain discipline.

TOC: B: Responded that:

More students can lead to more noise and distraction, making it difficult to maintain discipline and focus during teaching lessons.

TOC: C: Responded that:

Among other challenges, classroom management and discipline is one of the major challenges.

TOC: E: Responded that:

In a crowded classroom, it is difficult for a single teacher to manage students' behaviors and discipline.

TOC: A: Responded:

The same problem is related to classroom management and discipline. During observation it was observed that the teacher frequently stopped disciplining students as a result, the lesson time was last in short words classroom management and discipline reduced student engagement or teacher burnout. The observer observed that students. Reduced student engagement and teacher burnout are significant concerns within educational settings. Observations indicated that students frequently engaged in conversation, which hindered their ability to listen effectively. Further observations revealed that during reading activities, students were seen exchanging stationery and books, indicating a lack of focus. Teachers at EPS Mardan reported that overcrowded classrooms lead to disciplinary and management challenges. They expressed that these issues severely affect the learning environment. The teachers identified violence and theft as prevalent disciplinary problems, alongside instances of rudeness, teasing, and bullying among students. In addition to these disciplinary concerns, teachers also highlighted difficulties related to assessment and feedback.

Limitations and Challenges of Resources

The absence of essential resources and infrastructure necessary for effective learning is evident, including insufficient desks, chairs, appropriate classroom settings, computers, and internet access. Financial constraints and limited teaching time further exacerbate these challenges, negatively influencing the learning process.

Limited instructional Time

Teachers at EPS noted that the high student-to-teacher ratio results in inadequate time to manage various activities and tasks. A significant portion of class time is consumed by student disputes, detracting from instructional time. Individualized attention for each student is a time-intensive process that further complicates teaching efforts.



In this context TOC: B: Responded that:

There may be insufficient time allocated for group work or individual tasks, which restricts the variety of learning experiences available.

TOC: D: Responded that:

Teaching in overcrowded classrooms presents significant challenges, particularly in terms of time management due to the demands of homework marking.

TOC: E: Responded that:

Due to time constraints, I often find myself working during lunch or break periods to keep up with my responsibilities.

Similarly, TOC: A stated that:

There is an overwhelming amount of work to be completed, yet time is limited.

Challenges in individualized assessment

To understand each student's learning needs, including their strengths and weaknesses, individualized assessment is crucial. Teachers face many challenges in implementing effective individualized assessment, including limited time, the burden of grading, limited resources, lack of technology, difficulty monitoring assessments, lack of preparation time, teachers' workload, and diverse learning needs. In overcrowded classrooms, teachers do not have enough time to interact with each student, which makes it difficult to conduct an assessment that is tailored to each learner's needs. Grading is another time-consuming task, and the lack of resources, such as customized worksheets and assessment tools, also hurts assessment. Monitoring during assessment is another problematic element since it becomes difficult for teachers to keep an eye on each student's engagement. In overcrowded classrooms, the quality of tailored assessments suffers. The following are some instructor replies regarding assessments:

TOC: A: replied that:

Managing a large class size has presented me with the greatest challenge: providing feedback and assessment.

TOC: B: The responded resembles TOC as well:

A she replied that assessment is the most difficult aspect I have encountered; it is a very demanding task.

TOC: C: replied:

I believe that assessment and feedback are the most difficult and demanding tasks.

In response, TOC:D said

Because assessments and feedback are such a difficult task, particularly for elementary instructors, I am terrified of them.

TOC: E: In response, I said:

In crowded classrooms, grading tests takes a lot of time. Heard (2011) asserts that getting to know pupils is crucial since it will help one comprehend them more fully.

Limited Time Available for Providing FEEDBACK

Because there is less time for feedback in an overcrowded classroom, the learning process suffers. One factor that decreases the amount of time available for tailored feedback is workload. Some of the teacher responses from the interviews are listed under TOC: B: replied,

"One thing that I keep running into is." Assessing a large number of students and giving them feedback on their work might take a lot of time".

TOC:D: Answered:

With their lengthy duration and impact on teaching, evaluation, and feedback are the most difficult jobs in a packed classroom.

TOC:C: Answered:

Giving feedback and conducting assessments are extremely tough tasks. Similar to how other teachers have described it,

TOC: A: has the same response.

The grade 5 observer noticed that the teacher had taken a test to help the pupil's progress, but she was perplexed by the burden. According to teachers' replies at EPS, packed classrooms present the greatest challenges for assessments and feedback.



Conclusion

Overcrowded classrooms present teachers with several serious issues, such as problems with student management, engagement and participation in various activities, individual attention to students, insufficient teaching time, difficulties with assessment and feedback, and a lack of resources. However, teachers can somewhat mitigate these issues with their efforts. Improving the situation is crucial for the intervention to be successful. For both teachers and students, this will enhance instruction and learning.

Recommendations

When it comes to managing overcrowded classrooms, teachers encounter various intricate challenges. The following are some suggestions:

1. Teachers confront difficulties because of crowded classes. The greatest way to address the issue of individual attention is through focused teaching; students should be grouped based on their learning needs and skills, and customized instruction should be given. Peer tutoring should be promoted because it will help kids who do poorly.
2. The effective technique is rotational teaching when the teacher spends time with each pupil.
3. Use games, hands-on activities, and storytelling to increase students' interest in the teachings.
4. Use incentives to encourage students to participate;
5. Encourage students to evaluate their own and their peers' work and compare it;
6. Use quick assessment conduct as an additional technique for assessment during the lesson to check for improvement;
7. Implement resource-sharing systems in various classrooms; and

Recommendations for Additional Research

Some suggestions for additional research are included below:

1. This study looked at a single school as a case study. EPS.
2. To have a comprehensive understanding of overcrowded classrooms in schools, a more extensive study encompassing both urban and rural schools should be carried out.
3. Since this study mainly examines the challenges of teachers, more research on this subject should be done, including having students examine their own experiences in crowded settings. This will allow students' opinions about the packed classroom to be voiced alongside those of the professors.



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