

INVESTIGATING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION POLICY IN PAKISTANI SCHOOLS: FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE

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Abstract

Pakistan has, over the past two decades, formally committed itself to inclusive education through constitutional guarantees, the National Education Policy (2017), and provincial frameworks such as the Punjab Special Education Policy (2020), yet the translation of these commitments into everyday classroom practice remains uneven. This study investigated the implementation of inclusive education policy in Pakistani schools, with a specific focus on public sector schools in the province of Punjab, in order to determine the gap between policy intent and classroom-level practice. The study employed a quantitative, descriptive survey design. A structured questionnaire measuring policy awareness, implementation practices, and barriers to implementation was administered to 150 teachers and head teachers selected through multistage random sampling from five districts of Punjab. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, specifically weighted means and standard deviations with verbal interpretation. Findings revealed that while awareness of inclusive education policy among respondents was high, actual classroom-level implementation practices were rated at only a moderate level, and structural and resource-related barriers such as overcrowded classrooms, insufficient teacher training, and inadequate assistive infrastructure were rated as considerably high. These results indicate a persistent policy-practice gap in the implementation of inclusive education in Punjab. The study concludes with recommendations for targeted teacher training, resource allocation, and stronger monitoring mechanisms to bridge this gap, along with directions for future research.

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1. Introduction

Inclusive education has emerged as a globally endorsed approach to ensuring that all learners, regardless of ability, disability, gender, ethnicity, or socio-economic background, are educated together in mainstream schools rather than in segregated settings. This principle was formally articulated in the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994), which called on governments to adopt inclusive education as a matter of law or policy, and was further reinforced by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), to which Pakistan is a signatory. In line with

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these international commitments, Pakistan has undertaken a series of policy measures intended to institutionalize inclusive education at the national and provincial levels. Article 25-A of the Constitution of Pakistan, introduced through the 18th Constitutional Amendment of 2010, guarantees free and compulsory education to all children aged five to sixteen years without discrimination, while the National Education Policy (Government of Pakistan, 2017), explicitly adopts an inclusive education approach aimed at meeting the needs of learners from diverse backgrounds and reducing the likelihood of any child being left behind academically.

At the provincial level, the Government of Punjab has similarly moved toward formalizing inclusive education through instruments such as the Punjab Special Education Policy (2020), which dedicates a full chapter to special and inclusive education and sets a target of increasing the participation rate of children with disabilities to 50 percent by 2025, alongside the earlier Islamabad Declaration on Inclusive Education (2005), signed jointly by federal and provincial governments. On paper, therefore, Pakistan and Punjab in particular possesses a reasonably comprehensive policy architecture for inclusive education. However, a growing body of research suggests that the existence of policy documents does not automatically translate into inclusive practice at the school and classroom level. Studies have reported that schools continue to struggle with overcrowded classrooms, a shortage of specially trained teachers, inadequate assistive infrastructure, and limited support from local education authorities, all of which constrain the practical realization of inclusive education (Rafique & Hameed, 2021).

This disconnect between policy ambition and classroom reality constitutes the central problem addressed by this study. While Pakistan's inclusive education policies are frequently discussed in the literature at a conceptual or legislative level, comparatively fewer studies empirically document the extent to which these policies are actually being implemented in everyday school practice, particularly from the combined perspective of teachers and head teachers who are directly responsible for translating policy into classroom action. Understanding this gap is essential, since policies that remain unimplemented at the school level cannot deliver the equity outcomes they were designed to achieve, regardless of how well they are written.

This study therefore investigates the implementation of inclusive education policy in Pakistani schools, focusing specifically on public sector schools in the province of Punjab, in order to describe the current level of policy awareness, implementation practice, and the barriers that hinder full implementation. By empirically documenting how inclusive education policy is being enacted or not enacted at the school level, this study aims to provide evidence that can inform more targeted policy monitoring, teacher training, and resource allocation strategies, thereby contributing to the broader national and provincial goal of moving inclusive education from a matter of policy commitment to one of lived classroom practice.

1.1. Objective of the Study

This study aims to investigate the level of implementation of inclusive education policy in Pakistani public schools, specifically examining teachers' and head teachers' policy awareness, classroom-level implementation practices, and the barriers encountered, among school personnel in the province of Punjab.

1.2. Research Question

What is the level of implementation of inclusive education policy in terms of policy awareness, classroom implementation practices, and barriers encountered as perceived by teachers and head teachers in public schools of Punjab, Pakistan?

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1 Global and National Policy Framework for Inclusive Education

The international foundation for inclusive education was laid by the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994), which affirmed that regular schools with an inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes and building an inclusive society, and urged governments to give the highest policy priority to making education systems inclusive. This principle was later reinforced by the UNCRPD, which obligates state parties to ensure an inclusive education system at all levels for persons with disabilities. Pakistan, as a signatory to these instruments, has progressively embedded inclusive education into its domestic legal and policy framework. Article 25-A of the Constitution, introduced through the 18th Constitutional Amendment, guarantees the right to free and compulsory education for all children aged five to sixteen, and following the devolution of the education subject to the provinces under the same amendment, responsibility for special and inclusive education has largely shifted to provincial governments (Government of Punjab, Special Education Department, 2020).

At the national level, the National Education Policy (Government of Pakistan, 2017), formally adopts inclusive education as an approach that seeks to meet the needs of students from diverse backgrounds by broadening their engagement with education, fostering a sense of belonging in their schools and communities, and decreasing the likelihood of their being left behind academically. The policy sets an ambitious target of ensuring that 50 percent of children with disabilities are in school by 2025 and that accessible learning environments are built in half of all current formal education institutions. However, the same policy document acknowledges persistent policy-level issues, including low prioritization of disability-related education in planning, insufficient budgetary allocation, limited awareness among decision-makers, and weak coordination between the formal education system and special education departments. At the provincial level, the Punjab Special Education Policy (2020), similarly commits to expanding access for children with special needs and allocating a defined share of the education budget to special and inclusive education, building on earlier provincial education sector plans that identified inclusive education as a distinct future goal separate from traditional special education.

2.2 Conceptualizing and Measuring Inclusive Education Implementation

Beyond policy statements, researchers have developed practical frameworks for assessing the extent to which inclusive education is actually being implemented within schools. The Index for Inclusion (Booth & Ainscow, 2002), remains one of the most widely used frameworks internationally, organizing inclusive practice around three interlocking dimensions: creating

inclusive cultures, producing inclusive policies, and evolving inclusive practices, on the premise that meaningful inclusion requires alignment across values, institutional arrangements, and day-to-day classroom activity rather than policy commitment alone. A complementary framework, the Framework of Indicators for Inclusive Education developed by Kyriazopoulou and Weber (2009), operationalizes inclusion into measurable indicators covering areas such as access, participation, and support structures, allowing researchers to move beyond broad policy analysis toward concrete assessment of school-level implementation.

Applying these frameworks to the Pakistani context, Rafique and Hameed (2021), conducted a quantitative study assessing the level of implementation of inclusive practices across 51 schools representing four inclusive education models in Pakistan, gathering the perspectives of head teachers and teachers directly engaged in implementation. Their findings revealed that many schools were considered unfit to function as fully inclusive institutions due to missing human and material resources, overcrowded classrooms that made it difficult to accommodate children with disabilities, and a lack of support from local educational authorities. The study recommended contextually responsive teacher training, a reduced teacher-student ratio, and the recruitment of dedicated teaching assistants as practical measures to strengthen implementation. This line of research illustrates that inclusive education in Pakistan is best understood not as a binary state of policy presence or absence, but as a matter of degree, requiring granular, indicator-based measurement of actual school practice.

2.3 Teachers' Attitudes and Preparedness

Teachers occupy a central role in translating inclusive education policy into classroom practice, and their attitudes and preparedness have been extensively studied in the Pakistani context. Haider (2008), found that Pakistani teachers generally held a positive outlook toward inclusive education, recognizing its potential benefits for increasing social interaction and reducing negative behavior toward students with disabilities, although this positive attitude did not necessarily correspond with confidence in their own ability to implement inclusive practices. Sharma, Forlin, and Loreman (2013), as reported in subsequent Pakistani studies) similarly emphasize that a majority of teachers in developing contexts, including Pakistan, are not professionally trained to manage diverse classrooms or apply differentiation strategies, since conventional teacher education programs rarely include structured content on inclusive pedagogy. More recent research by Shaukat (2022), documented ongoing challenges in the education of children with disabilities in Pakistan, noting that teacher training gaps continue to constrain the quality of inclusive provision even where policy support exists. Taken together, this literature suggests that positive attitudes toward inclusion among Pakistani teachers are not always matched by adequate professional preparation, creating a gap between willingness to include and capacity to do so effectively.

2.4 Resource, Infrastructural, and Institutional Barriers

A recurring theme across the Pakistani inclusive education literature is the constraining role of limited resources and infrastructure. Ghouri, Waseem, (2010), examined the challenges facing inclusive education implementation in Karachi and identified funding constraints and

inadequate staff training as principal barriers, even though both school heads and teachers expressed cautious optimism about the broader goal of inclusion. Similarly, Rafique and Hameed (2021), reported that many schools lacked ramps, adapted learning materials, and other assistive infrastructure necessary to accommodate learners with disabilities, a deficiency that is particularly pronounced in rural areas of the country. Overcrowded classrooms compound these structural limitations: in the absence of a manageable teacher-student ratio, teachers report finding it difficult to provide the individualized attention that inclusive pedagogy requires, regardless of their attitudes or training. These institutional constraints suggest that successful implementation of inclusive education policy in Pakistan depends not only on teacher-level attitudes and skills but also on system-level investment in appropriate infrastructure, staffing ratios, and dedicated support personnel.

2.5 Provincial Context: Inclusive Education in Punjab

As the largest and most populous province, Punjab occupies a significant position in Pakistan's inclusive education landscape. The Punjab Special Education Department, established as an independent administrative department in 2003–04, has expanded its network of special education institutions considerably since its inception, and the Punjab Education Sector Plan (2019/20–2023/24), explicitly recognizes inclusive education as a distinct policy priority separate from traditional special education, reflecting an intended shift in ownership of inclusive education initiatives from the Special Education Department to the mainstream School Education Department. Despite this administrative reorganization, evidence suggests that this transition has been slow and uneven, with government schools in Punjab varying widely in their readiness to support inclusive practice depending on location, available resources, and the training background of their teaching staff. Given Punjab's central role in national education outcomes, empirically examining how inclusive education policy is actually being implemented within its public schools is of particular value for understanding the broader national policy-practice gap.

5. Research Methodology

5.1 Research Design

This study employed a quantitative, descriptive survey research design, appropriate for systematically describing the current level of inclusive education policy implementation as perceived by school personnel. This design follows the approach used by Rafique and Hameed (2021) in assessing inclusive practice implementation in Pakistani schools through the structured perspectives of head teachers and teachers.

5.2 Population and Sample

The population of the study comprised teachers and head teachers working in public sector schools implementing, or expected to implement, inclusive education practices in the province of Punjab. A total sample of 150 participants was drawn using multistage random sampling: five districts of Punjab (Lahore, Faisalabad, Rawalpindi, Multan, and Gujranwala) were

purposively selected to represent both urban and semi-urban educational contexts across the province, after which schools and, subsequently, individual teachers and head teachers were randomly selected within each district. The final sample consisted of 150 respondents, comprising 118 classroom teachers and 32 head teachers, drawn in approximately equal proportion from each of the five participating districts.

5.3 Research Instrument

Data were collected using a structured, self-administered questionnaire developed by the researcher and grounded in the Index for Inclusion (Booth & Ainscow, 2002) and the Framework of Indicators for Inclusive Education (Kyriazopoulou & Weber, 2009), consistent with the instrumentation approach used by Rafique and Hameed (2021) in a comparable Pakistani setting. The questionnaire consisted of four parts. Part I gathered demographic information (position, gender, school locale, and years of experience). Parts II, III, and IV consisted of five-point Likert-scale items (5 = Strongly Agree, 4 = Agree, 3 = Neutral, 2 = Disagree, 1 = Strongly Disagree) organized into three sections: Policy Awareness (five items), assessing respondents' familiarity with national and provincial inclusive education policy provisions; Implementation Practices (five items), assessing the extent to which inclusive practices are actually applied in classrooms and schools; and Barriers to Implementation (five items), assessing the degree to which specific structural and institutional obstacles hinder inclusive practice.

6. Data Analysis and Results

This section presents the descriptive statistics for the three dimensions examined in this study: policy awareness, implementation practices, and barriers to implementation. Table 2 presents the verbal interpretation scale applied to all weighted means.

Table 1. Demographic Distribution of Respondents (N = 150)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Position	Teacher	118	78.7%
	Head teacher	32	21.3%
Gender	Male	64	42.7%
	Female	86	57.3%
School Locale	Urban	92	61.3%
	Semi-Urban/Rural	58	38.7%
Teaching Experience	Less than 5 years	41	27.3%
	5–10 years	53	35.3%
	More than 10 years	56	37.3%

As shown in Table 1, the majority of respondents were classroom teachers (78.7%), with head teachers comprising the remainder (21.3%). Slightly more female (57.3%) than male (42.7%) respondents participated, and most respondents were drawn from urban schools (61.3%), reflecting the wider distribution of public schools within the sampled districts. Respondents were fairly evenly distributed across experience levels, with the largest group (37.3%) having more than ten years of teaching experience, suggesting that the sample captured perspectives from both relatively new and highly experienced school personnel.

Table 2. Verbal Interpretation Scale for Weighted Means

Mean Range	Response Category	Verbal Interpretation
4.21 – 5.00	Strongly Agree	Very High
3.41 – 4.20	Agree	High
2.61 – 3.40	Neutral	Moderate
1.81 – 2.60	Disagree	Low
1.00 – 1.80	Strongly Disagree	Very Low

Table 3. Level of Policy Awareness among Teachers and Head teachers (N = 150)

Item	Mean	SD	Interpretation
1. I am aware that Article 25-A of the Constitution guarantees free education to all children, including those with disabilities.	4.18	0.62	High
2. I am familiar with the inclusive education provisions of the National Education Policy (2017).	3.64	0.78	High
3. I am aware of the Punjab Special Education Policy (2020) and its targets for inclusive education.	3.41	0.85	High
4. My school has communicated to me what is expected under inclusive education policy.	3.05	0.91	Moderate
5. I have received official guidelines explaining how to implement inclusive education in my classroom.	2.78	0.95	Moderate
Overall Weighted Mean	3.41	0.71	High

Table 3 shows that respondents' overall policy awareness was rated at a high level ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 0.71$), driven largely by strong awareness of the constitutional guarantee under Article 25-A ($M = 4.18$, High) and general familiarity with the National Education Policy (2017) ($M = 3.64$, High). However, awareness dropped to a moderate level for more operational aspects of policy communication, particularly whether schools had clearly communicated expectations regarding inclusive education ($M = 3.05$, Moderate) and whether respondents had received official implementation guidelines ($M = 2.78$, Moderate). This pattern suggests

that while broad legal and policy-level awareness is reasonably well disseminated among school personnel, the more actionable, school-level communication of what inclusive education requires in daily practice remains comparatively weak consistent with the National Education Policy's (2017) own acknowledgment of coordination gaps between formal policy and institutional-level implementation.

Table 4. Level of Classroom Implementation Practices (N = 150)

Item	Mean	SD	Interpretation
1. I adapt my teaching methods to accommodate students with diverse learning needs.	3.55	0.80	High
2. My classroom materials and assessments are adjusted for students with disabilities.	2.95	0.88	Moderate
3. Students with disabilities in my class participate in the same activities as their peers.	3.10	0.84	Moderate
4. My school regularly monitors the progress of students with special needs.	2.72	0.93	Moderate
5. I collaborate with special education staff or resource persons when available.	2.68	0.97	Moderate
Overall Weighted Mean	3.00	0.79	Moderate

As shown in Table 4, actual classroom implementation practices were rated at only a moderate overall level ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 0.79$), notably lower than the level of policy awareness reported in Table 3. The comparatively higher-rated item concerned general adaptation of teaching methods ($M = 3.55$, *High*), while items requiring more specialized action adjusting materials and assessments ($M = 2.95$, *Moderate*), monitoring the progress of students with special needs ($M = 2.72$, *Moderate*), and collaborating with special education staff ($M = 2.68$, *Moderate*) were rated lowest. This gap between awareness and practice mirrors the findings of Rafique and Hameed (2021), who similarly found that many Pakistani schools, despite favorable attitudes toward inclusion, struggled to translate this awareness into consistent, specialized classroom practice.

Table 5. Barriers to Implementation of Inclusive Education (N = 150)

Item	Mean	SD	Interpretation
1. My classroom is too overcrowded to effectively accommodate students with diverse needs.	4.25	0.65	Very High
2. I have not received adequate training in inclusive teaching strategies.	4.10	0.70	High
3. My school lacks assistive devices, ramps, or adapted learning materials.	4.05	0.74	High

Item	Mean	SD	Interpretation
4. There is insufficient support from local education authorities for inclusive education.	3.88	0.79	High
5. Parents and community members hold negative attitudes toward including children with disabilities.	3.35	0.86	Moderate
Overall Weighted Mean	3.93	0.67	High

Table 5 indicates that barriers to implementation were rated at an overall high level ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 0.67$), with classroom overcrowding rated highest ($M = 4.25$, *Very High*), followed closely by inadequate training in inclusive teaching strategies ($M = 4.10$, *High*) and a lack of assistive devices and adapted materials ($M = 4.05$, *High*). Insufficient support from local education authorities was also rated high ($M = 3.88$), while negative community attitudes, though still notable, were rated comparatively lower ($M = 3.35$, *Moderate*). These findings are consistent with earlier reports that overcrowded classrooms, inadequate teacher training, and missing infrastructure are principal obstacles to inclusive education in Pakistan (Rafique & Hameed, 2021; Ghouri et al., 2010), and align with the National Education Policy's (2017) own recognition of insufficient budgetary allocation and limited institutional capacity as key barriers at the system level.

Table 6. Summary of Overall Levels across the Three Dimensions ($N = 150$)

Dimension	Weighted Mean	SD	Interpretation
Policy Awareness	3.41	0.71	High
Implementation Practices	3.00	0.79	Moderate
Barriers to Implementation	3.93	0.67	High

Table 6 summarizes the three dimensions of the study. The descending pattern from policy awareness (High) to implementation practices (Moderate), alongside a high level of reported barriers, provides a concise empirical picture of a policy-practice gap: teachers and head teachers in the sampled Punjab schools are reasonably aware of inclusive education policy, but structural and institutional barriers appear to be constraining the degree to which this awareness is converted into consistent classroom-level implementation.

7. Discussion

The findings of this study provide empirical evidence of a measurable gap between inclusive education policy and its implementation in Punjab's public schools. Respondents' relatively high awareness of overarching legal and policy commitments particularly Article 25-A of the Constitution and the National Education Policy (2017), suggests that broad dissemination of Pakistan's inclusive education agenda has been reasonably successful at the level of general public policy communication. However, the marked drop in awareness regarding school-level communication of expectations and the availability of official implementation guidelines indicates that this awareness has not been adequately operationalized into concrete guidance

for teachers and head teachers, echoing the National Education Policy's (2017), own acknowledgment of weak coordination and linkage between the formal education system and special education administration.

The moderate level of actual implementation practice, particularly regarding specialized actions such as adjusting assessments, monitoring the progress of students with special needs, and collaborating with special education personnel, suggests that Pakistani teachers consistent with the findings of Haider (2008), and subsequent studies may hold generally favorable attitudes toward inclusion without possessing the specific pedagogical skills or institutional support required to enact it fully. This aligns with the broader observation that conventional teacher education programs in Pakistan have historically provided limited structured training in inclusive or differentiated pedagogy, leaving many teachers to rely on general instructional adaptation rather than specialized inclusive strategies.

The consistently high ratings for structural barriers especially classroom overcrowding, inadequate training, and missing assistive infrastructure corroborate earlier findings by Rafique and Hameed (2021), and Ghouri et al. (2010), and suggest that these barriers function as a bottleneck constraining implementation even where policy awareness and teacher willingness are present. This pattern is important because it implies that further policy documentation or awareness campaigns alone are unlikely to substantially improve inclusive education outcomes in Punjab; rather, addressing the resource, staffing, and infrastructural constraints identified by respondents appears to be a necessary precondition for translating existing policy awareness into meaningful classroom practice, consistent with the Punjab Special Education Policy's (2020) own emphasis on dedicated budgetary allocation for special and inclusive education.

8. Conclusion

This study investigated the implementation of inclusive education policy in Pakistani public schools, focusing on the perceptions of 150 teachers and head teachers across five districts of Punjab. The findings revealed a high level of general policy awareness, a moderate level of actual classroom implementation practice, and a high level of perceived structural and institutional barriers, together indicating a persistent gap between inclusive education policy and its enactment in everyday school practice. This gap is not primarily attributable to a lack of awareness or willingness among school personnel, but rather to structural constraints overcrowded classrooms, insufficient specialized training, and inadequate assistive infrastructure that limit the practical translation of policy into classroom action.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, several recommendations are offered. First, provincial education authorities should move beyond general policy dissemination toward providing schools with clear, actionable implementation guidelines and structured support for translating inclusive education policy into classroom practice. Second, sustained investment in specialized teacher training covering differentiated instruction, assessment adaptation, and collaboration with special education personnel should be prioritized, consistent with recommendations made by

Rafique and Hameed (2021). Third, addressing structural barriers such as classroom overcrowding and the shortage of assistive infrastructure should be treated as a foundational precondition for inclusive education reform, rather than a secondary concern, in line with the budgetary commitments outlined in the Punjab Special Education Policy (2020). Finally, future researchers are encouraged to extend this line of inquiry through comparative studies across other provinces, longitudinal designs that track implementation over time, and mixed-methods approaches that combine the descriptive breadth of survey data with the contextual depth of qualitative classroom observation, in order to build a fuller understanding of how inclusive education policy can be more effectively moved from paper to practice across Pakistan.

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