Faculty of Social Sciences
P-ISSN-2518-8046 Home Page: https://jossams.smiu.edu.pk E-ISSN-2663-7049
Vol. 9, No. 2 (2025) DOI: https://doi.org/10.58921/jossams.09.02.0531 Pages: 01-11

JOSSAMS Journal of Social Sciences and Media Studies

Exploring the Inclusion of Children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in Government Primary Schools of Karachi: Perspectives of Teachers and Head Teachers

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education is a child's right, and teachers are the main change agents to bring the differences into the lives of their students. This qualitative research study explores the perspective of teachers and head teachers at government primary schools of Karachi about the inclusion of children with special needs in their system. A total of 14 schools were selected from 7 districts of Karachi through stratified sampling (2 schools from each district). The sample included 84 respondents 32 males and 52 females) selected through purposive sampling: 70 teachers (5 from each school), and 14 head teachers. The data collected through semi-structured interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis method, which was brought forward from the responses to research questions. Results were based on research objectives, emerging themes, and sub-themes. Current perceptions and practices reveal that teachers are not practicing inclusion, are unaware of the term inclusion, and feel uncomfortable and unwilling to step forward for the implementation of inclusion. The teachers and head teachers highlighted certain barriers and challenges that hinder inclusive education, including overloaded classes, overburdened with work, lack of training, lack of resources, and some cultural myths that hinder this process. The conclusion brought forward was to bring reforms that can support teachers to practice inclusion to the best of their abilities. The recommendations emphasized bringing inclusive education at the government policy level that transforms an aspirational framework into localized, enforceable strategies for the system and the willingness of teachers. Thus, addressing problems will help educators to practice inclusive education.

Keywords: Inclusion, Children, Special Educational Needs (SEN), Government Primary Schools, Perspectives of Teachers and Head Teachers

INTRODUCTION

Inclusion promises to end segregation within educational settings by ensuring inclusive classroom teaching that meets the special education needs of children in a manageable learning environment, providing a tailored educational response instead of a system where the student is fit into the system (Ydo, 2020). The education system must adjust to the learning and developmental needs (Arcidiacono & Baucal, 2020). Educators expect barriers in inclusive education and overcome these barriers by using teaching practices for their students (Sanger, 2020). Pakistan, being a signatory to the Dakar Declaration, has looked into its education policies in light of collective thinking from worldwide communities (Niwaz et al., 2014). The national plan of action on "Education for All" (EFA) was framed in the viewpoint of EFA goals and evolving requirements of the country (Ahmed & Khan, 2020). Schools must provide a more inclusive environment to cater to the needs of all children, but there is a limited number of inclusive schools for students with SEN in Pakistan due to a lack of awareness about the importance and effectiveness of inclusive education in society.

Inspired by social justice ideas, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) and the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), there has been continued support for inclusion and a global commitment to encourage and improve education for all (Ainscow, 2020). Many countries have developed policies and implemented practices to promote inclusive education (Arcidiacono & Baucal, 2020; Nelis et al., 2025). The importance of including students with SEN is a vital component within this international policy agenda, as reflected in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006), which states that the right to inclusive education encompasses a transformation in culture, policy, and practice in all educational environments to accommodate the differing requirements and identities of

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individual students, together with a commitment to remove the barriers that impede that possibility.

Inclusive education is more than just a policy, and it's a movement aimed at providing all children, especially those with special educational needs (SEN), with the opportunity to learn and thrive within regular education systems. Conceptual understandings of inclusion differ across contexts, which results in discrepancies in how it is translated into practice (Boyle & Anderson, 2020; Bandura, 1997).

While international frameworks, such as the Salamanca Statement and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, advocate for inclusive practices, Pakistan's education system still struggles to implement these policies effectively. Cultural perceptions, lack of teacher training, and a scarcity of resources complicate the inclusion process. In Karachi, where the education system faces a variety of challenges, inclusive education remains an under-explored concept. This research aims to explore the perspectives of teachers and head teachers about the challenges they face, and to uncover the barriers that prevent the successful inclusion of students with SEN.

OBJECTIVES

1. To explore the perception of teachers and head teachers about the inclusion of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in government primary schools of Karachi.
2. To identify the challenges and barriers faced by the teachers and head teachers in the implementation of inclusive education in government primary schools of Karachi.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the current teaching and learning practices of inclusion of Children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in government primary schools of Karachi, as perceived by their teachers and head teachers?
2. What challenges do teachers and head teachers face in including students with special educational needs in government primary schools of Karachi?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The basic concept of inclusive education is to have an attitude, belief, and practice that all students should be equipped with quality education, regardless of their abilities or disabilities, within a conventional setting or in general schools. As per Ainscow (2020), the notion of inclusion is not limited to disability, but it encompasses a diverse approach to create a conducive environment for all the students by fostering mutual respect, diversity, and empathy. Hehir et al. (2016) further added another layer to this concept, as they stated that inclusive education brings better social skills and academic performance to address the holistic educational approach-based idea.

There is a large number of theoretical frameworks supporting the idea of inclusive education, underlining the significance of observational learning, social interactions, and environmental influences in cognitive development, with students with SEN. Inclusive education's theoretical basis is grounded on several theories and models that highlight the significance of social interactions, environmental influences, and varied learning styles (Minhas & Munir, 2024). Inclusive education not only seeks to provide equal educational opportunities but also aims to create learning environments that accommodate and respond to the unique needs of each student. This involves adapting teaching methods, curricula, and learning environments to ensure that all students can achieve their full potential. The focus is on removing barriers to learning and participation, thereby fostering an inclusive culture within schools (Ainscow, 2020).

"In the arena of education, educators are regarded as the main promoters in the execution of the way of life of IE; thus, their opinions may result in their performance towards and recognition of SEN" (Thomas, 2021, p. 11). The perceptions and experiences of teachers and head teachers concerning inclusive education play an important role in the successful integration of students in the mainstream schools (Aas et al., 2024; Narot et al., 2024). The attitude of teachers towards the inclusion of students with disabilities is crucial for the success of inclusive education (Boyle et al., 2020; Kalhoro et al., 2020). Van Steen et al. (2020) study, by means of a meta-regression analysis of 38 samples, brings to light the link between teachers' attitude and a cultural aspect of their country: individualism" (Boyle et al., 2020, p. 2). Attitude is also linked to the teaching experience: "the higher it is in a country, the more favorable the teachers' attitude is towards inclusive education; however, there is no significant effect of gender, age, or teachers' training" (Guillemot et al., 2022, p. 8). Yet another study revealed that the qualifications, teaching experience, and educational work level have a significant effect on teachers' attitudes towards inclusion (Charitaki et al., 2024).

The personal positive experiences allow teachers and head teachers to critically examine the patterns and their underlying values. On the other hand, those with negative experiences or partiality may resist inclusion. In addition, the research also unveils that teachers' personal connections to disability, such as enhanced acquaintances with SEN or having a family member (Avramidis & Kalyva, 2007).

Inclusive education cannot be fully implemented without training teachers in the required manner; therefore, perceptions vary depending on whether teachers are trained or not (Vasileiadis et al., 2024). Also, Sharma et al. (2008) stated that the training programs for inclusive education bring a new set of skills for the teachers that refine their teaching skills, build confidence, and, most importantly, their willingness to embrace inclusive education.

There is another important aspect, which is grounded in the access to resources and support from special education professionals, school administration, and support from peers influence the perceptions towards inclusive education (González-Fernández & Iturra, 2024). Another research by Lampropoulou and Padeliadu (1997) stated that the teachers who receive resources and sufficient support are more likely to feel confident in supporting students with SEN by managing inclusive classrooms as required. Such support is based on adaptive materials and teaching assistants.

Maxwell (2024) highlights the importance of social norms and complexity towards disability inclusion and how it affects teachers' and head teachers' views. Teachers in areas where disability is viewed unfavorably might develop these beliefs, therefore opposing inclusive policies. In communities that are more accepting, teachers are more likely to have good attitudes towards inclusion (Singal, 2006). Therefore, teachers' acceptance is the byproduct of the societal norms and other related aspects.

Strong institutional policies and leadership supporting inclusive education might affect teachers' views favorably. According to Loreman (2007), teachers at schools with defined policies on inclusion are more likely to be dedicated to inclusive education if their leaders actively encourage and support inclusive practices.

Teachers with favorable opinions on inclusion are more likely to employ instructional strategies appropriate for various pupils, like varied teaching styles and group activities that help all students (Carvalho et al., 2024). For students with special needs to participate, they are more likely to make the classroom a friendly and inviting environment (Forlin et al., 2008). Favorable attitudes increase both the willingness for inclusive techniques and the willingness for adjustments for pupils with special needs.

The perceptions of teachers towards inclusion can have a significant influence on the general academic performance of students with SEN. Students may become more active, perform much better in their studies, and socialize with peers effortlessly if their instructors have upbeat perceptions. Participation in workshops, collaboration with special education specialists, and involvement in professional learning groups can help teachers to properly apply inclusive methods (Friend & Cook, 2007). Conversely, teachers with negative perceptions can expect little from their students, provide them with less support, and exclude them (Campbell et al., 2003; Algozzine et al., 2021). Additionally, noted by Avramidis et al. (2000) is the influence of the general school environment on teachers' and head teachers' perceptions of inclusive education. Typically, in schools where teachers hold good opinions about inclusion, the environment is more open and welcoming for all pupils. This positive environment can support children with SEN in feeling like they belong and enhance their wellbeing, therefore fortifying the school community.

Challenges and Barriers in Promoting Inclusive Education

There are several major obstacles in inclusive education implementation like social perceptions about disability and inclusion (Singal, 2006), philosophies and cultural beliefs about impairments can greatly affect schools and communities' readiness to adopt inclusive education (Hameed, 2013), lack of funds and resources (Miles and Singal, 2010), overcrowding classrooms, poor infrastructure, and restricted access to educational materials (Rahman, 2011), lack of implementation of inclusive education policies (Farooq, 2012), bureaucratic structure of educational systems creating problems to inclusive education's implementation (Ainscow et al., 2006), and the conventional curriculum and assessment methods not meeting the special education needs (Florian & Hawkins, 2011). A study by Ratheeswari and Nallathambi (2023) highlights "the difficulties and roadblocks related to inclusive education policies, illuminating issues with funding, opposition to change, teacher readiness, assessment, social inclusion, diversity, legal loopholes, and community involvement". Another study reveals the barriers "as limited resources, inadequate teacher training, societal attitudes, and systemic policies that do not prioritize IE" (Sivaguru & Irudhaya, 2023, p. 111).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A qualitative research design to explore teachers' and head teachers' perceptions of inclusive education was adopted, grounded on an interpretivist approach, which underlies that reality is created through experiences and social interactions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Targeted Population

The targeted population comprised all teachers and head teachers serving in special schools at government primary schools in Karachi.

Sample size

There are seven districts in Karachi, so a total of 14 schools were selected through stratified sampling (2 schools from each district). The sample included 84 respondents selected through purposive sampling: 70 teachers (5 each from 14 schools), teaching Grade 1 to Grade 5 children, and 14 head teachers (1 from each school). Out of 84 respondents, there were 32 males and 52 females having a wide range of teaching experience, from 2 years to 28 years. This diversity of teaching experience provided valuable insights into how attitudes towards inclusion can evolve over time, influenced by both personal experience and the broader educational environment.

Data Collection Tool

The data was collected using semi-structured interviews, which give participants the freedom to share their experiences, also ensuring that all necessary topics are covered. The interviews were designed to explore topics such as teachers' perceptions and practices towards inclusion, the challenges they face in classrooms, and the support they feel is necessary for successful inclusion. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring they understood the purpose of the study and their rights.

Data Analysis and Procedure

The data was analyzed using thematic analysis, which allows for the identification of patterns or themes in the responses that answer the research questions. Coding was conducted using both manual annotation and NVivo 12 software to ensure data traceability and analytical transparency. Codes were developed through two approaches: deductive coding, which was based on the conceptual framework and research objectives (e.g., training, resources, peer interaction), and inductive coding that emerged organically from participants' narratives (e.g., "Allah's test", "corner strategy", "moral duty"). This dual strategy aligns with the hybrid approach to thematic analysis advocated by Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006), which allows for structured yet open-ended theme development.

RESULTS

The results are based on research objectives, and the following themes and sub-themes highlight the results. These themes represent different ways that teachers and head teachers understood inclusive education, and the barriers they faced in the implementation of inclusive education.

Theme 1: Understanding of Inclusive Education

The analysis yielded three prominent sub-themes: Inclusion as Physical Placement, Inclusion as Moral or Religious Obligation, and Inclusion Confused with Integration.

1.1 Inclusion as Physical Placement

One of the most pervasive understandings of inclusive education among participants was its equation with physical presence in the classroom. Many teachers and head teachers described inclusion as "allowing" students with special educational needs (SEN) to sit in the same room as other students. The act of placement without modification of curriculum, teaching strategies, classroom environment, or assessment practices was frequently viewed as both necessary and sufficient.

Respondent 5:

"We let them sit with others, that's what inclusion is." (Teacher)

At first glance, this attitude may seem kind, even welcoming. But upon deeper analysis, it reflects what Ainscow and Miles (2008) identify as a "presence without participation" model of inclusion, where physical proximity replaces meaningful engagement. In such contexts, students with SEN are neither excluded nor included in any substantive way; they are simply present.

This minimalist view of inclusion also reveals the impact of the policy vacuum. Most participants had never received formal guidance on how to differentiate instruction or adapt pedagogy for students with diverse needs. As a result, inclusion becomes something you do by doing nothing, by not turning a student away; the teachers assume they have fulfilled their ethical and professional obligation.

Some Teachers described inclusion as "draining" or "impossible without help."

These conditions make it rational, if regrettable, for educators to default to inclusion as physical presence. It represents the maximum effort they can reasonably manage within severe constraints.

Respondent 9:

"I don't know what to teach them. But I can't turn them away either. So, they sit quietly, and I focus on the rest." (Teacher)

Respondent 3:

"We are not prepared for Inclusive Education." (Head teacher)

This sentiment underscores a dangerous paradox: inclusion becomes the absence of exclusion. Yet inclusion, as defined by UNESCO (2015), demands proactive strategies, systemic accommodation, and individualized support. Without shifting this default model, inclusion remains a name without a function.

1.2 Inclusion as Moral or Religious Obligation

While some educators in this study framed inclusive education through structural or logistical terms, a significant portion expressed a deep moral or spiritual rationale for including students with special educational needs (SEN). Rather than drawing from pedagogical training, educational policy, or formal guidelines, these teachers framed their commitment to inclusion in terms of compassion, religious duty, or emotional responsibility.

Respondent 1:

"They are also God's children. We cannot turn them away." (Teacher)

Respondent 6:

"Allah tests us with different kinds of students. How we respond is our test, too." (Teacher)

Respondent 2:

"We don't have training, but we have humanity. That is what matters." (Headteacher)

This framing aligns with what disability theorists term the charity model of disability (Oliver & Marwell, 2001), where support is offered based on sympathy and kindness rather than rights or entitlement. Within this model, the child is perceived not as a legitimate participant in mainstream education with the right to adaptations and equity, but as a deserving exception tolerated, supported, or included only because of the teacher's personal values or spiritual beliefs.

1.3 Conceptual Confusion with Integration

A third major sub-theme that emerged from the data was the conceptual confusion between inclusion and integration. In many of the interviews, teachers and head teachers spoke of "including" students with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream classrooms, but what they often described was closer to what educational scholars have called integration, placing students with disabilities in regular classrooms without adjusting the curriculum, pedagogical approaches, or classroom environment to meet their needs.

Respondent 3:

"We have always had slow learners in our classrooms. It's not something new." (Headteacher)

Respondent 7:

"I include them by letting them be in the class with the others, but they do the same work as everyone else." (Teacher)

Respondent 1:

"Integration means they are here with us. If they need something, they will ask." (Teacher)

The key distinction here is that integration implies that students with SEN are placed in mainstream classrooms, but the system and curriculum remain essentially unchanged. They are "in" the classroom but are not necessarily active participants in the learning process. In contrast, inclusion as defined by modern educational theory, especially frameworks like Universal Design for Learning (UDL), is about ensuring that all students, regardless of their needs, can participate meaningfully in classroom activities. This involves adapting teaching methods, modifying assessments, and providing support services to ensure full participation in learning experiences.

Theme 2: Barriers to Effective Inclusion

While the idea of inclusion was broadly supported in principle by most educators interviewed, this support did not translate into practice. Participants frequently described a complex array of systemic, pedagogical, interpersonal, and infrastructural factors that obstructed the implementation of inclusive education. These were not hypothetical constraints but daily, lived realities that shaped how inclusion was practiced (or not) in government primary schools.

Teachers often found themselves overwhelmed, unprepared, and unsupported, while head teachers described feeling powerless to operationalize inclusion within existing school structures. These barriers can be grouped into four primary categories: lack of professional training, overcrowded classrooms, infrastructure and resource limitations, and peer rejection and social isolation. Each of these barriers operates at a different level: individual, institutional, cultural, and structural, but they are deeply interlinked. Below, each is explored in detail.

2.1 Lack of Professional Training

One of the most universally cited barriers was the absence of formal, relevant training in inclusive pedagogy. Across the sample of 84 participants, only nine reported having attended any training session related to inclusive or special education, and most of those were described as brief, disconnected, and generic.

Respondent 15:

"We are not trained psychologists. We don't know how to deal with SEN students." (Teacher)

Respondent 8:

"We support the idea, but what can we do without proper tools or knowledge?" (Head teacher)

The lack of training is not limited to technical strategies. Many teachers do not even have access to basic diagnostic language**,** leading them to describe SEN students in vague or stigmatized terms ("weak," "slow," "different," "problematic"). Without training, teachers relied on intuition**,** trial-and-error, or simply avoidance.

This aligns with global findings. Research by Sharma and Lawrence (2014) shows that teacher attitudes towards inclusion are directly influenced by their level of preparedness**.** Where training is absent, teachers often develop negative or indifferent attitudes**,** regardless of their moral disposition. In the Pakistani context, teacher education curricula rarely include modules on disability, differentiation, or inclusive assessment, which means new teachers enter classrooms without even a conceptual framework for inclusive practice (Farooq, 2012; Hameed, 2013).

2.2 Overcrowded Classrooms

A second major barrier to inclusive education is class size. Many participants reported class sizes ranging from 40 to 60 students, sometimes more. This made individualized instruction impossible and often forced teachers to adopt a "teach to the middle" strategy.

Respondent 35:

"You cannot focus on one child when you have 50 others." (Teacher)

In these settings, SEN students became statistical casualties present but invisible. The scale of the class left no time for differentiated pacing, one-on-one feedback, or adapted assignments. Teachers described how students who were unable to keep up simply stopped trying, were labeled disruptive, or were quietly pushed to the margins of the classroom.

Respondent 62:

"They just stop listening. They know we can't help them anyway." (Teacher)

Respondent 10:

"This is very difficult, already teachers are overburdened, and multiple classes are placed in a single room" (Head teacher)

2.3 Infrastructure and Resource Gaps

The physical environments of most schools in this study were deeply inadequate for inclusive education. Necessities, such as fans, seating, and chalkboards, were often missing. Specialized equipment (e.g., visual aids, sensory tools, ramps, modified furniture) was absent.

Respondent 14:

"We don't even have fans, forget specialized learning materials." (Head teacher)
Schools lacked ramps or accessible bathrooms, visual support for non-verbal learners, sound amplification or quiet zones, and adaptive writing tools or enlarged text.

Without physical and material infrastructure, physical presence becomes a punishment, not an opportunity. Children with mobility issues, for example, are often confined to one part of the classroom, or even discouraged from attending during hot weather or exam periods. Teachers are not callous, but they are trapped in logistical constraints.

Respondent 19:

"Sometimes we feel bad for them. But how can we teach them properly when we don't even have working fans?" (Teacher)

Inclusion, under such material conditions, becomes a cruel optimism, a hope that cannot materialize because the basic architecture of the system does not support it.

2.4 Peer Rejection and Bullying

Even when teachers attempted inclusion, social dynamics among students often undermined their efforts. SEN students were frequently teased or bullied for being "different", excluded from group work or play, and mimicked in ways that reinforced stigma. As one of the respondents quoted.

Respondent 53:

"Children tease them. They call them names. Some even mimic their behavior." (Teacher)
This created emotionally hostile environments that further alienated SEN students and discouraged participation. Teachers, already stretched thin, admitted they rarely intervene effectively, not because they do not care, but because they lack training in classroom culture-building and conflict mediation.

In collectivist cultures, peer approval is a major factor in student identity and motivation (Carter et al., 2005). When that approval is denied, especially publicly, students with SEN experience double exclusion from learning and from belonging.

Respondent 27:

As a research respondent remarked, "Sometimes, the child just shuts down. They stop talking, stop trying." (Teacher)

Respondent 12:

According to another respondent, "Bullying is common in our school and creates a lot of issues on the management side" (Headteacher)

Without school-wide efforts to promote inclusive values, such as awareness programs, empathy training, or inclusive storytelling, classrooms become mirrors of social exclusion, not counters to it.

DISCUSSIONS

According to UNESCO (2020), inclusive education is not merely about allowing children with disabilities to attend mainstream schools; it is about reimagining education as a flexible, equitable, and participatory system that adapts to learners' needs. However, the findings from the study reveal that this global vision of inclusion is rarely mirrored in the everyday conceptualizations held by frontline educators in public primary schools in Karachi, Pakistan. Teachers who believe in inclusive education do not ask students to 'fit' the existing educational environments (Finkelstein et al., 2021). Inclusion is considered both a *process* that involves identifying and removing barriers to access, learning, and achievement for all students (Ainscow, 2020) and as an ideal *result* or outcome of such practices (Antoninis et al., 2020).

A key theme that emerged from the data was the fragmented and often superficial understanding of inclusive education among both teachers and headteachers. Many participants articulated a view of inclusion that centered solely on physical placement, the act of allowing students with special educational needs (SEN) to attend mainstream classes. While such placement is a necessary step toward inclusion, its limitation as an end goal reflects what Ainscow and Miles (2008) refer to as "presence without participation," a condition in which students are physically present but not academically engaged or socially integrated.

This conceptualization signals a reductionist interpretation of inclusion: teachers and head teachers perceive inclusion primarily as a logistical arrangement rather than a pedagogical or philosophical shift. In practice, this often meant that SEN students were present in classrooms but received no differentiated instruction, no curricular

adaptations, and no formal assessment modifications. Several educators explicitly stated that they have never received training on how to plan for or evaluate the progress of students with disabilities, reinforcing the notion that inclusion is considered outside the bounds of professional practice.

The study found that there are numerous issues in making education inclusive in Pakistan. These problems are common in many countries that have fewer resources. Research shows that resource limits are a big reason why inclusion is difficult in schools, especially in low-income countries like Pakistan (UNESCO, 2020). This study found that one of the biggest problems was overcrowded classrooms, and this result is in line with other studies concluding that teachers had an exceptional workload, were more stressed, had students with disabilities in their classes, and had inadequate resources to support inclusion (Sajjad, 2009; Gardner, 2015).

Some classes exceed 50 pupils, hindering teachers' ability to attend to each student. This challenge is particularly pronounced for children with special needs, such as physical handicaps or learning disabilities. The problem of overcrowded classrooms is not unique to Pakistan; global research shows that including everyone in instruction becomes difficult with a large student-to-teacher ratio. Teachers often focus on high-performing students, neglecting those needing additional help, which can leave students with special needs unsupported. Another hurdle to inclusion is the lack of physical resources; less than 10% of Pakistani schools meet the requirements for disabled students, according to the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report (2020). This low percentage indicates that many schools cannot accommodate special needs children. Additionally, there is a significant lack of adequate teacher training. Only 11% of teachers and head teachers reported that they have received formal training on students' special needs. This limited training is brief and unrelated to classroom realities, leaving teachers uninformed about effective strategies. A study by Françoise et al. (2022) reveals that neither the teachers' gender nor their training had a significant impact on their attitude. Other studies, like those by Singal (2006) and Forlin et al. (2008), found that South Asian teacher education programs rarely prepare teachers to include students with disabilities. Moreover, these obstacles affect teachers' emotional well-being. Many reported feelings of uncertainty, frustration, and reluctance to improve, hindering their efforts to support special needs students. Stress impedes teachers' motivation to maintain inclusive teaching. The emotional burden of inclusive education is often overlooked in Pakistan's educational system. Research by Florian and Spratt (2013) highlights that inclusion relies on recognizing the emotional aspects of teaching and supporting teachers' mental health, which is insufficiently addressed in Pakistan.

CONCLUSION

The limited and morally framed understandings of inclusive education among educators in Karachi reflect a broader structural and epistemic failure. Without clear definitions, adequate training, and usable tools, teachers fall back on intuitive, culturally familiar practices, many of which are benevolent but insufficient for true inclusion. Until inclusion is reframed from compassion to competence, and from charity to equity, it will remain misunderstood, inconsistently applied, and ultimately unsustainable.

The data presented in Theme 1 challenge the superficial assumption that inclusion is achieved simply by placing students with SEN into general classrooms. Without thoughtful planning, training, and support, such practices amount to symbolic gestures rather than substantive inclusion. Teachers' interpretations, while shaped by compassion and commitment, are not enough in the absence of systems that transform those interpretations into action.

True inclusion is not a desk in the back of the room. It is a curriculum that flexes. A teacher who adapts. A peer group that welcomes. An institution that reflects on itself. In Karachi's public primary schools and in similar contexts around the world, moving towards that vision requires confronting the comfort of misinterpretation and replacing it with the challenge of transformation.

The barriers to inclusion identified in this theme stressed a fundamental truth: intention alone cannot dismantle exclusion. Teachers may believe in inclusion, may desire it, and may even attempt it, but without structural, institutional, and cultural support, their efforts remain isolated, unsustainable, and insufficient. Inclusion is not a policy declaration. It is a reconfiguration of the system: how we train teachers, organize classrooms, fund schools, and define success. Until that shift happens, inclusion in Karachi's public schools will remain more symbolic than a real presence in language.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations are tailored for key stakeholder groups, including policy makers, who must transform aspirational frameworks into localized, enforceable strategies; teachers, who bear responsibility for preparing professionals equipped to serve diverse classrooms; school leaders, who must create inclusive cultures and mobilize limited resources; and communities and parents, whose attitudes and involvement significantly shape access and belonging for SEN students.

These recommendations emphasize the importance of contextual relevance, participatory design, and multi-level collaboration. The findings make a case that no single intervention will suffice; instead, inclusion must be approached as a systemic challenge requiring coordinated, sustained, and locally adapted strategies.

Programs for pre-service and in-service teacher education must include a basic understanding of inclusive education based on both local cultural realities and worldwide frameworks. Beyond general moral appeals, training should offer practical pedagogical techniques and classroom tools.

Ministries and training bodies should develop clear, contextually appropriate terminology guides distinguishing inclusion, integration, mainstreaming, and special education. These guides should be distributed across schools and embedded in training.

National and provincial policy documents must be broken down into school-level implementation toolkits, complete with classroom examples, timelines, and assessment criteria. Communication campaigns, staff development sessions, and leadership workshops must emphasize inclusion as a right, not a favor anchored in legal commitments, not personal morality alone.

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