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A Phenomenological Exploration of Efficacious Teachers' Experience with Instructional Challenges

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Abstract   *This psychological phenomenological study explored the challenges experienced by five efficacious teachers during instruction at a suburban government higher secondary school in Pakistan. The data collected through semi structured interviews was analyzed through Moustakas' phenomenological data analysis plan. It was determined that the participants could not utilize their efficacy skills because of the challenges like poor supervision and no accountability by the principal, overcrowded classrooms and faulty paper marking by the fellow teachers. Further discussions led us to conclude that the said challenges in their triple impact resulted in an environment favorable for the growth of a habitual non-professional attitude in teachers because of which they could not show any efforts like commitment and resilience against them so as to justify their efficacy beliefs. On these bases, some suggestions were made to be seriously considered for the removal of the hurdles that thwart teachers from the efficient delivery of their performance during instruction.*

Introduction

According to Bandura (1997), self-efficacy is one of the several agents that significantly influence teachers' instructional skills. This (self-efficacy) is highlighted in their potential to work out, organize and administer instructional activities in an efficient manner. With self-efficacy they are infused with the spirit that they are capable of achieving the anticipated learning outcomes. Likewise, Jennett et al., (2003) posit that self-efficacy strengthens the beliefs of teachers that they can impart quality instruction even in the presence of external hurdles. The level of teachers' efficaciousness influences students' active class participation, interest and motivation in learning (Bong, 2008; Eren, 2009).

This discussion has important connection with the teachers of the target (government higher secondary) school located in a suburban town of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Since my taking charge as a new staff member in 2015 there in the said school, it has been in my observation that though the teaching staff is well qualified both academically as well as professionally; however, their qualification seemed to have no contribution to students' performance. They regularly attended the classes and finished the courses well in time; yet the students were not showing up any good performance. Teachers seemed unable to transform their skills in to their students' success.

This irony of situations motivated me to conduct a qualitative study so as to explore the core causes (or hurdles) being responsible for the said phenomenon.

Literature Review

Teachers' (self-efficacy) beliefs that they can execute the assigned tasks efficiently (Bandura, 1977) are crucial to their instructional proficiency and their capability of achieving the desired learning outcomes (Gibbs & Powell, 2012). In this regard, based on Bandura's (1986) concept of self-efficacy, numerous studies have identified that

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contextual, teacher-related as well as administration-related factors contribute tremendously to constructive teachers' efficacy beliefs. For example, in a study conducted in middle and junior high schools, Ashton and Webb (1986) explored contextual factors related to self-efficacy and the behaviors associated with it. They focused the characteristics of teachers' self-efficacy and its relationship with students' performance. Their findings revealed that the middle school administration took decisions after mutual consultation with the staff. This democratic approach resulted in a favorable working environment which had a positive influence on the efficacy beliefs of teachers. Their self-efficacy was highlighted in their commitment, cooperation and that they considered instruction as a joint responsibility. Conversely, the administrative practices in the junior high school were purely authoritative in nature as a top down flow was observed in their decision making. That is why; the teachers seemed less enthusiastic and less committed about their teaching. However, results of a study conducted by Bradshaw and Hershfeldt (2012) revealed that in contrast to context related factors, teacher related factors like experience, readiness, mutual respect, and contact with parents and democratic administrative style greatly influenced teachers' efficacy beliefs. These findings may be matched with Woolfolk (1998) who affirmed that contextual factors do not significantly affect teachers' efficacy beliefs; however, since their findings also highlighted a positive influence of mutual respect among teachers and democratic administration on efficacy beliefs; thus, findings of Ashton and Webb's (1986) are supported. Similarly, Hoy and Woolfolk (1993) identified that teachers' self-efficacy was enhanced significantly because of their principal management abilities and skills in enabling them establish achievable targets for their students. Likewise, Ross et al. (2004) revealed that teachers' collective self-efficacy may be enhanced if the administration is empowered in decision making and establishing common goals for teachers. In addition, Knoblauch and Hoy's (2008), in their study pointed out that teachers' efficacy beliefs are shaped by the way they manage classroom problems, utilize instructional strategies and promote positive relationship with colleagues and administration.

Nonetheless, there is a limited number of studies that had a direct focus at investigating the challenges to teachers' self-efficacy. For examples, a study conducted by Skaalvik, M. and Skaalvik, S. (2010) revealed that factor like job stress is inversely related to job satisfaction and that the development of positive efficacy beliefs may be at risk in its presence. Similarly, Milner and Hoy (2003) in their qualitative investigation studied self-efficacy of an African American teacher in an unsupportive environment in a US suburban high school. In their findings, they identified that unsupportive working environment is a threat to teachers' sense of self-efficacy; however, this hurdle may be overcome if teachers exhibit perseverance. That is why, Gavora, P. Slovak, (2010) consider perseverance as a strong indicator of self-efficacy. Klassen and Durksen (2014) in a mixed method study examined how pre-service teachers develop work stress and self-efficacy during a teaching practicum. In findings, they revealed that self-efficacy is inversely related to work stress; however, mentoring may affect this relationship. Similarly, in a mixed method study, Cheung (2008) compared teachers' self-efficacy of primary in-service teachers of Shanghai and Hong Kong using Chinese version of Teachers' Sense of Efficacy Scale (TSES) followed by interview. The quantitative results reported higher self-efficacy of Shanghai teachers while the qualitative data identified teaching experience, training programs and confidence and respect the parents and students show for teachers as significant contributors in this regard.

Related literature shows that in Pakistan research studies on self-efficacy were generally comparative in nature and that only the need for developing efficacy beliefs was highlighted. For example, in a study on self-efficacy, conducted by Aslam, et al., (2017) in Punjab, the need to incorporate appropriate content in curriculum was highlighted so that students' emotional self-efficacy is developed. Similarly, Saboor and Mohti (2015) also studied self-efficacy and revealed a significant difference in the efficacy of classroom-based and web-based learners; as extraversion and openness to experience of classroom-based learners was found better than web-based learners. However, a study conducted by Shaukat, S. (2011) is found to be a rare study that focused the efficacy beliefs of in-service teachers. The study measured the efficacy beliefs of 180 teachers by developing a validated (questionnaire) instrument. The findings revealed significant variations in government and private teachers' scores. In conclusion, the application of Bandura teachers' efficacy model for Pakistani teachers was supported after intercorrelation of the four factors (persistent behavior, classroom management, professional mastery and level of teacher anxiety).

Nearly all the aforementioned studies were quantitative in nature; however, according to Goddard et al. (2000), such studies may not fully succeed in identifying the association between efficacy and contextual factors which may lead to an incomprehensive understanding of the phenomenon concerned. Accordingly, this pure qualitative study is an attempt to respond to this concern. It aimed to explore the influences upon teachers' self-efficacy beliefs in terms of the instructional challenges they faced during instruction. Having said that, a psychological phenomenological approach was used in order to answer the following two research questions:

1. What are the challenges efficacious teachers face during instruction?
2. How do these hurdles influence their efficacy skills?

The intention was to have an in depth understanding of the phenomenon and thus come with valid findings that may be significant for in-service teachers in connection to positive efficacy beliefs development in a tough working environment.

Methods

Design

According to Creswell (1998), phenomenological approach is mostly appropriate in that situation when a phenomenon needs profound understanding and the people associated with it share a common experience. He identified two approaches followed in phenomenological studies i.e. hermeneutic and psychological or transcendental. Hermeneutic (that interprets) phenomenology is derived from the work of Van Manen (1990), which focuses on representing the views of the participants from the researcher's perspective. Psychological or transcendental phenomenology is however the result of Moustakas' (1994) work, which is a derivation of Giorgi's (1985) psychological concept. Here, the researcher's voice is less echoed and the main focus is on the description of the participants' lived experiences. The researcher achieves this through Husserl's (1977) concept of epokhe i.e. bracketing (setting aside preconceptions to have an open and fresh look at the phenomenon being studied). Taking this into consideration, Moustakas' psychological phenomenological design was followed in the study because, i) the (target) phenomenon needed an in depth understanding (as highlighted previously), ii) the participants shared a common experience (efficaciousness) and iii) the researcher determined to present a description of their lived experiences through their own perspectives.

Participants

Based on Polkinghorne's (1989) recommendation for data collection from 5-25 participants (sharing a common experience) in phenomenological studies, a criterion of shared experience (efficaciousness) was further adopted along with purposive sampling for participants' selection (Creswell, 2013). In this regard, out of the 12 purposefully selected experienced teachers of the target school, only 5 participants were selected as efficacious teachers because of revealing high efficacy attributes on Hoy and Woolfolk's, (1993) Teacher Sense of Efficacy Scale (TSES). The selection of participants was based on their choice and upon signing consent letters to be interviewed and audio recorded. Pseudonyms were used for their representation. They had the right to depart from the study any time. Moreover, permissions were granted for using the TSES from its developer as well as from the head of the institution to conduct study in its premises.

Data Collection and Analysis

Because of the appropriateness with phenomenological studies, semi structured in-depth interviews were conducted for data collection (Moustakas, 1994; Marshall & Rossman, 2014). All the interviews were one on one, in depth in nature, audio recorded and almost 45 minutes long. The interview protocol was based on the research questions that were framed around Moustakas', recommended two main questions for phenomenological research i.e. what did the participants experience and how they experienced it. For example, the participants were asked to respond to the questions, 'what were their experiences in terms of the challenges they faced during instruction?' and 'how these challenges *if any* influenced their efficacy beliefs?' The responses

to these questions were recorded and the data was transcribed and then analyzed by the researcher and his colleagues in search for the hidden meaning.

Data was analyzed using Moustakas' (1994) modified Van Kaam's (1966) and Colaizzi's (1978 methods as it provided systematic steps (Creswell, 1998) for ensuring objectivity in data analysis. Following these steps, we, first of all identified and bracketed our preconceptions developed with the phenomenon *(epokhe)* during interviewing the participants so that they had no influence over data analysis. Then, we went through the interview transcripts in order to highlight statements or quotes having significant value to gain a general understanding of the overall experience *(horizonalization)*. Then, we reduced the information to more significant coded meaning units and organized them under general themes *(phenomenological reduction)*. At this stage, we textually described the three major emerging themes i.e. *absence of academic supervision, large class size* and *non-constructive academic practices* in order to answer the question 'what were the instructional challenges participants experienced during instruction?' In order to identify the context of the experiences, we re-read the themes and the associated data intently *(imaginative variation)*. That is where we developed the structural description of the experience to answer 'how the instructional challenges influenced their efficacy beliefs?' Then, the textual and structural descriptions were combined in the form of an overall account (essence) of the experience *(synthesis)*. The aim was to understand the context of its occurrences. Finally, we analyzed the essence of the experience through the lens of available literature (Bandura's social cognitive theory and Jager's habitual behavior framework) to further locate the context of participants experience in an attempt to generalize the findings and give it a universal touch (Polkinghorne, 1989).

Reliability and Validity

The strategy adopted for ensuring reliability was inter-judge (inter-coder) agreement (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The three coders (the principal author and two of his colleagues) analyzed and coded the data independently. The little bit incongruity highlighted was removed during discussion and an agreement was done at the final set of themes (Creswell, 2013; Silverman, 2005). For example, the three coders after independent coding named the 3rd theme differently: coder 2 and 3 named it undesirable academic activities and anti-academic practices respectively while I, as the principal author named it negative academic practices. However, since, the underlying idea was the same, the theme was unanimously named as non-constructive academic practices.

Likewise, member checking (Creswell, 2017) was used for determining the validity of the results. The participant teachers were asked to review and reflect on the concluding themes and findings for the purpose of accuracy and validity.

Results

Three major themes were emerged after the analysis of phenomenological data. The themes were: (1) poor supervision and no accountability (2) large class size (3) non-constructive academic practices (See *Figure 1*).
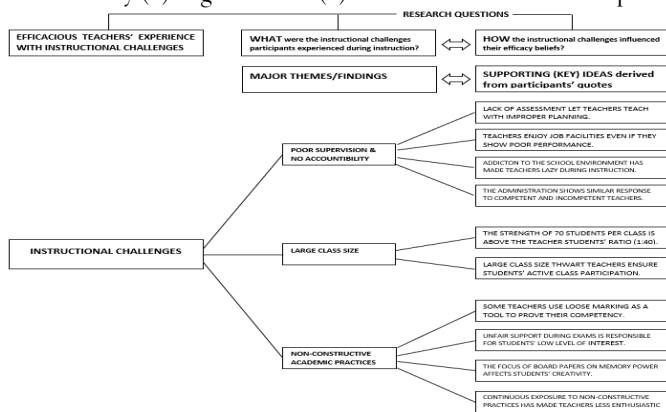

Figure 1: (Process of Data Analysis Leading to Themes Development)

Poor Supervision and No Accountability

The participants experienced *poor supervision* and *no accountability* as influential obstruction in their way to show full potential during instruction. They described that they didn't show enthusiasm and seriousness during instruction because they were not constantly assessed and supervised by the administration. A participant responded:

…I have neither been instructed nor been provided with any plan or procedure to follow during instruction. The administration doesn't direct me to produce any lesson plan for the concerned class…I enjoy full freedom whether to teach during a class or whether to pass the 40 minutes time in gossiping with the students…There is no assessment of my performance from their side. My colleagues as well as I have become so much addicted to this situation that we are unknowingly less inclined to practically apply proper instructional strategies during instruction… (P2)

Participants' experiences highlighted that the administration never asked about their performance and the progress of the students, about the way they taught and about the level of comprehension students attained during instruction. They were only concerned with getting information about teachers' leaves and timing schedules. However, they didn't care about the quality of the assessment procedures they carried out. In this regard, a participant shared his experience:

…the administration doesn't ensure whether a teacher uses unfair means or other sources in getting the students passed or what is the quality of the achievement or comprehension level of students in a subject. I am teaching since 2010, but in all these years the administration has never asked from me about students' performance in the concerned subject or about my future academic plans… (P4)

Similarly, the participants continuously experienced the lack of accountability on the part of the administration. This attitude of the administration was making them lazy in utilizing their full skills as efficacious teachers. A teacher expressed it:

… Here my fellow teachers and I enjoy full facilities even if we show poor performance or unsatisfactory result… Last year my subject result was 44% in class 6 and 72% in class 7; however, I was neither interrogated for the poor result nor appreciated for better performance by the administration … There is no accountability… The trend is that the administration responds towards competent and incompetent teachers just the same. (P3)

Large Class Size

Another responsible factor the participants experienced that often inhibited them from utilizing their instructional skills was large class size. Their experiences revealed that it was a hurdle in ensuring students' involvement in instruction. This strength of students (more than 80) was above the teacher students' ratio (1:40, set by the local government). Participants believed that the large number of students hampered their capacity to practice proper instructional techniques. The ease teachers feel in normal classes (having up to 40 students in Pakistani context) in managing the instructional activities was absent in large-sized classes. Their experiences highlighted that a great deal of valuable time was wasted in the overcrowded classrooms in management issues, making it difficult for them to teach properly in the less amount of available time. This often resulted in a failure in realizing the learning outcomes. A participant expressed his experience in these words:

There are more than 70 students I have to teach daily. This strength is above the teacher students' ratio that is 1:40. Right from the commencement of the class I start taking attendance; it almost wastes 15 minutes. Then asking the students to open their books and asking them to keep quiet and be attentive from time to time and ensuring that they have written the learning material from the board and so on… You see the forty minutes period is finished before I do any fruitful learning activity…Ensuring active class participation in such classes seems out of question… (P5)

Non-constructive Academic Practices

Teachers also experienced some non-constructive practices in the academic circle that they considered responsible for affecting the quality of instruction in the target school. One of these practices was *faulty marking* as experienced by them. Most importantly, they seemed to have habituated to such practices that is why they considered it to be part of normal academic routine. A participant explained it in these words:

Some fellow teachers do loose marking and thus get those students pass in exams who don't deserve it. They do it only to reveal that their result is good. Consequently, those students are promoted to new classes who have low level … That is why it

becomes a double challenge for us to make such students comprehend the instruction and finish the course in the allotted duration at the same time…, this has become a routine business and normally this issue never irritates us to ponder over or discuss it. (P4)

Another participant described the repercussions of the said practice in these words:

…I teach class 8; however, the fact is that these students even don't deserve to be placed in class 6… They even don't know how to write their names? Hence, it is not easy to teach with full capacity … Or if you even teach with full potential, the response is poor… (P1)

Use of unfair means was another non-constructive academic practice that the teachers experienced. They described that most of their students had low level of interest in instruction because they were assured to be supported unfairly during exams. They said that it was their fellow teachers who gave them such assurance. And again, it has become a routine business for them. This is echoed in these words:

Most of our students are confident about the use of unfair means in exams … they are sure that some of the teaching staff would assist them unfairly during exam. They are the teachers who strengthen their negative beliefs. Some parents are equally responsible in this regard; who also approach these teachers. …having used to such situations we consider ourselves a part of the system and have become comfort lovers and thus less enthusiastic to raise our voice against it. (P2)

The *unsystematic pattern of board papers* was another non-constructive academic practice that disturbed teachers' beliefs. Though this hurdle was beyond their control; however, it affected their instructional will in the classroom. The participants' experiences highlighted that the papers were generally based on text-based questions. They didn't assess students' conceptual understanding. This had made teachers too much selective in delivering instruction. They did not apply any such activity that may enhance students' creativity as the structure of these papers was such that only stimulated students' cramming power. That is why, it had become a routine practice for teachers to instruct them just to memorize certain textual material to get through the exam. In this respect, a participant described:

…Our board exams only let us prepare our students for the type of papers assessing memory power only. The standard that guarantees high academic grades here in our boards exams is enhanced cramming power. That is why we are interested only to identify some important questions in the text and ask them to memorize… We are only concerned with ensuring that they have memorized certain sections of the text books by heart so that they reproduce the same in their exam. …our routine teaching is going on in this fashion responding to the demands of such papers. (P1)

Synthesis

The participants' experiences portrayed two types of challenges that inhibited them from exercising their efficacy skills i.e. administration-related challenges like lack of academic supervision and accountability, large class size and poor paper pattern and teachers-related challenges like poor marking and promotion of the use of unfair means. Nonetheless, it might be further generalized from their experiences that the administration-caused challenges seemed more responsible for the teachers' performance; as normally the authority to run the affairs of the school lies with them. They could have positively supervised the academic affairs of the schools, made teachers accountable for their actions and thus could have achieved the desired outcomes to some extent. In the same way, they could have reported the problem of overcrowded classrooms to higher authorities to redress the problem accordingly. However, it might also be synthesized from the participants' experiences that they didn't seem to have activated their personal strengths (to be expected from efficacious teachers) to resist the external hurdles seriously. The reason may be that (as expressed by some participants, *"we have become so much addicted to this situation that we are unknowingly less inclined to practically apply proper instructional strategies during instruction – P2"*, *"The trend is that the administration responds towards competent and incompetent teachers just the same – P3"*, *"this has become a routine business – P4"* and *"Having used to such situations we consider ourselves a part of the system – P2"* and *"Our routine teaching is going on in this fashion – P1"*) the continuous exposure to the said situation in the target school has made them addicted to it and thus they seemed unable to feel the loss.

Interpretations and Discussions

In order to further comprehend the context of the participants' experiences, an effort was made to explain this mechanism through the lens of Alfred Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory (SCT). The theory (which also

serves as a theoretical basis for this study) portrays an inter-related triadic association among environmental, personal and behavioral factors which according to Bandura (1986) has an impact on efficacy beliefs. It means that one's strength of efficacy beliefs is revealed in the form of his behavior (action) through the manner it interacts with his personal strengths as well as environmental factors. The theory proclaims a reversible mechanism among the said factors i.e. at times when external factors try to destabilize one's efficacy beliefs, efficacious people may try to resist these hurdles (to balance the mentioned equation) by activating their personal strengths (Minet, R. 2015). However, in the context of this study and unlike the reciprocal determinism in the said theory, the participants' experiences revealed only the unidirectional mechanism *(see Figure 2)* i.e. the balanced-triadic-reciprocal-mechanism (in SCT) seemed to have shifted in favor of the environmental forces against the personal ones. This may imply that the participants found themselves accustomed to the constant influence of the environmental factors *(see results)*; that is why they seemed to have developed a habitual behavior of showing no effort like commitment and resilience (significant parameters of self-efficacy - Jennet et al., 2003) as a resistance against these challenges.
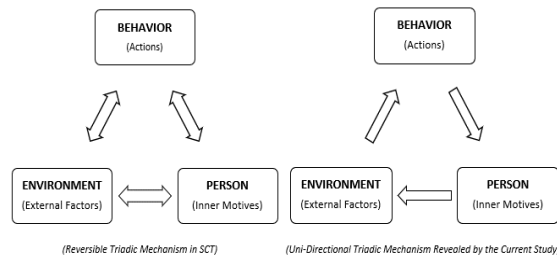
Figure 2. (Comparison of Triadic Relationships Models Revealed by SCT & the Current Study)

Taking the above scenario into consideration, Jager's (2003) framework for habitual behavior was consulted to analyze how participants were addicted to the mentioned environment in order to peep into their habit of showing no resistance against instructional challenges. Based on the said framework, Jager affirms that the ease, comfort and pleasure related to a behavior may motivate people to perform it repeatedly with a minimal of thinking involvement. The repetition may lead it to a habitual or routine behavior. At this stage, people may intrinsically not reason whether it has good or bad consequences. Considering this, the factors (highlighted in the findings) like poor supervision, overcrowded classrooms and non-constructive academic practices in their triple impact appeared to have established an environment conducive for the growth of a habitual non-professional instructional behavior in teachers. This may have been the reason behind their tendency to shirk commitment and perseverance in the face of challenges. Their experiences support their preferring its immediate effect (ease and comfort resulted by poor academic supervision and no proper accountability) over its long-term impact upon the students. This according to Jager, is a sign of negative behavior *(See Figure 3)*.
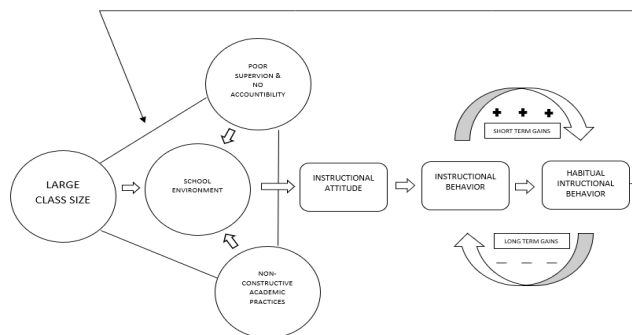
Figure 3. (Reworked Format of Jager's Habitual Behavior Framework)

The figure shows when the advantages (plusses) of a behavior weigh against its disadvantages (minuses), the behavior (already planned) may change into a habit *(whether its advantages or disadvantages are apparently there or whether they are self-conceived)*. The repetition of the behavior develops a loop (automatism) and the doer may have an irrational approach in weighing the pros and cons associated with it. This truly corresponds with the phenomenon in the current study. Because, the mentioned behavior of the participants developed into a habitual loop (automatism) when they showed an irrational approach in preferring its immediate or short-term outcomes (ease and comfort) represented by bold plusses over its long-term impact on students' performance. According to Jager (2003), it is only after the loop is broken (represented by the backward arrow in the diagram) through reconstructing of the attitude that may make the doer rational to perform with reason and a new behavior or habit may commence. How this loop might be broken in connection to the current study, and what should be done to make the teachers sensible in their approach towards instruction, has been explained in the next section.

Implications and Conclusions

The study presented the significance of utilizing qualitative methods in exploring the complex nature of teachers' experiences with instructional challenges. It has contributions to understanding how teachers' instructional beliefs are formed in a challenging environment. The findings not only revealed the challenges teachers face during instruction, but also the limited opportunities they had in shaping their efficacy beliefs. However, several limitations need to be addressed before discussing the study's implications. First, as data was collected from a small number of participants (only 5), the results have limited chances to be related to other research contexts. Second, there are so many elements that may contribute to teachers' instructional efficiency; however, only efficacy has been dealt with in the study.

In spite of these limitations, the study provides valuable insights and has significant implications for teachers and administrators accordingly.

On the basis of the findings the overarching conclusion may be that continuous exposure to external or environmental forces may make people addicted and may develop in them a routine behavior of showing no resistance. Based on the participants' experiences, the constant experience with external forces like poor supervision and no accountability, overcrowded classrooms and non-constructive academic practices led them develop a routine non-professional behavior of taking almost no interest during instruction and showing no commitment and perseveration against challenges. To be more specific, their self-efficacy was at risk in the presence of these hurdles. Now, in order to try to put them back on the right track, and thus make an attempt to stabilize their efficacy beliefs, the said automatism (addiction loop) need to be broken. In this respect, based on the recommendations of Jager (2003), the following suggestions are put forwarded as possible interventions;

1. *The environment favorable for the growth of undesirable routine behavior may be transformed.* For achieving this, first, the high ups must perform their due role in enabling the school administration to observe proper check and balance and access the academic activities on regular basis. Second, the higher authorities should cooperate with school administration to take steps on emergency basis to ensure practically the already settled teacher-students ratio in order to redress the problem of overcrowded classrooms to some extent. Third, with regards to the paper pattern in board exams, the authorities concerned are suggested to arrange collaborative meetings with education experts including class teachers to redesign the prevailing assessment procedures in such a way that teachers are motivated towards preparing their students on conceptual grounds during instruction. As far as the third instructional challenge is concerned, its exercise may automatically be discouraged to a greater extent when the said measures for the reconstruction of the school environment are successfully put to practice.

2. *The teachers must be educated about the long-term negative consequences of their existing behavior and an alternating positive instructional package may be provided accordingly.* For this purpose, workshops and refresher courses should be arranged focusing active instructional and large class size management strategies as well as

motivation towards a transparent honest approach during instruction by highlighting the ill effects of teaching without planning and use of unfair means etc.

3. *The said measures may be aligned with concerned emerging trends so that an automatic mechanism is developed for reconstructing the administration's as well as teachers' approach.* In this regard, alignment with 21st century administration skills and active learning strategies may be a good idea. This approach may automatically let administration make decision on collaborative and democratic grounds (Sharratt and Fullan, 2012) and enable teachers teach with interest and enthusiasm impacting students' performance positively (Beetham, H. & Sharpe, R. 2013).

In the end I must say that in response to the challenges of academic life; it is most important for teachers to remain steadfast and resolute. They should inculcate in them the beliefs that they are competent enough to influence their students positively regardless of the fact that challenges do exist in the instructional environment.

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