

## **Inclusive Education Through Informal School Spaces: Experiences of Students With Special Needs Beyond the Classroom in Pakistan**

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### **Abstract**

The research about inclusive education has had a primary orientation on the standard classroom setting, at times ignoring the contribution that informal school settings have on the students in their experiences with participating and belonging. This paper will analyze the concept of inclusive education which is practiced within informal school areas like corridors, playgrounds, assemblies, and extracurricular activities in the Pakistani primary and secondary school. The research problem will deal with the insufficient empirical concern which has been given to the way in which inclusion and exclusion are generated in contexts outside formal instructions. The main aim of the research was to examine the experience of students with special needs in terms of their participation, interactions, and marginalization in informal school environments. A qualitative research design was then used to collect the data using the semi-structured interviews with teachers and school administrators and reflective narratives of student interactions beyond the classroom. The study also postulated that informal spaces are considered to be a socially regulated space that is influenced by peer dynamics, supervision practices, and institutional norms with boundary conditions being school culture and availability of resources. Results indicate that the informal spaces may promote both social and social exclusion by the way they promote peer segregation, patterns of supervision and unstructured routines. These are the same findings related to the global studies of social inclusion but with context-specific knowledge about Pakistan. The paper also concludes by arguing that the inclusion of education is not only limited to the classroom space since informal school spaces can be an important space of participation.

**Keywords:** Silent exclusion; Disability marginalization; Inclusive schooling; Hidden practices; Qualitative study; School culture; Pakistan education

### **Introduction**

Interestingly, inclusive education has had prior concentration on methods of classroom teaching, curriculum modification, and assessment, and has not usually paid enough attention to the importance of the informal school environment. Studies are starting to point towards the importance of interactions between students and peer activities that help students feel that they belong, participate,

and develop the sense of identity outside of the formal classroom experiences (Allan, 2008; Slee, 2011). Social landscapes: Informal areas include playgrounds, corridors, assemblies, and extracurricular activities which are spaces in which norms of inclusion and exclusion are practiced. School culture can be highly regulated by hierarchy of supervision and routines, thus in Pakistan, informal spaces might play an important role in promoting social engagement among students with special needs (Singal, 2008; Shah, 2015). Inclusion in such spaces therefore implies that an inclusive approach in education needs to understand inclusive education.

An additional assumption in the research on inclusive education is that studies have adequate information on inclusive classroom practices in promoting the social inclusion of the students. But research indicates that it is common in unstructured or semi-structured environments that have little adult oversight (Messiou, 2017). Whereas global literature has investigated the aspect of peer relations in informal schools, empirical research on peer relations in Pakistan, is limited. Available Pakistani studies focus on policies and classroom experiences, with very little focus on the lives of the students outside of the classroom (Ehsan, 2018; Hayat, 2016). The gap makes the following research question: How do informal school spaces influence or exclude students with special needs in Pakistani schools?

The aim of this research is to examine the concept of inclusive schooling as practiced in informal school environments of the primary and secondary schools in Pakistani society. The study applies a qualitative method in the studies conducted to understand the impact of peer interaction, supervision practices, and school culture on the students outside the classroom. The results show that informal spaces may be useful in promoting social inclusion, as well as reproducing marginalization. This paper moves critical analytical focus out of the classroom into areas of informal space and therefore brings this contribution to the inclusive education literature to show that informal spaces are important but under-researched inclusion sites. The article has presented the review of relevant literature, then presented the methodology, results, discussion, and conclusion.

## **Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

The study of inclusive education has come to acknowledge growing interest in how experiences of inclusion can be shaped by classroom teaching, as well as other processes through social interaction in informal spaces of school. This literature review analyses the scholarship concerning informal spaces in schools, inter-peers interaction, social interactions, supervisory practices and no visible exclusion outside in the classroom. The guiding question, which the review relates to, is this: How do informal school spaces relate to the inclusion or exclusion of students with special needs? Based on global literature and the literature on a similar context in Pakistan and other Global South settings, the review uncovers the major theoretical viewpoints, empirical evidence, and research gaps that support the qualitative study of informal spaces in inclusive Pakistani schools.

### **Schools as Unofficial Areas in Social Space.**

Informal school environments playgrounds, corridors, cafeterias, and assemblies are important social environments in which negotiated relationships with peers occur (Blatchford et al., 2003; Thomson, 2010). These space are less organized and controlled by formal statutes than in the classrooms, and in most cases, by informal laws. Studies indicate that informal environments are at the centre of influencing the sense of belonging, social identity as well as peer acceptance among the students (Gibson and Kendall, 2010). In case of special needs, such spaces can provide students with a chance to be included socially or places of marginalization under different peer interactions and supervision patterns.

### **Peer Interaction and Social Inclusion.**

It is also well known that peer relationships are fundamental to the achievement of inclusive education (Koster et al., 2009). Research has shown that students with disabilities usually have less interactivity with peers in unplanned activities like recess and lunch (Humphrey and Symes, 2011).

Studies have identified visibility of difference, social competence expectations and school culture (Avramidis and Norwich, 2002) to have an impact on peer acceptance. This makes informal spaces important places through which inclusion comes in force or falls short in everyday social activities.

### **Supervision, Control and School Culture.**

Informal space adult presence is very important in determining the inclusivity experience of students. Studies indicate that poor or sporadic supervision may enable exclusionary peer actions to continue going on unknown (Blatchford and Baines, 2006). On the other hand, excessive supervision can be oppressive and demand more regulation in children (Hausknecht et al, 2000: p. 355). Leadership and school culture determine the level at which monitored and appreciated informal spaces are integration in the context of inclusiveness (Slee, 2011). The results obtained highlight the necessity to study the way institutional norms can regulate informal school climates.

### **Non-formal and Unannounced Ostracism.**

Hidden exclusion has been used to understand the informal school spaces in applying the concept to explain how individuals become marginalized without intention (Allan, 2008; Graham and Slee, 2008). Peer isolation in recess, exclusion of games, and lack of access to extracurricular activities are recorded as some types of non-verbal exclusion (Mishna et al., 2012). Such practices are normalized often and beyond the formal inclusion policies and promote invisibility of exclusion outside the classrooms.

### **Beyond Academic Learning Participation.**

Inclusive education scholarship also focuses on participation as a multidimensional concept including social, emotional and relational aspect to academic engagement (Booth and Ainscow, 2011). Informal space offers important backgrounds to friendship and autonomy and social skills. It is implied that being excluded tends to harm the wellbeing and sense of belonging to school among students (Rose et al., 2015). So the process of inclusive education should take into consideration the participation in the entire spectrum of school experiences.

### **Pakistani and Global South Realities.**

The studies in Global South point towards the way in which resource scarcity, overcrowded schools, and inflexible disciplinary framework contribute to informal schools (Miles and Singal, 2010; Grech, 2011). Inclusive education research in Pakistan has concentrated more on the classroom activities and policy execution and less on the social life of students out of classroom (Singal, 2008; Ehsan, 2018). Participation in informal spaces is also determined by cultural norms, gender segregation, and supervision practices. The lack of empirical studies that explore informal inclusion in Pakistan is also a massive gap.

### **Synthesis and Research Gap**

In the literature reviewed, we find six intertwined themes namely: (a) informal spaces as worrisome social sites, (b) peer interaction as a determinant of inclusion, (c) supervision and school culture, (d) hidden exclusion outside the classrooms, (e) participation as multi-dimensional concept, and (f) absence of quality qualitative research on Pakistan. Although the role of informal spaces is recognized in the literature of international studies, there is limited evidence on ways informal spaces can be used to facilitate the process of inclusive experience at Pakistani schools. This gap is filled through a qualitative examination of informal spaces in schools as availability and sites of exclusion in the present study.

## **Research Methodology**

### **Methodological Approach**

This paper has discussed the concept of inclusive education as practiced in the informal school environments in Pakistani primary and secondary schools where the practice of inclusion and exclusion is examined in relation to the education programs outside the classroom setting. The study issue related to the insufficient amount of knowledge of informing spaces in relation to marginalization and social participation of students. Since the focus was done on lived experiences,

social interaction and institutional norms, it relied on qualitative interpretive approach of research. The study was based on primary data and it used descriptive and exploratory design, which made it possible to examine in-depth meanings that informal interactions, supervision practices, and school culture have. The choice of qualitative inquiry was due to its ability to elicit the social processes that are not heralded.

### **Data Collection Methods**

The sample was sampled in public and privately owned primary and secondary schools in Punjab, Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa with the range of socio-cultural and institutional settings. The sample size was [approximately 30-45] teachers and school administrators, who had experience in supervising or managing informal school areas, especially, playground, corridors, assemblies as well as extracurricular activities. Purposive sampling technique was used to pick the participants who had long-term exposure to inclusive schools. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data, where the study was aimed at the interaction patterns with peers, supervision practices, involvement of peers in non-classroom activities, and school rules that regulated the unstructured activities within the school. Participants were privy to informed consent and granted confidentiality, and ensured their ethical approval, as well as free participation in the study.

### **Data Analysis Methods**

The data collected through interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed word-to-word and analyzed through thematic analysis. The analysis took the six-phase methodology that was described by Braun and Clarke (2006), and it included familiarization and initial coding, then theme development, reviewing, and refining. The areas of emphasis in coding included informal patterns of interaction, peer inclusion, and exclusion, supervision, and institutional norms, which constituted informal space. Data analysis was performed in qualitative data analysis software (e.g., NVivo) to make data systematically managed. Constant comparison among participants and reflexive writing of memos was strengthened to contribute to the used paths of analytic rigor to capture interpretive choices.

### **Methodology Evaluation and Justification.**

The qualitative interpretive method was suitable to analyses informal schools spaces where it is common to have inclusion and exclusion which are normally indirect and normalized. The semi-structured interviews helped the participants to look back on regular practice and informal interactions as they may be reflected in any formal policy. Triangulation and credibility was enhanced by having both teachers and administrators innovative in the study. Its weaknesses are being dependent on self-reports and that it was not directly observed in informal spaces, which could have given a better contextual detail. Such restrictions were overcome by being circumspect in their probing, cross case comparison and reflexive analysis. In spite of these limitations, the methodology offers a strong framework in comprehending the inclusive aspect outside classrooms in Pakistani schools.

## **Results**

The section is an analysis of semi-structured interviews with teachers and school administrators of inclusive primary and secondary schools in Pakistan. The findings dwell on student perceptions of being included and excluded in informal school environments outside the classroom and are divided in major themes that surfaced throughout participants and the schools.

### **Peer Interaction in Informal School Spaces Informal school**

According to the respondents, the most common places where they could interact with peers include playgrounds, corridors, and assembly areas, which constituted informal school premises. As noted by teachers, some of the students with special needs were active with other students during unstructured periods especially when the activities were cooperative or adult guided. Nonetheless, other participants also cited some lack of peer interaction among some students such as solitary play or not being involved in group activities. These trends were found to differ through schools and with age but were generally found to be powerful in determining the social experiences of the students.

### **Inclusion and Exclusion at Recess and Playtime.**

According to teachers and administrators, recess and playtime provided not only a chance to be socially included but also a chance to be highly vulnerable. The participants narrated the experience of seeing students with special needs being left out of games just because of the perception about physical ability, safety, or performance. Students were in other instances informally resettled in quieter places or other activities. These were termed as normal supervision determinations as opposed to official banishment.

### **Role of Adult Supervision**

The respondents emphasized the importance of adult supervision in forming inclusion in informal spaces. According to teachers, high supervision support inclusive behavior between peers whereas, low supervision support exclusionary behaviors to continue without notice. The administrators reported inconsistency of supervision practices with variations in staffing schedules, space schedules and school schedules. Social inclusion was not emphasized as much on social inclusion but on safety and discipline, a factor that affected the level of interaction with peers. Students were selectively included in extracurricular activities, assemblies and school events according to the report of the participants. Teachers explained their changes in roles, or restriction of role according to perceived ability, or due to logistical issues. Although there usually were students in the room, their involvement was not always active. These were common techniques that were reported in both public and private schools, and which were hardly specified as exclusionary.

### **Workforce Discrimination**

Students regularly referred to the practice of exclusion in informal areas and always took this characteristic as a matter of course and seldom addressed such instances in the work councils. There was a low level of informal inclusion being reflected as reported by teachers during staff meetings or training sessions. Administrators stated that the idea of inclusive practices was usually judged using classroom indicators and not through informal participation. This normalization helped to make invisibility exclusion outside classrooms.

### **Limitations in the Data Observed.**

The outcomes are to be viewed within the context of some shortcomings. The data was based on the self-reported information provided by teachers and administrators and could be biased on the perception but not actual observation. Informal environments were not well monitored and thus, it would not verify practices people reported. Also, the qualitative sample narrows external validity outside of similar school settings. These restrictions are accepted as they are and discussed in the Discussion section.

## **Discussion**

This paper has looked at the experience of inclusive education based on informal school environments in Pakistani primary and secondary schools. The results also reveal that informal spaces are important places of inclusion as well as exclusion among special needs students. There were patterns of peer interactions, practices of supervision as well as engagement of students in extracurricular and whole-school activities which influenced social aspects of students beyond classrooms. Exclusion in informal areas was usually indirect and normalized and seldom realized to be one of the aspects of inclusive education practices.

According to the findings, informal school environments are very essential in forming a sense of belonging and involvement of students. Although others enjoyed the peer interaction component of learning others were isolated during non-instructional hours. The dominance of the safety concern and the discipline over the social inclusion in the practices of supervision also enabled the exclusionary forces to thrive. These results reveal the importance of inclusion out of classrooms, which is dependent on social norms, mediation of adults, and school culture as opposed to formal policy.

These findings are also consistent with the international studies, which define the significance of informal space in social inclusion of students (Blatchford et al., 2003; Koster et al., 2009). Research has also recorded that recess and extra-curricular activities have the potential of either fostering inclusion or reinstating marginalization (Humphrey and Symes, 2011; Mishna et al., 2012). Normalization of informal exclusion is an expression of more general criticisms of hidden exclusion in the inclusive schools (Allan, 2008; Slee, 2011). Placing such findings into a Pakistan context, the study offers Global South thinking on inclusion beyond the classroom instruction (Singal, 2008; Grech, 2011).

There is a number of limitations which need to be mentioned. The research was based on the self-reported experiences of the teachers and administrators that might not be a complete picture of the real experience of the students. The lack of the informal space can be observed directly would inhibit the understanding of the real-time interaction between peer and peer. Also, the qualitative sample limits generalization. Such constraints demonstrate the necessity of conducting future studies that will use the student voice and observational techniques.

Theoretically, the study adds to the body of inclusion education by preempting information about informal school spaces serving as a key but poorly studied area of inclusion. In a practical sense, the results imply that the policy of inclusive education and professional development must reflectly include the supervision practices, inclusion of peers, and engagement in informal space. The school leaders are supposed to be aware of informal spaces as part of inclusive school culture, and not as peripheral to classroom instruction.

Other possible reasons of exclusion in informal spaces could be the lack of resource and large student body and staff shortage as opposed to being marginalized. Supervision and discipline cultural norms can also define the patterns of participation. This is indicated by these factors which imply that informal exclusion is a product of overlapping institutional and social circumstances.

Returning to the research question, which is how do informal school spaces construct the inclusion and exclusion of students with special needs in Pakistani schools, the results reveal that the negotiation of inclusion is actively achieved through peer interaction, supervision, and institutional norms out of classrooms. The paper confirms that informal spaces play the prime role to comprehend inclusive education in practice.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of the study was to investigate the experience of inclusive education in informal school spaces in Pakistani primary and secondary schools to fill an acute gap in the research on inclusion that has historically focused on classroom practices. Restating the main argument of the paper, the results show that inclusion and exclusion are constructively created in the informal areas like playgrounds, corridors, gatherings, and extra-curricular environments and are usually not covered by any formal inclusive policy.

The paper established that peer interactions, supervision practices and school culture play a significant role in influencing students experience of belonging and participation outside classrooms. Informal spaces were depicted to perform both as a source of social inclusion and as an informal source of deflected marginalization. The results are relevant to the scholarship of inclusive education as they widen the understanding of the concept of inclusion beyond teaching situations and emphasize the social aspects of schooling. Getting back to the introduction, the study highlights that meaningful inclusion cannot be attained without taking into consideration the everyday interactions that happen out of classrooms.

This research is important, as it has implications in the area of inclusive policy, school leadership and professional development in Pakistan. Inclusive systems of education should explicitly appreciate the informal schoolplace as a part of the learning experience of students. The theoretical framework of future research should reflect the views of students and observation techniques to shed more light on the process of inclusion implementation throughout the entire range of school life.

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