

## **Call for Inclusion: Comparative Study of Special Education Policies in Pakistan VS Global Benchmarks**

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### **Abstract**

This paper critically analyzes and contrasts Pakistan's Special Education policies against global standards and practices. Although Pakistan has initiated some policy development through efforts like the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (2002) and the signing of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2011, there are still considerable gaps in actual implementation. Pakistan's Special Education system continues to be dominated by segregated schools with limited resources, inadequate policy enforcement, a lack of inclusive teacher training and low public awareness. Conversely, international models, such as those in the United States, United Kingdom, and Scandinavian nations, focus on inclusive education in mainstream schools, legal accountability, early intervention, individualized education plans (IEPs) and family involvement. This comparative analysis underlines the need for Pakistan to shift towards an inclusive, rights-based strategy consistent with the CRPD, UNESCO's Salamanca Statement and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4). Policy reinforcement, teacher professional development and adequate resource mobilization are necessary for equitable learning opportunities among children with disabilities in Pakistan.

**Keywords:** Special Education, Comparison of Special Education Policies, Comparison of International Standards, Pakistan Special Education Policies.

### **Introduction**

Since the creation of life in this world, disabilities, abnormalities and handicaps have been a part of this life. Where a healthy, good and normal generation is born, some individuals are born with abnormalities such as deafness, blindness, physical damage or mental distortion. These people or individuals are called disabled persons, special persons or handicapped persons. Special Education has an important role in ensuring that children with disabilities are included in society and can be provided with equal educational opportunities.<sup>1</sup> Especially in the field of education, it was assumed that disabled persons could not get an education and

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<sup>1</sup> UNESCO, *Inclusive Education: The Way of the Future*. International Conference on Education, 48th Session. Geneva, Switzerland: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2009.

become useful people in society as well as compared to normal persons. With time, disabled persons started getting attention in this matter and institutions dedicated to special education were started building for them. Rehabilitation of these persons was the main focus of these institutes. Around the world, there has been substantial improvement in ensuring that children with special needs have their rights protected.<sup>2</sup> Yet, developing countries like Pakistan have substantial challenges in meeting international standards. The article tries to compare Pakistan's policies for Special Education with international best practices to indicate areas of gaps and improvement.

### **Special Education Policies in Pakistan**

Pakistan's key policy documents for Special Education are:

#### **1. The National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (2002)**

It is the first national policy in Pakistan's history for disabled people. Although efforts were made in the past, such as introducing the Disabled Persons (Employment and Rehabilitation) Ordinance 1981 to protect their rights, they did not materialize.<sup>3</sup>

#### **2. The Constitution of Pakistan (1973)**

Article 25-A provides for free and compulsory education to every child aged between 5 and 16 years, but does not mention special education specifically.<sup>4</sup>

#### **3. The Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act**

was passed in the year 2012 as a result of the 18th Amendment (2010) to the Constitution, which added Article 25-A, making education a basic right for children aged 5 to 16 years.<sup>5</sup>

#### **4. The Punjab Special Education Policy 2019**

was introduced to improve educational services for children with disabilities in Punjab. The policy was duly launched on 3 December 2019, in parallel with the International Day of Persons with Disabilities. It was a provincial-level policy specially designed to improve the educational system for disabled persons in Punjab.<sup>6</sup>

#### **5. Single National Curriculum (SNC)**

It introduced inclusive educational improvements for Special Education, ensuring equitable learning opportunities for the disabled. To streamline educational standards and eliminate discrimination among different educational systems, the Single National Curriculum (SNC) was introduced in Pakistan, thereby creating a framework for a national identity. The effort was

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<sup>2</sup> United Nations, *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)* (New York: United Nations, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Government of Pakistan, *National Policy for Persons with Disabilities* (Islamabad: Ministry of Women Development, Social Welfare and Special Education, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Government of Pakistan, *The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan*, Article 25-A (Islamabad: National Assembly of Pakistan, 1973).

<sup>5</sup> Government of Pakistan, *The Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act* (Islamabad: Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Government of the Punjab, *Punjab Special Education Policy 2019* (Lahore: Special Education Department, Government of the Punjab, 2019).

to normalize disparities among public/private schools and seminaries by putting one textbook in place.<sup>7</sup>

### **Challenges in Special Education Policy Implementation in Pakistan**

The following are the challenges being faced by Pakistan in the implementation of Special Education.

#### **1. Limited access to Special Education**

In Pakistan, limited access to special education is attributed to the non-existent specialized institutions and trained staff. Besides, poor policy implementation has left several children with disabilities out of school, especially in rural areas, denying them their right to education and integration into society. Only 5% of disabled children in Pakistan are provided with access to educational institutions.<sup>8</sup>

#### **2. Lack of inclusive schools**

Special education remains segregated to a large extent. The unavailability of inclusive schools in Pakistan is having a detrimental impact on integrating disabled children into the schools that are considered to be "normal." Many of these are without disability-friendly architecture or teachers trained to accommodate children with special needs; hence, the full participation of special needs students in academic life is seriously compromised.

#### **3. Shortage of Trained Staff**

There is a severe shortage of trained professionals in Pakistan in the sector of special education. Most teachers lack the professional skills essential to dealing with a wide spectrum of diversity in students with disability. This shortage directly affects the quality of inclusion and education efforts in rural and urban areas.<sup>9</sup>

#### **4. Strong social stigma about disability**

The strong social stigma around disability brutally limit the efforts toward inclusive education, community and family participation for the development of special children and the successful implementation of policies in Pakistan.<sup>10</sup>

#### **5. Weak enforcement of disability legislation and policy**

In Pakistan, pervasive social stigma regarding disability still prevents the education of children with special needs in schools. Stigmatizing societal attitudes frequently result in discrimination, isolation, and limited support, discouraging parents from sending their children to school.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Government of Pakistan, *Single National Curriculum (SNC), Grades Pre I–V* (Islamabad: Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, 2020).

<sup>8</sup> UNESCO, *Education for All Global Monitoring Report: Pakistan* (Paris: UNESCO, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> M. A. Sheikh and S. Saeed, "Special Education in Pakistan: In-Service Teacher Training and Professional Development," *Journal of Education and Educational Development* 6, no. 1 (2019): 113–128.

<sup>10</sup> S. Saeed and Z. Zubairi, *Scoping Study: Disability in Pakistan* (Karachi: British Council Pakistan, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> A. U. Nisa and S. Sarwar, "Challenges to Implement the Inclusive Education in Pakistan: A Case of Intellectually Disabled Children," *International Journal of Trends and Innovations in Business & Social Sciences* 2, no. 2 (June 2024): 168–175.

## International Standards for Special Education

- 1 United Nations Conventions and Plans
  - UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2006) focuses on inclusive education for all children as their basic right.<sup>12</sup>
  - UNESCO Salamanca Statement (1994) promotes inclusive education and mainstreaming of children with special needs in regular schools.<sup>13</sup>
  - Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) provides inclusive and equitable quality education and ensures lifelong learning opportunities for everyone by 2030.<sup>14</sup>
- 2 Best Practices in Developed Countries
  - In the United States (IDEA, 1975), the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandates “free appropriate public education (FAPE)” in the least restrictive environment (LRE) for children with disabilities.<sup>15</sup>
  - United Kingdom SEND Code of Practice, 2015 provides a detailed framework for identifying, supporting and protecting the educational rights of children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).<sup>16</sup>
  - Scandinavian Countries and Finland focus on “early intervention, collaboration among teachers and total inclusion in regular classrooms with individualized support”.

## Key Features Internationally

1. There are fewer separate special schools than inclusive education.
2. There are effective legal frameworks and enforcement.
3. Extensive teacher training in inclusive schools is mandatory.
4. Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) for students are made up and implemented.
5. Parental involvement in educational decision-making is crucial.
6. The curriculum is designed to be flexible.
7. Inclusive education policies are revised periodically.
8. There is availability of assistive technologies in classrooms.
9. Peer support of non-disabled peers is encouraged to promote inclusion.
10. Community outreach programs are designed.

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<sup>12</sup> United Nations, *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)* (New York: United Nations, 2006), accessed January 20, 2025, <https://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/convention/convoptprot-e.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> UNESCO, *The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education* (Salamanca: UNESCO, 1994).

<sup>14</sup> United Nations, *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (New York: United Nations, 2015), accessed January 21, 2025, <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal4>.

<sup>15</sup> U.S. Congress, *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)*, Public Law 94-142 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975), accessed January 21, 2025, <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/>.

<sup>16</sup> Department for Education and Department of Health, *Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice: 0 to 25 Years* (London: UK Government, 2015), accessed January 22, 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/send-code-of-practice-0-to-25>.

**Table 1: Comparative Analysis between the Pakistan and International Best Practices**

Features	Country: Pakistan	International Best Practices
Policy Emphasis	Segregated Special Schools	Inclusive Education in Regular Schools
Legal Enforcement	Weak	Strong, enforceable legislation
Teacher Training	Limited special education training	Mandatory inclusive education training
Resource Availability	Low (particularly in rural settings)	High, with adaptive technologies
Public Awareness	Low	Extensive awareness and advocacy
Family Involvement	Minimal	Strong parental involvement in education planning

### Conclusion

While there have been some policy endeavors in Pakistan to assist special children, the nation is still far behind international expectations and standards. Internationally, there is a distinct move toward inclusive education, early detection, and systematic support mechanisms ensuring that children with disability are not merely integrated into regular schools but also receive an equal chance of achieving success. Countries like the United Kingdom, the United States and many within the European Union have followed up frameworks like the SEND Code of Practice and IDEA, which mandate inclusion, teacher training and accessible infrastructure. On the other side in Pakistan still relies heavily on a separate model of special education, where special schools operate separately from the mainstream education system. Such schools also lack good facilities, old curriculum and trained professionals. Also, policies like the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (2002) and the Punjab Special Education Policy (2019) are in place, but their implementation is weak and patchy. Inclusive education teacher training is still negligible and awareness campaigns are absent. Consequently, special children are either denied education or offered poor services. Pakistan needs to address its special education system with an urgency to make it compatible with the world's new inclusive education agenda. To close the gap, Pakistan needs to:

1. Give inclusive education in mainstream school's top priority.
2. Improve policy implementation and monitoring.
3. Scale up teacher training and public sensitization.
4. Ensure adequate infrastructure and resources for supporting children with disabilities.
5. There should be proper screening at the time of birth for early detection of disabilities.
6. There should be accessible learning materials and technologies for special needs in institutions.
7. There should be more monitoring units at lower levels to inspect and monitor the facilities/ practices and other issues in the institutions.

8. A separate adequate budget should be allocated for the developments in special education.
9. The power of social media should be utilized with other sources for anti-stigma regarding disabilities.
10. There should be multiple student support services for disabled students.
11. Strengthen the ties with international partners to gain experience.

By becoming more aligned with international standards like the CRPD, IDEA and SDG4, Pakistan can embark on a journey towards an inclusive and equitable educational landscape for all children with disabilities, which is also the need of the time.