

## Perceptions of Teacher Educators About Inclusive Education: Challenges and Prospects

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### ***Abstract***

*The notion of inclusive education has evolved as a key endeavour aimed at providing disabled students with equal access to mainstream schools without any discrimination. The purpose of the present study was to look into teacher educators' perceptions about inclusive education, as well as challenges and prospects connected with the implementation of inclusive education. The study included all teacher educators from teacher training institutions in Lahore. A total of 30 teacher educators were selected randomly as a sample to participate in the study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teacher educators. Data were analysed by using thematic analysis. Most of the teacher educators perceived that including disabled children in regular classes was a challenging endeavour and had a negative attitude about total inclusion. They perceived outdated curriculum, length of course work, inadequate library resources, inadequate training of teacher educators, insufficient resources and facilities, and the gap between the government's inclusive education policy and implementation strategy as major challenges in implementing the concept of inclusive education. Moreover, the teacher educators proposed strategies to overcome these challenges, including revision of curriculum, preparation of master trainers for the training of teacher educators, provision of necessary resources and facilities, administrative support, reducing the class size, recruitment of teachers with specialisation in special education, and collaboration between general education and special education teachers.*

**Key Words:** *Inclusive Education, Teacher Educators, Challenges, Prospects.*

### **Introduction**

Over the last two decades, the international movement to mainstream special students into regular schools has gained popularity around the world. The underlying goal behind this approach was to provide education with fairness and justice, not just for all students, but also for those who have been excluded from the mainstream owing to disability, illness, endemic, gender, ethnicity, or other types of prejudice (UNESCO, 1994; UNESCO, 2000). Consequently, students who were previously considered as "less able or special" were given access to regular classrooms with adequate support (Florian & Linklater, 2009; Saloviita, 2018). Based on this interpretation of the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action

(1994), international institutions pledged to promote the notion of inclusive education to accommodate children with special needs in regular schools (UNESCO, 1994). Governments were urged to seek the cooperation of international funding agencies such as the World Conference on Education for All, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the World Bank in endorsing inclusive education in institutions by making it an integral part of all educational programmes (UNESCO, 2003). Four major commitments, such as Education for All and the Millennium Development Goals for universal primary education in 2000, initiatives by the Dakar Framework for Education for All (EFA), and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, can be viewed as significant initiatives for making the concept of inclusive education a global agenda (Inclusion International, 2009).

Despite the significance of inclusion, the target of implementing inclusive education could not be achieved in developing countries including Pakistan, which is one of 177 countries worldwide that have signed the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006). The CRPD was designed to defend disabled people's rights and to provide them with the same opportunities as other citizens. Through this document, all signatory countries agreed to make inclusive education a legal requirement. Pakistan attempted to attain the goal of inclusive education through the Islamabad Declaration on Accessibility for Persons with Disabilities (2006), in which attempts were made to implement the inclusive education programme in Pakistan. However, these efforts could not achieve the goal of inclusive education by becoming an integral element of all educational programmes, as pledged by Pakistan's government (UNESCO, 2013). While analysing the status of inclusive education, Schuelka (2018) argued that the successful implementation of inclusive education policy is only possible by transforming the school system. This systematic transformation might occur by changing the structure and adapting the content as well as the use of learner-centred instructional approaches.

In the whole process of inclusive education, teachers are considered important change agents who are expected to introduce this change in the classroom with adequate knowledge and skills. However, teachers with insufficient knowledge and training can develop a negative attitude towards inclusion (Antil, 2014; Blanton et al., 2010; Brownell, 2005; Cochran-Smith, 2012; Sarah et al., 2018). Therefore, it is inevitable to train teachers of general education teachers for inclusive classrooms to adjust disabled students in regular classrooms (Crawford & Tindal, 2006; Blanton et al., 2010; Eleweke, 2002; Kurth & Foley, 2014; Pugach, 2005). Based on different research studies, it was suggested that teacher training institutions should provide instructors with the required knowledge and skills so that they can prepare prospective teachers to carry out this task in future. This chain of training might be helpful to implement inclusive education effectively. Furthermore, teacher education institutions might concentrate on equipping general classroom teachers to apply the inclusive education approach. If teachers have the requisite information, skills, and understanding of inclusive education, they can become effective inclusive practitioners (Peebles & Mendaglio, 2014; Stella et al., 2007). In this way, teacher educators can play a significant role in facilitating the process of inclusion. Strasbourg (2009), Sleeter (2008), and Zagana et al. (2017) supported this view by mentioning that teachers' insight into children's access to education and rights can only be developed when teachers have adequate knowledge and understanding of basic international principles, legislation, and policy frameworks in the field of diversity. Hussain (2012) also emphasised the importance of teachers' abilities in dealing with disabled children.

By looking at the prevailing situation regarding the implementation of the concept of inclusive education, teacher educators can play a significant, therefore, the present study was designed to know the perception of teacher educators about inclusive education, challenges in implementing the concept of inclusive education, and strategies to overcome these challenges.

## Literature Review

Investing in human capital through formal education has been found a significant determinant in economic growth in studies all over the world. The provision of educational opportunities to all children can facilitate the reduction of social and economic disparities. Children with learning disabilities whose parents refuse to send them to school may become social outcasts and suffer from great poverty. Universal Primary Education (UPE) aims to ensure that all children who are eligible for the primary school must be allowed to enroll and remain in school to learn and get a quality basic education. Thus, inclusion is a process of restructuring and reorganizing the entire school system to guarantee that all students have equal access to the educational and social opportunities available at the school (Eunice et al., 2015; Bernardi & Plavgo, 2019).

The term inclusive education is defined variably by governments all around the world, as well as individuals within a state, city, or school. Some authors view it as just another term for mainstreaming, which refers to the placement of students with mild, moderate and severe disabilities in a pull-out programme to improve their skill level to that of their peers in the regular classroom (Armstrong et al., 2010; UNICEF, 2013; Whitworth, 1999;). In a broader sense, inclusive education is based on the principle of diversity, which emphasises that all students should receive a high-quality education regardless of their ability, individual characteristics, gender, social, or cultural disparities. As a result, students might be able to actively participate in the educational system (Ainscow 2015; Morina, 2016; Salind, 2001; Snee, 2010; UNESCO, 2001).

Disabled students benefit from social relationships and positive interactions with their peers when an inclusive approach is used in schools. Despite its benefits, administrators, parents, and teacher educators view the implementation of inclusion as a big challenge. Due to this reason, the implementation of inclusive education in underdeveloped countries is not satisfactory, as evidenced by the fact that a large number of disabled children remain out of school due to a lack of facilities and resources to educate them (Inclusion International, 2009). Teachers are expected to accept their changing roles and responsibilities in terms of their understanding of the characteristics of children with disabilities, as well as adapting the curriculum to meet the developmental requirements of these students to promote inclusion (Bruns & Mogharreban, 2009; Cate et al., 2018; Sucuoğlu et al., 2013). In addition, proponents of the inclusive approach argued for adjustments and flexibility in the educational system, structure, and procedures to accommodate children with disabilities (Eunice et al., 2015; Nguyet, 2010; Mcdiarmid, 1990; Whitworth, 1999).

### Inclusive Education in Pakistan

Pakistan is facing challenges like other developing countries such as Bangladesh, India, and Kenya (study results of Ahsan et al., 2012; Desai & Pradhan, 2017; Ireri et al., 2010; Singal, 2019; Wanjohi, 2010). At the federal level of Pakistan, the implementation of inclusive education could not become a reality. By following different models of inclusive education, some NGOs, INGOs, and UN agencies initiated to implement inclusive education on a small scale in different cities across Pakistan. However, no systematic analysis on the effectiveness of these initiatives was carried out at national or provincial levels in Pakistan. Moreover, there is a scarcity of comprehensive data on the educational status of disabled children (UNESCO, 2003). A total of 371,833 persons in Pakistan are living with some form of disability, yet they are largely invisible, unheard, and ignored in the country's development and planning projects (Hussain, 2012; Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2021). People are hesitant to move around in society with a child who has a physical or mental handicap. Those who succeed in breaking down societal barriers and attempting to

integrate into society, encounter mobility challenges. The majority of Pakistani educational institutes, except for a few public and private special schools, do not cater to the needs of people with disabilities who have mobility challenges (Rathore & Mansoor, 2019).

Moreover, these schools are not accessible to disabled children who reside in rural areas. The admission of children with disabilities is sometimes greeted with unhappiness from school administrators and teachers. The private institutions with an inclusive theme lack suitable infrastructure, teacher training, and the adoption of acceptable teaching methods for educating special children. There is insufficient coordination between the Ministries of Education, Social Welfare, and Special Education to fulfill the needs of disabled children and marginalised groups (Behlol, 2011; Ehsan, 2018; Khan & Behlol, 2014; Sarton & Smith, 2018; UNESCO, 2003). UNICEF (2003) advised Pakistan's Federal Ministry of Education to adjust the school environment, curriculum, and teacher training programmes to build capacity and address the challenge of inclusive schooling. It was emphasised that enough financial support and new infrastructure, together with a new perspective of education, may help the system to accomplish its inclusion goal.

## Research Objectives

The objectives of the study were to:

1. Investigate the perception of teacher educators towards inclusive education?
2. Explore the challenges perceived by teacher educators as barriers in implementing inclusive education.
3. Identify the strategies that teacher educators do consider appropriate to overcome the challenges for implementing the concept of inclusive education.

## Research Questions

Following research questions were formulated for the study:

1. What is the perception of teacher educators about inclusive education?
2. What challenges do teacher educators perceive as barriers in implementing inclusive education?
3. What strategies do teacher educators consider appropriate to overcome the challenges for implementing the concept of inclusive education?

## Method

The target population of the study consisted of all teacher educators of public teacher training institutions in Lahore. A total of 30 teacher educators were selected randomly as a sample for the study. The data from the sample were collected by using a qualitative approach. A semi-structured interview was designed for the study as it allowed the participants to provide information with more flexibility and depth that might not be possible through structured questions. It also allowed the researchers to prepare the participants before responding to complicated questions. The interview questions were based on investigating the perception of teacher educators about inclusive education, challenges in implementing inclusive education and proposed strategies that they perceive pertinent and workable to overcome these challenges. The coding procedure was used to analyse the responses obtained through interviews with teacher educators. The data were coded (keywords assigned by the researchers to identify main themes), analysed, and interpreted that facilitated the researcher to read it over and over again to locate the main

themes. After organizing the main themes into categories, data were divided into sub-categories which emerged through the process of coding in an organised form. The data were analysed by using thematic analysis. The identification of emerging themes helped the researchers to make categories of themes. New codes were given to sub-categories. At the next stage, data were analysed by highlighting similarities and differences in the data (responses of participants regarding phenomena). By rechecking transcripts and codes at the third stage, data were again verified for checking the validity of understanding by the researchers. Finally, key themes and sub-themes were used to interpret the data. The themes were identified by analysing the responses with the help of NVivo 11 plus software gained in form of interviews with teacher educators.

## Results

The findings of the study were categorized into three major themes:

1. Perception of teacher educators about inclusive education
2. Challenges in implementing inclusive education
3. Strategies to overcome challenges

### Perception of Teacher Educators about Inclusive Education

Some teacher educators had a positive attitude towards the inclusion of students with mild disabilities, whereas most of them exhibited a negative attitude towards total inclusion including moderate and severe disabilities by considering it a difficult task. They expressed that inclusion could only be possible by providing appropriate information on how to deal with disabled students, intensive training of teacher educators, and increased acceptance of children with disabilities among normal children's attitudes.

#### Positive Attitude

Some teacher educators believed that inclusive education can help to meet the educational needs of students who are typically marginalised and excluded owing to their disabilities. Furthermore, adjusting learners with specific needs in the mainstream will promote the principle of equality, which is the cornerstone of education.

This positive attitude was expressed by Teacher Educator No. 17 as:

*"Through inclusion, disabled children would be able to interact with their normal peers and overcome the critical situation they might face due to their disability. Furthermore, inclusion will also help the normal students to understand the concept of diversity".*

Teacher Educator No. 26 elaborated

*"The process of inclusion can develop confidence and social skills in disabled students as the result of interaction with normal students. Consequently, their academic and functional skills might be improved".*

### **Negative Attitude**

Most of the teacher educators showed a negative attitude towards the idea of inclusion. They stated that integrating inclusive education within the regular school system is a challenging endeavour. They elaborated that the inclusion of disabled students might develop stress among teachers as they are not prepared for this mode of teaching.

Teacher Educator No. 11 expressed

*“The idea of inclusive education in general classrooms seems to be impractical as teacher educators have no adequate knowledge and skills to deal with disabled students. These students might be adjusted in special education institutions, where teachers are knowledgeable and skilled in dealing with them effectively”.*

Teacher Educator No.29 said

*“The students with disabilities should be taught in a special school because they need extra attention and mentoring. It is quite tough for me to alter the curriculum and modify assignments in a way that will benefit disabled students' achievement.”*

### **Challenges in Implementing Inclusive Education**

All teacher educators perceived that the implementation of inclusive education in general education institutions is a difficult task due to certain challenges. These challenges include outdated curriculum, length of course work, inadequate library resources, inadequate training of teacher educators, insufficient resources and facilities, and the gap between the government's inclusive education policy and implementation strategy.

#### **Outdated Curriculum**

The majority of teacher educators mentioned that the existing curriculum does not correspond to the idea of inclusion. The provided examples of foreign countries where this concept has been successfully applied by introducing change following the needs of the time.

Teacher Educator No. 6 elaborated this challenge by indicating that:

*“The current curriculum does not meet the educational requirement of disabled students. For the last 20 years, the curriculum has not been updated. As a result, the majority of people are unaware of the concept of inclusive education and are unwilling to accept disabled children in normal settings. Furthermore, in nations where this strategy is operating well, the curriculum has been adjusted to meet the needs of special students.”*

Teacher Educator No. 9 mentioned that :

*“Rather than delivering teaching general curriculum, inclusive practices necessitate specialised educational planning to assist all students' learning and achievement. Therefore, a curriculum that can meet the needs of both regular and special education students should be developed. Special education teachers should be involved in the curriculum development process so that they can suggest effective*

*content that meets the needs of both general and special education students while also preparing them for market demands."*

Teacher Educator No 2 stated that :

*"The concept of inclusive education should be introduced into existing curricula so that normal students can gain a sufficient understanding of it. As a result, they will be mentally prepared to embrace this type of diversity when studying with special students."*

### **Length of Course Work**

All teacher educators expressed that students with disabilities require extra time and attention that is not possible in a regular length of course work.

Teacher Educator No. 8 expressed this challenge as:

*"More time is required to teach students with a disability because they need extra mentoring and attention. The normal time duration for course completion is insufficient to deal with disabled students with proper attention".*

Teacher Educator No. 26 mentioned:

*"The semester system is followed by universities. The duration of a semester is usually 4 months long to complete the course outline of a specific subject. I teach general education students, and it might be tough to finish a lengthy outline while also checking students' homework, quizzes, presentations, and other classroom activities. In a short semester, it would be more difficult for me to assign alternate tasks and plan appropriate activities for disabled students."*

### **Library Resources**

The majority of teacher educators believe that there are not enough books on inclusive education in the library to help them improve their knowledge and skills of how to deal with disabled students in the mainstream. Moreover, they argued that library staff should be trained to facilitate students with disabilities.

Teacher Educator No. 17 explained this challenge in the following manner:

*"There is a lack of books on inclusive education in the library, which are the primary source of information and skills about students with disabilities. In addition, the library has insufficient research journals and publications on inclusive education approaches. Braille and sign books for disabled students are not available in the library."*

### **Inadequate Training of Teacher Educators**

Most of the teacher educators highlighted the lack of training for implementing the concept of inclusive education. Teacher educators stated that their instructional skills were insufficient to support an inclusive classroom that may accommodate students with disabilities. They expressed that they are not trained in using sign language, braille books, or assistive technology required to teach students with disabilities.



Teacher Educator No. 5 expressed this challenge in the following manner:

*"I am not trained to teach students with disabilities because I am a general education teacher. I'm not equipped to educate special students by utilising braille books, sign language books, or assistive technology."*

Teacher Educator No. 19 expressed:

*"I am not familiar with appropriate instructional methods and how to manage students with disabilities in the regular classroom. I don't think I'm qualified to educate disabled students."*

### **Insufficient Resources and Facilities**

All teacher educators expressed that insufficient resources and facilities are a hurdle in achieving the target of inclusive education. They elaborated that there is a lack of resources to implement inclusive education such as language labs, instructional material, braille books, audio-visual aids, and adaptive equipment to conduct different classroom activities.

### **The Gap between Government' Inclusive Education Policy and Implementation Strategy**

Some teacher educators mentioned that there was a gap between the government's inclusive education policy and implementation strategy. They elaborated that the government is not showing serious concern in implementing inclusive education. The government signed the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities without considering the challenges that might become barriers to the successful implementation of inclusive education. Teacher Educator No. 15 expressed this view by saying:

*"The government has no serious concern and commitment towards education because it spends only 3 per cent of its Gross National Product (GNP) on it, which is not enough to fulfill the needs of both general and special students. The provision of financial resources by the government is inevitable to implement the concept of inclusive education in institutions."*

Teacher Educator No. 11 expressed

*"The government should allocate adequate budget to meet the needs of students with disabilities. The government is solely concerned about introducing initiatives in the form of policies, but not with the implementation process. As a result, despite the passage of time, the goal of inclusive education could not be achieved."*

### **Proposed Strategies to Overcome Challenges**

During the interview, teacher educators suggested various strategies to overcome the challenges they perceived appropriate to implement inclusive education. These strategies include revision of curriculum, preparation of master trainers for the training of teacher educators, provision of necessary resources and facilities, administrative support, reducing the class size, recruitment of teachers with specialisation in special education, and collaboration between general education and special education teachers.



### **Revision of Curriculum**

Most of the teacher educators expressed that the existing curriculum is unable to meet the requirements of inclusive education, therefore, the curriculum should be revised. The content related to dealing with disabled students should be included in the curriculum. Moreover, the information about the psychology of special children should be included in the subject of general psychology. The courses of special education should be introduced in the scheme of studies and chapters related to inclusive education should be incorporated into the curriculum.

### **Preparation of Master Trainers for Training of Teacher Educators**

Some teacher educators advocated for the preparation of master trainers who can train other teacher educators on how to implement inclusive classrooms. They suggested that preparing master trainers can help an institution avoid the financial load that comes with training so many teacher educators.

### **Provision of Necessary Resources and Facilities**

The majority of teacher educators proposed that necessary resources should be provided for the successful implementation of inclusion. They mentioned that braille books, sign language books, audiovisual aids, instructional material, adaptive equipment should be provided by the administration. Moreover, sufficient stock of books on inclusive education should be available in the library.

### **Administrative Support**

The majority of teacher educators emphasised the importance of administration in putting the notion of inclusive education into practice. They believed that the administration may play a key role in providing sufficient support by raising awareness, providing guidance, providing adequate teaching materials, and organising workshops and seminars to develop essential knowledge, skills, and positive attitude among teachers to deal with students with disabilities.

### **Reducing Class Size**

Some teacher educators suggested reducing the number of students in the classroom so that they can provide individual attention and mentoring to every student.

### **Recruitment of Teachers with Specialization in Special Education**

Some teacher educators advocated for hiring special education teachers to teach in inclusive classrooms. This way, general education teachers may get benefit from the appointment of special education teachers because they can seek their guidance if they face difficulty dealing with special students.

### **Collaboration between General Education and Special Education Teachers**

Most of the teacher educators suggested that close collaboration between general education and special education teachers can help general education teachers deal with the frustration and stress that comes with dealing with disabled children. General education teachers can get benefit from the knowledge and experiences of special education teachers. Consequently, they will be in a better position to use effective teaching strategies and remedies to teach students with disabilities.

## Discussion

The analysis of teacher educators perception about inclusive education revealed that while some have a positive attitude toward inclusive education for students with mild disabilities, the majority have a negative attitude towards total inclusion of children with moderate to severe disabilities. The negative attitude of teachers towards total inclusion was also identified by a review of research studies conducted by de Boer et al. (2011) and studies by different researchers (Al-Zyoudi, 2006; Boer et al., 2012; Rakap & Kaczmarek, 2010; This negative attitude might become a huge hurdle in the successful implementation of inclusive education. The literature shows that teachers are important clients who need to be convinced for bringing change in any educational system. The positive perception of teachers towards inclusion might help to create an ideal environment for inclusion in which all children can learn and flourish. The teacher educators indicated the challenges which formed their negative perception towards inclusion such as lack of necessary knowledge and skills to handle students with disabilities. Burton and Pace (2009), and Lancaster and Bain (2010), argued that a positive attitude cannot substitute for a lack of preparation; instead, teachers must believe that they have the strategies and capability to carry out the required practices. Moreover, teacher educators mentioned that they were not trained in using sign language, braille books, or assistive technology to deal with disabled students. The finding related to inadequate training of teachers for inclusive education has been uncovered by different studies (Crawford & Tindal, 2006; Kurth & Foley, 2014; Harvey et al., 2010; Hettiarachchi & Das, 2014). Teacher educators perceived the existing curriculum as outdated to respond to diversity. They proposed that the curriculum should be revised by including courses on special education and incorporating chapters to enhance awareness about inclusive education. Special education teachers should be involved in the curriculum development process so that a balanced curriculum for general and special students might be prepared. They expressed that institutions should appoint special education teachers who can guide general education teachers in case of difficulty. Close collaboration between general and special education instructors might be beneficial in reducing general education teachers' negative attitudes about inclusion. This challenge of curriculum reformation was also uncovered by studies and consistent with their findings (Ahsan, et al., 2012; Ali et al., 2006; Bahlol, 2011; Elweka & Rodda, 2002; Forlin, 2014; Ngugi, 2007; Premier, 2010). Another major challenge identified by the teacher educators was the provision of insufficient resources to teach and facilitate disabled students. This study finding is aligned with different study results (Ahmad & May, 2018; Newton et al., 2014; Okongo et al., 2015), which revealed that insufficient resources are barriers in implementing inclusive education successfully.

The strategies proposed by teacher educators for overcoming the challenges are in line with prior studies (Forlin & Sharma, 2009; Sarao, 2016). The provision of equity through quality education is only possible if governments not only show a keen interest in policies but also provide practical measures for implementation as indicated by Forlin (2014). She mentioned that like all regions, the needs of developing countries differ greatly. They require policies and practises that not only adhere to international conventions but also provide an appropriate mechanism for successful inclusion. Moreover, this mechanism must be appropriate for their local and regional context.

## Conclusion

The acceptance of regular classroom teachers towards inclusion plays a significant role, however, this acceptance converts into rejection due to certain factors. These factors might become challenges if not overcome with appropriate measures. The role of teacher educators is fundamental in achieving the target of inclusive education because they prepare prospective teachers who can carry out this task effectively in future. One of the major challenges apart from providing teacher educators with the

necessary knowledge, and skills to implement the concept of inclusive education, is to develop a positive attitude in teacher educators toward students with disabilities and their inclusion in regular classes. This task might be done by providing proper training and removing the challenges that develop a negative attitude in teacher educators towards inclusion. These challenges are being faced by those developing countries where sufficient resources and acceptability of such change do not exist. These challenges might be overcome by implementing suitable measures, changing a rigid system into a flexible one, and removing barriers with the government's help.

## Recommendations

- Teacher educators might be provided with sufficient knowledge and skills about inclusive education. The administration can organise workshops and seminars to train teacher educators for inclusive classrooms. However, this training might not be confined to the courses aimed at broadening their knowledge and skills; it should also address teacher educators' attitudes so that they can show their willingness to total inclusion, which is the major goal of inclusive education. Moreover, they should be provided adequate resources and equipment to deliver inclusive education effectively.
- Adequate resources might be provided by the government and administration to achieve the target of inclusive education in mainstream institutions. The government may allocate an adequate budget to implement inclusive education effectively.

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