

Exploring the Educational Needs of Young Adults with Hearing Disability, before the Taliban Regime in Kabul, Afghanistan: A Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: *The primary aim of the study was to explore the educational needs of young adults with hearing disability in pre-Taliban administered Kabul, Afghanistan.*

Method: *A qualitative approach was utilised, specifically employing the phenomenological method. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten participants, allowing them to articulate their experiences and perspectives in detail. Data was analysed thematically, following six key steps.*

Results: *The findings underscore the importance of facilitating a good quality educational system, employing qualified teachers, and ensuring the right to access better education for individuals with hearing disability. Addressing these fundamental components is crucial to providing a motivating and conducive learning environment, and enhancing educational opportunities to meet the unique educational needs of these individuals.*

Conclusion: *Individuals with hearing disability face many challenges in Afghanistan's education system. Despite commendable initiatives, the government's neglect and financial constraints hinder optimal development. Two proposed approaches — special education and inclusive education — highlight potential solutions, emphasising the need for teacher training and a supportive learning environment. The study also advocates for the universal right to quality education for individuals with hearing disability, calling for improved services and special classes tailored to their unique needs. However, the absence of data on individuals with hearing disability in Afghanistan, security concerns during data collection, and the unavailability of sign-language interpreters are some of the study's limitations.*

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Key words: access to education, good education system, educational needs, qualified teachers, young individuals with hearing disability

INTRODUCTION

All human beings have certain needs which should first be manifested and can then be satisfied. Fulfilling these needs can indeed lead to a sense of tranquillity and peace in an individual's life (Max-Neef, 2017). Persons with hearing disability have unique needs that require specific attention and support (World Health Organisation, 2018).

Education is a need, a powerful driver of development, and one of the strongest instruments for improving health, gender equality, peace, and stability (World Bank, 2018). There are different approaches to educating individuals with special needs. Special education is designed to cater specifically to the needs of students with disabilities, ensuring they have access to education. Inclusive education emphasises the integration of students with disability into general classrooms (Hoover & Patton, 2005).

Teachers play a pivotal role in providing educational services. Their characteristics, responsibilities, and behaviours significantly impact the quality of the education system. Effective classroom management, guidance, instruction, and professionalism are among the key attributes of successful teachers. Teaching and learning are interrelated, and effective learning requires appropriate teaching methods tailored to the needs of students (Theall & Franklin, 2001). The choice of teaching methods should consider the characteristics of both the learners and the subjects being taught (Vin-Mbah, 2012).

One of the characteristics of the learners is the presence of disabilities, and there are various approaches available for educating individuals with special needs. Taking special education as an example, it is designed to cater specifically to the needs of students with disabilities, ensuring they have access to education. However, relying solely on special education is not sufficient. Previous studies have suggested inclusive education, which emphasizes the integration of disabled students into general classrooms (Hoover & Patton, 2005). Aligned with the social model of disability, inclusive education seeks to eliminate barriers that impede equal educational opportunities and societal participation for students with disabilities (Jenson, 2018). The social model of disability offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the social exclusion experienced by disabled

individuals (Swain, Thomas, Barnes, & French, 2013). According to this model, disability is not an inherent characteristic of individuals but a consequence of societal barriers, prejudices, and exclusion. Essentially, disabled individuals are not disabled by their conditions but by the environment and societal structures surrounding them (Rakočević Uvodić, 2023). In essence, inclusive education aligns with the principles of the social model of disability by striving to create an educational landscape that is accessible, accommodating, and empowering for all, fostering a society where individuals are not defined by their disabilities but are instead enabled to participate fully in all aspects of life.

The above-mentioned arguments demonstrate that a well-structured educational system is essential for meeting the educational needs of individuals with disabilities (Sharma et al, 2013). It has been observed that the education system in Afghanistan has suffered tremendously. Numerous circumstances make the education procedure challenging for many Afghans, as for example, infrastructure, an extremist curriculum, women's education, and education against all odds (Farah et al, 2014).

In the context of Afghanistan, as well as many other countries, addressing the challenges associated with education often requires a multifaceted approach. This involves implementing policy changes, conducting awareness campaigns to counter negative attitudes, enhancing infrastructure to improve school accessibility, providing teacher training, and establishing support services for students with disabilities. These efforts are crucial to ensuring that individuals with disabilities, including females, have equitable access to high-quality education.

Objective

The unmet educational needs of young adults with hearing disability have not been tackled effectively by the authorities in Afghanistan and the reasons remain unclear. Therefore, the present study attempts to describe the educational needs of young adults with hearing disability in Kabul, before the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

METHOD

Study Design

The study employed a qualitative research approach, specifically utilising the phenomenological method. This approach is suitable for exploring the lived experiences and perspectives of young adults with hearing disability regarding their educational needs.

Participants

The study involved 10 participants, comprising 5 males and 5 females. Participants were selected based on certain inclusion and exclusion criteria criteria.

Inclusion criteria:

- Young adults in the age range of 20 to 40 years and with a hearing disability from birth.

Exclusion criteria:

- Persons with any residual hearing through hearing aids.

The decision to include 10 participants was based on data saturation, which is reached when no new information or themes emerge from the collected data (Guest et al, 2006).

Data Collection

Data was collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews.

The interviews consisted of two parts. Part one was related to demographic information, while part two consisted of five questions aimed at exploring the educational needs of young people with hearing disability. The interviews were conducted using sign language. Each interview lasted for a minimum of 25 minutes and a maximum of 45 minutes, and the sessions were video- recorded after obtaining the participant's consent.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed using thematic analysis, following the six steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). These steps involve familiarisation with the data, generating codes, identifying themes, searching for initial themes, reviewing

themes, defining and naming themes, and finally, producing a comprehensive research report.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from the participants, because participants should be aware of the researcher's purpose, procedures, risks and benefits, and they should have the option to withdraw (Orb et al, 2001).

RESULTS

Three overarching themes, along with 8 sub-themes, were identified. They provide a clear and organised framework for understanding the educational needs of young individuals with hearing disability in Afghanistan.

A Good Quality Education System for Students with Hearing Disability

A good quality education system refers to a system that is tailored to the specific educational needs of students with hearing disability. For this theme, the participants highlighted the importance of teaching and learning facilities, teaching aids and materials, and the use of suitable teaching methods by teachers in the classroom.

Teaching and Learning Facilities

Most participants mentioned that teaching and learning facilities are limited, such as laboratories, computer labs, tables, chairs, libraries, special needs classes, and separate classes for boys and girls. All these facilities are essential and helpful in learning, as one of the participants recalled.

"When I was a school student, all educational facilities, for example, a laboratory, a small library, a special classroom for professional learning were provided by those NGOs" [P4, Male, 40 years old, Diploma holder].

(Key respondent).

A female participant was dissatisfied with the facilities provided by the government.

"In all parts of Afghanistan males and females are studying separately, their schools are separated. But in this school, the classrooms for male and female students are not separated. I do not feel comfortable in the classroom" [P6, Female, 21 years old, High school Student].

The limited facilities available at school were described by another participant.

“This is clear when a school has to be established, all facilities like library, laboratory, computer lab, and ...have to be considered. But our school does not even have enough classrooms, let alone other facilities” [P9, Female, 31 years old, Bachelor Degree holder].

Teaching Aids and Materials

Teaching aids and materials refer to the tools which are used by the teachers and students to facilitate the process of learning, making lessons understandable and engaging all students in the classroom activities. These materials include pictures, cards, maps, videos, and many more items. Participants reported that teaching materials play a significant role in enhancing the learning experience.

“When I was in the first and second semesters of the university, the curriculum was designed for general students, and almost all of the classes were lecture-based. Therefore, I was unable to learn appropriately. However, in the third semester, most of our classrooms were having projectors, videos, and some other materials in the classroom, and this was the time I learned and enjoyed” [P9, Female, 31 years old, Bachelor Degree holder].

Many participants indicated that the utilisation of simple teaching materials in the classroom is beneficial to them.

“When I was in grade 4, the borderlands of Afghanistan were taught by a geography teacher. Although the teacher repeated many times, I could not understand which countries we were surrounded by; then, the teacher brought the map. First, she showed Afghanistan and then all the countries that we have borders with. I still remember all and will never forget” [P7, Female, 25 years old, Bachelor Degree holder].

Teaching Methods

A teaching method is an instructional approach employed by educators to convey the content of a subject to students. While educators use various methods, the most effective one is chosen based on the context. A participant with a Bachelor’s degree emphasised that selecting teaching methods tailored to students’ situations is crucial.

“To learn better, as a student with hearing disability, I needed some specific methods. For example, hands-on sessions, based on the group or individual” ([P5, Male, 31 years old, Bachelor Degree holder].

The participants reported that the demonstration method, which is based on observation, is one of the most suitable methods for teaching students with hearing disability.

“I was in class 7, and my biology teacher was teaching blood circulation to human beings. For this, he showed us a video. I watched a 3-minute video in the classroom and learned the most important topic with all processes”[P6, Female, 21 years old, High school Student].

On the basis of the participants’ perspectives, it may be concluded that the learning process is greatly enhanced by the availability of effective teaching and learning facilities. Teaching materials play a pivotal role in making lessons comprehensible and engaging all students in classroom activities. For students with hearing disabilities, the most suitable method is the demonstration method.

Qualified Teachers

Based on the study findings, the qualities of teachers encompass various aspects of their personal and professional lives. These include professionalism, a positive personality, positive attitudes, level of education, and relevant teaching experiences. Two sub-themes emerged: teacher characteristics and teacher-student interpersonal relationships, which provide detailed insights into the qualities of teachers.

Teacher Characteristics

In general, teacher characteristics encompass elements such as knowledge, level of education, skills, attitudes, behaviour, and professionalism. According to the study participants, a teacher’s knowledge of psychology, proficiency in sign language, and teaching experiences are pivotal characteristics.

“When I was in school, all of the teachers understood sign language. But at the university, most of our lecturers did not understand sign language; therefore when they were teaching, translators were needed to convey the lecture to the students. But the sign language translators were not professional to translate the lecture of the lecturers with better

understanding and details" [P8, Female, 28 years old, Bachelor Degree holder].

Another participant believed that the teacher's attitude towards students is a crucial characteristic.

"When I was at the university, I used to study with hearing people. When I wanted to ask something, the teacher would answer 'when you cannot go along with hearing students, please go to a special class, I have no extra time to repeat it for you' " [P1, Male, 39 years old, Bachelor Degree holder].

One participant emphasised the importance of teachers having knowledge of psychology.

"I read in a book that a teacher must be a psychologist but it is not necessary for a psychologist to be a teacher. I think, in addition to the teachers' skills and experiences their knowledge of psychology is also important. Some teachers punish their students without thinking 'why students do not study or why they are looking sad in the classroom'. It is directly linked to the lack of knowledge regarding psychology" [P6, Female, 21 years old, High school Student].

Another participant expressed a preference for teachers with hearing disability to teach students with hearing disability in primary and secondary schools. However, in high school and university, both hearing teachers and teachers with hearing disability were considered suitable.

"I have the experience of studying with both hearing teachers and teachers with hearing disability. Therefore, teachers with hearing disability in an elementary classroom are helpful because they could understand the situation of the students. But hearing teachers are better at high school and higher education levels because they have more information and knowledge compared to teachers with hearing disability" [P1, Male, 39 years old, Bachelor Degree holder].

Teacher-Student Interpersonal Relationships

Teacher-student interpersonal relationships denote the connection between a teacher and students during the learning process. The majority of participants indicated that such relationships encompass qualities like kindness, positive behaviours, love, respect, support, and helpfulness.

“Although lecturers were experts and professionals in the first year of the university, I failed, just because of our lecturers who were not supportive and helpful” [P9, Female, 31 years old, Bachelor Degree holder].

“Most of the teachers at the university were trying to avoid our questions. It was rarely that we got our answers, sometimes they were getting angry with us. To be clear, the main reason could be their fewer experiences and less professionalism which was affecting the teacher-student interpersonal relationship” [P5, Male, 31 years old, Bachelor Degree holder].

Therefore the second identified theme regarding educational needs was the importance of having qualified teachers. According to participant responses, a teacher is recognised as the most influential figure in students’ learning. If a teacher possesses the characteristics highlighted by the participants, it implies that almost half of the educational needs of students with hearing disability will be fulfilled.

The Right of Access to Better Education

Education is a fundamental human right, regardless of any differences. Three sub-themes are identified that include equality of educational opportunity, capacity building, and a conducive learning environment to explain the right of access to better education in detail.

Equality of Educational Opportunities

Equality of educational opportunities pertains to the legal, fair, and equal access to quality education regardless of one’s abilities. The majority of participants emphasised that having access to quality education is their right.

“I went to a mainstream school, and I failed two times, back to back, because there was no school for people with hearing disability. After 3 years, my family found a newly established special school in Kabul city, then I went there and started my first class again. I faced many challenges, although access to equal education with others, was my right” [P9, Female, 31 years old, Bachelor Degree holder].

Another participant stated that people with hearing disability need high-level and high-quality education.

“We have the right to have the opportunities for acquiring a high level of education. I have finished my Bachelor’s, and I want to continue my education (Masters, PhD)” [P1, Male, 39 years old, Bachelor Degree holder].

Capacity Building and Essential Skill Development

Capacity building refers to a systematic plan for positive change in beliefs, attitudes, skills and educational programmes, via training, workshops, access to technology, and certain other specific occupations such as tailoring, carpentry, painting, carpet weaving, make-up artist, and mechanic, to name a few.

A significant number of participants indicated that many of these skills are obtained through participation in workshops, attending occupational classes, and undergoing training.

“When I newly started my job as a teacher, I had to attend many workshops. It was the time when there were many foreign organisations and NGOs which were providing training and workshops to people with disability which are now very minimal, even equal to nil” [P1, Male, 39 years old, Bachelor Degree holder].

Another participant responded that the value of learning some skills is the same as learning the subjects taught in schools.

“When people with hearing disability are skilled in some occupations they can support themselves and their family. I am a tailor; I have some income, through that I can support my family” [P10, Female, 38 years old, Diploma holder].

Conducive Learning Environment

A conducive learning environment refers to an environment in which all students enjoy learning, feel secure, comfortable and valued. One of the participants shared her school experiences.

“In my school, I felt comfortable in most of the classes with all teachers because all students and most of the teachers were with hearing disability. The system, methods, teachers and classmate behaviour was convenient and acceptable for students with hearing disability. In my opinion that was a conducive learning environment” [P6, Female, 21 years old, High school Student].

Based on the insights provided by a few participants, the ideal number of students in a classroom for students with hearing disability should not exceed 10 to 15.

“I studied in a special school and the number of students in each class was eight to fifteen students. At the university, the number of students was above twenty-five in each class. For me, it was difficult to learn in a crowded place. Therefore,

*my activities and achievements turned into zero as I failed in the first semester”
[P5, Female, 31 years old, Bachelor Degree holder].*

Therefore, the right to access better education emerged as the third theme for the educational needs of young individuals with hearing disabilities. The findings indicate that access to quality education is a fundamental right for people with hearing disabilities. Additionally, the study participants expressed a need for skills that could be acquired through participation in workshops, attending occupational classes, and undergoing training.

DISCUSSION

The first theme shows that people with hearing disability require good teaching and learning facilities. According to the participants, those facilities are vital to the process of learning but are not being offered by the government. They did acknowledge that some NGOs provided such facilities. The participants also confirmed that teaching materials have a positive impact on learning. The right materials make learning fun and easy, and allow teachers to convey the learning message in a better way. They also mentioned that the demonstration method of teaching is one of the best methods for individuals with hearing disability as it allows learning through observation and sight. Thus there are three sub-themes from this theme.

The theme's findings confirm the findings of the study by Obiakor et al (2010) who have pointed out the significance of a conducive environment wherein classes should be equipped with modern technologies to make the lessons easy. Some participants did mention how easily they learned the lesson by watching the video and looking at the map shown by their respective teachers.

The study findings indicate that the government neglects the education of people with disability in Afghanistan (Pajhwok, 2012). The United Nations has urged governments worldwide to create a conducive environment for individuals with hearing disabilities (Youngs, 2010). While there have been commendable initiatives to address the issues faced by people with hearing disability in Afghanistan, the majority of participants expressed dissatisfaction with the current state of development.

Two possible approaches are suggested for engaging and developing individuals with hearing disability (Alfawair & Tobi, 2015). First, the implementation of special education involves enrolling only individuals with hearing disability

and providing them with all necessary facilities to maximise their potential. This approach has proven successful, as demonstrated by the positive impact of the special education department in Oman, which arranges and provides essential facilities for people with hearing disability (Alfawari & Tobi, 2015).

The second approach involves inclusive education, where special-needs students are enrolled alongside regular students and the curriculum is designed to accommodate everyone, offering equal value and opportunities for participation and growth (Mittler, 2012) Welsh Government, 2019).

Along with the inclusiveness policy, the United States has developed a specific study plan (Individualised Education Plan) for special students where their strengths and weaknesses both have been taken care of (Kisanji, 2003) considering the philosophy behind inclusive education which offers people with disability the opportunity to mix with others and push themselves hard to shine brighter.

In addition, the social model of disability has offered a comprehensive framework for understanding the social exclusion experienced by disabled individuals (Swain, Thomas, Barnes, and French, 2013). This model has been successful in facilitating the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in society by confronting prejudice and exclusion, fostering civil rights and political engagement, and empowering disabled individuals to assert their rightful position within society (Owens, 2015). Even though it was once obscure, the social model of disability is now widely accepted in the field of disability studies (Samaha, 2007). It led to the development of inclusive education, which strives to provide equal opportunities for everyone regardless of disability (Terzi, 2014).

Second, the implementation of special education involves enrolling only hearing-disabled individuals and providing them with all necessary facilities to maximize their potential. This approach has proven successful, as demonstrated by the positive impact of the special education department in Oman, which arranges and provides essential facilities for hearing-disabled people (Alfawari & Tobi, 2015).

Even though the social model of disability is now widely accepted as a modern approach considering disability (Samaha, 2007), and inclusive education is generally viewed as a holistic concept for disabled people (Landorf & Nevin, 2007), the participants' personal experiences indicate that, due to unfriendly environment, non-standardized examinations, a shortage of professional and expert sign language teachers, and an insufficient sign language interpreters,

special schools are considered preferable to regular schools in Kabul, especially for individuals with hearing disabilities..

These findings align with previous studies, which stated that even in developed countries, not all educators have adopted the inclusive philosophy, and a few are opposed to the concept (Brantlinger, 1997; Freire & César, 2002; Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994). Some disability-focused organizations continue to advocate for separate services that are tailored specifically for individuals with disabilities. Particularly, numerous organizations that represent the Deaf community argue that separate educational facilities are essential to ensuring their right to education in sign language and their ability to fully engage with Deaf culture (Freire & César, 2003).

The financial problem of the Afghanistan government where it becomes difficult and more expensive for it if it starts establishing special schools, and curriculum separately, thus Afghanistan government should accommodate both students in the same building along with individualised study plan (NCERT, 2006). There is a possibility that some students may find it difficult in the beginning but as time passes things will change, and it will lead to the creation of a healthy and progressive society.

This overarching theme encompasses two sub-themes: teacher characteristics and teacher-student interpersonal relationships. The findings underscore the importance of teachers possessing not only general teaching qualities but also specific attributes to effectively educate disabled students. Effective teaching of disabled students requires teachers to be aware of psychology, understand sign language, and exhibit positive behavior towards students. These findings align with studies by Antia (1985) and Antia, Kreimeyer, and Eldredge (1993), which identified factors affecting the education of hearing-disabled students, including communication barriers, teacher experiences, awareness, and knowledge of teachers about deafness, psychology, and sign language, as well as the interaction of hearing-disabled students.

The study findings reveal a preference among students with hearing disability for teachers who share their disability, especially at the primary and secondary levels. This preference is rooted in the belief that these teachers better understand the characteristics, needs, expectations, communication methods, and interactions of students with hearing disability. This aligns with studies carried out by Davis (2005) and Ward (2015), emphasising that individuals with hearing disability feel comfortable to learn when the teacher knows sign language.

Additionally, the findings emphasise the importance of teachers possessing positive attitudes towards students and their learning, effective communication skills, and expertise in the subjects they teach, in line with Grieve's (2010) ideas about the characteristics of a great teacher.

Given the current situation in Afghanistan, it is suggested that the government organise numerous workshops for teachers. These workshops should focus on equipping teachers with necessary knowledge related to people's learning styles and challenges. Additionally, teachers should be encouraged to be kind and pleasant with their students, providing support and making them realise the significant responsibility they hold in shaping the future of the nation.

The third theme is the right of access to better education. There are three sub-themes that include equality of educational opportunities, capacity building and essential skills development, and a conducive learning environment. The findings revealed that hearing-disabled people require high-level and high-quality education and they consider it from elementary school to higher education as their basic right.

The right to education is enshrined in the Child Rights Convention (1989) and the Disability Rights Convention (2008), and extends to all children, youth and adults with disability. It is also discussed in many important international documents, including the 1990 World Declaration on Education for All, the 1994 UNESCO Statement and Mechanism for Action, and the 2000 Dakar Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2009). In 2012, Afghanistan ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability and its Optional Protocol. In 2013, the Afghan Parliament approved the Law on Rights and Privileges of Persons with Disabilities, ensuring the rights of persons with disabilities to participate actively in all aspects of society.

However, there are limited education-related services to assist people with disability in Afghanistan. Johnson and Seaton (2012) indicated that students who have hearing disability do not have access to sufficient schooling. Thus, students with hearing disability require special services in order to meet their needs and to help them achieve their maximum potential (Johnson & Seaton, 2012).

Based on the current study participants' experiences, it would appear that the government is using different platforms to make sure everyone gets a full and unbiased opportunity for learning. However, participants commented that in today's world, along with theoretical knowledge people have to have some skills

and special capabilities that help them secure better job opportunities, and these skills can be learned through workshops and special training. Therefore, they need special classes to learn such skills.

In addition, the number of students per class should not be more than 15 because people with hearing disability focus and understand better when the class is small. Molnar et al (1999) recommended 15 students per class as an ideal setting. The author of the current research believes that the US Individualised Study Plan, which considers the strengths and weaknesses of people, must be taking this point into consideration as well.

From experience, study participants found that special school was better than regular school which has neither a friendly environment nor teachers who are well-versed in the sign language. Gudyanga et al (2014) stated that in the Netherlands many students with hearing disability who were attending regular classes wanted to return to their special schools after suffering from stigma and isolation. They also noted that the pattern was in line with some studies in developed countries (Mushoriwa & Gasva, 2008), which had found negative attitudes towards inclusion were held by regular teachers and pupils.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study underscores the critical challenges regarding access to quality education faced by individuals with hearing disability in Afghanistan.

The first theme highlights the inadequacy of teaching facilities provided by the government and the positive impact of inclusive teaching methods, echoing the importance of a conducive learning environment as emphasised by international studies.

The second theme delves into the pivotal role of teacher characteristics and interpersonal relationships in the education of students with hearing disability. The preference for teachers who share their disability and possess positive attitudes aligns with global research, urging the Afghan government to prioritise workshops for teachers to enhance their understanding and communication skills.

The third theme emphasises the universal right to better education for individuals with hearing disability, as enshrined in international conventions and Afghan legislation. However, the discrepancy between policy and practice is evident,

with limited services hindering access to quality education. The call for special classes, smaller class sizes, and specialised skills training resonates with global best practices, pointing towards the need for tailored educational strategies.

Ultimately, the study recommends two approaches — special education and inclusive education — while considering the financial constraints of the Afghan government. Striking a balance between these approaches and addressing the concerns raised by participants can pave the way for a more inclusive, supportive, and progressive educational landscape for individuals with hearing disability in Afghanistan.

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