



Beyond Physical Access: Teacher Capacity and Sociocultural Barriers to Inclusive Education in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education in Pakistan has gained recognition through international rights-based frameworks, national education policies, and higher education disability guidelines. However, inclusion often remains limited to physical access or formal enrolment in mainstream institutions. This article argues that physical access does not constitute meaningful inclusion unless students with disabilities are supported through prepared teachers, inclusive pedagogy, reasonable accommodations, positive classroom practices, and sociocultural acceptance. Using qualitative documentary analysis and thematic analysis of academic literature, policy documents, and development reports, the study examines how teacher capacity and sociocultural barriers shape inclusive education practices in Pakistan. The analysis is informed by the Social Model of Disability, Street-Level Bureaucracy, and Inclusive Pedagogy. Four themes are developed: moving from physical access to meaningful participation; teacher capacity and inclusive pedagogy; passive inclusion and classroom-level practice; and sociocultural attitudes and disability stigma. The findings show that students with disabilities may be enrolled in mainstream institutions yet remain academically and socially excluded because of weak teacher preparation, inflexible assessment, limited assistive technology, low expectations, and stigma. The article contributes to the concept of an access–participation gap and argues that inclusive education in Pakistan should be evaluated by participation, learning, progression, and belonging rather than enrolment alone.



Introduction

Inclusive education has emerged as a significant issue in worldwide discussions regarding educational equity, disability rights, and social justice. It is no longer perceived merely as the physical integration of students with disabilities into regular classrooms. Instead, it requires

transforming educational settings to enable all learners to engage, learn, advance, and feel a sense of belonging. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities recognizes inclusive education as a legal entitlement and mandates that states ensure that individuals with disabilities are not excluded from general education because of their disability (United Nations, 2006). Likewise, the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2016) clarifies that inclusion demands modifications in educational culture, policy, curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and support systems.

Through national educational policies, disability-related legislation, and the Higher Education Commission's policy for students with disabilities, inclusive education has drawn more political interest in Pakistan. (Higher Education Commission Pakistan, 2021; Government of Pakistan, 2017) These frameworks acknowledge the necessity of inclusive institutional practices, assistive technologies, reasonable accommodations, and accessible environments. Implementation, however, remains uneven. Poor monitoring, inadequate teacher preparation, restricted assistive technologies, inaccessible infrastructure, socio-cultural stigma, and low academic support are frequently cited in research as significant obstacles (Kamran & Bano, 2023; Manzoor et al., 2024; Sightsavers, 2025; Special Talent Exchange Program, 2006).

Inclusive education is often reduced to physical access or formal enrolment, which is a major issue. Although students with disabilities may be admitted to mainstream schools, colleges, or universities, admission alone does not ensure meaningful participation in learning and flexible assessment. Inclusion is superficial without flexible assessment, disability-sensitive classroom communication, adjusted teaching techniques, social acceptance, and competent instructors. Passive inclusion, where students are physically present but socially marginalized and educationally unsupported, can be described as this form of superficial inclusion.

This article centers on the human, educational, and sociocultural aspects of inclusive education in Pakistan. It contends that the true challenge lies not just in the admission of students with disabilities into regular schools, but in the readiness of educators and institutions to facilitate their learning and sense of belonging. Consequently, the article goes "beyond mere physical access" by exploring teacher capability, classroom methodologies, stigma surrounding disabilities, and societal attitudes.

Statement of the Problem

Pakistan has formally committed to inclusive education through international disability-rights obligations, national education policies, and higher education disability guidelines (Government of Pakistan, 2017; Higher Education Commission Pakistan, 2021). However, students with disabilities continue to encounter barriers that restrict their active participation in learning. Many institutions still understand inclusion as enrolment or physical placement rather than as a deeper process of pedagogical, social, and cultural transformation. As a result, students may sit in mainstream classrooms while facing inaccessible teaching methods, rigid assessments, limited assistive technologies, weak academic support, low expectations, and negative perceptions (Kamran & Bano, 2023; Manzoor et al., 2024).

This issue is critical because teachers play a decisive role in the effectiveness of inclusive education. Even when policies exist, teachers translate those policies into classroom practice. If educators are not trained in inclusive pedagogy, differentiated instruction, disability-sensitive

communication, and assistive technology, students with disabilities may not receive meaningful academic support (Kamran & Bano, 2023; Bokhari et al., 2026). Similarly, when disability is perceived through charity-based, medicalised, or deficit-focused viewpoints, classroom inclusion can reproduce exclusion rather than reduce it (Gul, 2020; Muhammad et al., 2024; Hussain et al., 2025). Therefore, this article examines the gap between physical access and meaningful participation in inclusive education in Pakistan. The focus is not to reject the importance of access, but to show that access must be connected to the conditions that make learning possible: prepared teachers, flexible classroom practice, reasonable accommodations, peer acceptance, and institutional accountability.

Research Gap

Existing literature on inclusive education in Pakistan has examined policy frameworks, disability rights, institutional accessibility, higher education support, and implementation barriers (Gul, 2020; Kamran & Bano, 2023; Manzoor et al., 2024; Hussain et al., 2025). However, much of this discussion remains centred on policy commitments, infrastructure, and institutional arrangements, while comparatively less attention is given to how teacher capacity, classroom-level practice, and sociocultural attitudes shape the everyday participation of students with disabilities. Recent work on teacher education in Punjab shows that pre-service teachers may experience conceptual confusion, practical unpreparedness, and tension between inclusive policy ideals and school realities, indicating that teacher preparation remains a critical but underdeveloped area of inquiry (Bokhari et al., 2026).

This study addresses that gap by focusing on the pedagogical and sociocultural dimensions of inclusion. It examines how teachers, classroom accommodations, disability perceptions, stigma, and community attitudes shape whether inclusive education is meaningful or remains symbolic. By developing the idea of an access–participation gap, the study extends existing debates by arguing that inclusion should not be evaluated solely by enrolment or physical placement, but by participation, learning, progression, and belonging (Ainscow, 2020, 2024; World Bank, 2019).

Research Objectives

1. To analyse why physical placement does not automatically create meaningful inclusion.
2. To examine the role of teacher capacity in inclusive education implementation.
3. To explore classroom-level practices that support or restrict participation.
4. To investigate how sociocultural attitudes toward disability influence inclusive education in Pakistan.

Research Questions

1. Why is physical access alone insufficient for meaningful inclusive education in Pakistan?
2. How does teacher capacity affect the implementation of inclusive education?
3. How do classroom-level practices contribute to passive or meaningful inclusion?
4. How do sociocultural attitudes and disability stigma shape inclusive education experiences?

Literature Review

Conceptualizing Inclusive Education Beyond Placement

Inclusive education requires more than the placement of students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms. It demands equitable and participatory learning environments responsive to the diverse needs of all learners. The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2016) distinguishes between integration and inclusion. Integration places learners into existing systems without transforming them, whereas inclusion requires systemic change in curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, infrastructure, and institutional culture.

UNESCO (2020) contends that genuine inclusion must systematically confront every dimension of exclusion that impedes learners' meaningful participation in quality education. Complementing this view, Ainscow (2020) posits that truly inclusive schools actively recognize and dismantle the structural and pedagogical barriers that obstruct learning and full participation. Taken together, these perspectives make clear that physical access, while necessary, represents only the threshold of a far broader undertaking. Authentic inclusion demands that every student not only occupies a seat in the classroom but genuinely experiences academic scaffolding, meaningful curricular engagement, affirmative peer relationships, personal dignity, and an enduring sense of belonging within the educational community.

World Bank (2019), reinforcing this view, argues that inclusion should go beyond placement and address the learning crisis faced by children with disabilities. If students are physically present but unable to access curriculum, teaching, assessment, or support, then education systems reproduce inequality. Therefore, meaningful inclusion requires a shift from “being there” to “participating and learning.”

Teacher Preparedness and Inclusive Pedagogical Practice

Teacher preparedness is one of the most important conditions for inclusive education. The success of inclusive education hinges primarily on the expertise and readiness of teachers. They are the key facilitators in the classroom, tasked with everything from adapting instructional plans and delivering content in accessible formats to fostering social connections among peers and leveraging assistive technology. When teachers are not properly prepared, even the most robust inclusive policies struggle to take root in the classroom.

Research in Pakistan shows that many teachers lack training in inclusive pedagogy, differentiated instruction, disability-sensitive teaching, and assistive technology (Kamran & Bano, 2023; Muhammad et al., 2024). This lack of preparation limits their ability to effectively modify curricula or assessments to meet the needs of diverse learners. As a result, students with disabilities may find themselves physically present in a general classroom but remain academically isolated because they aren't receiving the necessary support.

As Ainscow (2024) emphasizes, creating truly inclusive schools requires a shift in professional culture toward collaboration and reflection, where student diversity is seen as a standard part of education rather than a problem to be solved. This means that teacher development must go beyond technical skill-building to foster inclusive values. Educators need to be encouraged to

view disability through a social and rights-based lens, moving away from outdated models that focus solely on a student's perceived deficits.

Classroom Mediation, Accommodation, and Participation

The success of inclusive education is also shaped by classroom mediation and accommodation. Teachers make everyday decisions about task modification, assessment flexibility, peer support, extra time, alternative materials, and classroom participation. These decisions determine whether inclusive policy becomes meaningful practice or remains symbolic. Lipsky's (1980) concept of Street-Level Bureaucracy is useful because it positions teachers as frontline implementers who interpret policy through daily practice.

Teacher attitudes matter in this process. When educators perceive disability through the lens of inability or abnormality, they may lower expectations and limit participation opportunities. Oliver's (1990) Social Model of Disability challenges such assumptions by arguing that disability is produced by social and institutional barriers rather than by impairment alone. In inclusive classrooms, the central issue is not whether students with disabilities can learn, but whether teaching, assessment, and classroom culture are designed to support their learning.

Accommodation is, therefore, not a minor administrative adjustment but a mechanism for educational justice. Reasonable accommodations, such as accessible materials, extra time, alternative response formats, captioned resources, or assistive technologies, can determine whether students participate meaningfully or remain present without support. The classroom is thus the point at which policy commitments are either translated into lived inclusion or reduced to symbolic compliance.

Sociocultural Constructions of Disability in Pakistan

Sociocultural attitudes are another major barrier to inclusive education in Pakistan. Disability is often understood through charity-based, welfare-based, religious, medicalised, or pity-based assumptions rather than through rights- and equality-based perspectives (Gul, 2020; Hussain et al., 2025). These attitudes can create stigma, low expectations, and social distancing.

Muhammad, Waqar, and Anis (2024) show that policy language can also reproduce deficit-based views when it uses medicalised terminology or treats inclusion as partial integration. This is important because language shapes institutional and social attitudes. If students with disabilities are described mainly through limitations, institutions may fail to recognise their capabilities and rights.

Sociocultural stigma reverberates through the domestic sphere as well. Families, burdened by the fear of bullying or the weight of social "shame," may opt out of mainstream schooling entirely. By framing disability as a private family tragedy rather than a public rights concern, the community effectively stifles the demand for institutional accountability and slows the momentum toward an inclusive educational landscape.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in a tripartite theoretical framework that brings together three complementary lenses. The Social Model of Disability shifts attention from individual

impairment to the social, institutional, and pedagogical barriers that produce exclusion (Oliver, 1990). It helps explain how stigma, inaccessible teaching, low expectations, and inflexible assessment marginalize students with disabilities in mainstream settings. Street-Level Bureaucracy positions teachers as frontline policy implementers whose daily decisions on task modification, assessment flexibility, and student support shape whether inclusive education is realized in practice (Lipsky, 1980). Inclusive Pedagogy provides the normative standard by arguing that teaching should be designed to accommodate learner diversity through differentiated instruction, collaborative practice, and rights-based classroom culture (Ainscow, 2020, 2024).

Together, these perspectives provide an integrated analytical lens for understanding passive inclusion, in which students are formally enrolled yet remain educationally and socially marginalized. The framework therefore treats inclusive education as both a pedagogical and sociological issue. It shows that inclusion depends not only on policy and infrastructure, but also on teacher practice, classroom culture, institutional support, and social attitudes

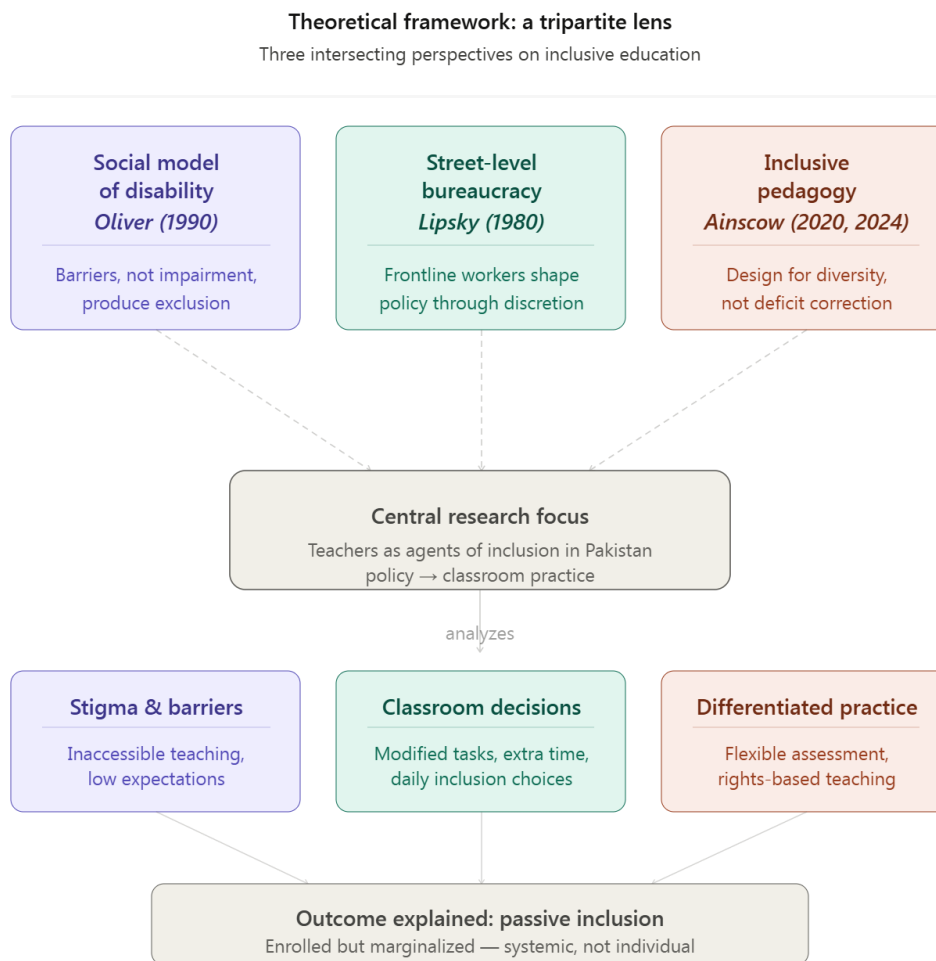


Figure 1: Theoretical framework: a tripartite lens

Methodology

Research Design

This article employs a qualitative documentary research design. It is derived from a more extensive documentary study concerning inclusive education policy and practice in Pakistan. The current article specifically concentrates on teacher capacity, classroom participation, and sociocultural obstacles.

Data Sources

The article utilizes secondary sources, which encompass academic research, policy documents, international frameworks, and development reports. Sources were selected for their relevance to inclusive education, disability rights, teacher preparation, classroom participation, and sociocultural barriers in Pakistan.

The primary sources consist of studies focused on inclusive education in Pakistan, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), reports from UNESCO, documents from the World Bank, policies from the Higher Education Commission (HEC), reports from UNICEF, as well as literature pertaining to disability studies and inclusive pedagogy.

Analytical Approach

The research employs thematic analysis to discern recurring patterns within the reviewed literature. This analysis adhered to the methodology proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2022), which encompasses familiarization, coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and final interpretation.

Inclusion Criteria

Sources were considered if they addressed at least one of the following topics: inclusive education, teacher capacity, attitudes towards disability, classroom practices, sociocultural barriers, disability rights, or the execution of inclusive education in Pakistan.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was enhanced by using a range of sources, including peer-reviewed research, policy documents, and international reports. The coding procedure transitioned from identifying data patterns to developing initial codes, analytical categories, and concluding themes.

Limitation

This article relies on documentary and literature-based analysis. It does not feature primary interviews with students, educators, parents, or administrators. Future studies should incorporate empirical fieldwork to investigate actual classroom experiences.

Findings and Thematic Analysis

The thematic analysis resulted in four interrelated themes that help explain the roles of teacher capacity, classroom practice and sociocultural attitude in inclusive education in Pakistan. Beyond a simple notion of inclusion as a place to be, the analysis examines how students with disabilities can be engaged in learning, evaluation, group interaction, and the life of the institution. The literature reviewed indicates that while students may be formally enrolled in mainstream schools, they may be academically and socially excluded due to inflexible classroom practices and the understandings of disability that are either charity-based or deficit-based (Oliver, 1990; Kamran & Bano, 2023; Muhammad et al., 2024).

Four themes emerged: moving from physical access to meaningful participation; teacher capacity and inclusive pedagogy; passive inclusion and classroom-level practice; and sociocultural attitudes and disability stigma. These themes illustrate that meaningful inclusive education must not be dependent on a school's "open door" policy, but requires teacher readiness to teach, pedagogical approaches that are accessible to students with disabilities, reasonable adjustments, rights-informed attitudes, and societal acceptance (Ainscow, 2020; UNESCO, 2020; World Bank, 2019).

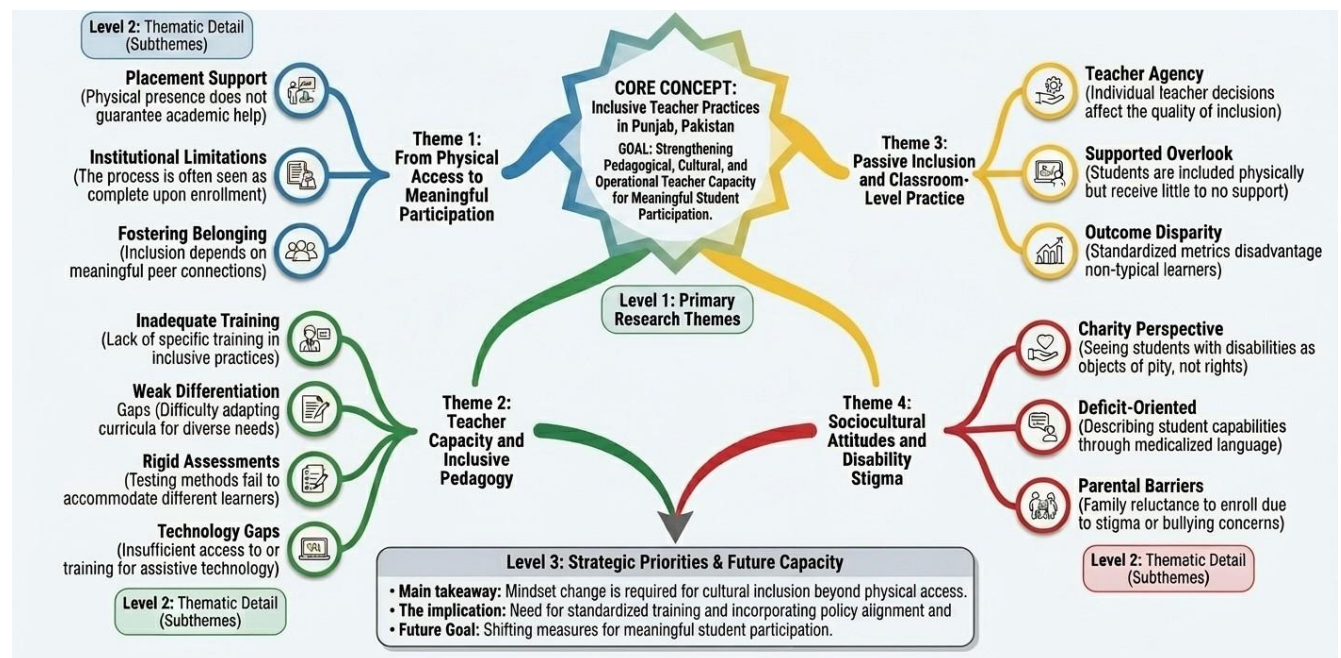


Figure 2: Thematic Hierarchical flow map

Theme 1: Moving from Physical Access to Meaningful Participation

The first theme demonstrates that whilst physical inclusion in mainstream schools may not lead to meaningful inclusion. For most people in Pakistan, inclusive education is understood as the inclusion of students with disabilities in the mainstream schools, colleges and universities. But, just being formally enrolled does not guarantee students will have access to teaching materials, will be able to engage in classroom activities, will be able to complete assessments fairly, will have access to peers, or will feel like they belong in the academic environment. International

bodies that have addressed the rights of learners with disabilities, such as the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2016) and UNESCO (2020), have distinguished inclusion from integration by emphasizing the need for transforming education systems to support learner diversity.

The findings indicate that an 'access-based' approach can achieve the illusion of inclusion but not change the underlying levels of exclusion. Teachers who are not ready, technologies that assist students with disabilities are unavailable, and traditional assessment systems that do not change may prevent a student from being present in a classroom and learning. This represents the World Bank's (2019) position that inclusive education is not about placement but about learning, participation and outcomes of children with disabilities.

Physical Placement without Learning Support

The lack of learning support appears to be one of the most important issues limiting meaningful inclusion in terms of physical placement. Students with disabilities can be enrolled in mainstream schools, but they might not receive reasonable academic adjustments, assistive technologies, appropriate classroom materials or teaching adjustments. In this instance, inclusion is merely an administrative process, and not an educational one. The student is counted as present in the classroom but pedagogically, communication and assessment of the student are not available in the classroom.

The lack of teacher training and availability, limited assistive technologies and the lack of institutional support are areas of concern for meaningful inclusion in Pakistan (Kamran & Bano, 2023; Manzoor et al., 2024). Physical placement is then insufficient if institutions fail to offer learning conditions in terms of pedagogy, technology and administration to enable students with disability to engage in learning.

Access without Participation

Access without participation refers to students who can attend class without participating in any activities. Participation involves contributing to class discussions, group work, and assessments, relating to peers and being involved in the institutional life. But if teachers fail to modify their lessons, or if colleagues and staff have low expectations, students with disabilities can be passive participants rather than active learners.

According to Ainscow (2020), it is essential for schools to be inclusive and this demands a commitment to identifying and addressing barriers to learning and participation. Institutions need to consider inclusion not only in terms of enrolment data but also in the quality of students' academic and social engagement. A student is in class but not engaged in learning is considered to be in the class, but not in the classroom.

Academic and Social Belonging

Belonging, both academically and socially, is at the heart of meaningful inclusion. Students with disabilities must have access to assistance in their academic work, but they must have dignity, recognition, acceptance and confidence in the learning community as well. Instructional support and social inclusion are thus two aspects of inclusion. UNESCO (2020) explains that inclusion is about all learners who are excluded, and that schools need to act to diversity, not difference.

In Pakistan, a sense of belonging can be precarious and fragile when it comes to inclusion. The student might feel excluded from the mainstream school or like a dependent student. Meaningful inclusion requires an approach that goes beyond simply having students in classrooms, to creating environments that recognise them as capable, active and valued members of the educational community (Ainscow, 2024; World Bank, 2019).

Theme 2: Teacher Capacities and Inclusive Pedagogy

The second theme highlights teachers' capacity as a key factor for inclusive education. Teachers are prime actors, whose role is to make inclusive education policy into practice in the classroom. Inclusion, whether through active participation or passive presence, depends on their knowledge, confidence and attitudes, as well as pedagogical decisions. The study by Kamran and Bano (2023) in Pakistan revealed that teachers are poorly prepared in inclusive pedagogy, differentiated instruction, disability sensitive communication, classroom adaptation, and assistive technology (Muhammad et al., 2024).

Technical ability is not the only aspect of teacher capacity. It also involves having a comprehensive perspective of disability based on a rights and social-model approach. Teachers might have a negative view of disability, an inability, or dependency and set lower expectations and offer fewer opportunities for learning. When they understand disabilities as a result of the social and institutional barriers, they are more likely to adapt teaching and remove barriers to participation (Oliver, 1990; Ainscow, 2024).

Limited Preparation for Inclusive Teaching

There is inadequate preparation for teaching inclusive education, which makes classroom implementation difficult. In principle, teachers may wish to support inclusion but lack confidence in their ability to teach learners with diverse learning needs. Inclusive education will lead teachers to make some changes in teaching, such as simplification and enrichment of learning materials, explanation in different ways, facilitating peer interaction, etc. and to give attention to differences in learning so that every student can participate in a class. Teachers could use whole class approaches if they are not prepared and are not designed to cater for differing learners.

Research in Pakistan also shows that the teacher training is inadequate to implement inclusive education in the classrooms (Muhammad et al., 2024; Kamran & Bano, 2023). This result aligns with the wider inclusive education literature which has supported the need for both theoretical knowledge and practical approaches to differentiate instruction, assessment and support for learners when preparing teachers (Ainscow, 2020, 2024).

Weak Differentiated Instruction & Flexible Assessment

Limited differentiated instruction and assessment are significant challenges for students with disabilities. Teachers need to tailor teaching and learning content, activities, teaching materials and assessment strategies to learners to create an inclusive learning environment. Where teachers are not trained to differentiate instruction, however, students with disabilities might be required to learn and perform using the same (standard) approach which does not meet their needs.

There is a need for flexibility in assessment, especially in the case of the assessment. Additional time, alternative formats, oral responses, scribes, recorded materials, Braille resources, modified assessment conditions and assistive technology may be needed for some students. Without such accommodations, disability-related barriers will be measured rather than measures of learning. Inclusive education is defined as a key component of reasonable accommodations by the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2016), and the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan (2021) has also identified the need for academic accommodations for students with disabilities.

Limited Use of Assistive Technology

Assistive technology is used very little, further limiting inclusive practice in the classroom. The use of assistive technology, like screen readers, Braille materials, hearing support, captioned video, accessible documents and mobility support, can enhance participation for students with disabilities. But teachers' knowledge of how they can use the technology in the classroom is also a prerequisite for technology provision.

The reviewed literature identifies limited access to assistive technology as a persistent barrier in Pakistan (Manzoor et al., 2024; Sightsavers, 2025). This implies that the teacher training and provision of resources need to be connected. Institutions should not only provide assistive devices but also ensure that teachers understand how to use them for lesson planning, assessment, and classroom communication. If there were no connection, assistive technology would not be used and inclusion wouldn't be achieved.

Continuous Professional Development

To become competent in inclusive teaching, continuous professional development is required, as it is not a skill that can be acquired at a one-time workshop. There is a need for continuous training, mentoring, collaboration amongst teachers, observing teachers in action and providing them with practical guidance. Ainscow (2024) suggests that inclusive schools rely on teachers' professional cultures which talk to each other and consider participation barriers. This implies that inclusive education should be integrated into the current teacher training program rather than as a single-event workshop.

Attitudes and beliefs should also be a focus of PD. Teachers require opportunities to critically reflect on deficit, medicalised and charity-thinking when it comes to disability. An awareness of disability based on rights can assist teachers in shifting from problem to barriers in classroom practice and institutional designs (Oliver, 1990; UNESCO, 2020).

Themes 3 - Passive Inclusion and classroom-level practice

The third theme is related to passive inclusion, where the student with disability is formally included in the mainstream classroom but is not supported in learning, participation and/or assessment. It is difficult to detect this type of exclusion as it can be recorded on the student's enrolment record in the institution but the classroom experience can be slight or unequal.

Teachers play a crucial role in this process as they make decisions every day about how to modify tasks, be flexible with assessments, provide peer support, use alternative materials and interact with students in the classroom. If there is a lack of institutional leadership, these

decisions might be based on personal teacher confidence, workload, attitudes, and the support available to teachers as they make decisions, rather than on a uniform inclusion system (Lipsky, 1980).

Physical Presence without Active Learning.

An absence of presence, with absence of learning, is an invisible exclusion. Students can register and sit in class, but cannot participate in the class or activities. They may not have materials available to them, may not be asked to join others in discussion, may not be given the opportunity to work in pairs and groups and may be assessed in inappropriate ways. This type of exclusion is challenging to detect, since the student seems like they're in.

Presence and participation are key tenets of inclusive education. UNESCO (2020) states that inclusion is more than "being in school", it's about "participating in quality education. Likewise, the World Bank (2019) emphasizes the need to achieve learning gains for children with disabilities, instead of just attending school. Passive inclusion thus indicates a lack of change in classroom practices.

Teacher Discretion and Uneven Classroom Support

Teacher discretion negatively affects classroom support when the implementation of inclusive practices is not based on institutional systems, but on the individual teachers' willingness. Some teachers may make a concerted effort to adopt and support students, while others do not attempt adaptations because they lack the training or time, may not know how or have a negative attitude toward it. Therefore, students with disabilities can receive different levels of support based on the teachers, department, and institution.

Lipsky's (1980) theory of the policy worker can be used to understand how outcomes are determined by policy workers' daily decisions. In inclusive education, this means that there is flexibility in how policy is applied from class to class. Inclusive education depends on the commitment of individuals, as well as the lack of clear institutional direction, professional development, and accountability.

Classroom Constraints and Institutional Neglect

Passive inclusion is also a result of constraints within the classroom. In the classroom, teachers might be expected to apply the principles of inclusion in classrooms that are overcrowded, lack specialist assistance and supportive technology, have few assistive technologies and are poorly guided. In such situations, even the most positive teachers will find it difficult to offer any meaningful assistance.

This does not remove teacher responsibility, but it shows that teacher capacity must be institutionally supported. The elements of inclusive classroom practice include leadership, accessible materials, reasonable accommodations, assistive technology and collaborative support systems. Manzoor et al. (2024) and Sightsavers (2025) mentioned that the lack of support systems and the limited resources remain major challenges in Pakistan. Thus, passive inclusion occurs not only in the classroom but also in broader institutional neglect.

Theme 4: Sociocultural Attitudes and Disability Stigma

The fourth theme reveals that the attitudes towards disability in the Pakistani society are strongly influencing inclusive education in Pakistan. Rights, equality and participation (Gul, 2020; Hussain et al., 2025) are often mistakenly interpreted in disability terms through a charitable, pity-based, religious, welfare-based perspective or a medicalized lens. These strongly held values shape family, teacher, administrator, peer and community reactions to students with disabilities.

Thus, there is a need to consider how a policy is implemented, as it is not done in a vacuum; therefore, the role of the socio-cultural attitudes is important. Schools are situated in a social context. When disability is viewed as dependency or incapacity, inclusion could be seen as a nice thing to do, instead of a right to inclusion. When disability is seen as a rights issue, the role of the institution is to provide access to teaching, reasonable adjustments to teaching methods and enable participation. (United Nations, 2006; Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016).

Charity-Based and Deficit-Based Understandings of Disability

Deficit and/or charity-based conceptions of disability locate students with disabilities as the objects of sympathy and not rights-bearing learners. These attitudes can appear helpful but may reinforce inequality by implying that students are less able and dependent. This reduces the chances of meaningful inclusion because it focuses on obstacles at the individual level instead of the institutional level.

Muhammad et al. (2024) demonstrate how deficit discourse can be perpetuated through policy language by musicalizing language or establishing inclusion as one form of integration. Language is important as it influences institutional practice. If a student's experiences are largely framed in terms of their impairments, then the institutions may prioritise managing disability instead of addressing barriers to participation and removing them.

Low Expectations and Classroom Marginalisation

A lack of expectations at school is an effective way of excluding people from learning. Teachers, families, peers and communities may limit opportunities for students with disabilities if they believe that students with disabilities are not capable of learning. Teachers might not be willing to challenge their students, peers might exclude students from group activities and families might not be willing to invest in mainstream education.

The Social Model of Disability takes the focus away from the individual and towards social and institutional barriers to the realization of low expectations (Oliver, 1990). From this perspective, the key question is not whether students with disabilities can learn, but whether classrooms provide accessible teaching, appropriate support, and equal expectations. That is why low expectations equate to pedagogical and cultural barriers.

Family Hesitation and Community Stigma.

The involvement of families and community stigma also influences inclusive education. Parents might not want their children to go to mainstream schools due to the fear of being bullied, discriminated against, labelled as a 'different type of child' or feeling unsafe in the school or a

lack of institutional support. Disability can be perceived as an issue of the family instead of a rights one. These attitudes may diminish the demand for inclusive education in society and the pressures on institutions to be inclusive.

Gul (2020) and Hussain et al. (2025) demonstrate that the social stigma and welfare-based assumptions about persons with disabilities in Pakistan are a major determinant of their disability status. This type of attitude is not only seen in families but also in institutions. If stigma remains unchallenged, schools and universities may continue to treat inclusion as a marginal concern rather than a central responsibility.

Rights-Based Cultural Change

Means of cultural change grounded in rights are needed in order to achieve meaningful and inclusive education. Teacher, student, parent, administrator and community perspectives on disability that remain in the charity or deficit lens will not work within policy frameworks. Inclusion is therefore a matter of shifting from a sympathy-driven approach to an equal participation, dignity, accessibility and justice-based approach, which requires disability awareness, respectful language, student voice, parent involvement and positive representation of persons with disabilities (United Nations, 2006).

The CRPD puts people with disabilities in the right as rights holders and not as objects of care (United Nations, 2006). It is a rights-based approach, which should be followed by educational institutions in Pakistan. Inclusion must be interpreted as equal participation, equal dignity for all, access to it, and equal justice, rather than sympathy or special treatment for the other.

Integrated Thematic Interpretation

The four themes demonstrate the inseparable connection of inclusive education in Pakistan, and its engagement is not only a matter of policy commitment but also of accessibility of the space. Physical placement alone is not sufficient, but is made meaningful by teacher preparedness, classroom adaptation and reasonable accommodations, attitudes, and social acceptance. The quality of the academic support is influenced by the capacity of the teachers; the nature of classroom practice, whether active or passive, influences inclusion; and the sociocultural attitudes of students and/or teachers influence the recognition of the student with a disability as a capable student or a student who is being charitable and assumed to be deficient. The overall conclusion is that Pakistan has a long path to follow to shift from access-based inclusion to participation-based inclusion, in which students with disabilities are welcomed into mainstream institutions and provided with support to learn, participate, progress and belong.

Discussion

This article emphasized physical access to inclusive education for disabled children and beyond and the factors which affect inclusive education in Pakistan, such as teacher capacity and sociocultural barriers. In conclusion, the results show a need to differentiate between formal and informal participation within mainstream institutions, as the latter is necessary but not sufficient for inclusion. Being physically present in classrooms is not enough for students with disabilities to learn, as the teaching methods might be inaccessible, assessments are inflexible, teachers might not be prepared to teach in an inclusive way, and there might be a deficit-based or charity-

oriented approach to disability. In the analysis, the main policy implication discussed is the need to move from an access-based inclusive education to participation-based inclusive education in the context of Pakistan.

The findings further corroborate the idea that superficial inclusion results from physical inclusion. International rights-based frameworks differentiate between true inclusion and integration, emphasizing the need to transform education systems' curricula, pedagogy, assessment, support systems and institutional culture (Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2016; UNESCO, 2020). This difference is important in Pakistan because institutional progress may be measured through admission or enrolment, although the more difficult question of participation remains underexamined. Inclusion is symbolic without students in the classroom to participate in learning discussions, group work, assessment or peer interaction.

Teachers' capacity is the key classroom variable that is positively linked to meaningful inclusion. Inclusive policy is enacted into day-to-day practice by teachers, who decide what adaptations to make, how to be flexible with assessment, which assistive technology to use, whether to include peer support, and how to communicate in the classroom, among other things, in determining whether students with disabilities are included as active participants or passive presences. Research conducted in Pakistan indicates that teachers are not well trained in inclusive pedagogy (Kamran & Bano, 2023), differentiated instruction (Muhammad et al., 2024), disability sensitive teaching, and assistive technology. Inclusive education cannot be based solely on policy commitments; it needs systematic teacher preparation and ongoing professional development.

The results also indicate that passive inclusion is a large risk factor in the mainstream context. Passive inclusion, when students with disabilities are formally included but not supported in education. The type of exclusion is hard to detect as the pupil seems to be part of the classroom. When an accessible classroom is not provided with accessible materials, adapted tasks, fair assessment options, and opportunities for active engagement, the classroom remains an exclusionary space. Lipsky's (1980) concept of Street-Level Bureaucracy provides a useful explanation of this process, as teachers are the frontline implementers of the policy. In some settings where institutional direction is limited, inclusion may depend on individual teachers' discretion rather than institutional responsibility.

In addition to the above, attitudes within the socio-cultural realm add complexity to inclusive education. There is a tendency in Pakistan to view disability through the lens of medicalized, welfare-oriented, pity-oriented or charity-oriented perspectives instead of the rights, equality, and participation-based approach (Gul, 2020; Hussain et al., 2025). Such attitudes can affect teacher expectations, family choices, peer relationships, and institutional priorities. This is also evident in the study by Muhammad et al. (2024), which revealed that deficit-based language in policy discourse can perpetuate exclusionary assumptions. Consequently, Inclusive education demands a reform of the classroom as well as a change in cultural attitudes towards disability. This has policy implications as infrastructure is not enough to bring about institutional improvement. The different aspects of teacher preparation, family participation, disability-aware leadership, and student voice must be treated as part of the same inclusion agenda.

Theoretically, this article contributes to identifying an access-participation gap in inclusive education in Pakistan. This gap explains how students with disabilities may be formally enrolled

in mainstream institutions but remain excluded from active learning, assessment, peer interaction, and belonging. The article uses the Social Model of Disability, Street-Level Bureaucracy and Inclusive Pedagogy to highlight passive inclusion as a systemic problem rather than an issue for the individual learner. The Social Model introduces the concept of social, institutional, and pedagogical barriers to inclusion, even when there is no impairment (Oliver, 1990); Street-Level Bureaucracy brings to light the role teachers play in shaping the real meaning of inclusion in their everyday decisions (Lipsky, 1980); and Inclusive Pedagogy offers the educational solution as differentiation, flexible assessment, collaboration, and appreciating learner diversity (Ainscow, 2020, 2024).

Overall, it is concluded that there is a need for coordinated reform to achieve meaningful inclusive education in Pakistan. Teacher education programs need to be trained to deal with teachers in diverse classrooms in an experiential and rights-based manner. Institutions should provide reasonable accommodations, accessible learning materials, assistive technologies, and classroom-level support. There is a need to involve families and communities to challenge stigma and low expectations. Most of all, inclusion should be considered not only in terms of enrolment, but also in terms of evidence of participation, learning, progression and belonging. These would help to make hidden exclusion more visible and would enable institutional leaders to know in which cases a student is simply present and in which cases they are effectively supported in learning.

Conclusion

This article has concluded that inclusive education in Pakistan needs to go beyond physical access and formal enrolment. Despite the international frameworks, the national policies and institutional guidelines, meaningful inclusion has been limited when students with disabilities are enrolled in mainstream classes but have not received pedagogical support; they are socially excluded and culturally stigmatized.

The analysis identified four connected patterns. Physical inclusion does not necessarily mean meaningful inclusion; Teacher capacity is a key factor in making inclusion a reality in the mainstream classroom; inclusion may be passive and foster ongoing exclusion within the mainstream classroom; and there is a sociocultural stigma attached to disability that influences how families, teachers, peers and institutions perceive disability. Together, these findings show that inclusive education is not only a policy or infrastructure issue. It is also a pedagogical, cultural, and sociological problem.

The main contribution of the article is the distinction between access-based inclusion and participation-based inclusion. Access-based inclusion asks whether students with disabilities are admitted into mainstream institutions. Participation-based inclusion asks whether they are supported in learning, interacting, progressing, and belonging. This distinction is important because enrolment alone can conceal classroom-level exclusion. Including participation, learning and belonging would make passive inclusion more visible and enable institutions to become more aware of barriers to participation in learning, assessment, peer interaction and support.

For Pakistan, the priority should be to strengthen the conditions that enable participation. This requires inclusive pedagogy in teacher education, continuous professional development, reasonable accommodations in the classroom, assistive technology, disability awareness

grounded in rights, and monitoring of participation rather than enrolment in the institutions. Inclusive education should therefore mean more than allowing students with disabilities to sit in mainstream classrooms. It should mean that they are treated with dignity, nurtured as needed, equitably valued and accepted members of the classroom and are recognized as capable learners. This documentary analysis should be extended in future empirical work to include the voices of students with disabilities, teachers, parents and institutional leaders to gain a lived-experience perspective on participation-based inclusion alongside policy and literature perspectives.

The Policy and Practical Recommendations

- Inclusive pedagogy needs to be part of the curriculum in pre-service and in-service teacher education. Differentiated instruction, flexible assessment, disability-sensitive communication, classroom adaptation and assistive technology should be taught.
- There should be clear processes and guidelines within the institution for reasonable accommodations, such as extra time to complete the exam; alternative means to complete the exam; alternative formats of materials; possibly recorded lectures; a scribe to write the questions or materials in Braille; captioned video or flexible attendance if required.
- Should track participation, not just enrollment at schools, colleges and universities. Indicators to look for are classroom engagement, access to assessments, use of accommodations, student progress, peer inclusion, and student satisfaction.
- All educational institutions should appoint a trained disability focal person or inclusion coordinator for students to inform teachers, coordinate disability-related needs and report accessibility issues.
- Regular building inspections, teaching materials, assessments, classroom participation, assistive technology, and assessments of building accessibility and inclusion should be performed by the institutions. The results of such audits should inform annual plans for improving inclusivity.

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Appendix

Coding Matrix

Data pattern	Initial codes	Analytical category	Final theme
Students may enter mainstream institutions but remain unsupported in learning.	Physical placement; limited participation; superficial access	Access versus participation	From Physical Access to Meaningful Participation
Teachers often lack training in inclusive pedagogy and disability-	Teacher unpreparedness; training gap; weak	Teacher capacity	Teacher Capacity and Inclusive Pedagogy

sensitive methods.	differentiation		
Teachers interpret inclusion through daily classroom decisions.	Teacher discretion; frontline practice; classroom adaptation	Classroom implementation	Passive Inclusion and Classroom-Level Practice
Disability is often understood through charity, pity, medicalised labels, or low expectations.	Stigma; deficit views; charity model; low expectations	Cultural construction of disability	Sociocultural Attitudes and Disability Stigma