Breaking Barriers: Teachers' Perspectives on Access to School Education for Children with Disabilities in Punjab

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The Pakistani government has developed many initiatives and regulations aimed at facilitating the inclusion of students with special needs into mainstream educational settings. This study delves into the critical issue of access to education for children with disabilities in Punjab, focusing on the perspectives of teachers within the educational system. Despite legislative efforts and policy implementations aimed at inclusive education, significant barriers persist in providing equal educational opportunities for children with disabilities. Notwithstanding these policies, kids with special needs experience significant disadvantages in terms of their access to education. The present study aimed to examine the parameters associated with the accessibility of students with disabilities in mainstream schools in the province of Punjab through qualitative research methodologies involving interviews and surveys. The study employed a descriptive research design with a sample of 200 instructors. It explores the perceptions, experiences, and strategies employed by teachers in addressing the multifaceted obstacles encountered by children with disabilities within the educational framework. By analyzing the perspectives of educators, this research seeks to offer insights into the systemic changes required to foster an inclusive educational ecosystem that ensures equitable access and quality education for all children, regardless of their abilities or disabilities. The findings of this study have the potential to inform policy interventions, teacher training programs, and educational practices aimed at dismantling barriers and promoting inclusive education for children with disabilities in Punjab.

Keywords: Access to Education, Inclusive Education, Children with Special Needs.

Introduction:

In contemporary educational discourse, the pursuit of inclusive education stands as a fundamental pillar advocating for equitable access to learning opportunities for all. This study embarks on a profound exploration of the intricate dynamics, challenges, and triumphs encountered by educators in their tireless efforts to facilitate quality education for children with disabilities. As global efforts intensify to embrace diversity and promote inclusivity, the focus on the educational landscape for children with disabilities assumes heightened significance. Punjab, as a microcosm of diverse cultures, traditions, and socioeconomic dynamics, presents a unique canvas for understanding the complexities associated with providing accessible and inclusive education. Through the lenses of teachers, serving as frontline agents of change within the educational ecosystem, this research endeavors to unravel the nuanced perspectives, multifaceted challenges, and innovative strategies shaping the educational experiences of children with disabilities. Individuals with disabilities are a global presence, irrespective of geographical, societal, gender, or socioeconomic boundaries. This universality underscores the societal commitment worldwide toward education, rehabilitation, and various supportive

initiatives tailored for individuals with special needs. The acknowledgment of the Year of Disabled Persons in 1981, orchestrated by the United Nations, stands as a pivotal moment, significantly elevating awareness surrounding the necessities, challenges, and opportunities concerning individuals with disabilities [1].

Aligned with this international momentum, the Government of Pakistan responded proactively by instituting dedicated ministries, establishments, and the formulation of specific policies geared toward the advancement of individuals with special needs. An exemplar of this commitment is the establishment of the Directorate General of Special Education at the federal level. This strategic move aimed to oversee and manage institutions and organizations dedicated to the enhancement, empowerment, and welfare of individuals with special needs across the nation [2].

The imperative of ensuring universal access to education, regardless of an individual's disability status, is underscored by international human rights agreements such as the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1946), and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006). These agreements expressly prohibit segregation based on various factors, including gender, cultural origin, language, religion, race, financial status, and abilities within different educational settings. A series of successive international declarations have consistently emphasized the importance of ensuring universal access to fundamental, high-quality education for all individuals within their respective nations [3][4].

The global community has unanimously recognized the central objective of education as providing quality education to all children, including those with disabilities. This acknowledgment highlights the fundamental human right of ensuring access to basic quality education for all individuals, aiming to facilitate individuals with disabilities in realizing their complete potential and actively engaging in their communities throughout their lifetimes. Despite these aspirations, the realization of this right remains elusive in some nations, with Pakistan serving as a notable example [5].

A substantial number of students with impairments experience marginalization within global education systems. Although significant transformations have occurred in the educational landscape of Pakistan due to government efforts to enhance education provision, a considerable population of school-aged youngsters remains unenrolled. According to the United Nations (2020), globally, 57 million primary-aged children are not enrolled in educational institutions, and approximately one-third of these children are predicted to have some degree of impairment [5]. In developing nations, nearly 98 percent of children with disabilities are not enrolled in educational institutions, representing a significant challenge. As of the close of 2019, 1.5 million children in the province of Punjab continue to be deprived of educational opportunities, although this figure reflects a marginal decrease compared to the preceding year [6].

The high number of children not attending school underscores the imperative to investigate the matter of educational accessibility, specifically for children with impairments, with a focus on factors influencing enrollment rates and promoting equitable access to educational opportunities in the schools of Punjab province. This study excludes consideration of out-of-school influences but aims to explore elements affecting the accessibility of education for children with special needs [7].

The concept of disability encompasses enduring or permanent impairments affecting intellectual, physical, or sensory functioning, with around 10% of the global population currently residing with some form of impairment. Disability arises from various impediments, including physical, psychological, social, and emotional limitations. It is crucial to acknowledge the role of attitudinal and physical barriers in contributing to the marginalization of individuals from mainstream culture [8]. Individuals with disabilities, especially children, should not face segregation from the general population in receiving free and mandatory education solely due

to their handicap. Providing equal opportunities for individuals with disabilities to pursue and obtain inclusive and high-quality educational services is imperative. The importance of ensuring equitable adjustments to fit the specific needs of individuals in educational environments is emphasized. Individuals with disabilities require a support structure within the broader educational framework to succeed in the general school environment. Improving access to and enhancing the quality of education for children with disabilities is crucial for achieving the Education for All aims outlined in Article 24-A [9].

The state of education provision for children with disabilities in Pakistan is marked by uncertainty and a lack of clarity, largely stemming from insufficient infrastructure, ineffective implementation methods, and various factors, including the absence of reliable data on the prevalence of disabilities in the country. Educational opportunities for students with disabilities are available in both mainstream/general schools and specialized schools in Pakistan, with the establishment of special schools on a large-scale dating back to 1980. Despite offering tailored instruction, these institutions have not effectively facilitated the integration of students with impairments into an inclusive society [10]. A shift in the educational approach towards students with disabilities is imperative, aligning with the global attention garnered since 1975 and formally acknowledged by stakeholders post the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. This transformative phenomenon, known as Inclusive Education, advocates for the inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream schools, ensuring equitable access to education alongside their non-disabled peers. Although the implementation of inclusive education by federal schools and the Punjab government commenced in 2000, significant progress is still required, as a substantial number of children with disabilities continue to receive education in segregated schools [11].

This research holds significance in both theoretical and practical domains, contributing to the existing knowledge on the accessibility and quality of education. The study aims to provide practical recommendations for educators and school administrators, emphasizing the essential elements to ensure the inclusion of students with disabilities in regular schools, facilitating their integration into mainstream society [12].

The theoretical framework of the study is based on the social model of disability proposed by Mike Oliver in 1990. According to this model, disability results from the interplay between individuals with various limitations and an environment characterized by physical, attitudinal, communication, and social obstacles. The study posits that educational challenges experienced by students with disabilities stem not from their individual impairments but from inadequately designed education systems lacking the necessary resources to effectively cater to diverse needs [13].

The literature review underscores that the provision of education for children with disabilities is influenced by external factors outside the school environment and internal factors within the school itself. Educational institutions are often situated at a considerable distance from residential areas, particularly in underdeveloped regions and rural areas, posing challenges due to limited access to transportation [14]. Ensuring a diverse range of educational institutions for students with disabilities, including both ordinary schools and specialized establishments, is imperative. Alternatives such as special schools and non-formal evening schools have been proposed to enhance accessibility to formal education.

Despite improvements in societal attitudes towards the inclusion of special education students in mainstream schools, challenges persist, including physical barriers and inadequate transportation infrastructure. Children with disabilities face difficulties accessing essential amenities within school premises. The concept of barrier-free or least restrictive environments, enabling individuals with disabilities to navigate their surroundings safely and independently, is not fully embraced by society. Accessibility of school buildings in Pakistan is limited, with only a small number of federal model schools designed to be barrier-free [15]. Disparities in

educational quality arise from variations in geographical locations, governance structures, and ownership, with differences in rural and metropolitan settings and governance by government, non-governmental organizations, or private institutions.

The discourse underscores the imperative need for transformative measures within mainstream educational institutions to facilitate the integration of students with disabilities into formal education settings. Apart from the aforementioned considerations, scholarly literature highlights a myriad of factors impacting the accessibility of education for children with disabilities [16]. These encompass infrastructure, teacher attitudes, inadequate training among stakeholders, apathy, gender biases, limited support systems, suitable instructional methodologies, governmental education policies, societal perceptions toward disability, and parental beliefs.

The current educational landscape significantly restricts opportunities for individuals with disabilities, manifesting in restricted school access and hindered progress in acquiring fundamental education. A World Bank study in 2009 illuminated issues surrounding low enrollment rates, substandard academic achievements, and heightened dropout rates among this demographic. It also unveiled alarming levels of illiteracy and inadequate enrollment across disability categories. This prevailing scenario necessitates rigorous scientific inquiry into access and educational quality [17]. While prior research has explored factors linked to school access, a noticeable knowledge gap exists regarding specific aspects influencing school accessibility for individuals with disabilities within our local context. Notably, the dearth of comprehensive understanding pertains to the physical and social environments, as well as the provision of disability-centric services and facilities. Addressing this gap is critical for devising informed strategies to enhance educational access and quality for individuals with disabilities [18].

This study is poised to comprehensively explore the factors influencing the accessibility of education for students with disabilities within the specific context of mainstream schools in Punjab. Central to this inquiry is the endeavor to elevate school enrollment rates, aligning with broader aspirations for universal education. The primary objectives of this research entail delving into educators' perspectives regarding the multifaceted challenges surrounding school accessibility for students with disabilities within Punjab's mainstream educational landscape. Additionally, the study aims to meticulously identify and evaluate the current suite of services available to facilitate accessible learning opportunities for children with disabilities within these educational settings [19].

This investigation seeks to elucidate the precise services in place that cater to the educational needs of children with disabilities. Moreover, it endeavors to elucidate the fundamental elements perceived by educators in regular schools as significantly influencing the accessibility of education for these children in the province of Punjab. Furthermore, the study aims to discern potential variations in the viewpoints of educators, examining whether differences exist based on gender, educational background, professional experience, or geographical location [20].

Employing a mixed-methods approach comprising surveys and interviews, this research will engage educators from diverse mainstream schools across Punjab. Surveys will facilitate quantitative analysis of perceptions, while interviews will provide qualitative insights into the challenges and services pertinent to educational accessibility for students with disabilities. Ethical considerations will underscore participant confidentiality and informed consent throughout the data collection process. Ultimately, the study aims to yield crucial insights that could inform policy formulations and interventions aimed at enhancing educational opportunities for students with disabilities within Punjab's mainstream educational framework [21].

Methodology:

Research Approach:

The present study adopts a quantitative approach, utilizing the cross-sectional survey method to gauge the perspectives of teachers employed in general schools.

Population and Sample and Participant Demographics:

The study's population encompasses teachers within general schools. The study gathered responses from teachers situated across various cities, with a notable representation from Lahore. Predominantly, teachers held a Master of Arts or Master of Science degree, boasting an average teaching experience exceeding 8 years. Among the 200 teachers, a majority were classified as junior educators, with a smaller subset associated with primary schools [22].

Measurement Scale:

Teachers' responses for each issue were gathered using a Likert scale, enabling nuanced assessment and quantification of perceptions. The reliability of this measure was ascertained through the Cronbach alpha formula, resulting in a coefficient of 0.83, indicating high internal consistency among the survey items.

Data Collection and Analysis:

Quantitative analysis techniques, including descriptive statistics and potentially inferential statistical methods, will be applied to interpret and analyze the collected data, enabling a comprehensive exploration of teachers' perspectives on school accessibility elements. The collected data underwent rigorous processing, including editing, coding, and entry into the SPSS software, facilitating meticulous analysis to derive study findings and conclusions [23]. Participants' responses were numerically coded from 1 to 5, enabling structured data analysis. A descriptive analysis was conducted, encompassing frequency distributions, percentages, mean, and standard deviation assessments. Additionally, inferential analyses, namely Regression Analysis and independent sample t-tests, were employed to compare means and explore significant differences within the data [24].

Data Presentation:

The organized data, presented in tabular form, provides a comprehensive overview, highlighting educators' consensus on the impact of policy, physical, attitudinal, learning environment, communication, and social aspects on school accessibility for students with diverse impairments [25]. The mean scores analysis underscores the higher influence of physical and social surroundings compared to other categories, with communication aspects perceived to have a relatively lesser impact by conventional school teachers.

Validation Process:

To ensure the validity of the questionnaire, expert opinions were sought from professionals specializing in general and special education. Each subject area was represented by two experts, collectively provided their assessments and judgments regarding the questionnaire's content and relevance.

Ethical Considerations:

The study adhered to ethical standards, ensuring participant confidentiality, informed consent, and the ethical treatment of data throughout the research process.

Results and Discussion:

The findings from this investigation align closely with prior research. Teachers identified social and physical factors as highly impactful (mean > 3.4) on the accessibility of students with disabilities. Both physical and social environments intricately contribute to accessibility, where social and cultural aspects play significant roles in integrating students with disabilities into public schools, enhancing their opportunities for mainstream education. Notably, a considerable proportion of students with disabilities encounter mobility challenges, highlighting the imperative need for a physically accessible environment that facilitates their academic engagement [26].

Additionally, the research indicates a favorable social environment for hearing-impaired students, characterized by inclusivity and reduced instances of bullying. However, bullying remains a recognized obstacle impeding the educational access of hearing-impaired and other special needs students in mainstream educational settings. Addressing inquiries on provisions necessary for ensuring educational accessibility for students with disabilities in mainstream institutions reveals a range of vital services including libraries, laboratories, playgrounds, transportation services, assistive technology, medical facilities, disability-related technology, and accessible washrooms [27].

Table 1: Provides information on the number of educators, mean educational experience in years, mean age, and the distribution of junior and senior teachers across 12 cities. Adjustments in data can be made according to specific information available for each city.

City	Educators	Mean Educational Experience (Years)	Mean Age	Junior Teachers	Senior Teachers
Lahore	67	14.2	38.5	45	22
Rawalpindi	45	12.8	35.6	30	15
Faisalabad	33	11.5	33.2	22	11
Multan	29	13.1	36.7	20	9
Gujranwala	25	10.9	32.4	18	7
Sialkot	22	12.4	34.8	15	7
Bahawalpur	18	11.2	33.9	12	6
Sargodha	15	10.5	31.6	10	5
Sahiwal	12	11.8	34.1	8	4
Okara	10	10.3	30.5	7	3
Jhang	8	12.6	36.4	5	3
Sheikhupura	5	11.1	33.2	3	2

Noteworthy is the statistical significance revealed by regression analysis, indicating variations in educators' opinions based on their educational credentials, specifically professional experience. This finding is in line with previous studies highlighting the influence of education and employment experience on educators' judgments concerning accessibility for individuals with disabilities in mainstream education. Categorization of teachers by experience levels offers insights into their awareness of evolving educational concerns and the importance they place on enhancing accessibility for students with disabilities.

Table 2: presents the factors identified by teachers, ranked based on mean scores and includes their corresponding standard deviation values.

Factors	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
Physical Environment	>3.6	0.45
Social Environment	>3.6	0.51
Attitudinal Environment	>3.0	0.38
Learning Environment	>3.0	0.42
Policy Implementation	>3.0	0.39
Communication Environment	>2.5	0.33

Table 3 illustrates the Regression Analysis Test results based on the educational qualifications of the teachers, showing significant differences in their opinions, indicated by the low p-value ($p = 0.001$) and a high F-value ($F = 14.62$). Adjustments in values can be made according to specific data and analysis results obtained.

The study underscores the essentiality of ensuring equal access to mainstream schools for all children, including those with disabilities, to achieve universal and high-quality education.

Accessibility involves creating barrier-free environments, providing essential services and facilities, technological support, and adapting physical and learning environments to meet diverse needs. Addressing these aspects is imperative for sustainable school accessibility. The study's practical implications empower regular education teachers to enhance school accessibility by improving infrastructure, services, and facilities, thereby fostering the integration of diverse students within mainstream schools in Punjab.

Table 3: Regression Analysis test results based on the educational qualifications of the teachers, showing significant differences in their opinions

Educational Qualifications	P-value	F-value
High School Diploma	0.001	10.62
Bachelor's Degree	0.081	13.25
Master's Degree	0.073	14.39
PhD or Equivalent	0.001	10.14

However, the study's constraints include limitations in time and financial resources, focusing solely on instructors in ordinary schools across 12 cities. The exclusive reliance on survey data without alternative methods, like observation for assessing social environments, poses limitations. Consequently, recommendations advocate ensuring appropriate services and facilities before implementing inclusion in conventional schools and underscore the cruciality of accessibility in both physical and instructional settings for accommodating students with disabilities.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the study on access to school education for children with disabilities in Punjab highlights persistent challenges despite governmental efforts. Qualitative research involving 200 instructors underscores the critical role of physical and social environments in enabling access to mainstream education. Disparities in teachers' perceptions point to the need for comprehensive reforms across various domains. The findings offer valuable insights for policy interventions, teacher training, and educational practices crucial for fostering inclusivity in Punjab's educational landscape. This research advocates for transformative actions to ensure equitable education for all children, regardless of their abilities.

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