

**Policies and Practices of Punjab Government
Towards Inclusive Education: From the Lens of
Senior Special Education Teacher's**

Hamayoun Shah Nawaz¹

Hina Fazil²

Nadeem Ahmad³

Abstract

The purpose of this review article is twofold, first to present a clear picture of policies and practices of the Punjab Government towards inclusive education. Secondly, identify the gaps between policies of the Punjab Government and practicing Inclusive Education (IE). The present study is qualitative in its nature and policy document analysis was used. To analyze policy documents a review desk was designed regarding policies and practices of the Punjab Government towards inclusive education. A focus group discussion was also used to identify the gaps between the policies of the Punjab Government and practicing inclusive education. The study sample was comprised of eight Senior Special Education Teachers (SSETs) working in different Government special educational institutes of Punjab. The sample of the study was selected through purposive sampling, utilizing a criterion sampling technique. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with the focus group. The results of this study revealed that the majority of the participants were agreed on the policies made by Punjab Governments towards IE not very promising. It was argued that Punjab Government needs to introduce more innovative approaches and policies to successfully implement inclusive education.

Keywords: inclusive education, policies, and practices, special education teachers, qualitative research, Punjab

¹ Ph.D. Scholar, Institute of Special Education, University of the Punjab, LHR.
Corresponding Author Email: humayun888@hotmail.com

² Assistant Professor, Institute of Special Education, University of the Punjab, LHR) Email: hinafazil@hotmail.com

³ Ph.D. Scholar, Institute of Special Education, University of the Punjab, LHR),
Email: nadeemahmad.hsm@gmail.com

Introduction

Children with Disabilities (CWDs) are the silent and unnoticeable members of most societies. They are often at risk of being abused, neglecting and exploited. Rarely their needs are considered in programs and policies. They always face barriers in availing proper services, including education. A large number of CWDs never visited schools. Pakistan has approximately 5.5 million children who are unfortunately out of school which is the 2nd highest number in the whole world after the African country Nigeria (UNESCO & UNICEF, 2014). In Pakistan, the condition of CWDs is very similar to in the other developing countries of the world.

Pakistan is also a signatory of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and is surely responsible to achieve educational targets. The Punjab government is answerable for accommodating the educational requirements of 62% people of the total population (Pakistan Economic Survey, 2015-16) with a substantial number of CWDs are facing the problems that may encumber the effective execution of the UNCRPD related to the provision of IE (Thakur & Abbas, 2017). Pakistan is doing extremely serious efforts to achieve globally committed legal bindings regarding IE for CWDs (Hameed & Manzoor, 2019).

The idea of IE is not new in Pakistan, and it is under serious discussion over the years. Although, Pakistan has various international commitments, yet it has not met the quality standards of the world in the field of education (Fazil, 2020). IE is a way of fulfilling the diverse needs of children through enhanced involvement in classrooms activities and minimizing exclusion from education (LEVELS, 2008). The provision of equal educational opportunities to the whole population has become a difficult task for all the countries all across the globe due to world educational movements and initiatives. To fulfill the global commitment, inclusive education has become a vital part of educational policies (Thakur & Abbas, 2017). In this way, IE can reduce the gap by providing equal participation opportunities to

differently-abled people in mainstream education (Khan & Behlol, 2014).

It is a general perception that the Government of Punjab has made more considerable efforts for the betterment of special needs education as compared to any other province of Pakistan. The Special Education Department (SpED) of Punjab has still many issues to deal with. IE is all about removing hurdles that exclude people from the mainstream education system. This notion has developed as a major theme in educational policies globally and is a fundamental component of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In Pakistan, inclusive education is still evolving and presently it focused primarily on the provision of education to disabled children through special education (Rieser, 2012).

Policymakers and stakeholders are trying to compensate for the lack of emphasis on inclusive education. Punjab, being the largest province of Pakistan, has launched its new policy for Special Education which addresses several challenges of providing education to CWDs. Similarly, a policy for IE has also been introduced to help bring children of all backgrounds even with minor learning disabilities into the mainstream education system.

This study is an effort to present a crystal-clear picture of policies and practices introduced and implemented by the Punjab Government to enhance the knowledge and fortify the volume to advance on-going programs towards inclusive education. It is believed to oblige as an advocacy instrument for the promotion of IE. This study unfolds several gaps so that Pakistan can develop a suitable policy and plan of action to deal with the issues of this particular area.

Objectives of the Study

The study sought to:

1. Present a clear picture of policies and practices of the Punjab government towards inclusive education.
2. Identify the gaps between the present policies of the government of Punjab and practicing inclusive education.
3. Propose strategies to mitigate the gaps between the present policies of the government of Punjab and practice inclusive education.

Research Questions:

1. What are the policies and practices of the Punjab Government towards inclusive education?
2. What are the gaps between the present policies of the government of Punjab and practicing inclusive education?
3. What are the proposed strategies to mitigate the gaps between the present policies of the government of Punjab and practicing inclusive education?

Methodology

To meet the first objective of this study, an intensive review of the literature was undertaken to present a clear picture of policies and practices of the Punjab Government towards IE. As a qualitative research method, an analysis of policy documents was adopted by the researchers to identify the gaps between existing policies and practices IE. A review desk was planned to examine policy documents regarding IE. Similarly, to mitigate the gaps between existing policies of the Punjab Government and practicing IE, researchers used focus group discussion techniques with eminent Senior Special Education Teachers(SSETs) of Punjab.

Based on initial review and after the identification of the gaps between existing policies of the Punjab Government and practicing IE through policy document analysis, a presentation was delivered by the researchers to a panel of SSETs to have their viewpoint on the proposed strategies to mitigate the gaps between existing policies of Punjab Government and practicing IE.

Participants of the Study

The study sample was comprised of eight Senior Special Education Teachers (SSETs) working in different Government special educational institutes of Punjab. The sample of the study was selected through purposive sampling, utilizing a criterion sampling technique (Patton, 2014). In criterion sampling, a criteria is set and only those cases are selected that fulfill the prescribed criteria, for example, only those SSETs were selected who have completed their 10 years of Government service. They

have the minimum qualification of M.Phil. Special Education. The reason behind this criteria was to collect information from experienced teachers.

Procedure

I, as a chief investigator, facilitate the focus groups, Hamayoun and Nadeem worked as co-facilitator (as described by Gibbs, Maxwell, Morgan, & Britten, 2002). Our experiences as special educationists are very vital for the focus group proceedings, serving research participants feel more contented, stating their identities and believes better understood in terms of their experiences. The magnitude of the focus group was determined keeping in view prior studies specifically the query of perfect numbers of participants(Morgan, Gibbs, Maxwell, & Britten, 2002). The length of the focus group discussion was approximately 90 minutes. All the research participants were interviewed using an open and semi-structured focus group method. The chief investigator prepared the questions for semi-structured interviews of all the participants. The audio recordings of the participants were instantly transcribed by the chief investigator and her other team members. Each of the members transcribed one equal proportion section (30 minutes) from the audio recording of 90-minute.

Focus Group Discussion

The focus group technique of discussion generates data from the opinions of the research participants. A presentation was delivered to the participants of the group discussion. After the presentation the researchers raised the following issues for discussion:

- Do you feel the existing policies of the government of Punjab regarding IE are in line with the policies adopted at the international level?
- Do you think existing IE policies fulfill the inclusionary requirement or need to be revised?

- Do you believe Punjab Government has implemented existing IE policies in true spirit or manners?
- Do you believe the steps taken by the Punjab Government towards IE are sufficient or do new policies specific to IE need to be introduced?
- What would you suggest to the Punjab Government to implement inclusive education policy in general education setup?
- Do you consider the practicing pedagogical strategies to be able to promote inclusive education in the remaining districts of Punjab?

The viewpoints of the participants who actively engaged in the discussion are as under:

Research Participant 1

Focus group participant No. 1 pointed out that contemporary policies do not provide suitable services for inclusion to CWDs. However, during the last few years, Punjab Government has launched new interventions and projects, but these interventions and projects are very limited and may not be able to cause an impact without a solid political obligation at the national and provincial levels to resolve the challenges of IE. Lack of coordination among the concerned departments, a large number of children are suffering. Likewise, many issues urgently need to be replanned, including the provision of health facilities and social backing for families, early identification, and psychological support. However, without forming appropriate synergies the education of special children will not be able to benefit them.

Research Participant 2

Focus group participant No. 2 during the discussion, highlighted a very technical point related to the implementation of existing policies regarding inclusive education, which requires good inter-departmental coordination. Further, she explained that, although there are gaps in the existing policies and practicing

inclusive education in Punjab the initiatives were taken to implement inclusive education is admirable.

However, more work is needed to certify that CWDs will be treated rightly and suitable provisions will also be available to them. Provincial Government can endorse IE and may lead to changes in attitudes and practices by developing appropriate policies.

Research Participant 3

Research participant No. 3 pointed out that education policy in Punjab was predominantly focused on increasing enrolment and improving education quality. Due to international bindings and after realizing the importance of inclusive education, Punjab Government took initiatives to endorse IE. However, the Punjab Government has encountered ample challenges in its attempt to promote and develop IE. There has been a lack of any officially defined framework for classifying, identifying, measuring, and developing responses to meet the needs of CWDs across the whole educational system. The lack of a specific policy on inclusive education significantly restricted the extent to which CWDs could effectively be served by mainstream schools. School Education Department (SED) played a limited role in addressing the needs of CWDs, while Special Education Department's focused on children with severe and profound disabilities only.

Research Participant 4

Research participant No. 4 shared his views regarding existing policies and laws stating that these policies need to be revised. Enforcement mechanisms should be strengthened so that PWDs could avail themselves of all the benefits as their right, not a privilege, she said. This requires strong coordination among the government and its subordinate departments.

Furthermore, she highlighted that schools are unwilling to give IE services to deserving children because of an ambiguous admission policy. While on the other hand, school administrators do not know the way to implement IE in their institutes. Restricted school infrastructure and unavailability of staff development

opportunities for teachers and inadequate professional qualification are the other prominent causes of fail in implementing IE. Punjab Government needs to take some serious steps to promote inclusive education. In addition, she explained that persons with disabilities are likely to attain more significance in the social setup but the policies envisaged for them by Punjab Governments are not up to the mark.

Research Participant 5

Research participant No.5 mentioned that the Punjab government should develop inclusive educational policies that are necessary for IE to be successfully implemented in Punjab. The policies and laws reserved for the wellbeing of PWDs are not fully implemented due to a lack of awareness among the masses and poor enforcement mechanisms on the part of decision-makers.

Additionally, he explained that most of the steps Punjab Government has taken orally, and only a few measures were taken by the Punjab Government which failed to cater to the needs of the PWDs, due to the absence of wide-ranging legislation and planning. The Punjab Government must legislate for the promotion and implementation of IE as early as possible, defining a target for the next couple of years to complete the process. That's how the school of the public and private sector in Punjab will take the obligatory steps to develop an integrated and IE system for all.

Research Participant 6

Research participant No.6 revealed that Pakistan is dealing with several challenges in its drive to implement IE like the other under developing countries. The present status of IE in the most densely populated province of Pakistan, i.e. Punjab is very disappointing. The success of the Punjab Inclusive Education Project (PIEP) and Inclusive Voucher Scheme (IVS) revealed that these projects have significantly improved the special education conditions in Punjab and facilitated the conversion of the mainstream education system into an IE system. In addition, he noted that despite ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children, and UNCRPD, the PWDs in general, women

and children with disabilities in particular are still waiting for the practical steps from the government side. The Punjab Government failed to introduce any strategy/plan to include the children with disabilities in the general education setup.

Research Participant 7

Research participant No.7 emphasized that the present number of special schools in Punjab do not fulfill the educational needs of these children. He stressed the need of establishing more special schools to support and promote IE in Punjab. He also appreciated PIEP and IVS but merely these two projects will never be sufficient to address the inclusion issues in the educational institutions of Punjab. However, there is still a long way to go to implement a vibrant IE setup in Punjab.

Moreover, research participants argued that the current structures of the education system in the country are not willing to welcome children with disabilities. It is understood that without the introduction of proper legislation public and private schools will never accommodate these children with unique needs. During the group discussion, he stated that the condition of special education schools which are administered by the provincial governments is deplorable. Apart from the fact that these schools are fewer in number and most children belonging to rural areas do not have access to them. The provision of human resources is very poor, and there are hardly any teachers' training programs. In addition, some certain interest groups back the exclusion of special education as any change may harm their interests.

Research Participant 8

Research participant No.8 believed that a well-organized, effective, and long-term solution is needed to eradicate barriers to IE by enhancing community involvement in schools. She stressed the need for a comprehensive policy in respect of IE that could support the education as well as rehabilitation of these deserving children. Furthermore, she explained that policymakers should realize that an IE system must involve and benefits children of all groups in society, rather than facilitating just CWDs by displaying

tolerance, acceptance, and appreciation towards them. The idea of shifting mainstream schools into inclusive setup is cheap and conducive for countries like Pakistan. We can benefit from the idea by making little changes in our infrastructure, and enhancing teachers' proficiencies besides creating create a segregated setup that is poorly managed, disruptive, and against the spirit of provision of equal educational opportunities laid down in the constitution of Pakistan as well as in international conventions. Implementation of all plans and conventions related to inclusive education must take into practice now.

Results

The following results were identified:

Research Question No. 1

What are the policies and practices of the Punjab Government towards inclusive education?

To answer the first research question, researchers used an in-depth analysis of policy documents through desk review to present a clear picture of the policies and practices of the Punjab Government towards inclusive education.

Policies and Practices of Punjab Government towards Inclusive Education

All four provinces of Pakistan have a policy on disability (Ahmad & Yousaf, 2011). Its educational acts entertain and devise a system for the education of CWDs in segregated school systems after the implementation of the National Policy for PWDs(2002). However, as far as the emphasis on IE is concerned these educational policies differ from each other. In Punjab, the inclusive education act (2012), allows students with mild to moderate levels of disabilities to be admitted to mainstream primary and lower secondary schools whose teachers will be trained by master trainers of the special education department (UNESCO, 2020).

Recent education plans for the Punjab province (2013–17), include inclusive education as a future goal in contrast to special education. The overall plan of the National Policy for

PWDs(2002)is to generate such a learning environment that would allow children with special needs to maximize their full potential through inclusive mainstream education(Pakistan, 2002). In 2009, National Education Policy (NEP) reiterated the same objectives which were to provide equal learning to all special children through the availability of basic services to the handicapped boys and girls, marginalized groups, and special children of the society.

During the financial year, 2015-2016 government of Punjab introduced a much-needed pilot project with an approximate cost of Rs. 188.235 million named as Punjab Inclusive Education Project for the two metropolitan cities of south Punjab i.e. Bahawalpur and Muzaffargarh Districts(Hameed & Manzoor, 2016). After the successful launch of a pilot project in 2 districts, another inclusive program was initiated in collaboration with Punjab Education Foundation (PEF)affiliated schools in the following 07 districts (Lahore, Vehari, Multan, and 04 districts of Rawalpindi division) for the fiscal year of 2015-16 to 2017-18 with a huge amount of Rs. 191.900 million focusing on screening and identification, Provision of assistive devices, provision of extra vouchers more than the demand, teachers' training, and development of enabling infrastructure (Thakur & Abbas, 2017).

Remarkably, the government of Punjab has launched its first-ever Special Education Policy to ensure the education and accessibility of Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) to an inclusive and improved education system that could fulfill their unique needs. All these initiatives taken by the Punjab government are an effort to fulfill national and international commitments of providing quality education with equal opportunities to every child without any discrimination.

The non-government sector also contributes abundantly to providing inclusive educational opportunities to CWDsthrough various mega inclusive projects such as the Inclusive Assessments (IA) pilot project introduced by Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi (ITA) in Punjab province in association with USAID. The other prestigious institute in this list is Ghazalieducation trust Lahore, a well-renowned NGO serving children in the field of education for many years in Pakistan, has initiated Rural Inclusive Education Project (RIEP) facilitating financially and technically to the private

schools serving in remote areas of Punjab to change into inclusive schools (Manzoor, Hameed, & Nabeel, 2018).

Research Question No. 2

What are the gaps between existing policies of the Punjab Government and practicing inclusive education?

To answer the second research question, researchers used focus group discussion to identify the gaps between existing policies of the Punjab Government and practicing inclusive education.

Gaps between Policies and Practices towards Inclusive Education

A study conducted by Pasha(2012), indicated that educational institutes are presently not fully prepared to make IE dream come true. Due to ambiguous admission policy provided by the stakeholders, having the very limited understanding to implement IE among school administrators, lack of accessible and supporting school atmosphere, and the dearth of staff development projects for mainstream school teachers to implement IE(Pasha, 2012). Merely a skilled and fully trained special educationist and educators are not adequate to fulfill the learning needs of such children (Fazal, 2012). Employing highly skilled and trained teachers is also a challenge for the department of special education.

These gaps affect the quality of education as the instructors have no other option than to take additional classes or handle large classes, even teaching specialized subject teachers who are not equipped enough to help students learn and comprehend the concept properly. The Annual Status of Education Reports (ASER) indicate the very low academic performance of the children aged ranging from 3 to 16 years in Punjab than those without disabilities for both literacy and numeracy (ASER, 2015). Existing policies and practices towards IE fall short in providing adequate services to CWDs. However, luckily the induction of new interventions are result-oriented, these ongoing projects could ultimately provide vital learning experiences to the deprived children of the society, but at the same time, it is awful that these projects are very short range and may not likely to have a long-lasting effect on inclusive education. Strong and consistent political support at the national and provincial levels may require addressing issues like lack of

coordination among the relevant department, ensuring availability of services for early identification, provision of social protection for families, and provision of psychological support to the children with special needs.

The literature reveals when it was intensely reviewed that the Inclusive education drive has been launched primarily by INGOs like UNESCO&UNICEF along with some other country-based NGOs. Special education institutes and mainstream institutes are working in a daze and isolation(Hameed & Fazil, 2012). No considerable development has been observed specifically concerning policy development for inclusive schools' programs.

School Education Department (SED) played a limited role in catering to the needs of these deprived children. Till the end of 2018, in Punjab, the focus of education policy was to increase enrolment and improve the quality of education for boys and girls without discrimination. There has been a lack of an official defined framework for classification, identification, measuring, and developing responses to cater to the needs of CWDs across the educational system. The lack of specific policy on special and IE significantly restricts the extent to which CWDs could be effectively served by mainstream schools.

Research Question No. 3

What are the proposed strategies to mitigate the gaps between existing policies of the Punjab Government and practicing inclusive education?

To answer the third research question, researchers used focus group discussion to mitigate the gaps between existing policies of the Punjab Government and practicing inclusive education.

Propose Strategies to Mitigate the Gaps between Existing Policies and Practicing IE

To fill the identified gaps between existing policies and practicing inclusive education a complete series with a proper plan of implementation have been prepared to achieve desired goals of IE especially, to maintain the following aspects for CWDs:

- A well-organized, effective, and long-term solution (by rethinking and restructuring policies, curricula, etc.) is needed to eradicate barriers from implementing IE.
- The public and private sectors in Punjab should take the obligatory steps (i.e. develop legislation, policies, and support services) to remove barriers.
- Restricted school infrastructure and unavailability of staff development opportunities for teachers and inadequate professional qualification are the causes to implement IE in its true letter and spirit.
- Promote the inclusive education system by using social media and newspapers and other digital sources.
- Promote training in government and private sectors for teachers to accept inclusion at every level (i.e. federal, provincial, and district levels).
- To mitigate the gaps between policies and practicing IE the dire need is to bring reformations in the policies and to integrate global policies into the local context.
- School Education Department (SED) can play a vital role by developing flexible infrastructure, resource rooms, and teachers' training programs.

Conclusions

The detailed review of the policy document and focus group discussion on the policies and practices of the Punjab Government towards IE reveals that Punjab Government needs to introduce a few more innovative approaches and policies to successfully adopt practices that are working quite well in other countries of the world including some organizations, and individuals working incredibly in the field of IE. The majority of the participants agreed that the policies made by Punjab Governments towards IE are not very promising. Similarly, the efforts done for the execution of these policies are undoubtedly extremely disappointing.

Although the government of Punjab has started a few steps to realize the value of IE in Punjab, yet the education of these special children is making no considerable progress without the formation of appropriate inclusionary settings. Punjab Government failed to

introduce any strategy/plan to include the children with disabilities in the general education setup. Still, there exists a very long way ahead to making move towards IE in Punjab. Participants of the focus group highlighted that due to a lack of direction and management among the relevant departments, CWDs are unable to get education through inclusive education despite, making acknowledging efforts to implement IE in Punjab.

To put in an eggshell all these efforts have resulted in the removal of some barriers towards IE, however, some follow-up plans should also be introduced to minimize the hurdles that come on the way to implementing IE. That is the only reason that the Punjab government despite doing sincere efforts, set targets of inclusive education still not been able to fully achieve them.

Recommendations

The following recommendations have been suggested to promote inclusive education in Punjab, based on the results of this qualitative study:

1. Existing policies and practices need to be refined to bring in line with international commitments regarding inclusive education.
2. Punjab Government's existing policies and practices must be geared towards increasing inclusion at all levels.
3. Weak enforcement mechanisms in respect of policy implementation should be empowered so that its benefits could reach the PWDs.
4. Ensure policies and practices about inclusive education that reflect a right-based approach and target the underprivileged children.
5. Devise appropriate and long-term policies with defined objectives of socio-economic development to achieve sustainable objectives of IE.
6. Inclusive education should be inextricably linked with the national education policy of the country.
7. Improving the monitoring and evaluation criteria to improve the output of policies and practices related to inclusive education in Punjab.

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