

Challenges for Education of Children With Disabilities in Pakistan

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Abstract

Considering the needs of children with diverse needs, current legislation emphasizes the allocation of a special budget to address the needs of children with disabilities in Pakistan. However, Pakistan is one of the countries that is not investing a reasonable budget to accommodate the needs of children with disabilities like many other developing and developed countries. This column reports on three current issues in relation to children with disabilities in Pakistan: (a) education for children with disabilities, (b) challenges to inclusion of children with disabilities, and (c) current education status of children with disabilities. Suggestions for future directions are also discussed.

Keywords

international special education, teacher training, inclusion

Compared with other countries in Asia, Pakistan has a lack of reliable empirical evidence on the prevalence and status of individuals with disabilities. The challenge of lack of observation has been debated by many national and international agencies, such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 1999), Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA, 2002) and United Nations Children's Fund. In the past few decades, the Pakistani government has initiated different attempts to collect accurate data regarding persons with disabilities in the population censuses of 1961, 1981, and 1998. However, these efforts have been unsuccessful due to insufficient clarity of the facts and figures, and apprehensions regarding underreporting due to issues of social stigma. Children with diverse needs in Pakistan are facing varied problems such as societal discrimination, shame, and stigma and have insufficient access to quality education (The Economist Intelligence Unit Limited, 2014). Pakistan has formulated the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* to determine the rights of persons with disabilities, including the right to education. Followed by this, Pakistan has also ratified the *World Conference of Education for All* (UNESCO, 1990), the *Salamanca Declaration* (UNESCO, 1994), and the *Dakar Framework for Action of Education for All* (Pakistan Institute of Development Economics

[UNICEF], 2004). While the Pakistani government has initiated different programs for the well-being of students with disabilities, the provision of facilities to this overlooked and often stigmatized section of society still is not a priority (Ministry of Children and Youth Services, 2005). The government of Pakistan recently has introduced Article 25-A, with a focus on allocating a special budget that caters to the needs of children with disabilities (Singal, 2015). Children with disabilities are still being treated as a vulnerable population, who are experiencing societal discrimination, shame, stigma, and limited access to quality education (The Economist Intelligence Unit Limited, 2014).

According to the recent survey of Pakistan Bureau of Statistics data taken by the National Database and Registration Authority (Government of Pakistan [NADRA], 2020), there are 371,833 children with disabilities in Pakistan across disability areas such as blindness (19,643), deafness and speech impairment (25,183), physical disabilities (295,093), and intellectual disabilities (31,914).

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The *Annual Status of Education Reports* (ASER-Pakistan, 2017) examined extensive disparities between richer and poorer cities in rural Pakistan and, even within the richest cities, it was found that poor girls perform unsatisfactory more often than their richer counterparts (Alcott & Rose, 2015). ASER also presented emerging evidence on both access and learning for children with disabilities in the Punjab province in Pakistan (Malik et al., 2022). Many children with diverse needs are learning the fundamentals in numeracy and literacy, although their chances of learning the basics are more constrained compared with their peers in a context of overall very low levels of learning. However, other factors (e.g., parental background, socioeconomic status, and the type of school attended) are also considered. In emerging countries, including Pakistan, children with diverse needs are more vulnerable as compared with children in the developed world (Harland, 2002; Hameed & Manzoor, 2019). In Pakistan, such children face the binary problem of (a) having a disability, and (b) growing up in a developing country, hence making them more vulnerable in all walks of life (Ali et al., 2014).

Children With Disabilities in Pakistan

Children with disabilities are those who are identified with (a) deafness and speech impairment, (b) blindness, (c) autism, (d) mental health issues, (e) physical disability, and (f) learning disabilities. They need focused remedial services based on a specific rehabilitation plan. National laws and policies define disability as “a long term physical or mental condition that limits a person’s movements, senses or activities and shall include physical, mental, intellectual and developmental disorders or sensory impairments” (Pakistan, ICT Rights of Persons with Disability Act, 2020), whereas according to Disabled World (2009) an individual with disability is a person who has physical or mental impairment that severely influences the performing of one’s regular activities. The words *disabled* and *disability* are often used in an undesirable context in Pakistani society (Malik et al., 2022). In Pakistan, children with disabilities experience many challenges both from their own family members and from the society in general. People with a lack of empathy and awareness may stigmatize such children socially with some viewing a disability as a “curse of God,” particularly in rural areas of Pakistan (Rathore et al., 2011). Moreover, mainly due to superstitious beliefs, many people consider their child’s disability has occurred because of their own misdeeds committed in the past (Rohwerder, 2018). These children are often seen as an embarrassment for their family and may even be kept hidden from other people so as the family’s social prestige may be safeguarded (Upadhayay & Kakar, 2021). Many children with disabilities live a miserable life due to the prejudiced attitude of their parents who regard them as inferior compared to their typically developing children (Jette, 2006). Subsequently,

they are socially segregated from most mainstream public activities (Rohwerder, 2018).

Situation for Children With Disabilities in Pakistan

In Pakistan, children with disabilities are not integrated into the society and encounter multiple challenges such as a lack of access to health facilities, funds, and qualified educational staff to satisfy to their needs. Similarly, parents consider their child with a disability as an economic burden, who may be the target of inappropriate remarks, disrespectful behavior, cursing, and mocking both by adults and by children (Arsh & Darain, 2019).

The subject of women and girls with disabilities is not addressed distinctly from males with diverse needs. There is slight recognition of the issues of women and girls with disability in the *National Plan of Action* (NPA) (Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Education, 2006), but the NPA is only part of documents and literary discourse rather a practical guideline for the desired purpose. The relevant stakeholders are not aware of the rights of women and girls with disabilities, coupled with laws, policies, plan of actions, and protocols. Consequently, there is no little application of these. Likewise, the existing policy or judicial framework is insufficient to meet the diverse needs of women and girls. There is meager coordination between the government departments and divisions, and insignificant access to civic society organizations (Hameed & Manzoor, 2019).

Likewise, access to education for children with diverse needs can be a challenge due especially to a lack of transportation services (UNICEF, 2013). More often than not the existing transport vehicles lack special stairs or lifts to facilitate physical access to the bus. Such circumstances can discourage students with disabilities from pursuing appropriate education, hence causing them challenges in exploring employment in the future. Pakistan spends less than 3% of its gross national product (GNP) for education, which is lower than almost all other countries in the Asian region. Moreover, reports (Aslam & Kingdon, 2011) reveal a very real inadequate quality of teaching and learning in classrooms. In addition, there is also a dearth of qualified teachers in training to work with children with disabilities (Upadhayay & Kakar, 2021). In Pakistan, a large number of educational institutions have no sign language practice for the deaf and no Braille coaching for students with visual impairment. This state of affairs is not only sad for these children but also a distressing situation for the country’s literacy rates (Singal, 2015).

Implementation of Policy Legislation for Children With Disabilities

Significant special education initiatives, including the National Policy for Persons with Disability (Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Women Development, Social

Welfare and Special Education, 2002), have been taken in Pakistan to provide equal opportunity of education to the children with disabilities. This is the exclusive document delineating the government's purpose statement and vision in this domain and presents a holistic approach for the overall benefits of individuals with disabilities pertaining to all aspects of their lives in the community and society. Moreover, it states, "At the international level, the movement towards making education an integral part of education has been gaining ground. Integration of children with disabilities in normal systems of education shall therefore be promoted at all levels" (p.7). Hence, this policy emphasizes the rationale to provide the focused rehabilitation and education that is desired at international level.

Nevertheless, the policy's aim of mainstreaming individuals with disabilities is significant but the lack of execution remains a major worry. Another initiative, *The National Plan of Action* (Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Women Development, Social Welfare and Special Education, 2006), recommends measures to operationalize the policy and notes that access, inclusion, and stabilization of prospects for those with disabilities are not possible through inaccessible interventions. The NPA indicates 17 domains of intervention, from assessment of the extent of the problem to service delivery systems, with a long-term plan to be achieved by July 2025. Furthermore, it stresses the effective execution and development of social support and a social security program under the requirements of prevailing laws. Two additional documents contribute in the domain of disability in Pakistan, specifically the *Islamabad Declaration on Accessibility for Persons with Disabilities* (2006) and the *Islamabad Declaration on Accessibility for Persons with Disabilities* (2009), both of which have been the result of many nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) coming together to sustain a responsibility regarding disability issues. However, neither of these documents have any authorized status, although they are insightful of the existing state and thinking in the field. Hence, some reviewers have debated that, given the current situation, prevailing policies and laws on disability in Pakistan need to be refined and reformed to bring them in line with changes in society and evolution in various models for the rehabilitation and mainstreaming of persons with disabilities. Thus, in a nutshell, Pakistan is still in a segment of designing inclusive policies but operationalizing only a few small-scale projects rather than a national commitment (Singal, 2015).

Current Education Status of Children With Disabilities

The World Bank categorizes Pakistan as a "lower middle income" state. Pakistan is the sixth most populated country in the world with its population of over 210 million people.

Pakistan's fertility proportion is the uppermost between neighboring countries at 3.7 children per woman (United Nations Population Division, 2019). The percentage of children below 5 years of age in Pakistan is very high at 37% and is associated with the lower middle-income country average of 29% (Upadhyay & Kakar, 2021). Approximately 40% of the population lives in metropolitan cities; however, the rest still are located in rural areas. The core religion of Pakistan is Islam with about 96.4% of the overall population being Muslim (World Bank, 2019).

Individuals with disabilities are lagging on numerous socioeconomic indicators and are limited in their rights to education, health care, employment, and medical treatment. Compared with neighboring countries in the South Asian developing regions, Singal (2016) revealed that compared with India, Pakistan remained unsuccessful in improving the circumstances of children with disabilities, finding that a large number of them stay out of school. These challenges are mainly faced by children with disabilities in relation to school enrolment and obtaining a quality education. These undesirable effects are more pronounced for girls. Likewise, women with disabilities have worse access to both education and lifework prospects. In Pakistan, a girl with a disability experiences higher discrimination in access to education, health care, employment, and finding a life partner (Upadhyay & Kakar, 2021). Moreover, girls with disabilities may stay out of school in higher numbers due to perceived humiliation associated with disability, and the possibility of harassment, particularly where girls require assistance moving around (Roman et al., 2014). Another indicator associated with enrolment in schools is parental education. Regardless of disability status of children, parents (i.e., both father and mother) who are educated themselves reveal a higher inclination to send their children to schools; hence, a positive relationship exists between parents' educational attainments with their children's educational attainments.

Another significant challenge is the lack of proper introduction of inclusive education that is not well defined in either constitutional or policy legislation across federal and provincial levels. Although some documents have indirectly mentioned the idea of *inclusive education*, ambiguity persists concerning which vulnerable groups are likely to be excluded from the education system due to barriers and must be incorporated into any inclusive education policy. A consequence of this absence of definition at the systems level is observed in how most of the educational plans do not consider the needs of all vulnerable groups regardless of gender, learning needs, age, ethnic/minority context, and economic characteristics. The existence of special education schools as well as segregated schools for boys and girls echoes an inadequate understanding of inclusive education. Although typical schools cannot refuse admission to a child with mild or physical disabilities, the presence of a parallel

special education system demonstrates that the mainstream schools remain incapable of providing a comprehensive learning environment and culture for children with disabilities where the dimensions of inclusive learning are yet to be entirely familiar. Another barrier is the absence of a suitable and flexible curriculum (Upadhayay & Kakar, 2021).

After the 18th Legitimate Amendment in 2010, education became a regional subject of study. However, the curriculum in practice across the country is the National Curriculum (Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Education, 2006), which does not address the requirements of inclusive education. As a consequence, the textbooks, learning resources, assessments, and monitoring mechanisms are not effective. Children from vulnerable families, including children with disabilities, gender minorities, ethnic minorities, poor, rural, and immigrants, are not catered to properly within the normal education system. Another significant challenge is a deficit of resources and qualified staff, which acts as a roadblock. Lack of teacher training to integrate the concept of inclusive education into the curriculum and insufficient appropriate teaching pedagogies are significant challenges to teaching children with disabilities (Thakur & Abbas, 2017; Umar & Asghar, 2017).

Challenges to Inclusion of Children With Disabilities

Teachers confront several challenges when working with children in mainstream schools. Not only do they have to provide the children with a quality education; they also have to certify the protection and comfort of these children. When children with disabilities are included in the classroom, challenges for the teacher reasonably rise, and teacher attitudes and concerns become even more important. Many mainstream education teachers reveal annoyance, frustration, and an undesirable attitude toward children with disabilities, mainly because they feel fearful and unprepared to work with them in the regular classrooms.

Coles et al. (2005) noted a primary challenge that teachers have to face is individual to himself/herself. They have to keep order, stay impartial, and also engender eagerness, persistence, and respect. The teacher must make sure to provide children with disabilities an equivalent opportunity to attain their full potential but not at the expense of the other children, which can be a significant challenge without proper training. It is crucial that the teacher not show personal prejudices toward any student with or without a disability. Teachers have to be open-minded in the classroom setting so that knowledge is dispersed equally to all the students.

It would require a majority of teachers who were willing to teach children with disabilities for there to be a chance for an effective execution of inclusion in Pakistan. However,

evidence indicates that teachers do believe that mainstreaming is more helpful, but they indicate a lack of confidence in teaching children with diverse needs and believe that such children are still better off in special segregated schools (Mizunoya et al., 2018). Moreover, teachers do not believe that inclusion can be applied successfully if there is also a resource teacher available who is supposed to present in the class only to support in educating the special needs children (Singal, 2015). Another challenge is that teachers feel they lack the coaching and training to teach children with disabilities, so to encourage inclusion, additional training organizations should be set up to train teachers specifically to cater the needs of these children (Malik et al., 2022).

Teacher Licensing: A Step Toward Quality Special Education in Pakistan

Teacher licensing currently does not exist in Pakistan. There are many studies that indicate the poor teaching quality in Pakistan to address the needs of the learners in mainstreaming schools and this scenario in special schools is even more serious (Naqvi, 2013; Rieser, 2008; Singal, 2015). Teacher education programs are not emphasizing the practice-based teaching to enable preservice teachers to meet the needs of the learners. Hence, teacher certification is generally the best solution that is obligatory in most countries and is used as a means of capacity building of those who enter the profession. The benefits of teacher certification comprise amplified declaration and confidence of parents and pupils in the teachers' knowledge, characteristics, competence, skills, and training. At an advanced management level, education departments and institutes of teacher education would be able to regulate and manage teachers and have precise data for placement, subject specialization, and deliberate planning. Likewise, planning for continuous professional development and planned career development pathway for helping teachers would be rationalized. Newly-developed continuous professional development program or an in-service associate degree in education would be bridging courses for facilitating serving teachers. (Rizwan, 2015).

Introducing teacher licensing should be a part of the National Education Policy implemented through the Ministry of Education at the federal and provincial levels (Rizwan, 2015). This initiative can bring opportunities for the true serving of teachers who want to make difference in children's learning by utilizing their motivational strategies. This will also motivate serving (in-service) teachers to upgrade their qualification that would also bring continuous professional development opportunities. In general, teacher licensing as a means of quality assurance would help the education system and novice teachers in particular. These enterprises are a leap in the accurate

direction and would facilitate refining the quality of education in the country, provided they are instigated and of a high level of quality, and that transparency and liability standards are sustained.

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