

Barriers and Challenges Faced by Teachers and Headteachers towards the Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs in Government Primary Schools of Karachi

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Abstract

Inclusive education has become a central requirement of rights-based education reform, yet the everyday implementation of inclusion remains uneven in many low-resource public school systems. This qualitative study explores how teachers and head teachers in government primary schools of Karachi understand and experience the inclusion of children with special educational needs (SEN). Fourteen government primary schools were selected from the seven districts of Karachi, with two schools from each district. The sample included 84 participants: 70 classroom teachers and 14 head teachers. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed through a hybrid thematic approach that combined deductive codes drawn from the study objectives with inductive codes emerging from participants' accounts. Findings show that educators generally supported the moral idea of inclusion, but their understanding was often limited to physical placement, charitable care, or integration without instructional adaptation. Four major barriers shaped practice: limited professional preparation, overcrowded classrooms, weak infrastructure and learning resources, and peer rejection or bullying. The study argues that inclusion in Karachi's government primary schools is not failing because teachers lack compassion; it is constrained because policy commitments have not been translated into practical school-level systems, teacher preparation, classroom support, accessible infrastructure, and accountability mechanisms. The paper recommends a phased implementation model that links provincial policy, teacher education, school leadership, community engagement, and district-level resource support. It concludes that genuine inclusion requires a shift from presence to participation, from goodwill to professional competence, and from isolated teacher effort to coordinated

institutional responsibility.

Keywords: Inclusive education; Special educational needs; Government primary schools; Karachi; Teacher perceptions; Head teachers; Pakistan; Disability inclusion

Introduction

Inclusive education is now widely recognized as a core dimension of educational justice, not a peripheral service for a small group of learners (Arcidiacono & Baucal, 2020; Nelis & Pedaste, 2020). Its central promise is that schools should adapt to children rather than requiring children to fit a narrow model of schooling. This promise is especially important for children with special educational needs (SEN), including learners who experience physical, sensory, intellectual, developmental, communication, behavioral, or learning-related barriers. 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 a system where the student is fit in 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). In a rights-based understanding, these children are not guests in mainstream classrooms. They are entitled to access, participation, learning, safety, dignity, and belonging. International frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and UNESCO's inclusion agenda frame inclusive education as a transformation of culture, policy, and practice (Aas et al., 2024). In this view, inclusion is not achieved by enrolling a child in a general classroom while leaving curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and school culture unchanged. It requires planned changes in how teachers teach, how schools organize support, how peers interact, and how systems allocate resources. 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).

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 & Pedaste, 2020). 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 individual students, together with a commitment to remove the barriers that impede that possibility. Conceptual understandings of inclusion differ across contexts which results in discrepancies in how it is translated into practice (Boyle & Anderson, 2020).

Research Problem

The need for such a transformation is urgent in Pakistan, where educational exclusion is shaped by poverty, gender, geography, disability, language, school quality, and weak public-sector capacity. Government primary schools in large urban centers such as Karachi carry a heavy responsibility because they serve communities with diverse social and economic realities. Karachi is not only Pakistan's largest city; it is a complex educational landscape in which public schools often function under pressure from overcrowding, teacher shortages, uneven infrastructure, large numbers of out-of-school children, and limited specialist services. In such settings, inclusive education is both necessary and difficult. It is necessary because children with SEN are likely to be present in neighborhoods served by government schools, whether formally identified or not. It is difficult because mainstream teachers are often asked to respond to diverse learners without training, assistive materials, classroom aides, diagnostic pathways, or clear implementation guidance.

This study focuses on the perceptions of teachers and head teachers because they are the people through whom inclusive education is either enacted or stalled at classroom level. Policies may declare inclusion, but teachers translate policy into daily routines: seating, explanation, questioning, feedback, assessment, peer grouping, classroom management, and emotional support. Head teachers shape the school climate, mobilize resources, guide teachers, mediate parent concerns, and decide whether inclusion becomes a whole-school responsibility or remains an individual teacher's burden. Their perspectives therefore provide a practical window into how inclusion is understood in government primary schools, what kinds of barriers teachers face, and what support is needed for meaningful change.

Rationale of the Research

The study is grounded in the assumption that teachers' responses to inclusion cannot be reduced to personal attitude alone, because inclusive practice is shaped by the interaction of teacher beliefs, professional preparation, school conditions, leadership, resources, policy clarity, and community expectations. A teacher may believe that every child deserves education, yet still be unable to adapt lessons for a learner with intellectual disability in a class of 55 pupils; similarly, a head teacher may wish to welcome children with disabilities but lack ramps, accessible toilets, referral pathways, or budget authority. Recent 2026 research supports this view by showing that inclusive education requires teacher preparation, leadership support, confidence, systemic structures, and practical field-based experience, not only positive beliefs (Aiono-Conradi et al., 2026). Teachers' and head teachers' accounts in this study are therefore treated as socially and institutionally situated evidence of how the education system communicates expectations, provides support, and defines successful schooling. The study addresses two central questions: how teachers and head teachers perceive current teaching and learning practices related to the inclusion of children with SEN in government primary schools of Karachi, and what challenges they face in including these children in mainstream classrooms. By answering these questions, the paper contributes to inclusive education literature in Pakistan and provides evidence for policy makers, teacher educators, school leaders, and development partners seeking to move inclusion from aspiration to practice. The paper argues that the main problem is not the absence of moral concern among educators, as many participants described children with

SEN with sympathy and care; rather, the deeper problem is that compassion has not been converted into professional preparation, rights-based thinking, pedagogical adaptation, and system-level support. This distinction matters because recent studies show that case-based inclusive education coursework can strengthen preservice teachers' efficacy for inclusive practices, while weak preparation and limited school-based support reduce teachers' responsiveness to diverse learning needs (Xin et al., 2026). The article therefore proceeds by reviewing global and local literature on inclusive education, teacher attitudes and self-efficacy, leadership, Universal Design for Learning, policy implementation, and the Pakistani/Sindh context, followed by the methodology, findings, discussion, and a phased localized model for strengthening inclusive education in Karachi's government primary schools.

Literature Review

Inclusive education has evolved from a narrow focus on the placement of children with disabilities in mainstream schools to a broader concern with participation, equity, and system transformation (Ainscow, 2020). Hehir et al., (2016), further added another layer to this concept as he stated that inclusive education brings better social skills and academic performance to address the holistic educational approach-based idea.

UNESCO's widely used framing emphasizes that inclusive education addresses the presence, participation, and achievement of all learners, especially those at risk of marginalization. The phrase "all means all" captures the core idea that education systems must identify and remove barriers rather than create parallel pathways that reproduce exclusion. Ainscow's work is especially useful because it presents inclusion as a continuous process of school improvement rather than a finished state. This process requires evidence, collaborative inquiry, leadership, and attention to the ways schools unintentionally marginalize learners. In this sense, inclusion is not a special project. It is a measure of the quality and fairness of the education system itself. 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).

"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 in inclusive education (Boyle et al., 2020). "Van Steen et al.'s (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 (Haritaki et al., 2024).

The distinction between inclusion and integration is central to the present study. Integration generally refers to the placement of learners with disabilities or SEN in mainstream settings, but the responsibility for adjustment remains largely with the child. Inclusion, by contrast, requires the school to change. The curriculum, classroom environment, assessment practices, teacher interaction, peer culture, and school leadership must become flexible enough to accommodate learner diversity. A child who sits silently in the back of a classroom without adapted instruction is integrated in space but excluded from learning. A child who participates in lesson activities through differentiated tasks, peer support, accessible materials, and teacher feedback is more meaningfully included. This distinction is important in Pakistan because many educators equate admission or attendance with inclusion. The result is a model of “presence without participation,” where the child is technically enrolled but educationally neglected.

Maxwell, (2024) highlights the importance of social norms and complexity towards disability inclusion and how it affects teachers' and head teachers' views. Recent research continues to show that teachers are central to the success of inclusive education (Ainscow et al., 2006). Attitudes matter because they shape expectations, willingness to adapt, classroom interaction, and the emotional climate of learning. However, attitudes are not formed in isolation. They are influenced by teacher education, self-efficacy, prior contact with disability, perceived leadership support, class size, school culture, and the availability of resources (Ainscow et al., 2008). As per Charitaki et al (2024), cross-national work highlights that teacher attitudes include cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. Teachers may cognitively agree that all children have the right to learn, feel affectively anxious or unprepared, and behaviorally avoid adaptation because they do not know what to do. This multidimensional view helps explain why teachers in the present study often expressed support for inclusion in principle while describing little inclusive practice in the classroom.

Teacher self-efficacy is another important concept. Teachers who believe they can manage diverse classrooms are more likely to attempt differentiated instruction, collaborate with colleagues, communicate with parents, and persist when difficulties arise (Antoninis et al., 2020). Teachers with low efficacy may interpret SEN as a specialist issue beyond their role. In low-resource systems, low efficacy is understandable because teachers may be expected to include children with complex needs without training or support. The literature therefore suggests that teacher attitudes should not be treated as fixed personal traits (Arcidiacono, 2020). They can improve when teachers receive relevant preparation, practical tools, mentoring, collaborative planning time, and supportive leadership. Short awareness workshops alone are unlikely to produce durable change if teachers return to overcrowded classrooms without materials or follow-up. 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).

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) provides one practical framework for translating inclusion into classroom practice. UDL encourages teachers to plan lessons with multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression (Avramidis, 2000). Instead of

designing a single lesson for an imagined average learner and then making exceptions, teachers anticipate variability from the start. For example, a lesson can include oral explanation, visual support, peer discussion, concrete objects, short written tasks, and alternative ways for students to show understanding. In government primary classrooms where specialist resources are scarce, UDL is valuable because it does not require every adaptation to be individualized or expensive. It asks teachers to broaden access to learning for the whole class. However, UDL cannot be implemented through slogans. Teachers need examples linked to their curriculum, language realities, class size, and assessment pressures. Without such examples, UDL remains an attractive but abstract idea.

Inclusive pedagogy also emphasizes the teacher's stance toward learner difference (Booth, 2016). Also, Florian (2013), cited that argue that inclusive pedagogy avoids sorting children into fixed categories of "normal" and "special." Instead, it extends what is ordinarily available in the classroom so that more children can participate. This is particularly relevant where formal diagnosis is weak or unavailable. In many Pakistani government schools, children may be described as "slow," "weak," "hyper," "not interested," or "unable," without any formal assessment. A purely diagnostic model of support may therefore leave many children invisible. Inclusive pedagogy encourages teachers to begin with observable learning barriers and classroom responses, even when formal labels are absent. This does not remove the need for specialist assessment, but it prevents teachers from waiting passively for services that may not arrive.

According to Carvalho et al., (2024), School leadership is increasingly recognized as a decisive condition for inclusion. The Global Education Monitoring Report (2024/25) emphasizes that effective principals contribute to safe, healthy, and inclusive schools. Leadership matters because inclusion requires coordination. Head teachers can establish norms against bullying, encourage teachers to share strategies, communicate with parents, advocate for resources, and create school-level routines for identifying and supporting children who need help. In the absence of leadership, inclusion becomes a private matter between one teacher and one child. That model is fragile. It depends on individual goodwill and collapses when a teacher changes, a class becomes too crowded, or a child's needs become more complex. A whole-school approach is more sustainable because it distributes responsibility and makes inclusion part of the school's identity.

The policy context in Pakistan shows a gap between commitment and implementation (Hashmi et al., 2017). Pakistan has ratified international rights frameworks and developed national and provincial policy documents that refer to inclusive education, equity, and children with special needs. The National Education Policy Development Framework 2024 recognizes that children with special needs remain among the most excluded from education and notes that inclusive education has not yet been organized through a systematic approach. This is an important admission because it moves the debate beyond isolated success stories. Sindh's legal framework also contains stronger language than everyday practice often reflects. The Sindh Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2018 defines inclusive education as a system in which students with and without disabilities learn together and

teaching and learning are adapted to meet different needs. That definition is close to global rights-based understandings. The challenge is that many schools lack the operational tools required to enact it.

Research consistently identified similar barriers: inadequate teacher preparation, large class sizes, insufficient resources, inaccessible buildings, limited assessment and referral systems, social stigma, and weak coordination between education, health, and special education departments. Studies on teacher perceptions in government primary schools show that teachers may favor inclusion for children with mild disabilities but feel less confident about including children with severe, cognitive, behavioral, or communication-related needs (Loreman et al., 2007). However, in Pakistan the challenge is intensified by underfunded schools, limited specialist staffing, and the absence of routine classroom-based support. The result is a contradiction: inclusion is morally praised and legally endorsed, but practically unsupported.

Community attitudes also influence inclusion. Disability may be interpreted through religious, charitable, medical, or stigmatizing frames. Moral and religious compassion can motivate acceptance, but it can also unintentionally reduce children with SEN to objects of pity (Hehir et al., 2016). The charity model offers support as kindness, whereas the rights model frames support as entitlement. In the present study, teachers' religious and moral language often reflected genuine care, but it rarely translated into adaptation, assessment, or rights-based advocacy. This finding does not suggest that religious values are incompatible with inclusion. Rather, it suggests that compassion must be linked with professional knowledge and legal obligation. A child should not be included only because a teacher is kind; the child should be included because the school is responsible for providing equitable education.

Peer relationships are another major dimension of inclusion. Children with SEN may be physically present but socially isolated, mocked, or excluded from play and group work (Nelis, 2025). Bullying damages attendance, self-esteem, participation, and learning. Inclusive education therefore requires attention to classroom culture, not only lesson planning. Teachers need practical strategies for cooperative learning, peer support, empathy-building, classroom norms, and early intervention in teasing or name-calling (Nelis et al., 2023). Head teachers need school-wide policies and routines that make safety visible. Without attention to peer culture, inclusion can become emotionally unsafe. A child who is laughed at every day is not meaningfully included, even if the teacher allows the child to sit in class (Shakespeare, 2014). A study by Ratheeswari and Nallathambi (2023, p 77) 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".

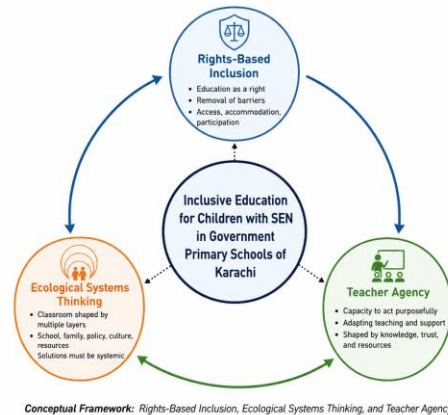
The literature suggests that sustainable inclusion requires coherence across levels. At policy level, definitions and responsibilities must be clear (Nelis, 2023). At district level, schools need monitoring, resource channels, and referral pathways. At teacher education level, pre-

service and in-service programs must include practical inclusive pedagogy. At school level, head teachers must lead inclusive culture and planning. At classroom level, teachers need strategies for differentiation, peer support, and formative assessment. At community level, parents and local actors need awareness that shifts disability from shame or pity to rights and participation. The present study contributes to this multi-level understanding by showing how frontline educators experience the gap between policy aspiration and classroom reality.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is built on three connected ideas: rights-based inclusion, ecological systems thinking, and teacher agency. Together, these ideas explain inclusive education as a matter of children's entitlement, school conditions, and teachers' capacity to act. A rights-based view shows that children with SEN should not depend on charity, sympathy, or individual goodwill; they have a right to access, participation, reasonable support, dignity, and meaningful learning. Recent work by Wheeler (2026) strengthens this view by arguing that inclusion should be judged through sustained participation, not merely visible attendance or surface-level classroom presence. Ecological systems thinking helps explain why teachers' inclusive practices are shaped by wider conditions such as class size, school leadership, resources, parent expectations, district support, cultural beliefs, and policy implementation. In this sense, exclusion is not produced by teachers alone; it is often created through weak institutional design and unsupported school environments. Teacher agency provides the third lens because inclusion depends on whether teachers can act purposefully within these conditions. Teachers show agency when they adapt tasks, change seating, use peer support, communicate with parents, modify assessment, and reflect on learner progress. Hà (2026) similarly presents teachers as active agents of inclusive education and emphasizes reflective practice as a way to connect teachers' beliefs, classroom decisions, and inclusive action. This framework therefore avoids blaming teachers alone and also avoids assuming that policy automatically produces inclusion. It interprets teachers' and head teachers' responses as evidence of both commitment and constraint, showing that meaningful inclusion requires rights-based expectations, supportive school systems, and strengthened teacher agency.

Figure 1: Integrated Model of Inclusion



Research Objectives

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

Research Questions

1. What are the current perceptions and practices of teachers and head teachers regarding the inclusion of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in government primary schools of Karachi?
2. What challenges and barriers do teachers and head teachers face in including children with SEN in government primary schools of Karachi?

Research Design

A qualitative research design was adopted to explore teachers' and head teachers' perceptions of inclusive education in government primary schools of Karachi. This design was appropriate because the study aimed to understand participants' meanings, experiences, beliefs, and interpretations rather than measure variables numerically. The study was grounded in an interpretivist approach, which assumes that social reality is constructed through human experience, interaction, language, and institutional context (Creswell & Creswell, 2020). From this perspective, inclusive education was not treated as a fixed concept understood in the same way by all participants. Instead, the study examined how teachers and head teachers made sense of inclusion through their everyday professional experiences, classroom challenges, school conditions, and interactions with children with SEN. Recent inclusive education research supports this approach because teachers' perceptions often reveal how inclusion is shaped by professional preparation, confidence, school leadership, collaboration, and available support. For example, Alsamiri and Alsamani's (2026) qualitative phenomenological study found that teachers' perceptions are important for understanding professional development needs in inclusive public schools, while Ahmad et al. (2026) used a qualitative case study to show how teacher leadership in inclusive education is shaped by collaboration, communication, autonomy, and school environment. Similarly, Laursen,

Milner, and Winchip (2026) found that school leaders may support inclusive ideals, but structural and economic constraints can make implementation difficult. This approach therefore allowed the study to capture the complexity of participants' views and to understand how inclusive education is interpreted and practiced within the real conditions of government primary schools.

Targeted Population

The target population consisted of teachers and head teachers working in government primary schools in Karachi. Karachi has seven districts, and the study selected 14 schools through stratified sampling, with two schools from each district. This strategy helped ensure geographic spread across the city. The participant sample included 84 respondents: 70 teachers and 14 head teachers. Five teachers were selected from each school, and one head teacher was included from each school. Participants were selected purposively because the study required educators who had direct experience with primary classrooms and school management. The sample included 32 male and 52 female participants. Teachers had a wide range of experience, from two years to 28 years, allowing the study to capture perceptions across different career stages.

Data Collection Tool

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. This tool was appropriate because it allowed the researcher to ask common questions across participants while also giving respondents space to explain their experiences in their own language. The interview guide addressed participants' understanding of inclusive education, classroom practices, experiences with children with SEN, perceived barriers, available support, peer interactions, parent responses, and recommendations for improvement. Semi-structured interviews were especially useful because some participants were unfamiliar with formal terminology. The interviewer could ask follow-up questions, request examples, and clarify whether a participant was describing inclusion, integration, special education, or general classroom difficulty.

Data Analysis and Procedure

Data were analyzed through thematic analysis using a hybrid coding approach that combined deductive and inductive procedures, an approach recommended in recent qualitative research because it allows researchers to connect analysis with existing concepts while still allowing themes to emerge from participants' own meanings (Katz et al., 2026; Lochmiller et al., 2026). Deductive codes were developed from the research objectives and relevant literature, including training, resources, class size, teacher attitudes, peer interaction, infrastructure, and policy support, while inductive codes emerged directly from participants' language, such as "Allah's test," "letting them sit," "corner strategy," "slow learners," "we are not psychologists," and "we cannot turn them away." This combination helped the analysis remain connected to existing inclusive education concepts while also preserving local meanings from Karachi's government primary schools. The interview data were read repeatedly to develop familiarity, meaningful text units were coded, related codes were grouped into preliminary themes, and the themes were reviewed, named, and refined to

ensure that they accurately represented participants' accounts. Manual annotation was used to organize the data, compare patterns across participants, retain links between codes and original responses, and improve transparency. This process is consistent with recent methodological work that emphasizes thematic analysis as a systematic process of familiarization, coding, theme development, review, and interpretation (Katz et al., 2026). Trustworthiness was strengthened through repeated reading, careful documentation of coding decisions, comparison of themes against the data, and attention to contradictory responses, especially where participants expressed moral support for children with SEN but described limited classroom adaptation (Lochmiller et al., 2026). The study also has limitations. It focused only on government primary schools in Karachi and therefore does not represent private schools, rural schools, special schools, or secondary schools. It relied on self-reported interview data, which may differ from observed classroom practice, and it did not include children with SEN, parents, district officials, teacher educators, or special education professionals. Future studies should therefore use classroom observations, student and parent voices, and mixed-method or longitudinal designs to examine how inclusion is practiced over time and how children with SEN experience participation, belonging, and learning in everyday school life (Jayawardene & Ewing, 2026; Nguyen-Trung & Nguyen, 2026).

Ethical Consideration

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the research process. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw. Informed consent was obtained before interviews. Identifying information about schools and participants was treated confidentially. Respondent numbers were used in reporting quotations to protect privacy. Because the study involved teachers discussing institutional weaknesses, confidentiality was important for encouraging honest responses. The research did not evaluate individual teacher performance; it examined systemic and professional conditions affecting inclusion.

Findings

The findings are organized into two broad areas. The first concerns how teachers and head teachers understood inclusive education. The second concerns the barriers that prevented meaningful implementation. Across the interviews, participants generally did not reject the idea that children with SEN should receive education. Many expressed sympathy, religious responsibility, or moral concern. However, their descriptions showed that inclusion was often understood as physical placement, charitable acceptance, or integration without adaptation. Classroom practices rarely reflected differentiated instruction, modified assessment, structured peer support, or formal individualized planning. Participants' accounts therefore reveal a pattern of moral acceptance without pedagogical transformation.

Table 1: Summary of the Analysis and Findings

CATEGORY	THEME	MEANING IN THE STUDY
UNDERSTANDING OF INCLUSION	Physical placement	Inclusion seen as allowing children with SEN to sit in

UNDERSTANDING OF INCLUSION	OF	Moral or religious duty	the general classroom. Teachers expressed care through compassion, faith, and humanity, but often without pedagogical adaptation.
UNDERSTANDING OF INCLUSION	OF	Integration confused with inclusion	Students were expected to do the same work as others, with little modification.
IMPLEMENTATION BARRIERS		Lack of training	Teachers and head teachers reported low confidence and limited practical preparation.
IMPLEMENTATION BARRIERS		Overcrowding	Large classes reduced opportunities for individual attention and differentiation.
IMPLEMENTATION BARRIERS		Resource and infrastructure gaps	Schools lacked accessible facilities, assistive materials, and basic learning supports.
IMPLEMENTATION BARRIERS		Peer rejection and bullying	Children with SEN were teased, isolated, or discouraged from participating.

This section presents the major themes that emerged from the interviews with teachers and head teachers working in government primary schools of Karachi. The findings are organized around eight interrelated themes that explain how inclusive education for children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) is understood, experienced, and practiced in the selected schools. The themes show that teachers and head teachers generally expressed positive intentions toward the inclusion of children with SEN. However, their responses also revealed serious limitations in conceptual understanding, classroom practice, professional preparation, institutional support, school infrastructure, peer culture, and policy implementation.

The findings suggest that inclusive education in the studied schools exists more as an aspiration than as a structured pedagogical reality. Teachers and head teachers did not necessarily reject the idea of inclusion. In fact, many participants expressed compassion, responsibility, and willingness to accept children with SEN. However, this acceptance was often not supported by practical knowledge, adapted teaching strategies, accessible resources, or institutional mechanisms. As a result, inclusion frequently remained limited to physical presence in the classroom rather than meaningful participation in learning.

The eight themes are:

1. Partial Inclusion and the Visibility Trap
2. Compassion-Led Inclusion and the Limits of Goodwill

3. Equal Treatment Versus Equitable Support
4. Professional Uncertainty and Pedagogical Insecurity
5. The Overloaded Classroom as a Barrier to Responsiveness
6. Material Exclusion within the School Environment
7. Social Belonging and Peer-Mediated Exclusion
8. Unsupported Policy Translation at School Level

Together, these themes provide a detailed picture of the gap between inclusive education as a policy ideal and inclusive education as an everyday classroom practice in government primary schools of Karachi.

Theme 1: Partial Inclusion and the Visibility Trap

The first major theme that emerged from the data was partial inclusion, where children with SEN were allowed to be physically present in mainstream classrooms but were not necessarily supported to participate meaningfully in learning. Many participants understood inclusion as the act of allowing children with SEN to sit with other children in the same classroom. This suggests that inclusion was commonly interpreted as physical placement rather than as a transformation of teaching, curriculum, assessment, peer interaction, and school culture.

Several teachers described inclusion in simple spatial terms. For them, the child's presence in the classroom was treated as the main evidence that the school was being inclusive. This understanding is important because it shows that exclusion was not always direct or visible. Children with SEN were not necessarily denied entry. Instead, they were often included in a limited and passive way. They were present, but their learning needs were not systematically addressed.

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.

Respondent 5 (Teacher):

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

This statement captures a minimal understanding of inclusion. The phrase "let them sit" suggests permission rather than participation. The child is allowed to occupy the same physical space, but the response does not indicate any planned adaptation of teaching methods, learning materials, classroom interaction, or assessment. This form of inclusion can be described as a visibility trap because the child becomes visible in the classroom, yet remains educationally invisible. The child appears to be included because they are physically present, but their actual learning experience may remain unchanged.

This theme is significant because it challenges the assumption that admission into a mainstream classroom automatically leads to inclusion. In the studied schools, physical access did not always lead to curricular access, social access, or pedagogical access. A child with SEN could sit in the room while the teacher continued to teach in the usual whole-class manner. The child might hear the lesson, but not understand it. The child might receive the

same textbook, but not be able to use it. The child might be counted as enrolled, but not be meaningfully engaged.

Another teacher described the difficulty more openly:

Respondent 9 (Teacher):

“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.”

This response shows the tension between moral responsibility and professional uncertainty. The teacher does not want to reject the child, but also does not know how to teach the child. The phrase “they sit quietly” is particularly important. It suggests that silence may be mistaken for inclusion. A quiet child may be seen as manageable, but silence may also indicate disengagement, confusion, fear, or resignation. The teacher’s focus shifts to “the rest,” meaning the majority of students who can follow the usual classroom pace. The child with SEN remains present, but the classroom system continues without meaningful adjustment. This finding indicates that children with SEN may become peripheral learners in mainstream classrooms. They are not necessarily removed from the classroom, but they may be placed at the margins of instruction. Their participation depends largely on whether the ordinary lesson happens to be accessible to them. If the teacher does not adapt content, pace, language, activity, seating, or assessment, then the child must adjust to the classroom rather than the classroom adjusting to the child. This reflects a limited model of inclusion.

A head teacher also acknowledged the lack of preparedness at the school level:

Respondent 3 (Head Teacher):

“We are not prepared for inclusive education.”

This statement broadens the issue beyond individual teachers. It suggests that schools as institutions are not equipped to support inclusion. The problem is not only that teachers lack knowledge. The school system itself lacks preparation. There may be no school-level inclusion plan, no resource teacher, no referral mechanism, no training routine, no monitoring system, no adapted materials, and no formal support for teachers. Therefore, the visibility trap is produced not only by teachers’ limited understanding but also by institutional absence.

This theme reveals that inclusion in the studied schools is often reduced to non-rejection. Teachers may believe they are being inclusive because they do not turn children away. However, non-rejection is only the first step. Meaningful inclusion requires active planning. It requires teachers to identify learning barriers, adapt teaching, involve peers, communicate with parents, and assess progress in flexible ways. Without these actions, inclusion becomes passive.

The findings also show that this partial inclusion is not necessarily caused by negative attitudes alone. Many teachers appeared concerned but lacked confidence and support. This is important for interpretation. It would be too simple to say that teachers do not care. The data suggest a more complex reality: teachers may care, but they do not have the knowledge, tools, time, or institutional backing to convert care into inclusive practice.

Therefore, Theme 1 shows that the first barrier to inclusion is not only exclusion from school. It is also the limited form of inclusion that allows children with SEN to be physically present without ensuring learning participation. For inclusive education to become meaningful, schools must move from presence to participation, from admission to accommodation, and

from visibility to learning engagement.

Theme 2: Compassion-Led Inclusion and the Limits of Goodwill

The second major theme was the strong presence of moral, religious, and humanitarian language in participants' understanding of inclusion. Many teachers and head teachers explained their acceptance of children with SEN through ideas of kindness, humanity, religious duty, and compassion. This shows that educators did not generally view children with SEN as undeserving of education. Instead, many participants believed that such children should be treated with care and should not be rejected.

However, the data also revealed that compassion was often not connected to pedagogical competence. Teachers felt morally responsible for children with SEN, but they did not always know how to support them academically or socially. Therefore, this theme is called compassion-led inclusion and the limits of goodwill. It recognizes the positive role of compassion while also showing that goodwill alone cannot produce educational inclusion. This framing aligns with what disability theorists term the charity model of disability (Oliver, & Marwell, 2001).

Respondent 1 (Teacher):

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

This statement reflects a deeply moral understanding of inclusion. The teacher's response is based on dignity, humanity, and religious belief. The child with SEN is seen as deserving of acceptance because they are also created by God. This kind of belief can reduce harsh rejection and may encourage teachers to show patience. In contexts where disability can be misunderstood or stigmatized, moral and religious language may provide an important foundation for acceptance.

Another teacher expressed a similar view:

Respondent 6 (Teacher):

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

This response shows that the teacher interprets the presence of children with SEN as a moral test for educators. The teacher's role is not only technical but also ethical. This is important because it suggests that teachers may see inclusion as part of their personal and spiritual responsibility. Such a view can motivate care, patience, and tolerance. It can also help teachers resist pressure to reject children who are seen as difficult to teach.

A head teacher also emphasized humanity over training:

Respondent 2 (Head Teacher):

"We do not have training, but we have humanity. That is what matters."

This statement is especially important because it shows both strength and limitation. The strength is that the head teacher values humanity and does not dismiss children with SEN. The limitation is that humanity is presented as a substitute for training. The statement suggests that if teachers are kind and humane, they may be able to include children even without professional preparation. However, the wider findings of the study show that this is not enough.

Compassion can help a child enter the classroom, but it cannot automatically modify a lesson. Kindness can prevent rejection, but it cannot replace differentiated instruction. Sympathy can encourage patience, but it cannot design accessible assessment. Moral concern can reduce cruelty, but it cannot build a structured anti-bullying system. Therefore, compassion is

necessary but insufficient.

This theme shows an important distinction between moral inclusion and educational inclusion. Moral inclusion means that teachers feel sympathy, accept the child, and avoid direct rejection. Educational inclusion means that the child receives meaningful access to teaching, learning materials, peer interaction, feedback, and assessment. The findings suggest that many participants were closer to moral inclusion than educational inclusion.

This distinction matters for teacher education and policy. Training programs should not dismiss teachers' moral or religious motivations. In fact, these motivations may be valuable entry points for professional development. Teachers who already believe that children with SEN deserve compassion can be supported to understand that compassion must be expressed through professional action. For example, a teacher's kindness can be translated into adapting instructions, using peer support, checking understanding, allowing alternative responses, reducing stigma, and communicating with parents.

At the same time, inclusive education must not depend only on individual goodwill. If inclusion depends on the personal kindness of a teacher, then support becomes inconsistent. A child may receive care in one classroom but neglect in another. Rights-based inclusion requires that support should not depend on whether a teacher personally feels sympathetic. It must be an institutional responsibility.

The findings therefore show that the studied schools have a moral foundation for inclusion, but this foundation needs to be strengthened through rights-based and competence-based practice. Teachers need to understand that children with SEN are not merely objects of sympathy. They are learners with rights. They are entitled to access, accommodation, participation, respect, and learning progress. This shift from charity to rights is essential for sustainable inclusion.

Theme 2 therefore shows that compassion is an important starting point, but it must not be the final form of inclusion. Inclusive education in government primary schools requires the transformation of goodwill into structured pedagogy, ethical concern into professional competence, and personal kindness into institutional responsibility.

Theme 3: Equal Treatment Versus Equitable Support

The third theme focuses on the difference between equal treatment and equitable support. Many teachers believed that children with SEN should be given the same work as other children. This was often understood as fairness. However, inclusive education requires a deeper understanding of fairness. Treating all children exactly the same may appear fair, but it can become exclusionary when learners have different needs. Equity means that children receive the support they need in order to participate meaningfully.

This theme shows that some teachers had difficulty distinguishing between equality and equity. Equality means giving everyone the same thing. Equity means giving each learner what they need to access learning. In inclusive education, equity is essential because children differ in how they see, hear, communicate, move, understand, respond, and participate.

Respondent 7 (Teacher):

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

This quote shows that the teacher associates' inclusion with sameness. The child with SEN is included by being in the same room and doing the same work. On the surface, this may appear

fair because no child is being treated differently. However, the statement also shows that the teacher may not recognize the need for adaptation. If a child cannot access the same work in the same way, then identical treatment becomes a barrier.

For example, a child with a visual impairment may not be able to read small text. A child with a hearing difficulty may not follow oral instructions. A child with an intellectual disability may need simplified steps. A child with autism may need visual routines. A child with a writing difficulty may need oral response options. If all children receive the same task without adjustment, then some children are excluded from participation even though they are physically present.

Another teacher stated:

Respondent 1 (Teacher):

“Integration means they are here with us. If they need something, they will ask.”

This statement reveals two important assumptions. First, the teacher uses the idea of integration, suggesting that the child’s presence in the mainstream classroom is enough. Second, the teacher assumes that the child will ask if support is needed. This assumption is problematic because many children with SEN may not be able to ask for help. Some may lack the language, confidence, communication skills, or emotional security to express their needs. Others may avoid asking because they fear embarrassment or peer teasing.

This finding shows that teachers may unintentionally place responsibility on the child. The child is expected to identify their own difficulty, request support, and adjust to the classroom. In inclusive education, however, the teacher and school have responsibility to anticipate barriers and create supportive conditions. Children should not have to prove their need for support before receiving it.

A head teacher also commented:

Respondent 3 (Head Teacher):

“We have always had slow learners in our classrooms. It is not something new.”

This statement shows that children with learning difficulties may have long been present in government classrooms, but their presence has not necessarily led to inclusive practice. The term “slow learners” suggests that teachers may recognize difference, but not through a clear professional framework. The child is categorized informally, but the school may not provide structured support. The head teacher’s statement also suggests that the presence of children with learning difficulties is normalized, but not necessarily addressed.

This theme reveals conceptual confusion between integration and inclusion. Integration places children with SEN into regular classrooms but leaves the system largely unchanged. Inclusion requires the school to change its practices so that children can participate. In integration, the child adjusts to the school. In inclusion, the school adapts to the child. The findings show that many participants were operating closer to integration than inclusion.

The theme also highlights the need to redefine fairness in teacher education. Teachers may resist adaptation if they believe it gives unfair advantage to one child. Therefore, training must explain that adaptation is not favoritism. It is a way of removing barriers. Giving enlarged text to a child with low vision does not give that child an unfair advantage. It gives the child access to the same learning opportunity. Allowing extra time to a child with processing difficulties does not reduce standards. It allows the child to demonstrate understanding more fairly.

This theme is particularly important for PhD-level analysis because it shows that inclusion is not only blocked by resources but also by concepts. If teachers misunderstand fairness, they may reproduce exclusion while believing they are being fair. Therefore, inclusive education requires conceptual change as well as material support.

Theme 3 concludes that meaningful inclusion depends on teachers' ability to move from equal treatment to equitable support. Children with SEN should not be expected to succeed through identical tasks and identical pacing. They require flexible teaching, adapted materials, varied response options, and supportive assessment. Equity, not sameness, is the foundation of inclusive classroom practice.

Theme 4: Professional Uncertainty and Pedagogical Insecurity

The fourth theme concerns teachers' feelings of uncertainty, lack of confidence, and professional insecurity when working with children with SEN. Participants frequently stated that they did not have the training, tools, or knowledge required to include children with diverse needs. This theme is not limited to the absence of training. It also captures the emotional and professional consequences of being expected to teach children with SEN without preparation.

Teachers did not always express unwillingness. Instead, many expressed anxiety, confusion, and hesitation. They were unsure how to identify children's needs, how to adapt lessons, how to manage classroom behavior, and how to evaluate progress. This created a sense of pedagogical insecurity.

Respondent 15 (Teacher):

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

This quote shows that the teacher feels unqualified. The reference to "psychologists" suggests that teachers may see SEN as a specialist issue beyond their professional role. This perception is understandable in a context where teachers have not been trained in inclusive pedagogy. However, it may also create distance between teachers and children with SEN. If teachers believe that only psychologists or specialists can support these children, they may feel powerless in the classroom.

The phrase "deal with SEN students" also reflects uncertainty. It suggests that teachers may see SEN as a problem to be managed rather than as a learning need to be supported. This language does not necessarily indicate lack of care. Rather, it reveals the absence of professional vocabulary and pedagogical preparation. Teachers need language that helps them understand learner needs without stigmatizing children.

A head teacher expressed a similar concern:

Respondent 8 (Head Teacher):

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

This quote reflects institutional insecurity. The head teacher supports inclusion in principle but feels unable to implement it in practice. The phrase "what can we do" suggests helplessness. It shows that positive attitude alone cannot produce action when professional knowledge and resources are missing.

This aligns with global findings. Research by Sharma et al. (2014) shows that teacher attitudes toward 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). Professional uncertainty appeared in several forms. First, teachers lacked knowledge of different types of SEN. They were often unsure whether a child had a learning difficulty, speech difficulty, emotional issue, hearing problem, visual problem, intellectual disability, or simply weak prior schooling. Without this understanding, teachers could not plan appropriate support. Second, teachers lacked strategies for adaptation. They did not consistently describe differentiated tasks, visual aids, peer-supported learning, alternative assessment, or individual progress monitoring. Third, teachers lacked confidence in managing peer responses and classroom behavior. This made them hesitant to include children who required additional attention.

The findings suggest that when teachers lack preparation, they often rely on trial and error. They may seat the child near the front, ask the child to copy from peers, repeat instructions, or allow the child to remain quiet. These strategies may help in some cases, but they do not amount to systematic inclusive pedagogy. Without training, teachers' responses remain informal and inconsistent.

This theme also has an emotional dimension. Teachers who feel unprepared may experience frustration, guilt, or fear of failure. They may want to help but feel that they are failing both the child with SEN and the rest of the class. This emotional burden can reduce willingness to attempt inclusive strategies. Teachers may withdraw from the challenge because they feel judged but not supported.

At the head teacher level, pedagogical insecurity becomes administrative insecurity. Head teachers are expected to lead schools, respond to parents, support teachers, and maintain discipline. However, without training in inclusive leadership, they may not know how to create school-level systems for identifying needs, supporting teachers, documenting progress, or preventing bullying. Therefore, inclusion remains dependent on individual improvisation rather than organized leadership.

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 this 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* which 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). This theme shows that teacher training must be practical, continuous, and context-sensitive. One-time awareness workshops are not enough. Teachers need professional development that includes classroom examples, lesson adaptation, role play, case discussions, observation, mentoring, and follow-up support. Training should help teachers answer practical questions: How do I identify a child who is struggling? How do I modify a task? How do I use peer support? How do I manage teasing? How do I assess progress? How do I communicate with parents? Theme 4 concludes that inclusive education cannot succeed when teachers are professionally uncertain and pedagogically insecure.

Teachers need confidence, but confidence must be built through knowledge, practice, institutional trust, and ongoing support. Without this, inclusion remains emotionally demanding and practically weak.

Theme 5: The Overloaded Classroom as a Barrier to Responsiveness

The fifth theme highlights how overcrowded classrooms, heavy workload, syllabus pressure, and limited time reduce teachers' capacity to respond to children with SEN. Participants repeatedly explained that they were responsible for large numbers of students, often between 40 and 60 children in a class. In such circumstances, teachers found it difficult to provide individualized support. This theme is important because it shifts the analysis from individual teacher attitude to classroom ecology. Teachers' practices are shaped by the conditions in which they work. A teacher may support inclusion in principle but still struggle to implement it in a crowded classroom with limited time, limited materials, and pressure to complete the syllabus.

Respondent 35 (Teacher):

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

This statement captures the practical challenge of inclusion in overcrowded classrooms. The teacher is not rejecting the child with SEN. Rather; the teacher is describing a conflict of attention. In a classroom of 50 students, giving additional support to one child may feel impossible because many other children also require attention. The teacher must manage discipline, deliver content, check work, answer questions, and maintain pace. Under these conditions, individualized support becomes difficult.

Another teacher described the impact on children:

Respondent 62 (Teacher):

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

This quote is powerful because it shows how structural constraints affect children's motivation. When children realize that the teacher cannot provide support, they may disengage. The phrase "stop listening" may indicate more than lack of attention. It may reflect learned helplessness. Children who repeatedly fail to understand lessons without support may begin to believe that trying is useless. This can lead to silence, withdrawal, disruptive behavior, or poor attendance.

A head teacher also linked inclusion challenges to workload:

Respondent 10 (Head Teacher):

"This is very difficult. Already teachers are overburdened and multiple classes are placed in a single room."

This statement shows that the problem is not only class size but also school organization. In some contexts, multiple classes may share one room or one teacher may manage more than one group. This makes differentiated instruction even more difficult. Teachers are already overburdened with teaching, administrative tasks, examination preparation, record keeping, and classroom management. The addition of inclusive responsibilities without support can feel overwhelming.

The overloaded classroom affects inclusion in several ways. First, it reduces observation. Teachers may not notice subtle learning difficulties because they are managing many students at once. Second, it reduces interaction. Children with SEN may not receive one-to-one explanation or feedback. Third, it reduces flexibility. Teachers rely on whole-class

teaching because it is the most manageable method in large groups. Fourth, it increases discipline pressure. Teachers may avoid activities that require movement, group work, or individual variation because these may be harder to control in crowded classrooms. Fifth, it increases emotional stress for teachers, which can reduce patience and creativity.

This theme shows that inclusive education must be designed for real classroom conditions. It is not useful to recommend idealized strategies that assume small classes, teaching assistants, abundant resources, and specialist support if these conditions do not exist. Teachers in government primary schools need strategies that are feasible in large classes. These may include peer buddy systems, mixed-ability grouping, classroom monitors, visual instructions on the board, short repeated routines, simple differentiated worksheets, oral checking, flexible seating, and targeted support during independent work.

However, the findings also show that low-cost strategies cannot fully replace structural reform. Large class sizes remain a serious barrier. Reducing class size, appointing support teachers, improving teacher-student ratios, and providing classroom aides would strengthen inclusion. Until such reforms occur, teachers need realistic methods that help them respond better within existing constraints.

This theme also highlights the need to understand inclusion as a system-level responsibility. It is unfair to place the full burden of inclusion on individual teachers while leaving class size, workload, infrastructure, and staffing unchanged. Teachers cannot be expected to deliver individualized support in impossible conditions without additional help. Therefore, the overloaded classroom must be treated as a structural barrier, not merely a teacher complaint. Theme 5 concludes that meaningful inclusion requires classroom conditions that allow teacher responsiveness. When classrooms are overcrowded and teachers are overburdened, children with SEN are more likely to become silent, ignored, or left behind. Inclusive education must therefore address workload, class size, time, and classroom management support as central implementation issues.

Theme 6: Material Exclusion within the School Environment

The sixth theme concerns the physical and material conditions of government primary schools. Participants described schools that lacked basic facilities such as fans, appropriate seating, accessible toilets, ramps, learning materials, and assistive resources. This theme is called material exclusion because the school environment itself can exclude children with SEN even when teachers are willing to accept them.

Material exclusion means that barriers are built into the physical and instructional environment. A child may be officially admitted, but the school building, classroom layout, seating, temperature, noise level, toilet access, and learning materials may prevent meaningful participation. This shows that inclusion is not only a matter of teacher attitude. It is also a matter of school design and resource allocation. Research shows that resource limits are a big reason why inclusion is difficult in schools, especially in low-income countries like Pakistan (UNESCO, 2020).

Respondent 14 (Head Teacher):

“We don’t even have fans, forget specialized learning materials.”

This quote highlights the severity of resource limitations. The head teacher is not only saying that specialized SEN materials are missing. The statement shows that even basic facilities are inadequate. If schools lack basic comfort and safety, then specialized inclusion may appear

unrealistic to teachers and head teachers. The phrase “forget specialized learning materials” suggests that inclusive resources are seen as far beyond the school’s current capacity.

A teacher expressed a similar concern:

Respondent 19 (Teacher):

“Sometimes we feel bad for them. But how can we teach them properly when we don’t even have working fans?”

This response shows the emotional tension teachers experience. Research by Florian & Spratt (2013) highlights that inclusion relies on recognizing the emotional aspects of teaching and supporting teachers’ mental health, which is frequently insufficiently addressed in Pakistan. They feel sympathy for children with SEN but also feel constrained by poor physical conditions. In hot classrooms without working fans, all children may struggle, but children with SEN may be especially affected. Children with sensory sensitivities, medical conditions, mobility difficulties, or attention difficulties may find such environments particularly challenging. 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) The material barriers identified by participants included the absence of ramps, accessible toilets, modified furniture, visual aids, hearing support, sensory materials, assistive devices, enlarged text, and adapted learning resources. These barriers affect children differently. A child using a wheelchair may be unable to enter the classroom or toilet. A child with low vision may not see the board. A child with hearing difficulty may not understand oral instruction in a noisy room. A child with fine motor difficulty may struggle to write in standard notebooks. A child with attention or sensory needs may become distressed in a crowded and uncomfortable classroom.

This theme shows that infrastructure communicates belonging. When a school has no ramp, inaccessible toilets, overcrowded seating, and no adapted materials, it sends a message that some children were not considered when the school environment was designed. Even if teachers are kind, the physical environment may still exclude. Therefore, inclusion requires material planning.

The lack of resources also affects teaching quality. Teachers cannot adapt lessons effectively if they have no visual aids, concrete materials, picture cards, large print, manipulatives, or flexible seating. While some inclusive strategies can be low-cost, teachers still need basic materials. A classroom with only a chalkboard and crowded benches limits the possibilities for varied instruction.

This theme also reveals a policy issue. If inclusive education is expected in government schools, then minimum standards are needed. Schools require a basic inclusion package. This may include accessible entrances, safe pathways, functional toilets, adequate ventilation, flexible seating, simple visual materials, large-print options, and low-cost teaching aids. Not all resources need to be expensive, but they must be planned and provided.

Material exclusion also affects teachers’ beliefs. When schools lack resources, teachers may begin to see inclusion as unrealistic. They may feel that inclusive education is an ideal for private schools or well-funded institutions, not for overcrowded government schools. This perception can reduce motivation. Therefore, improving infrastructure and resources is also important for changing teacher confidence.

Theme 6 concludes that inclusive education cannot be achieved through attitude change alone. Children with SEN need accessible spaces and appropriate materials. Schools must be physically, socially, and pedagogically prepared. Without basic facilities and adaptive resources, inclusion remains a promise that the school environment cannot support.

Theme 7: Social Belonging and Peer-Mediated Exclusion

The seventh theme focuses on the social experiences of children with SEN in classrooms and school spaces. Participants reported that children with SEN were sometimes teased, called names, mimicked, excluded from play, or rejected during group activities. This shows that inclusion is not only about access to the classroom or curriculum. It is also about social belonging.

A child may be admitted to school and seated in the classroom, but still feel excluded if peers ridicule or avoid them. Peer behavior can either support or damage inclusion. In the studied schools, participants' responses suggested that peer rejection and bullying were significant barriers to participation.

Respondent 53 (Teacher):

"Children tease them. They call them names. Some even mimic their behavior."

This quote shows that children with SEN may experience everyday forms of social humiliation. Teasing and mimicry are not minor issues. They can affect a child's confidence, emotional safety, classroom participation, and attendance. When a child is repeatedly mocked, the classroom becomes a threatening environment rather than a supportive learning space.

Another teacher described the emotional effect:

Respondent 27 (Teacher):

"Sometimes, the child just shuts down. They stop talking, stop trying."

This statement shows how peer rejection can lead to withdrawal. The phrase "shuts down" suggests emotional closure. The child may stop participating to avoid further embarrassment. This can be misinterpreted as lack of ability or lack of interest, when in fact it may be a protective response to humiliation. Peer-mediated exclusion therefore affects both social belonging and academic learning.

A head teacher also acknowledged bullying as a school management issue:

Respondent 12 (Head Teacher):

"Bullying is common in our school and creates a lot of issues on the management side."

This quote indicates that bullying is not isolated. It is common enough to create management problems. However, the findings suggest that schools may lack systematic anti-bullying procedures. Teachers may scold students when incidents occur, but there may be no structured approach to building empathy, changing peer attitudes, monitoring bullying, or supporting affected children.

This theme is important because inclusive education depends on the peer group. Children learn not only from teachers but also from classmates. Peer acceptance can help children with

SEN participate in group work, play, communication, and classroom routines. Peer rejection, on the other hand, can isolate them even when teachers are supportive.

The findings suggest that schools need to treat peer culture as part of inclusive education. Children without SEN also need to be educated about difference, respect, cooperation, and support. Inclusion is not only a service given to children with SEN. It is a school culture that all children must learn. Teachers can use stories, role play, class rules, buddy systems, cooperative learning, group responsibilities, and classroom discussions to reduce stigma.

The theme also shows that bullying may be connected to wider cultural beliefs about disability and difference. Children may imitate language and attitudes they hear at home, in the community, or from peers. Therefore, schools need to work with parents and communities as well. Awareness sessions, parent meetings, and school assemblies can help communicate that children with SEN have dignity and should not be mocked or excluded.

Peer-mediated exclusion also affects teachers. Teachers who already feel overburdened may find bullying difficult to manage. If they lack training in classroom culture-building, they may respond only after incidents occur. Inclusive classrooms require proactive strategies. Teachers need to establish expectations before bullying happens, not only punish after it occurs.

Theme 7 concludes that inclusion must be understood as social belonging as well as academic access. Children with SEN need to feel safe, accepted, and valued by classmates. Without peer acceptance, inclusion remains fragile. Schools must therefore build inclusive peer cultures through structured routines, anti-bullying systems, cooperative activities, and explicit teaching of respect.

Theme 8: Unsupported Policy Translation at School Level

The eighth theme concerns the gap between inclusive education policy and school-level practice. Participants' responses showed that inclusive education was known as a general idea, but it was not clearly translated into daily school routines. Teachers and head teachers did not describe specific systems for screening, referral, individualized support, adapted assessment, teacher mentoring, resource allocation, accessibility audits, or progress monitoring.

This theme is called unsupported policy translation because the problem is not simply that policies do not exist. Rather, the problem is that policy language does not reach schools in a usable form. Teachers may hear that inclusion is important, but they do not receive practical guidance on what to do in the classroom.

Respondent 3 (Head Teacher):

“We are not prepared for inclusive education.”

This statement reflects the gap between policy expectation and school reality. If schools are expected to include children with SEN, they need preparation. Preparation includes training, resources, clear definitions, referral pathways, parent communication systems, and monitoring tools. Without these, inclusion remains an expectation without implementation support.

Another head teacher stated:

Respondent 8 (Head Teacher):

“We support the idea, but what can we do without proper tools or knowledge?”

This quote shows that support for inclusion at the level of attitude does not automatically

become practice. The head teacher's question reveals the absence of operational guidance. The school may accept the idea of inclusion but not know how to organize it. This shows a policy-practice gap at the implementation level.

Unsupported policy translation affects teachers in several ways. First, teachers may not know what inclusive education officially means. Some may confuse it with integration, charity, or equal treatment. Second, teachers may not know what their responsibilities are. They may not know whether they should adapt lessons, identify needs, refer children, communicate with parents, or keep records. Third, teachers may not know where to seek support. If there is no district-level support mechanism, they remain isolated. Fourth, teachers may not be held accountable for meaningful inclusion because monitoring may focus more on enrollment than participation.

The findings suggest that policy must be translated into practical tools. Schools need simple and clear guidelines that explain what inclusion looks like in daily practice. For example, teachers need checklists for identifying learning barriers, examples of adapted tasks, strategies for large classes, guidance for seating arrangements, anti-bullying procedures, parent communication formats, and progress monitoring templates. Head teachers need school-level inclusion planning tools, accessibility audit formats, staff meeting guides, and referral contact lists.

This theme also shows that policy implementation must be realistic for government school conditions. A policy that assumes small classes, specialists, and abundant resources may not work in crowded public-sector classrooms. Schools need staged implementation. First, teachers need conceptual clarity and basic training. Then schools can introduce low-cost classroom adaptations and peer support systems. Next, infrastructure improvements and resource allocation can be strengthened. Over time, district support networks and monitoring systems can be developed.

The theme also reveals that head teachers are central to policy translation. They are the link between policy and classroom practice. However, they cannot lead inclusion if they are not trained and supported. Inclusive school leadership requires head teachers to create a supportive culture, encourage teacher collaboration, respond to bullying, communicate with families, and document school needs. Without leadership preparation, inclusive education remains dependent on individual teachers.

Unsupported policy translation also affects accountability. If schools are only asked whether children with SEN are enrolled, then partial inclusion may continue. Monitoring must go beyond enrollment. It should examine whether children attend regularly, participate in lessons, receive adaptations, interact with peers, progress academically, and feel safe. Inclusion must be measured through participation and learning, not only physical presence. Theme 8 concludes that inclusive education requires implementation architecture. Policies must be converted into classroom routines, leadership practices, resource standards, training programs, monitoring indicators, and district support systems. Without this translation, inclusion remains symbolic: present in official language, but weak in classroom life.

Integrated Interpretation of the Findings

Across the eight themes, the findings show that inclusive education in government primary schools of Karachi is shaped by a complex interaction of attitudes, knowledge, resources,

classroom conditions, peer culture, and policy implementation. The participants generally did not reject the idea of inclusion. Many teachers and head teachers expressed care for children with SEN and believed that they should not be excluded from school. However, their understanding of inclusion was often incomplete, and their ability to practice it was constrained by multiple barriers.

The first three themes show conceptual limitations. Inclusion was often understood as physical presence, moral kindness, or equal treatment. These understandings are not entirely negative, but they are incomplete. Physical presence is necessary, but it is not sufficient. Compassion is valuable, but it does not replace pedagogy. Equal treatment may appear fair, but it can ignore individual needs. These findings show that inclusive education requires conceptual clarity. Teachers and head teachers need to understand that inclusion means meaningful participation, equitable support, adapted teaching, social belonging, and institutional responsibility.

The fourth and fifth themes show professional and classroom constraints. Teachers felt uncertain because they lacked training and practical tools. They were also working in overcrowded classrooms where individualized support was difficult. This means that teachers limited inclusive practice cannot be explained only as a lack of willingness. Their agency was constrained by training gaps, workload, class size, and limited support. Inclusive education must therefore strengthen teacher capacity while also improving working conditions.

The sixth and seventh themes show material and social barriers. Schools lacked accessible infrastructure and learning resources. Children with SEN also faced teasing, bullying, and social exclusion from peers. These findings show that inclusion must address both the physical environment and the social environment. A child cannot be fully included if the school building is inaccessible or if classmates make the child feel unsafe. Inclusion requires accessible spaces and inclusive relationships.

The eighth theme shows that policy commitments are not enough unless they are translated into school-level practice. Teachers and head teachers need more than broad policy statements. They need practical guidance, training, resources, leadership support, monitoring systems, and referral pathways. Without these supports, inclusive education remains dependent on individual goodwill and improvisation.

Overall, the findings suggest that inclusion in the studied schools is currently present as intention, but weak as implementation. Teachers and head teachers often want to accept children with SEN, but they lack the structured support required to ensure meaningful participation. The study therefore argues that inclusive education in Karachi's government primary schools must move through three major shifts:

First, it must move from placement to participation. Children with SEN should not only sit in classrooms. They should participate in learning, interaction, and assessment.

Second, it must move from compassion to competence. Teachers' moral concern should be strengthened through professional knowledge and practical inclusive strategies.

Third, it must move from policy language to school-level systems. Inclusive education must be supported through training, resources, leadership routines, monitoring, and accountability.

These shifts are essential if government primary schools are to provide meaningful

educational opportunities for children with SEN. The findings demonstrate that inclusion cannot be achieved through admission alone. It requires a coordinated transformation of teacher preparation, classroom practice, school culture, infrastructure, peer relationships, and policy implementation.

Discussion

The findings of this study show that inclusive education in government primary schools of Karachi is still understood more as physical placement than meaningful participation. Teachers and head teachers generally supported the idea that children with SEN should not be excluded, but their responses showed limited classroom adaptation, weak professional confidence, and few school-level systems for support. This reflects a wider access-and-equity concern identified in the Global Education Monitoring (GEM), 2026 report, which notes that education systems must be judged not only by whether learners enter school, but also by whether barriers linked to disability, poverty, location, and other disadvantages are reduced in practice (UNESCO, 2026). Similarly, Kaji and Dutta's (2026) study found that teachers in inclusive classrooms continue to face inadequate training, limited knowledge of diverse needs, insufficient resources, overcrowded classrooms, and lack of multidisciplinary support. These issues closely match the experiences reported by teachers in Karachi, where goodwill toward children with SEN was present, but teachers lacked the practical tools needed to adapt instruction, manage peer behavior, and assess learning fairly.

The study also shows a clear policy-practice gap. Inclusive education is accepted in principle, but it is not yet translated into daily teaching routines, school planning, or teacher preparation. Hazir, Alan, and Gunlu (2026) describe this kind of problem as policy-practice decoupling, where inclusive pedagogy appears in official teacher education discourse but remains weak in practical implementation. The same pattern appears in the present study: teachers know that inclusion is important, but many do not know how to identify SEN, modify lessons, use peer support, or create equitable classroom participation. Therefore, the main issue is not only teacher attitude; it is the absence of structured professional preparation, accessible resources, leadership guidance, and monitoring. Meaningful inclusion in Karachi's government primary schools requires a shift from "letting children sit in class" to ensuring that they participate, learn, feel safe, and receive support according to their needs.

Recommendations

The study recommends that inclusive education in government primary schools should be implemented through a coordinated school-system approach, where policy makers, teacher education institutions, school leaders, teachers, district officials, parents, and communities share responsibility for supporting children with SEN. Policy makers should develop a clear provincial framework that defines minimum accessibility standards, school responsibilities, referral systems, resource channels, and monitoring indicators, while teacher education institutions should revise pre-service and in-service programs to include practical inclusive pedagogy, Universal Design for Learning, differentiated instruction, formative assessment, peer support, and collaboration with parents and specialists. Recent evidence supports this direction, as Porta, Quane, and Cumming (2026) show that teachers' use of Universal Design

for Learning can support inclusive classroom environments when teachers understand learner diversity and plan flexible learning opportunities. Similarly, Rusconi, Squillaci, and Mainardi (2026) found that UDL-based professional development can strengthen inclusive teaching competencies, including teacher mindset, lesson design, collaboration, and self-efficacy. Head teachers should also be trained as inclusive leaders so they can guide teachers, conduct accessibility audits, address bullying, involve parents, and create small school inclusion teams. Schools should begin with feasible classroom adaptations such as short instructions, visual aids, flexible seating, peer buddies, oral responses, extra time, and anti-bullying routines. District education offices should connect schools with hospitals, special education centers, disability services, and NGOs. Community engagement should frame disability through dignity, rights, and learning potential rather than pity. Monitoring should move beyond enrollment and include accessibility, teacher training, classroom participation, attendance, bullying incidents, and learning progress, because inclusive education requires both access and meaningful participation in school life (Ayuso-del Puerto et al., 2026).

Practical Implementation Roadmap for Karachi

A practical roadmap is needed because government primary schools cannot move from current conditions to full inclusion in a single step. The first phase should focus on recognition and conceptual clarity by giving every school a simple orientation on the difference between exclusion, segregation, integration, and inclusion, using classroom examples rather than abstract definitions. For example, a child with low vision is not included merely by being seated in class; inclusion begins when seating, print size, board visibility, peer support, and teacher feedback are adjusted so the child can learn. The second phase should focus on teacher practice through three to five low-cost strategies such as clear instructions, visual support, peer pairing, short formative checks, and flexible response options, because recent evidence shows that teachers' instructional adaptations, differentiated pedagogy, assistive supports, and family-school collaboration are central to the academic and social participation of students with SEN (Wang, 2026). The third phase should strengthen school culture and safety through anti-bullying routines, respectful classroom language, peer support, storytelling, and cooperative activities, since students with SEN often experience verbal harassment, social exclusion, silence, withdrawal, and reduced belonging when schools do not actively address bullying (Irshad & Amjad, 2026). The fourth phase should address infrastructure and district support through accessibility audits, ramps, handrails, accessible toilets, seating adjustments, visual signs, shaded spaces, and referral links with health, rehabilitation, and special education services. The fifth phase should focus on accountability by monitoring attendance, participation, peer belonging, teacher adaptation, parent communication, bullying incidents, and learning progress rather than treating enrollment as the only indicator of success. Peer-support programs can also help build inclusive and supportive school environments when they are structured around cooperation, mentoring, tutoring, and respectful interaction (Felső & Fehérvári, 2026). Together, these phases can help Karachi's government primary schools move from goodwill to organized inclusive practice.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged, and these limitations also point toward future research. First, the study focused only on teachers and head teachers, so future studies should include children with SEN, parents, peers, district officials, teacher educators, and special education professionals, because recent research shows that parent and teacher perspectives together provide a fuller understanding of students' academic, social, and emotional adjustment in inclusive settings (Ormanci et al., 2026). Second, the study relied on interview data, so future research should include classroom observation, teacher reflection notes, student feedback, and mixed-method designs to examine actual teaching practices, peer interaction, and classroom participation; this approach is supported by recent inclusive classroom research that used observation and reflection data to assess active participation and instructional feasibility (Mishra et al., 2026). Third, because the study was limited to government primary schools in Karachi, future studies should compare rural Sindh, private schools, special schools, and secondary schools to examine how context shapes inclusion. Fourth, the study did not examine different disability categories in depth, so future research should explore specific needs such as hearing impairment, visual impairment, autism, intellectual disability, speech and language difficulties, and behavioral challenges. Future researchers should also test intervention models such as cluster-based teacher mentoring, head teacher training, peer-awareness programs, anti-bullying routines, and action research projects in which teachers become co-researchers. Longitudinal research is especially needed because recent evidence shows that teachers' inclusion-related experiences, attitudes, and self-efficacy change over time and can influence inclusive practice (Fahrback et al., 2026). Finally, policy research should examine how provincial legal commitments are translated into district budgets, school-level planning, referral systems, monitoring tools, and accountability mechanisms so that inclusion can be measured through participation, belonging, and learning progress rather than enrollment alone.

Conclusion

The study shows that inclusive education in government primary schools of Karachi remains more symbolic than systematic. Teachers and head teachers often express compassion and moral support for children with SEN, but their understanding of inclusion is frequently limited to physical placement or integration without adaptation. Children may be allowed to sit in classrooms, yet remain excluded from meaningful learning, classroom participation, and peer belonging. This finding connects with recent research showing that inclusive education depends not only on positive attitudes but also on teachers' confidence, preparation, and practical capacity to respond to learner diversity (Kielblock et al., 2026). The main barriers identified in this study are not only attitudinal; they include limited professional training, overcrowded classrooms, inadequate infrastructure, lack of teaching resources, peer rejection, and weak implementation guidance. These challenges show that inclusion is not a desk at the back of the room or the silent presence of a child expected to adjust alone. It requires flexible curriculum planning, teacher agency, classroom adaptations, peer acceptance, school leadership, and system-level support. Recent work on teacher preparation also emphasizes that inclusive education becomes possible when teachers are prepared to act purposefully within school systems rather than merely accept inclusion as a

policy slogan (Wilt et al., 2026). For Karachi's government primary schools, the way forward is not to wait for perfect conditions. Schools can begin with conceptual clarity, low-cost adaptations, anti-bullying routines, and stronger parent communication. At the same time, government must address structural barriers such as teacher preparation, class size, infrastructure, specialist support, and data systems. Inclusive education should therefore be treated as a gradual but urgent transformation from aspirational policy to practical, localized, and sustained implementation. When that happens, children with SEN will not merely be present in school; they will participate, learn, and belong.

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