

Original Article

Embracing Inclusion: Private School Teachers' Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Background: The concept of inclusive education, which integrates students with and without special needs, is pivotal for fostering equitable learning opportunities. Teacher attitudes are a significant determinant of the success of inclusive education policies.

Objective: To ascertain the perspectives of private school teachers in Peshawar regarding the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream educational settings.

Methods: A descriptive cross-sectional study was carried out over six months at seven private schools in Hayatabad, Peshawar, following IRB and ethical approval from KMU. The sample of 200 teachers was determined using a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of 5%. Data were collected using the Attitudes Towards Mainstreaming Scale and analyzed using SPSS Version 25 to provide descriptive statistics, including frequencies and mean±SD values.

Results: Teachers generally regarded inclusive education as a favorable practice (mean 2.03±0.89), with a significant number expressing strong agreement to the inclusion of learners in regular classrooms. The acceptance varied based on the type of disability, with physical disabilities (mean 2.40±1.12 for wheelchair-bound learners) receiving more agreement than behavioral issues (mean 2.36±0.95 for learners who stutter).

Conclusion: Most private school teachers in Peshawar exhibit a supportive stance towards inclusive education. This positive attitude is crucial for fostering an inclusive environment that benefits all students.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Teacher Attitudes, Special Needs, Mainstream Education, Private Schools, Peshawar, Disability Inclusion, Cross-Sectional Study.

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education, defined as the integration of all students, regardless of individual differences, into mainstream educational settings with appropriate adaptations and support, is essential for fostering a sense of community and belonging among students, including those with special abilities (1-3). This approach, which places students in neighborhood schools full-time, is supported by international literature indicating that the attitudes of teachers are crucial for the effective implementation of inclusive educational policies (4). Research has extensively explored the readiness, perceptions, attitudes, and implementation strategies of inclusion in mainstream schools, highlighting the significant resource requirements for its implementation (3). Secondary schools that offer inclusive accommodations play a pivotal role in mitigating discriminatory attitudes, nurturing welcoming communities, constructing an inclusive society, and ultimately achieving education for all. These institutions not only provide quality education to a wide range of learners but also contribute to the improvement of the organizational and economic status of the education system at large, as endorsed by UNESCO (5).

The literature review reveals numerous studies focused on the implementation of inclusive education, the attitudes of teachers and parents towards it (3,4,7,8,9), and identifies essential elements for its success, including resources, school administration, teacher attitudes, and training (10). However, challenges such as the lack of adaptive tools and inaccessible infrastructure impede the realization of inclusive education as a successful practice (5,10). Moreover, differentiation and inequity related to class, gender, and physical appearance persist as common obstacles to its implementation (10). In response to these challenges, Pakistan ratified the

CRPD in 2011, aiming to ensure basic rights for persons with disabilities (PWDs) in education, health, employment, and other community domains (11). The United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (1989) and on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) underscore literacy as a critical component for all, including children with disabilities (12, 13).

Specific studies within the Pakistani context, such as the investigation into teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education in primary private schools in Lahore (2008) and a comparative analysis of the perceptions of primary school teachers in Peshawar (2020) between rural and urban boys' schools, have shown a generally positive perception of inclusive education with no significant differences between urban and rural teachers' views (5,14). Despite this positive outlook, a gap in the literature was identified regarding the attitudes of private school teachers towards inclusive education in Peshawar. Addressing this gap, our study aimed to explore the perspectives of private school teachers on the inclusion and mainstreaming of children with disabilities (CWDs) in mainstream schools. This investigation seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on inclusive education, highlighting the necessity of supportive teacher attitudes and adequate resources for its success.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Following the approval of our research proposal by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the ethical committee of Khyber Medical University (KMU), we conducted a descriptive cross-sectional study across seven private schools located in Hayatabad, Peshawar, over a period of six months. Utilizing a Rao soft calculator, the sample size was determined to be 200 participants, based on a known population size, with a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of 5%. The primary instrument for data collection was the Attitudes Towards Mainstreaming Scale (ATMS) questionnaire, which was designed to assess the demographic characteristics of the teachers and their attitudes towards inclusive education and the integration of children with diverse abilities into mainstream schools (13).

Data collection was rigorously conducted in accordance with the ethical standards set forth by the Declaration of Helsinki. Prior to participating in the study, all teachers were provided with comprehensive information about the research objectives, methodology, and potential implications of the study. Informed consent was obtained from each participant, ensuring their understanding that participation was voluntary, their responses would remain confidential, and the data collected would be accessible only to the research team for analysis purposes. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without any consequences.

The data analysis was performed using SPSS Version 25, marking an update from the initially planned software version to ensure the application of the latest statistical analysis techniques. The analysis employed descriptive statistics to summarize the data, including frequencies and mean \pm standard deviation (S.D.) measures. This approach facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the prevailing attitudes towards inclusive education among private school teachers in Hayatabad, Peshawar.

Throughout the research process, strict adherence to ethical considerations was maintained to protect the rights and welfare of the participants. This included ensuring confidentiality and privacy of the teacher responses, which were safeguarded throughout the study. The commitment to ethical standards underscores the integrity of the research findings and contributes to the credibility of the study's conclusions regarding the attitudes of private school teachers towards inclusive education.

RESULTS

The results of the study revealed nuanced attitudes toward inclusive education among participants. The visualized data comprises two graphs representing the age and gender distribution of study participants. The bar chart on the left shows the age distribution

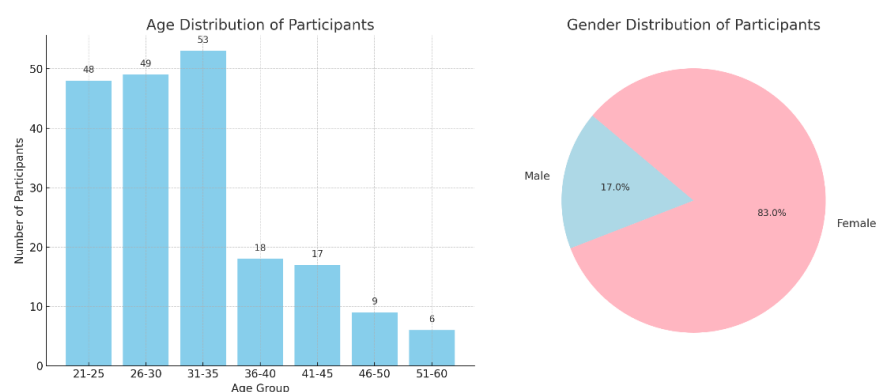


Figure 1 Age and Gender Distribution

with the largest group being 31-35 years old with 53 participants, followed closely by the 26-30 and 21-25 age groups with 49 and 48 participants respectively. The other age groups, 36-40, 41-45, 46-50, and 51-60 years, have significantly fewer participants, with counts of 18, 17, 9, and 6 respectively. The pie chart on the right illustrates the gender distribution, with a predominant 83% of participants being female and 17% being male, indicating a substantial gender imbalance among the study subjects.

In assessing the general perception of inclusive education as a desirable practice (Table 1), the mean response was notably low, with the first statement receiving a mean of 2.03 and a standard deviation (SD) of 0.955. This suggests a positive inclination, as reflected by 28% of participants strongly agreeing and a majority of 53% agreeing with the statement. A similar sentiment was observed in the second statement, where a slightly lower mean of 1.91 (SD = 1.01) was recorded, and a combined 79.5% either agreed or strongly agreed with the right of all learners to be included in regular classrooms. The feasibility of teaching students of varying intellectual abilities together was met with more reservation, evident from a higher mean of 2.97 (SD = 1.33) and a more dispersed response: 18% strongly agreed, 22% agreed, while 27% disagreed and 14% strongly disagreed (Table 1).

When considering the inclusion of children with visual and hearing impairments (Table 2), the participants expressed more caution. The mean scores were higher, indicating less agreement, with learners with visual impairments receiving a mean of 2.32 (SD = 0.948) and those who are hearing-impaired but not deaf receiving a mean of 2.69 (SD = 1.099). The most reluctance was observed regarding the inclusion of deaf learners in regular classrooms, with a mean of 3.05 (SD = 1.32) and 43% expressing some form of disagreement (Table 2).

Table 1: Attitude Toward Inclusion as a Desirable Educational Practice

S.No	Statements	Mean	SD	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Uncertain (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
1	In general, inclusive education is a desirable educational practice.	2.03	0.955	28	53	11	4	4
2	Learners should have the right to be in regular classrooms.	1.91	1.01	41	38.5	12.5	3.5	4.5
3	Feasible to teach gifted, normal, and intellectually disabled together.	2.97	1.33	18	22	19	27	14
4	Generally, inclusive education is a desirable practice.	1.98	0.90	29	53	12	2	3.5
5	Inclusive education will be sufficiently successful to be retained.	2.19	0.93	21.4	50.2	16.9	9.5	1.5

Table 2: Attitude Towards Inclusion of Children with Visual and Hearing Impairment

S.No	Statements	Mean	SD	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Uncertain (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
1	Learners with visual impairments in regular classrooms.	2.32	0.948	16.5	51	18	13	1.5
2	Hearing-impaired, but not deaf, in regular classrooms.	2.69	1.099	13.5	36.5	21	25.5	3.5
3	Deaf learners should be in regular classrooms.	3.05	1.32	14.5	25	17.5	27	16

Table 3: Attitude Towards Inclusion of Children with Physical Disabilities

S.No	Statements	Mean	SD	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Uncertain (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
1	Physically disabled in wheelchairs in regular classrooms.	2.40	1.12	24	35	21	16	3.5
2	Physically disabled not in wheelchairs in regular classrooms.	2.43	1.044	17.5	45	16	20	1.5
3	With cerebral palsy who cannot control limbs in regular classrooms.	2.99	1.13	12.5	22	25	35	5.5
4	Learners with epilepsy should be in regular classrooms.	2.87	1.18	17	46	22	14	1
5	Learners with diabetes should be in regular classrooms.	2.07	1.18	20	33	21	23.5	2

Table 4: Attitude Towards Children with Language and Behavior Issues

S.No	Statements	Mean	SD	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Uncertain (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
1	Learners who stutter in regular classrooms.	2.36	0.95	12	33	19	28	8
2	Speech difficult to understand in regular classrooms.	2.54	1.11	21	58	14	5.5	1
3	Short-tempered and easily angered in regular classrooms.	2.30	0.89	15.5	52	20.5	11	1
4	Provoke peers or authorities in regular classrooms.	2.48	0.98	13.5	45.5	21	19	1
5	Defiant and non-compliant in regular classrooms.	2.30	0.94	20	43.5	22.5	14	0
6	Poor frustration tolerance in regular classrooms.	2.36	0.95	14.9	50.2	18.9	13.9	1.5
7	Angry or hostile in regular classrooms.	2.30	1.02	19.9	50.2	10	18.4	1
8	Persistent discipline problems in regular classrooms.	2.50	0.88	9	48.8	25.4	15.9	0.5

The attitudes toward the inclusion of children with physical disabilities (Table 3) showed a similar pattern of cautious acceptance. Physical disability requiring a wheelchair had a mean score of 2.40 (SD = 1.12) and a total of 59% of participants in favor of their inclusion. Contrastingly, the inclusion of children with cerebral palsy who have uncontrolled limb movement received a higher mean of 2.99 (SD = 1.13), indicating more hesitation, with a significant 40.5% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with their inclusion in regular classrooms (Table 3).

Lastly, the inclusion of children with language and behavioral issues (Table 4) was met with varied responses. Learners with stuttering had a mean of 2.36 (SD = 0.95), with 45% in agreement with their inclusion, whereas learners with difficult-to-understand speech were more accepted, as indicated by a higher agreement rate (79%) and a mean of 2.54 (SD = 1.11). The acceptance decreased for learners with behavior issues like short temper, defiance, and poor frustration tolerance, with means ranging from 2.30 to 2.50 and higher percentages of uncertainty and disagreement (Table 4).

DISCUSSION

The integration of children with special needs alongside their peers in general education classrooms, a concept known as inclusive education, seeks to provide equitable opportunities and foster an environment conducive to the best performance of all students, thereby enhancing their problem-solving abilities and self-esteem (15). The findings from our study suggest that the majority of teachers held a favorable view (mean attitude score of 2.03 ± 0.89) towards inclusive education, aligning with the positive attitudes observed in Finland and Japan (9). These results resonate with previous research within Pakistan, where a significant proportion of teachers responded positively to the concept of inclusive education (mean attitude score of 3.8 ± 1.134) (Khan, Hashmi, Khanum). However, there was also a notable count of dissenters (mean attitude score of 2.52 ± 1.255) who questioned the practicality of teaching children with and without special needs in the same classroom (16). This contrasted with the situation in Ghana, where the prevailing attitude among teachers towards inclusive education was less favorable (17).

Concurrently, research conducted at the University of Haifa revealed a positive stance from teachers regarding the inclusion of students with behavioral and learning challenges (mean attitude score of 3.12 ± 0.45), underscoring the need for environmental adjustments to facilitate such integration (18). This perspective was echoed in our study, which also underscored an optimistic view among teachers towards accommodating children with behavioral issues and those who struggle with adherence to rules (mean attitude score of 2.30 ± 0.89). The study further indicated a greater propensity among teachers to support the inclusion of physically disabled students who are ambulatory (17.5% strongly agreed, 45% agreed) as opposed to those who are wheelchair-bound (24% strongly agreed, 35% agreed), findings that were in line with previous studies advocating for the inclusion of students with less severe disabilities in regular classrooms (19, 20).

Contrastingly, one study highlighted a general teacher reluctance to include students with aggressive behavior, despite a willingness to integrate those with communicative difficulties (21), a finding at odds with our research where the majority of participants favored including children with aggressive tendencies and communication disorders in the classroom. Inclusive education underscores the full participation of all students, irrespective of disabilities, in a shared learning environment, thus enhancing their morale and reinforcing their value within society. The success of inclusive education is heavily dependent on the competence and willingness of teachers to recognize and meet the diverse needs of their students (22).

A comparative study at the University of Tuzla looked at teacher attitudes towards inclusive education in Bosnia, Herzegovina, and the European Union, revealing that EU teachers displayed more positive attitudes than their Bosnian and Herzegovinian counterparts (23). These findings are congruent with our study, where most teachers (53%) exhibited a positive attitude, with only a small fraction expressing uncertainty (11%) or disagreement (4%) regarding the concept of inclusive education.

In conclusion, our research aimed to elucidate the attitudes of private school teachers towards inclusive education. The findings indicate that despite some challenges, most teachers hold a supportive stance on inclusive education and recognize its benefits for both special needs and typically developing children. Teachers appear ready to welcome children with diverse needs into their classrooms, though they acknowledge certain limitations in meeting these needs adequately.

Considering these findings, we recommend that the government should spearhead training programs to enhance teacher proficiency and foster a favorable disposition towards an inclusive environment. Additionally, conducting seminars, workshops, and awareness sessions on inclusive education can contribute to building a more positive perception. Further research should investigate parental readiness for inclusive education and the potential for sending their children to inclusive settings. Lastly, ensuring the provision of adequate resources is crucial for the successful implementation of inclusive education. The study does have its limitations, including the use of convenience sampling and the exclusive focus on private schools, which may not provide a comprehensive view of the broader educational landscape.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the positive attitudes toward inclusive education held by private school teachers, as indicated by this study, have significant implications for human healthcare, particularly in the context of mental health and social integration. When educators embrace inclusive practices, they foster an environment that supports the psychological well-being and development of all children, especially those with special needs. This inclusivity not only prepares students for a diverse society but also promotes resilience and empathy among the student population. Such outcomes align with broader health objectives that seek to improve quality of life and social cohesion, thereby underlining the vital role of inclusive education in the advancement of public health.

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