

AN IGNORED SOLUTION TO K-12 EDUCATION PROBLEMS IN PAKISTAN: FRAMEWORK FOR MAINSTREAMING CAREER EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

Career Education (CE) is defined as “school-based efforts to prepare students for career-related developmental tasks, including career choices” . This suggests that deliberate endeavors are necessary for school to develop the sense of career among students and help them to choose the careers consciously. Hence, CE is proposed at K-12 level to minimize the gap between schooling and job market, instilling knowledge, skills and attitude required for career development and encouraging each individual to play their role in economic activities.

The situation of K-12 education in Pakistan is being constantly reported poor in terms of access, quality, learning achievement and students’ drop-out. It is regrettable fact that problems of education in Pakistan are discussed with the lens of various approaches but attention to very origin is missing in literature. Whereas the global literature presents the comprehensive approach to similar education problems and confirms the role of CE as significant solution to the problems such as improved students’ engagement in learning, school valuing and decreasing the rate of school dropout.

However, the national literature discusses Career Counselling (CC) – discrete approach - over CE – integrated approach. Moreover, unlike CE, the CC has not been discussed to resolve the educational problems. The research studies under the umbrella of CC in Pakistan depict that the focus has been less on middle and primary grades while highlighting the gaps of either absence of CC or providing it in an unfitting way. Almost all studies conducted under the umbrella of K-12 level in Pakistan explore either perspectives or current practices, if available, of CC only.

The literature shows that integrated approach towards career development known as CE seems missing research. Moreover, research mostly present career-related guidance at secondary stages. Whereas the international research confirms the benefits of CE at elementary level and one of the local research studies recommended that CE is necessary at elementary grades. This made the case for this research study to look deeper in the literature to further understand the application of CE in schooling process for the career development and develop a framework that may support to implement CE in Pakistan. Hence, this study was based on the following objectives:

- To conduct systematic analysis for reviewing career-related research studies in Pakistan
- To develop the contextually relevant framework of career education for K-12 Education in Pakistan

METHODOLOGY

A robust phase wise approach was used to meet the research objectives of this research project. First, a systematic review was conducted to understand the research trends in line with Career Education (CE) and guidelines had been prepared to develop a CE framework. The systematic review played a role of springboard for achieving the major objective of framework development.

Initially a framework draft was prepared using the findings from systematic review. Later, it has been validated through two-phase Delphi technique through consulting the experts.

Systematic review approach was adopted as preliminary research method to build the base for devising a robust framework for Career Education. Systematic reviews are widely used in the field of education for translating research findings into practical solution to educational problems. In the same vein, the major objective of this research was to develop framework of Career Education as a solution for developing link between school and learners' professional life.

FINDINGS

Findings from systematic review are discussed in two parts: global and national literature. Global studies indicate that integrating CE in core curriculum builds strong foundation for the career development of students. CE is also reported to have a positive impact on the students' learning outcomes, their engagement in learning, decreasing school dropout, students' preparation for future careers and their self-efficacy. Findings also revealed a higher on-time completion rate, positive behavior, and high perceived value of education in students. Presence of 'trusted adults' have been reported positive on development of career aspirations. So, the CEFP emphasized on help taken by 'supporting people' (parents, teachers, friends) and also reflecting on supporting people's input in career aspirations.

In developing countries, where employment opportunities are scarce, education can be a resource that offers individuals control over their career-related perceptions across genders. The integration of CE in schools is regarded as an equity function in such countries where most disadvantaged students benefit from career awareness and support in formal settings. Development of transferable skills such as communication, confidence, decision-making abilities, and critical thinking skills are also emphasized globally, therefore, the CEFP also includes such skills. In CEFP, such skills are suggested in core curriculum for K-12 grade students and some of the items are developed presuming the existing learning competencies of core curriculum i.e., communication (writing/speaking) skills learnt in (English and regional) languages.

Career-related research studies at national level mostly report the poor picture of career guidance and counselling (CGC) i.e., absence of CGC. The research studies do not include clear description of CGC and particularly its role, which arises a question that 'who is the right person to guide students for their future development?' So, efforts must be put in defining the process of CGC and describing the individuals who need to provide CGC. Interestingly, the review suggests that teachers are expected to be at the very forefront while providing students with CGC which supports integration of CE that exclusively depends more on teachers. Unfortunately, none of the research studies have explored about provision of CGC at K-8 grades. Though importance of CGC either in all school grades or in early high school grades is mentioned but most of the studies discoursed more about CGC services for secondary and college level students from various dimensions except the two out of 19 studies. Moreover, traditional and gendered biases have also been reported in career-aspirations which has been reflected while developing the CEFP.

Moreover, the key finding of this study was development of comprehensive 'Career Education Framework for Pakistan (CEFP)'. The CEFP is based on three distinct but interconnected factors such as Knowledge, Skills and Attitude required for imparting career education at K-12 level. The CEFP is vertically divided in 4 educational levels such as Primary (K-5), Middle (6-8), Secondary (9-10) and Higher Secondary (11-12). Each factor and level have different tenets (detailed framework is available in research report) to be implemented and achieved for the successful integration of CE in mainstream education.

CONCLUSION

This research focused on in-depth review of literature to conceptualize the CE approach in solving the educational challenges in Pakistan and devising contextual framework to implement CE in mainstream education. Global and national literature advocates CE as promising solution to educational problems such as low academic achievement, students learning disengagement, drop-out and quality of education. This further resulted in successful creation of Pakistan's first inaugural Career Education Framework for Pakistan (CEFP) which based on in-depth understanding of literature, experts' insights and contextual needs. The validation of CEFP through Delphi rounds further ensures its contextual relevance and efficacy as a solution to Pakistan's educational dilemmas.

In summary, this research conclusively supports CE as the optimal strategy to address educational challenges while fostering human capital development. The CEFP, serving as a tangible translation of research into practice, holds the promise to reshape the educational landscape. Moving forward, it is imperative to consider the practical implications of implementing the CEFP and to explore avenues for its seamless integration within the education system. As Pakistan embraces this transformative framework, it sets a promising course toward enhancing educational outcomes and nurturing a more empowered and prepared generation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This research has yielded several pertinent recommendations based on the study's findings, which hold significant implications for the enhancement of Career Education Framework (CEFP) integration within Pakistan's educational landscape:

1. **Educational Policy and Stakeholder Engagement:** Educational policymakers are strongly encouraged to engage in a comprehensive review of existing educational policies through the lens of CEFP. This revision process should encompass all pertinent stakeholders, including curriculum developers, textbook authors, teacher educators, researchers, teachers, parents, and students. This concerted effort will facilitate the alignment of educational objectives with CEFP principles, ensuring a cohesive and progressive educational framework.
2. **Curricular Integration:** The curricula for K-12 grade levels in various subjects necessitate rigorous review to harmonize with CEFP tenets. The incorporation of CEFP principles will bridge the gap between classroom learning and students' career aspirations, enriching educational experiences and fostering a holistic development approach.
3. **Textbook Alignment:** A pivotal step involves critically examining all K-12 level textbooks within the purview of CEFP. This evaluative process will enable the seamless infusion of CEFP principles into textbook content, propelling students towards introspective career exploration and informed decision-making.
4. **Research Endeavors:** Social science researchers are advised to explore the realms of Career Education (CE) further, particularly emphasizing its integrated approach and inherent significance. Dissemination of key insights regarding CEFP's transformative potential will catalyze informed discourse and facilitate its effective implementation.
5. **Localized Contextualization:** Future research endeavors, spanning diverse regions of Pakistan, should earnestly evaluate CEFP for its contextual strengths and limitations. Researchers are encouraged to scrutinize the framework within their unique local contexts, suggesting contextual adaptations and improvements as needed.

6. **Curriculum Analysis:** Future research initiatives must extend their purview to encompass a meticulous analysis of educational policies, curricula, and subject-specific textbooks, all viewed through the comprehensive lens of CEFP. This holistic evaluation will illuminate existing alignment, provide guidance for seamless integration, and propose supplementary content embedding CEFP principles.
7. **Teacher Preparation and Professional Development:** Teacher educators hold a critical role in propagating CEFP principles to K-12 educators. It is recommended that teacher training programs be revisited and revamped to encompass CEFP learning components, empowering teachers to facilitate meaningful career-oriented education.
8. **Educator Degree Programs Enhancement:** The revision of policies and curricula for B.Ed. and BS Education programs across varying durations (1.5, 2.5 & 4 years) should be meticulously undertaken with a dedicated CEFP focus. This adaptation will equip future educators with the necessary tools and insights to effectively integrate CEFP principles into their instructional practices.

By heeding these recommendations, Pakistan's educational landscape can harness the transformative potential of the Career Education Framework (CEFP), promoting enriched student experiences, informed career decisions, and a dynamic educational ecosystem that resonates with the evolving needs of the 21st century.