



## 'Back to School after PhD': Exploring Teachers' Work Experiences

Muhammad Saqib<sup>\*</sup>

Syed Abdul Waheed<sup>†</sup>

Nadia Gilani<sup>‡</sup>

**Abstract:** Working in a school after attaining one of the highest research degrees is uncommon in academia. Nevertheless, this is an emerging phenomenon due to an increased number of PhDs in Pakistan. Yet, many PhDs are unemployed. On the other hand, a school is a place that requires content expert and pedagogically skilled teachers. In the present study, the researchers attempted to address the central questions of the study; how is it like to work in schools after completing PhD and how do PhDs experience being the most qualified persons teaching in schools? A phenomenological approach was employed to uncover participants' lived experiences of working in schools. Thirteen PhDs were approached through snowball sampling who were teaching in schools. The data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews at different schools that were analyzed using phenomenological analysis. As a result, three main themes and two sub-themes emerged from the interview transcripts. The themes included working in schools, joining the school after PhD (sub-themes; teaching and managing classroom, assessing and interaction with students) and working with non-PhDs. The study results have implications for PhDs working in schools, other school teachers and heads of the school, and the school education department.

**Key Words:** PhD, School Teachers, Working Experience, School Education, Qualitative Study

### Introduction

Everyone is curious about one's future and wants to secure it through employment. Usually, it is a common perception that people improve their qualification to become more secure regarding their current position and further professional opportunities in the future. The school education department of a country plays an important role to create employment opportunities for qualified and highly teachers. Having graduation or a masters' degree, young people can apply in this department to start their career as a school educator. Overall, the trend of obtaining a higher education is increasing with time. It happened not only in Pakistan but also in the whole world (Waheed et al., 2020). By improving qualification, one can reach the highest level of academics like PhD degree. Some people joined the school education department as a teacher before starting

their PhD degree, some during their PhD degree, and others after completing their PhD degree.

The PhD degree holders also seek their career in schools due to a lack of funds (research grants) for further research and other opportunities in higher educational institutions. On the other hand, high schools may need PhDs, especially for teaching science, because they want to restructure science teaching and shift from memorizing method to inquiry-based learning to better understand students. The number of PhDs is increasing day by day and if research funding or grants are not available, the PhDs will be failed to grow professionally and be frustrated with respect to their future career.

The school education department can play a significant role in controlling unemployment, creating job opportunities for PhDs in schools and to improve quality education through benefitting

<sup>\*</sup> Education Teacher, Center of Excellence, GHSS, Jaranwala, Punjab, Pakistan.

<sup>†</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of Educational Research & Assessment, University of Okara, Okara, Punjab, Pakistan. Email: [awsyed@hotmail.com](mailto:awsyed@hotmail.com) (Corresponding Author)

<sup>‡</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of Teacher Education, University of Okara, Okara, Punjab, Pakistan.

from their expertise and experience. PhDs entering schools have a more understanding of the research process and inquiry-based learning as compared with other teachers, especially in sciences. Understanding of science can be increased by laboratory experiments, and this inquiry-based approach is used by most of the PhDs in schools. School students are much interested in science's wonders and thus are usually attracted to PhD teachers (Doyle & Vale, 2013).

There are three levels of institutes for the teaching and learning process worldwide, such as schools, colleges, and universities. Historically, PhDs had been engaged only in universities, and the personnel with less qualification were appointed in schools and colleges. Over time, the number of PhDs increased globally, including in Pakistan (Waheed, 2020). Now, PhD teachers are doing a job in universities and colleges and at primary, elementary, secondary, and higher secondary schools in Pakistan. A few of them are also working in administrative positions in schools and colleges. For instance, 387 PhDs are working in School Education Department (SED), which is 0.11 % of 367735 registered teachers in Punjab, Pakistan (Government of the Punjab, School Education Department, 2020).

In this study, the researchers aimed to explore insights of highly qualified teachers like PhDs working in public sector schools. This study will improve the educational structures of schools, quality of education, and socio-academic integration of PhDs in schools. It is also need of the hour that these earlier career researchers should be empowered and they should create a network with the help of collaboration with other PhD degree holder teachers working in schools. This will help and support many schools in promoting research cultures. Also, there are chances for further increase in the number of PhDs in schools because there are not sufficient job opportunities in universities and colleges. This study will explore and highlight the experiences and insights of PhD degree holder school teachers working in a school. The researchers attempted to

find out how is it like to work in schools after doing a PhD?

### Research Questions

The researchers addressed the following questions:

1. How is it like for a PhD to be a teacher at a school?
2. How do PhDs experience being the most qualified persons teaching in schools?
3. How do PhDs distinguish themselves from non-PhDs teaching in schools?

### Methodology

A qualitative research design, specifically a phenomenological approach, was used to study how it is like to be a school teacher after PhD. The study focused on the work experience of such PhD degree holder school teachers in schools. The phenomenological approach deals with studying human experience, feelings, learning, and understanding of a phenomenon that exists in the social world (Gallagher, 2012). The phenomenological studies are conducted in medical and health sciences and educational and social sciences (Creswell, 2018).

### Participants of the Study

The study sample consisted of PhD degree holder school teachers working in different public schools under the School Education Department in the province of Punjab, Pakistan. Due to the limited accessibility of teachers having PhD degree working in the school education department, the researchers used a snowball sampling technique to approach the participants. Thirteen PhD school teachers were contacted through this technique. They were both male and female teachers with the age range from 30 to 55 year. They were teaching the students from grade 6 to 12 for the last 8 to 35 years. The participants' characteristics are given in table 1 in terms of their teaching experience, school level, scale and designation and teaching level.

**Table 1.** Participants of the Study

Characteristics	Details of Characteristics	No. of Participants
Teaching experience	Less than 10 year	03
	10 to 20 years	04

Characteristics	Details of Characteristics	No. of Participants
School-level	20 to 30 years	05
	Above 30 years	01
	Higher secondary	07
	Secondary school	05
	Lower secondary/ elementary schools	01
Scale and designation	Elementary School Teacher (EST) BS-15	01
	Senior Vernacular (SV) BS-16	01
	Secondary School Teacher (SST) SBS-16 General	01
	Secondary School Educator (SSE) BS-16	01
	Secondary School Teacher (SST) BS-17	04
Teaching level	Senior Subject Specialist (SSS) BS-18	03
	Officer Grade 1 (OG-1)	02
	Lower middle / Primary Education (1 to 5 Levels)	00
	Middle / Elementary Education (6 to 8 Levels)	04
	SSC/High/Secondary Education (9 to 10 Levels)	05
	HSSC/Higher Secondary Education (11 to 12 Levels)	04

### Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews are beneficial for uncovering participants' experience and seeking in-depth information about a phenomenon. An interview is a technique of collecting information orally from the participants during a face-to-face conversation. It is a two-way method that permits the exchange of ideas and information (Philips, 2016). The researchers prepared an interview guide with open questions to conduct face-to-face semi-structured interviews with the study participants. The interview guide used in this research can also be called the phenomenological interview guide because interviews are based on phenomenological research (Roulston, 2018). The interview guide was improved while conducting interviews, and new questions were added meanwhile. The questions were based on the experience, opinion, feelings and perspectives of the participants. The data were collected with official permission from the head of the institutions. The researchers assured that the data will be used for research purpose only and kept confidential.

The phenomenological analysis was used while analyzing the interview transcripts. Such analysis emphasizes on convergence and divergence of lived experiences of a small number of participants. There are two aspects in this analysis; one is the essence of lived experiences, and the other is an interpretation of these experiences to understand the phenomenon. Participants' words, phrases and statements were used for the elaboration of the themes. The researcher's subjective judgment is essential because a researcher has to shape the knowledge collected from the participants in the form of data through interviews. Applying a word 'how' on a phenomenon in its natural setting imparts meanings and insights for interpreting participants' lived experiences (Creswell, 2018).

### Results

The researchers used the interview as a tool for data collection and analysis, followed by a phenomenological approach of qualitative research. The emergent themes and sub-themes are given in Figure 1 and described below:

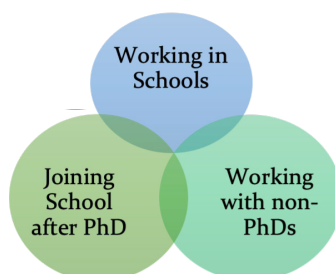


Figure 1: Main Themes of the Study

## Working in Schools

PhDs can be found at all levels in academia like schools, colleges, and universities, but most PhDs work in higher education institutions (HEIs). It was explored by interviewing with PhD degree holder teachers working in schools that if the teaching profession is a passion of a PhD teacher, it does not matter where or at what level he is teaching; they find themselves comfortable both in schools and higher education institutions. The passion of working with interest, honesty, hardworking and motivation also matters in teaching. It was examined from interviews that PhD teachers become more progressive and dynamic if they get a chance to move from a lower to a higher level of teaching in schools. Also, teaching at higher education institutions (college or university) is more concerned with self-study, openness, and exploring things, whereas teaching in schools is concerned with focusing on students' level, planning the lesson, and sharing knowledge.

Facilities and environment are important factors mentioned by most of the PhD teachers in this study. In higher education institutions, facilities and the environment are better as compared with schools. The environment is supportive at a college or university, and there are 'mature' students whom PhDs can teach. The PhD teachers are generally more interested in teaching at college and university than at school because their abilities tend to be enhanced while teaching at higher education institutions. The participants remarked that there are more learning opportunities while teaching at a college or university than teaching at schools with an extraordinary workload, responsibilities, and environmental issues.

All PhD teachers were of the view that there are necessary teaching skills, including individual coaching of the students, attention to students, the motivation of both student and teachers, observation skills of both student and teachers, guidance and counselling of the students, clarification of concepts, subject selection counselling and general guidance for life.

At the school level, it is not compulsory to appoint PhD teachers because master level qualification is considered enough. Nevertheless, one of the PhD teachers reflected that "*PhD teachers at a lower level of academics can build strong basics of students*". Another interviewee

working in a public school for the last 27 years commented that "*If we realize the importance of lower-level education like ECE as compared to graduate and post-graduate studies, then PhDs should also be in schools*". Qualification is not just a degree but a set of skills like how to teach and transfer or deliver knowledge.

On the other hand, it is also reflected by most of the participants that learning of PhDs stops while teaching at school, but one can continue his research work because employment conditions are relatively easy in schools. One of the interviewees working as a PhD teacher in the subject of Urdu in a public school expressed that "Financial constraints led PhDs to work in schools because teaching at school supports them and their families." Most of the participants agreed that PhDs should be available in schools if given high remuneration (pay or benefits).

## Joining School after PhD

The study participants remarked that a teacher, who is a researcher, is well planned regarding classroom management, teaching methodology, and assessment techniques. A PhD teacher described that "*Experience or skill matters along with qualification in schools because the teaching is text-book based*". Most of the participants reflected that they felt improved after PhD and they progressed from limited to more ideas, from conservation to innovation, from learnt vocabulary/terminology to many new words and phrases, and from dispersed concepts to matured ones. They kept psychological perspectives of teaching and learning in mind that supported them in being a good teacher.

## Teaching and Managing Classroom

Teaching style and methodology improves with the passage of time and experience. One of the participants, who did his PhD in biological sciences three years ago and had been teaching for 23 years, remarked that "*there is no short cut of experience*". Most PhD teachers observed changes in their methodology after PhD like time and resources management, avoiding use "helping books" and preferring text-books, planned and objective-based teaching, using different teaching methods (like question-answer method, discussions, group task), focusing on reading skills, improving handwriting skills of students,

focusing on the capacities, abilities, and aptitude of the students, interactive teaching styles like teaching by involving students, in assignment tasks, in group competitions, and in making field visits. The PhD teachers supported learning by doing and practical examples from daily life for a better understanding of the concepts. These types of innovations produce attraction in the teaching and learning process. Also, most PhD teachers described that confidence was increased after the completion of PhD degree.

Classroom management and classroom environment are considered the most important factors in teaching. According to the participants, assuring appropriate seating arrangement in classes for better interaction and learning environment was important. Students feel the difference between a PhD and a non-PhD teacher in a classroom, and they share this difference with other fellow students. It was also observed by the research participants that students are ready to listen and share their ideas with the PhD teachers with more attention and disciplined behavior than the other teachers.

One of the young male PhD teachers also discussed that their professional qualification (like Masters in Education) supported him in improving classroom management skills and teaching methodologies. Other PhD teachers also realized the importance of professional qualification that enables them to be a good classroom manager.

### Assessment and Interaction with Students

Assessment and evaluation are an integral part of every education system. It assesses the teaching and learning process from different aspects. Some PhD teachers explained different styles for preparation and assessing students during a

formative assessment, such as they gave them a topic-wise test daily two months before the final examination. PhD teachers allowed their students to participate in co-curricular activities and discouraged homework during vacations. The appreciated them visiting different parts of the country. Sometimes, open-book homework was also assigned by the PhD teachers to students for increasing their abilities. One of the female PhD teachers teaching in a higher secondary school assigned homework to their students while linking it to daily life and practical examples. In summative assessment or final exams, the participation of PhD teachers as an invigilation staff, deputy superintendent and superintendent were less.

A teacher is usually an interactive person with his students in the classroom. During teaching, interaction with students is an important aspect. After completion of PhD degree, many teachers have changed their interaction with students from distant style to interactive and discussion style. Most participants agreed that they became friendly and democratic with their students and gave them a chance to public speech in tutorials after every 15 days or a month. PhD teachers appreciated students on good work and shared their free time or lectures with them. In this activity, students felt more confident by discussing with a PhD teacher and expressed their teacher's feelings.

One research participant of the subject biology who was at the age of 49 and teaching in a school for the last 23 years explained that after PhD, "ability to ask questions independently and give other students a chance *for asking a question is increased.*" Highly qualified did not mean to teach higher classes only; instead, it means to increase the understanding of students' problems and their solutions. The themes and sub-themes merged from the analysis are given in Table 2.

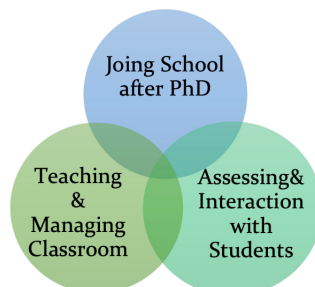


Figure 2: Theme and sub-themes

## Working with Non-PhDs

All the schools' activities revolve around the teaching and learning process and this process continues between teachers and students. It was explored that PhD degree holder teachers in schools had extensive command over content, vocabulary, pronunciation, observational skills, extensive learning experience, broad vision, open-mindedness, and good personality that made them prominent compared with non-PhD teachers. The PhD teachers believed that they produced better results, increased students' satisfaction, motivated them, gave solutions to many problems, focused on growth and development of students, provided a supportive environment and exhibited a democratic teaching style towards their students. This supportive and democratic environment encouraged students to ask more questions. Furthermore, PhD teachers accept challenging teaching and focus on making students knowledgeable rather than giving them marks. One of the participants described that *"marks and knowledge are two different things. Also, a teacher having low qualification can also produce good results regarding marks"*.

One male Urdu subject PhD teacher explained the importance of language. In his view, parents are a big barrier to the language learning of students. Further, he recommended that there should be a PhD teacher for language teaching in schools. One of the strong evidence explained by one male art teacher and a female science teacher was that PhD teacher's existence in schools was due to clarity of their concepts regarding a subject matter. In elementary education, students absorbed more concepts at the school level due to less emphasis on marks than higher academic levels. Students stuck with these concepts whole life as they got from school life. Thus, the presence of PhD teachers in schools can clear these concepts better than other teachers.

## Discussion

The work experience of PhD teachers in schools is highly encouraging and motivating for all stakeholders and school communities, including students, colleagues, headteachers and other persons in society. They were enjoying school teaching but struggling to move forward to join higher educational institutions. They were teaching different subjects at all grades in schools and working on research papers in universities in

their relevant subject fields utilizing their evening time or weekend. Some PhD teachers felt stuck in schools but also appreciated school working hours and financial benefits from the school job.

The participants felt contentment while performing this school because there is much unemployment in the country, and it was better to work in a school rather than be an unemployed person. One can imagine the worse issue of unemployment in Pakistan. The Higher Education Commission of Pakistan (HEC) has decided to spend 70% of resources on the workforce in university research grants and faculty recruitment and the remaining 30% to equipping institutes with better resources ([Yousaf & Zaheer, 2021](#)).

In addition to PhDs work experience at schools, it was not easy to work full time in schools while pursuing a PhD degree, but this teaching job allowed me to spend summers holidays to complete research work. For this, one has to maintain a balance between working hours and other routine life ([Tustin, 2018](#)). Anyone can manage a workload and publish a research paper while doing a job in a school. Nights, weekends, and other vocations provide support for the research work.

It was revealed by the participants that teaching influences PhDs work experience in schools more than other teachers. Academic and professional qualifications, along with experience, help enhance teaching skills. The participants believed that PhD teacher who is a researcher could be a good teacher compared to others because concepts and participation in the research process empower a teacher in school teaching. Also, understanding of science can be increased by laboratory experiments and this inquiry-based approach was used by most of the PhDs. School students are much interested in science's wonders, which is why they are attracted to PhD teachers ([Doyle & Vale, 2013](#)). Also, the curriculum development process is not successful without the participation of teachers ([Craig, 2009](#)).

## Conclusion

Working in a school was considered a stop-gap arrangement by the PhDs unless they get a 'good' position in a higher education institution. They entered into the school job with 'high hopes, but they had to struggle in continuing the job while working on research articles after PhDs. The had

collegial relationships with other teachers and the head of the school. Most of the PhDs were of the view that they were “better” than non-PhDs working in the schools. They considered themselves to be more skilled, competent and cooperative due to the higher qualification. They were more confident in teaching and managing classrooms, assessment and interaction with students.

Nevertheless, every teacher must attain professional skills along with an academic qualification. They were friendly with students and were liked by them. School teaching provided PhDs financial support for survival and further professional growth and development. The study has implications for theory and practice that how PhDs work experience can be further improved, and they are provided better job opportunities in policymaking, research on school improvement, and higher education institutions.

## References

- Craig, C. J. (2009). Teacher research and teacher as researcher. *International Handbook of Research on Teachers and Teaching*, 61-70.
- Creswell, J. W. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Doyle, K. M. H., & Vale, R. D. (2013, November). Creating opportunities for science PhDs to pursue careers in high school education. *Mol Biol Cell*, 24(21), 3292-6.
- Gilani, N., Waheed, S. A., & Shaheen, A. (2020). Making a debut in teaching: Uncovering prospective teachers' first-time teaching experiences in schools. *Universal Journal of Educational Research*, 8(11), 5443-5452. DOI: 10.13189/ujer.2020.081147.
- Gallagher, S. (1997). Mutual enlightenment: Recent phenomenology in cognitive science. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 4(3), 195-214.
- Gallagher, S., & Francesconi, D. (2012) Teaching Phenomenology to Qualitative Researchers, Cognitive Scientists, and Phenomenologists. *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology*, 12(3), 1-10, DOI: 10.2989/IPJP.2012.12.3.4.1112
- Government of Punjab, Pakistan School Education Department. (2020, December 7). *sis.punjab.gov.pk*.  
<https://Sis.Punjab.Gov.Pk/>.  
<https://sis.punjab.gov.pk/stats/>
- Hussain, D. M. A., Bhatti, D. R., Tufail, M. M., & Rashid, D. F. (2017). *Philosophy of Education*. Allama Iqbal Open University: Islamabad.
- Philips, w. (2016). *Research Methodology in Education*. Research Methodology in Education - An LLED Manual. <https://lled500.trubox.ca/2016/225>.
- Roulston, K. (2018). *How to develop an interview guide* (Part 1). <https://qualpage.com/2018/02/08/how-to-develop-an-interview-guide-part-1/>.
- Smith, B. (2020). *Inside Higher Ed*. The benefits of working in an independent K-12 school as a Ph.D. grad (opinion). <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2020/02/13/benefits-working-independent-k-12-school-phd-grad-opinion>.
- Tustin, R. (2018, February). Pros and Cons of Getting a PhD While Teaching Full Time. *Study.com*. <https://study.com/blog/pros-and-cons-of-getting-a-phd-while-teaching-full-time.html>.
- Waheed, S. A. (2020). Doctoral students' transition to the academic culture of foreign universities: Setting the stage for PhD. *Sir Syed Journal of Education & Social Research*, 3(2), 408-419.
- Waheed, S. A., Gilani, N. & Raza, M. (2020). Temporality: Living through the time while doing doctoral studies. *Journal of Business and Social Review in Emerging Economies*, 6(3), 1111-1117.
- Yousaf, A., & Zaheer, M. (2021, March 6). *Dilemma of HEC research grants*. The Express Tribune. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2287885/dilemma-of-hec-research-grants>.