
From Policy to Practice: A Critical Review of Inclusive Education for Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities in Punjab, Pakistan

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Abstract

This critical review examines the gap between inclusive education policies and their implementation for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) in Punjab, Pakistan. Drawing on literature from 2010-2023, this paper analyses policy frameworks, implementation challenges, teacher preparedness, infrastructural barriers, and socio-cultural factors affecting inclusive education. The review reveals significant disparities between policy intentions and ground realities, highlighting systemic issues that impede meaningful inclusion. Recommendations for bridging the policy-practice divide are presented to inform future educational reform in Punjab.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Special Educational Needs, Disabilities, Punjab, Pakistan, Policy Implementation

Introduction

Inclusive education represents a fundamental shift from segregated special education towards creating learning environments that accommodate all children regardless of their abilities or disabilities (Singal et al., 2019). Pakistan, as a signatory to international conventions including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4, has committed to ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education for all (Government of Pakistan, 2017). However, the translation of these commitments into practice remains problematic, particularly in Punjab, Pakistan's most populous province. Punjab hosts approximately 56% of Pakistan's population and faces significant challenges in educating children with SEND (Punjab Education Sector Plan, 2019). An estimated 3.3 million children with disabilities in Pakistan are out of school, with Punjab accounting for a substantial proportion (Humanity and Inclusion, 2018). This review critically examines how inclusive education policies have been implemented in Punjab between 2010-2023, identifying gaps between policy rhetoric and practical realities. The objective of this review is threefold: first, to analyse the policy framework governing inclusive education in Punjab; second, to examine implementation challenges and barriers; and third, to propose evidence-based recommendations for improving inclusive education practices.

Methodology

This review employs a systematic approach to analyse peer-reviewed articles, government reports, and policy documents published between 2010-2023. Search strategies included databases such as Google Scholar, ERIC, and JSTOR, using keywords: "inclusive education Pakistan," "special educational needs Punjab," "disability education Pakistan," and "SEND Pakistan." Priority was given to empirical studies conducted in Pakistani contexts, particularly Punjab. A total of 47

sources were reviewed, with 38 directly focused on Pakistani contexts.

Policy Framework for Inclusive Education in Punjab

National and Provincial Legislation

Pakistan's commitment to inclusive education is embedded in several policy documents. The Constitution of Pakistan (Article 25-A) guarantees free and compulsory education for all children aged 5-16 years (Government of Pakistan, 2010). The National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (2002) and the National Plan of Action (2006) established early frameworks, though implementation remained weak (Haider, 2017). Following the 18th Constitutional Amendment in 2010, education became a provincial subject, transferring responsibility to provincial governments (Shah, 2019). Punjab responded by developing the Punjab Inclusive Education Policy 2013, which explicitly committed to providing education for children with disabilities in mainstream schools (Government of Punjab, 2013). This policy mandated the establishment of Special Education Needs Resource Rooms in mainstream schools and required teacher training in inclusive practices. The Punjab Persons with Disability Act 2014 further reinforced these commitments by ensuring 2% quota in educational institutions for persons with disabilities and requiring accessible infrastructure (Government of Punjab, 2014). The Punjab Education Sector Plan 2019-2024 prioritised inclusive education, targeting to enrol 100% of children with disabilities in schools by 2024 (Punjab Education Foundation, 2019).

Policy Intentions and Objectives

Punjab's inclusive education policies articulate progressive intentions including: ensuring access to mainstream education for children with SEND; creating barrier-free learning environments; training teachers in inclusive pedagogies; developing individualized education plans (IEPs); and fostering positive attitudes towards disability (Government of Punjab, 2013). These policies align with international best practices and reflect global inclusive education discourse (Miles and Singal, 2010). However, critical analyses reveal that these policies often reflect 'borrowed' international frameworks without adequate contextualisation to Punjab's socio-economic realities (Malik, 2017). Alur and Timmons (2009) argue that inclusive education policies in South Asian contexts frequently represent rhetorical commitments rather than actionable plans with dedicated resources and accountability mechanisms.

The Reality of Implementation: Gaps Between Policy and Practice

Access and Enrolment

Despite policy commitments, enrolment rates for children with SEND in Punjab remain disturbingly low. According to Malik and Syeda (2018), only 5-10% of children with disabilities in Punjab access any form of education, with the majority remaining out of school. Rural-urban disparities are pronounced, with rural areas showing significantly lower enrolment (Haider, 2017). Research by Rauf et al. (2016) in Punjab districts revealed that 78% of surveyed children with disabilities had never attended school, primarily due to inaccessible infrastructure, poverty, and negative parental attitudes. Even when enrolled, retention rates remain problematic, with many children dropping out due to inadequate support and discriminatory practices (Wazir and Lakhani, 2020). Gender intersects with disability, creating compounded disadvantage. Girls with disabilities face double discrimination, resulting in even lower enrolment rates compared to boys with disabilities (Shehzadi and Ashraf, 2021). Cultural norms restricting female mobility and perceiving girls with disabilities as burdens contribute to their educational exclusion (Fatima and Saleem, 2018).

Infrastructure and Accessibility

Physical accessibility remains a fundamental barrier. Despite policy requirements for barrier-free environments, most mainstream schools in Punjab lack basic accessibility features including ramps, accessible toilets, and appropriate furniture (Kaleem et al., 2021). A survey by Ahmed et al. (2013) found that 89% of government schools in Punjab were physically inaccessible to children with mobility impairments. Beyond physical infrastructure, learning materials and assistive technologies are largely absent. Braille materials, sign language resources, and audio-visual aids are scarce even in special education schools, let alone mainstream settings (Jabeen and Qasim, 2015). The digital divide further exacerbates exclusion, with limited access to technology-based learning supports (Khan and Khan, 2020). Classroom environments often fail to accommodate diverse learning needs. Large class sizes, averaging 40-50 students in government schools, make individualised attention impossible (Government of Punjab, 2018). The physical layout of classrooms, designed for traditional teaching methods, does not facilitate inclusive pedagogies or collaborative learning (Rizvi and Ahmed, 2019).

Teacher Preparedness and Training

Teacher competence is critical for inclusive education, yet significant gaps exist in Punjab. Pre-service teacher education programmes minimally address special educational needs, with inclusive education often confined to one optional course (Qureshi and Pirzado, 2018). Consequently, most teachers enter classrooms with limited understanding of disability or inclusive pedagogies. In-service training provision remains inadequate. While the Punjab Inclusive Education Policy mandated teacher training, implementation has been sporadic and under-resourced (Farooq, 2012). Research by Saeed and Mahmood (2020) found that only 12% of teachers in mainstream schools had received any training in inclusive education, and this training was typically brief and theoretical rather than practical. Teacher attitudes significantly influence inclusive practices. Studies reveal mixed attitudes among Punjab's teachers, with many expressing sympathy towards children with disabilities whilst simultaneously doubting their ability to teach them effectively (Kausar et al., 2016). Lack of confidence, fear of inadequacy, and concerns about disrupting 'normal' students' learning create resistance to inclusion (Imtiaz and Qasim, 2017). Workload concerns are legitimate barriers. Teachers already managing large classes with limited resources perceive inclusive education as additional burden without corresponding support or recognition (Tahir, 2018). The absence of specialist support staff, such as special education teachers, psychologists, or speech therapists, in mainstream schools leaves classroom teachers isolated and overwhelmed (Hussain et al., 2020).

Curriculum and Assessment

Punjab's curriculum lacks flexibility to accommodate diverse learners. The standardised, examination-focused curriculum prioritises rote memorization over understanding, disadvantaging children with learning disabilities (Parveen and Batool, 2012). Rigid assessment systems based on written examinations exclude children who might demonstrate learning through alternative modalities (Khan et al., 2017). Individualised Education Plans (IEPs), recommended in policy documents, are rarely implemented. Research by Haider and Munawar (2020) found that less than 5% of children with SEND in mainstream schools had IEPs, and where they existed, they were superficial documents rather than functional planning tools. The absence of systematic assessment mechanisms to identify learning needs prevents appropriate support provision (Fatima and Javaid, 2019). The medium of instruction presents additional challenges. Children with hearing impairments lack access to sign language instruction, as Pakistan Sign Language is not recognised or used systematically in educational settings (Zeshan and Palfreyman, 2020). Similarly, lack of mother-tongue instruction disadvantages children from linguistic minorities who may also have

learning disabilities.

Parental and Community Involvement

Parental attitudes significantly influence educational outcomes for children with SEND. In Punjab's context, disability is often understood through medical or charity models rather than rights-based perspectives (Singal, 2016). Cultural beliefs attributing disability to divine will, karma, or parental sin create stigma and shame, leading families to hide children with disabilities (Rauf and Wazir, 2018). Low parental expectations limit educational aspirations. Research by Imran and Shafique (2014) found that 63% of parents in rural Punjab believed children with disabilities could not benefit from education, preferring to keep them at home. Poverty compounds this, as families prioritize education for non-disabled children who are perceived as having better livelihood prospects (Ayub, 2019). However, studies also reveal that when provided with appropriate information and support, parental attitudes can shift positively (Shahid et al., 2019). Community-based awareness programmes have shown promise in changing perceptions, though such initiatives remain limited in scale (Khan and Lodhi, 2018). Parent-school partnerships are weak in Pakistani contexts generally, and weaker still regarding children with SEND (Ali and Zaman, 2017). Communication barriers, low parental literacy levels, and school cultures that discourage parental involvement create distance between families and educational institutions (Naz and Hanif, 2020).

Socio-Cultural and Economic Factors

Poverty and Inequality

Punjab, despite being Pakistan's wealthiest province, exhibits stark inequalities. Approximately 39% of the population lives below the poverty line (World Bank, 2020). For families with children with disabilities, poverty creates multiple barriers: direct costs of education (uniforms, transport, materials); opportunity costs (forgoing child's contribution to household work); and disability-related expenses (medical care, assistive devices) (Handicap International, 2014). Resource allocation reflects these inequalities. Per-pupil spending in special education schools is higher than mainstream schools, yet remains insufficient, whilst mainstream schools receive no additional funding to support inclusive education (Malik, 2017). The absence of social protection systems means families bear full financial burden of disability-related needs (UNICEF Pakistan, 2019).

Cultural Perceptions of Disability

Understanding disability in Punjab requires recognising diverse cultural perspectives. Traditional belief systems attribute disability to supernatural causes, creating stigma and affecting family honour (biradari) (Miles, 2017). Such perceptions discourage public visibility of children with disabilities and their participation in community institutions including schools (Munir and Parveen, 2020). Gender norms intersect with disability. Girls with disabilities are considered unmarriageable, reducing perceived value of their education (Shehzadi and Ashraf, 2021). Conversely, boys with disabilities face pressure to achieve economic independence despite limited opportunities, creating different but equally damaging pressures (Ahmed and Yasmin, 2016). Religious interpretations play complex roles. Whilst Islamic teachings emphasise compassion and inclusion, popular interpretations sometimes reinforce fatalistic acceptance rather than rights-based advocacy (Hasnain et al., 2008). Progressive religious scholars have challenged these interpretations, but their influence remains limited (Ahmed, 2015).

Urban-Rural Divide

Geographic disparities are pronounced. Urban areas have concentrated special education facilities and better-resourced mainstream schools, whilst rural areas lack both (Haider, 2017).

Transportation barriers, particularly for children with mobility impairments, are acute in rural contexts with limited public transport and inaccessible roads (Rauf et al., 2016). Rural schools face compounded challenges: fewer trained teachers, limited infrastructure, and stronger traditional attitudes towards disability (Imtiaz and Bilal, 2019). Distance learning initiatives during COVID-19 highlighted digital divides, with rural children with disabilities almost entirely excluded from online education (Aziz and Fatima, 2021).

Systemic and Institutional Challenges

Parallel Systems: Mainstream versus Special Education

Punjab operates dual systems: special education schools under the Directorate of Special Education and mainstream schools under the School Education Department (Haider, 2017). This institutional separation creates structural barriers to inclusion, with limited coordination and competing priorities (Malik and Syeda, 2018). Special education schools, whilst providing services, reinforce segregation. As of 2020, Punjab had 309 special education institutions serving approximately 25,000 children—a fraction of those needing services (Government of Punjab, 2020). Moreover, these institutions concentrate in urban areas, leaving rural children unserved (Kaleem et al., 2021). The quality of special education institutions themselves is questionable. Research reveals inadequate facilities, undertrained staff, and limited curriculum breadth that fails to prepare students for independent living or employment (Jabeen and Qasim, 2015). The segregated nature of these institutions limits social integration and perpetuates stigma (Singal et al., 2019).

Resource Allocation and Financing

Education financing in Punjab prioritises infrastructure development over inclusive programming. The education budget allocates minimal funds specifically for inclusive education or SEND support, with most resources directed towards salaries and construction (Punjab Education Budget, 2021). This reflects underlying priorities that view inclusive education as additional rather than integral to education provision (Malik, 2017). Donor funding has supported inclusive education pilots, but sustainability is problematic when projects end (Farooq, 2012). International organisations including UNICEF, Save the Children, and Sightsavers have implemented programmes, yet these remain fragmented and small-scale relative to need (UNICEF Pakistan, 2019).

Monitoring and Accountability

Weak monitoring systems prevent accountability for inclusive education implementation. Education Management Information Systems (EMIS) in Punjab inadequately capture disability data, with many children with disabilities either uncounted or misclassified (Government of Punjab, 2018). Without accurate data, planning and resource allocation remain arbitrary (Wazir and Lakhani, 2020). Accountability mechanisms for policy implementation are absent. The Punjab Inclusive Education Policy 2013 lacked implementation timeline, designated responsibilities, or budget allocation, essentially remaining a declarative document (Malik and Syeda, 2018). Subsequent policies have shown similar weaknesses, suggesting systemic issues in policy formulation and implementation (Shah, 2019).

Bright Spots and Promising Practices

Despite challenges, some positive developments merit recognition. Non-governmental organisations have pioneered inclusive education models. The Akhuwat-Dawood Schools of Inclusive Education in Lahore demonstrate successful inclusion with trained teachers, accessible infrastructure, and community engagement (Akhuwat, 2019). However, scaling such models

remains challenging (Khan and Lodhi, 2018). Teacher training initiatives by organisations like Special Talent Exchange Programme (STEP) have shown that with appropriate professional development, teachers can effectively implement inclusive practices (STEP Pakistan, 2018). Community-based rehabilitation programmes integrating education components have increased enrolment in rural areas (CBM Pakistan, 2017). Technology offers potential solutions. Mobile applications for learning disabilities, digital braille resources, and online teacher training platforms are emerging, though accessibility and affordability remain concerns (Khan and Khan, 2020). COVID-19 accelerated digital adoption, potentially creating opportunities for blended learning models that accommodate diverse needs (Aziz and Fatima, 2021).

Policy momentum has increased. The Punjab government's commitment in the Education Sector Plan 2019-2024 to universal enrolment of children with disabilities, whilst ambitious, signals political will (Punjab Education Foundation, 2019). Collaborations between government departments, civil society, and international organisations have strengthened advocacy and awareness (Humanity and Inclusion, 2020).

Discussion and Critical Analysis

The evidence reviewed reveals profound gaps between inclusive education policies and implementation in Punjab. This disconnect reflects several interrelated factors: insufficient resource allocation, weak institutional capacity, inadequate teacher preparation, sociocultural barriers, and lack of political prioritisation (Singal et al., 2019). Policy formulation in Pakistan often represents symbolic compliance with international norms rather than genuine commitment to reform (Miles and Singal, 2010). Inclusive education policies, whilst well-intentioned, lack concrete implementation strategies, timelines, and dedicated budgets, rendering them aspirational rather than operational (Malik, 2017). This pattern reflects broader governance challenges in Pakistan where policy-practice gaps pervade public sector functioning (Shah, 2019).

Teacher preparation emerges as a critical bottleneck. International evidence demonstrates that teacher attitudes and competencies fundamentally determine inclusive education success (Florian and Black-Hawkins, 2011). Punjab's teacher education system, however, has failed to integrate inclusive education meaningfully, leaving teachers unprepared and unsupported (Qureshi and Pirzado, 2018). Addressing this requires systemic reform of both pre-service and in-service teacher education, accompanied by ongoing mentoring and support systems (Saeed and Mahmood, 2020). Socio-cultural factors represent deep-rooted challenges requiring long-term engagement. Changing attitudes towards disability demands multi-pronged approaches including community awareness, religious engagement, media representation, and successful role models (Munir and Parveen, 2020). Education itself can be transformative, as exposure to diversity challenges prejudices, but this requires sustained contact in genuinely inclusive environments rather than token integration (Singal, 2016).

The urban-rural divide reflects broader development inequalities in Pakistan. Rural areas, home to 64% of Punjab's population, remain underserved across all social services (World Bank, 2020). Addressing educational exclusion of rural children with disabilities requires integrated rural development approaches, not just education interventions (Rauf et al., 2016). Institutional fragmentation between special and mainstream education systems structurally impedes inclusion. International experience suggests that integrating special education expertise within mainstream systems, rather than maintaining parallel structures, facilitates inclusive transformation (Peters, 2007). Punjab requires institutional restructuring to align organizational arrangements with inclusive education goals (Haider, 2017).

Recommendations

Based on this critical review, the following recommendations are proposed for improving inclusive

education in Punjab:

Policy and Governance

1. **"Develop actionable implementation plans"** with clear timelines, responsibilities, and budgets for existing policies (Malik and Syeda, 2018).
2. **"Establish coordination mechanisms"** between Special Education and mainstream School Education Departments to align efforts and share resources (Haider, 2017).
3. **"Strengthen data systems"** to accurately identify and track children with SEND, enabling evidence-based planning (Government of Punjab, 2018).
4. **"Create accountability frameworks"** with regular monitoring and public reporting on inclusive education indicators (Wazir and Lakhani, 2020).

Resource Allocation

5. **"Increase dedicated funding"** for inclusive education, including per-pupil weightings that recognize additional costs (Malik, 2017).
6. **"Prioritise rural areas"** for resource allocation to address geographic inequalities (Rauf et al., 2016).
7. **"Establish subsidy programmes"** to reduce financial barriers for families, covering transport, assistive devices, and opportunity costs (UNICEF Pakistan, 2019).

Teacher Development

8. **"Revise teacher education curriculum"** to make inclusive education compulsory and practical across all pre-service programmes (Qureshi and Pirzado, 2018).
9. **"Implement comprehensive in-service training"** using cascade models and ongoing mentoring (Saeed and Mahmood, 2020).
10. **"Develop specialized support roles"** including resource teachers, educational psychologists, and para-educators in mainstream schools (Hussain et al., 2020).
11. **"Create incentive systems"** recognizing teachers' inclusive education efforts through career progression and recognition (Tahir, 2018).

Infrastructure and Materials

12. **"Conduct accessibility audits"** of all schools and implement retrofitting programmes for priority barriers (Kaleem et al., 2021).
13. **"Develop and distribute appropriate learning materials"** including braille, large print, and audio-visual resources (Jabeen and Qasim, 2015).
14. **"Invest in assistive technologies"** and ensure affordability and maintenance support (Khan and Khan, 2020).

Curriculum and Assessment

15. **"Revise curriculum"** to allow flexibility and multiple pathways for demonstrating learning (Khan et al., 2017).
16. **"Develop alternative assessment methods"** beyond written examinations (Parveen and Batool, 2012).
17. **"Systematize IEP processes"** with training and quality assurance mechanisms (Haider and Munawar, 2020).

Community and Family Engagement

18. **"Implement community awareness programmes"** challenging stigma and promoting disability rights (Khan and Lodhi, 2018).

19. **"Establish parent support groups"** facilitating peer learning and advocacy (Shahid et al., 2019).
20. **"Engage religious leaders"** in promoting inclusive values consistent with Islamic teachings (Ahmed, 2015).

Research and Evidence

21. **"Support longitudinal research"** examining outcomes of inclusive education interventions in Pakistani contexts (Singal et al., 2019).
22. **"Document and disseminate promising practices"** from successful programmes (Akhuwat, 2019).
23. **"Develop context-appropriate assessment tools"** for identifying learning needs in Punjabi contexts (Fatima and Javaid, 2019).

Conclusion

This critical review demonstrates that whilst Punjab has developed progressive inclusive education policies aligned with international commitments, implementation remains severely inadequate. The gap between policy rhetoric and ground realities results from insufficient resources, weak institutional capacity, unprepared teachers, inaccessible infrastructure, and socio-cultural barriers rooted in poverty and traditional attitudes towards disability. Bridging this divide requires more than incremental improvements; it demands systemic transformation of education governance, financing, teacher preparation, and social attitudes. The challenge is fundamentally about political will and prioritisation. Inclusive education cannot be treated as a specialized sub-sector or charitable endeavour; it must be recognized as integral to education quality and social justice.

The 3.3 million Pakistani children with disabilities currently out of school represent not only individual tragedies but collective failure and wasted potential. Punjab, as Pakistan's most populous and wealthiest province, has both responsibility and capacity to lead transformation. However, this requires moving beyond policy declarations to concrete action: allocating necessary resources, building institutional capacity, preparing teachers, changing attitudes, and holding systems accountable. International evidence demonstrates that inclusive education is achievable even in resource-constrained contexts when genuine commitment exists (UNESCO, 2020). Punjab possesses dedicated professionals, active civil society, and increasing awareness—foundations upon which to build. The recommendations outlined provide a roadmap, but ultimately success depends on sustained political commitment and societal determination to ensure every child's right to education is realized in practice, not just promised in policy. Future research should examine implementation processes in depth, document effective interventions, and generate contextually-grounded evidence to inform policy and practice. As Punjab moves towards its 2024 targets, critical monitoring and honest assessment will be essential to ensure that commitments translate into transformed lives for children with special educational needs and disabilities.

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