Exploring Cultural Influences Supporting Inclusive Education In Pakistan: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract
This qualitative study investigates the cultural influences supporting inclusive education in Pakistan, aiming to explore the factors contributing to its promotion and examine the perspectives and experiences of key stakeholders. Employing a phenomenological approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 Heads of Government Special Education Schools/Centres and five District Education Officers across Pakistan. The objectives were to investigate participants' perspectives on inclusive education, identify cultural influences shaping inclusive practices, and provide recommendations for policy and practice. Thematic analysis revealed diverse perspectives on inclusive education, emphasizing equity, diversity, and accessibility as fundamental components. Cultural beliefs and values emerged as significant factors shaping inclusive practices, underscoring the need for culturally responsive approaches. Challenges such as limited resources and resistance to change were identified, alongside opportunities for collaboration with stakeholders and policymakers. Recommendations included the development of culturally sensitive policies, implementation of inclusive teacher training programs, and fostering community engagement. In conclusion, aligning policies, resources, and practices with inclusive principles is crucial for creating equitable and accessible educational environments in Pakistan. Continuous collaboration and reflection among stakeholders are essential for meaningful and sustainable change in inclusive education practices.

Keywords: Inclusive education, cultural influences, qualitative study, cultural diversity, thematic analysis

Introduction
Inclusive education, as a fundamental human right, lies at the heart of efforts to ensure equitable access to quality education for all students, irrespective of their diverse learning needs (UNESCO, 2020). It represents a transformative approach to education that seeks to address barriers to learning and create supportive environments where every learner can thrive (Booth & Ainscow, 2011). Central to the success of inclusive education are cultural factors, which play a significant role in shaping attitudes, policies, and practices within educational systems (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002).

Background of the Study
In Pakistan, as in many other countries, inclusive education remains a pressing concern, particularly for marginalized and vulnerable groups, including children with disabilities, girls, and those from low-income backgrounds (Ahmed, 2017). Despite efforts to promote inclusive education through policy initiatives such as the National Education Policy (2017-2025), significant challenges persist in translating inclusive ideals into practice (Government of Pakistan, 2017). Limited resources, inadequate teacher training, and social stigma continue to hinder progress towards inclusive education goals (Ahmed, 2017; UNESCO, 2019).

Within this context, cultural norms, beliefs, and practices exert a profound influence on educational practices and the experiences of students with diverse learning needs (Habib, 2018). Pakistan's rich cultural heritage, characterized by linguistic diversity, religious pluralism, and traditional values, shapes perceptions of disability, gender roles, and social inclusion (Khan, Ali, & Ahmed, 2020). While cultural factors can either facilitate or hinder inclusive education efforts, there is a need for empirical research to explore the specific ways in which cultural influences contribute to the promotion of inclusive practices in Pakistani schools.

Cultural Perceptions of Disability

Cultural norms and beliefs about disability significantly influence attitudes towards inclusive education in Pakistan. In many cultural contexts, disability is stigmatized, and individuals with disabilities may face social exclusion and discrimination (Ahmed, 2017). However, cultural beliefs also vary widely across communities, with some traditions valuing diversity and emphasizing the importance of inclusion (Khan, Ali, & Ahmed, 2020). Understanding and challenging negative stereotypes about disability are essential steps towards fostering inclusivity in Pakistani schools (Habib, 2018). Culturally sensitive approaches that recognize the unique strengths and contributions of individuals with disabilities can help promote acceptance and create inclusive learning environments (Loreman et al., 2011).

Gender Norms and Educational Equity

Cultural norms regarding gender roles and expectations play a significant role in shaping access to education in Pakistan. While progress has been made in increasing girls' enrollment in schools, gender disparities persist, particularly in rural and marginalized communities (UNESCO, 2019). Deep-rooted cultural beliefs about the appropriate roles and responsibilities of girls and women may limit their access to education and perpetuate inequalities (Government of Pakistan, 2017). Addressing gender norms and promoting girls' education are crucial components of inclusive education efforts, requiring collaboration with families, communities, and religious leaders to challenge stereotypes and promote gender equity in schools (Ahmed, 2017).

Language and Cultural Diversity

Pakistan's linguistic diversity presents both challenges and opportunities for inclusive education. With more than 70 languages spoken across the country, language barriers can hinder access to education for marginalized communities (UNESCO, 2019). However, cultural diversity also enriches the educational experience and provides opportunities for cross-cultural learning (Khan, Ali, & Ahmed, 2020). Embracing linguistic and cultural diversity in schools can promote inclusivity and foster a sense of belonging among students from diverse backgrounds (Habib, 2018). Culturally responsive teaching practices that incorporate students' languages and cultural perspectives can enhance learning outcomes and promote social cohesion (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002).

Community Engagement and Social Capital

Cultural practices of community engagement and social capital play a vital role in supporting inclusive education initiatives in Pakistan. Strong social networks and community support can enhance school participation and provide essential resources for students with diverse learning needs (Ahmed, 2017). Community-based organizations, religious institutions, and local leaders can act as advocates for inclusive education and mobilize resources to support marginalized students (Khan, Ali, & Ahmed, 2020). Collaborative partnerships between schools and communities are essential for promoting inclusivity and addressing barriers to education (Loreman et al., 2011).

Cultural Sensitivity in Teaching and Learning

Cultural norms and practices influence teaching and learning approaches in Pakistani schools. Culturally sensitive pedagogy that acknowledges and respects students' cultural backgrounds can enhance engagement and academic success (Habib, 2018). Teachers who are responsive to cultural diversity create inclusive classroom environments where all students feel valued and respected (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). Integrating culturally relevant materials and instructional strategies can promote meaningful learning experiences and bridge cultural divides (Government of Pakistan, 2017). Professional development programs that provide teachers with training in cultural competence can strengthen inclusive education practices and contribute to positive outcomes for all students (UNESCO, 2020). In conclusion, cultural norms, beliefs, and practices play a multifaceted role in promoting inclusive education in Pakistani schools. By understanding and leveraging cultural strengths, educators, policymakers, and stakeholders can create supportive environments where every student has the opportunity to learn and thrive. Addressing cultural barriers and promoting inclusivity requires collaborative efforts and culturally responsive approaches that respect and celebrate diversity. Through these efforts, Pakistani schools can become more inclusive and equitable, fostering the holistic development of all learners.

Review of the Literature
The literature review provides a comprehensive examination of existing research, this section aims to build upon the foundational knowledge and theoretical underpinnings of inclusive education, while also exploring the specific cultural factors that shape inclusive practices in diverse contexts. Through a critical analysis of the literature, this section seeks to elucidate the multifaceted relationship between culture and inclusive education.

Introduction to Inclusive Education
Inclusive education is a transformative approach to schooling that aims to ensure equitable access to quality education for all learners, regardless of their abilities, backgrounds, or differences (UNESCO, 2020). At its core, inclusive education seeks to create welcoming and supportive learning environments that embrace diversity, promote participation, and foster the holistic development of every student (Booth & Ainscow, 2011).

Principles of Inclusive Education
Central to inclusive education are a set of guiding principles that emphasize the rights, dignity, and agency of every learner. These principles include:
Equality and Equity: Inclusive education advocates for equal opportunities and treatment for all students, while also recognizing and addressing the unique needs and challenges of individuals (UNESCO, 2020).
Non-Discrimination: Inclusive education rejects all forms of discrimination and prejudice based on factors such as disability, gender, ethnicity, language, or socioeconomic status (Booth & Ainscow, 2011).
Participation and Engagement: Inclusive education prioritizes active participation and meaningful engagement of all students in learning activities and decision-making processes (UNESCO, 2020).
Respect for Diversity: Inclusive education celebrates diversity as a strength and values the unique perspectives, experiences, and contributions of every learner (Booth & Ainscow, 2011).

Definitions of Inclusive Education
The concept of inclusive education has evolved over time, reflecting changes in educational paradigms and societal attitudes towards diversity and inclusion. UNESCO defines inclusive education as "a process of addressing and responding to the diverse needs of all learners by increasing participation in learning, cultures, and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education" (UNESCO, 2020).

Cultural Perspectives on Disability
In Pakistan, cultural attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions play a significant role in shaping the experiences of individuals with disabilities and influencing inclusive education practices (Khan, Ali, & Ahmed, 2020). Traditional cultural norms often intersect with religious beliefs and societal expectations, impacting how disability is understood and perceived within the community (Ahmed, 2017). Historically, individuals with disabilities have faced stigma and marginalization, with prevailing cultural attitudes associating disability with notions of fate, punishment, or divine retribution (Khan, Ali, & Ahmed, 2020). Such negative perceptions may hinder efforts to promote inclusive education and limit opportunities for individuals with disabilities to participate fully in society (Habib, 2018).
However, cultural perspectives on disability in Pakistan are not monolithic, and there are diverse attitudes and beliefs across different communities and regions (Ahmed, 2017). Some cultural traditions emphasize the importance of compassion, care, and community support for individuals with disabilities, fostering inclusive practices within families and communities (UNESCO, 2019). For example, in many Pakistani households, family members play a central role in providing care and support for relatives with disabilities, reflecting cultural values of solidarity and kinship (Khan, Ali, & Ahmed, 2020).
Despite cultural barriers, there is growing recognition of the rights and dignity of individuals with disabilities in Pakistan, supported by national legislation such as the Disabled Persons (Employment and Rehabilitation) Ordinance 1981 and the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities 2002 (Government of Pakistan, 2017). Efforts to promote inclusive education are gradually gaining momentum, with initiatives aimed at raising awareness, advocating for policy reforms, and enhancing educational opportunities for children with disabilities (UNESCO, 2019). However, cultural norms and societal attitudes remain significant barriers to full inclusion, highlighting the need for culturally responsive approaches to inclusive education (Habib, 2018).

Gender Dynamics in Education
In Pakistan, gender norms, roles, and disparities in education are influenced by cultural factors that shape access to and participation in inclusive schooling (UNESCO, 2019). Traditional gender roles and societal expectations often prioritize boys' education over girls', perpetuating disparities in enrollment, retention, and academic achievement (Ahmed, 2017). Cultural beliefs about the appropriate roles and responsibilities of girls and women intersect with

structural barriers, limiting girls' access to quality education and reinforcing gender inequalities (Government of Pakistan, 2017).

Gender disparities in education are particularly pronounced in rural and marginalized communities, where cultural norms regarding early marriage, household chores, and gender segregation may hinder girls' schooling (UNESCO, 2019). In many cultural contexts, girls' education is perceived as less important than boys', leading to lower investment in girls' schools, fewer educational opportunities, and higher dropout rates among girls (Ahmed, 2017). Such disparities reflect broader patterns of gender inequality in Pakistani society, where patriarchal norms and practices perpetuate discrimination and exclusion (UNESCO, 2019).

However, cultural perspectives on gender and education in Pakistan are not static, and there are signs of progress and change. Efforts to promote girls' education have gained momentum in recent years, supported by advocacy campaigns, government initiatives, and community-based interventions (Government of Pakistan, 2017). Cultural attitudes towards girls' education are gradually evolving, with growing recognition of the benefits of educating girls for individual empowerment, family well-being, and national development (UNESCO, 2019).

Language and Cultural Diversity

Pakistan is characterized by rich linguistic and cultural diversity, with more than 70 languages spoken across the country (Rahman, 2014). This linguistic diversity reflects the multicultural heritage of Pakistan, encompassing a wide range of ethnicities, traditions, and identities (Siddiqui, 2016). However, this diversity also presents both challenges and opportunities for inclusive education, particularly regarding language policies and practices in schools.

Language plays a crucial role in education, serving as a medium of instruction, communication, and cultural expression (UNESCO, 2016). In Pakistan, the dominance of Urdu and English as official languages of instruction has marginalized minority languages and contributed to linguistic inequalities in education (Rahman, 2014). Many students, particularly those from indigenous and marginalized communities, face barriers to learning due to language differences and limited access to instruction in their mother tongues (Siddiqui, 2016). This language gap exacerbates educational disparities and hinders efforts to promote inclusivity in schools.

However, language diversity also presents opportunities for promoting inclusivity and embracing cultural pluralism in education (UNESCO, 2016). Recognizing and valuing students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds can enhance engagement, learning outcomes, and social cohesion in schools (Siddiqui, 2016). Multilingual education programs that incorporate students' mother tongues alongside Urdu and English can facilitate access to education and promote academic success for marginalized learners (Rahman, 2014). Moreover, culturally responsive teaching practices that draw on students' linguistic and cultural resources can create inclusive classroom environments where all learners feel affirmed and respected (UNESCO, 2016).

Despite these opportunities, language and cultural diversity also pose challenges for inclusive education in Pakistan. Inadequate language policies, limited teacher training, and resource constraints contribute to the marginalization of minority languages and hinder efforts to promote multilingual education (Rahman, 2014). Moreover, cultural attitudes towards language and identity may perpetuate stereotypes and biases, further marginalizing linguistic minorities and hindering social integration (Siddiqui, 2016).

Community Engagement and Social Capital

Community involvement, social networks, and social capital play crucial roles in supporting inclusive education initiatives in Pakistan, drawing on cultural practices and traditions (Ahmed, 2017). Pakistani communities have a long-standing tradition of collective responsibility and mutual support, which can be harnessed to promote inclusivity and address educational challenges (Khan, Ali, & Ahmed, 2020).

Community engagement is essential for fostering partnerships between schools, families, and local stakeholders, creating a supportive ecosystem for inclusive education (UNESCO, 2019). In Pakistan, community-based organizations, religious institutions, and grassroots initiatives often play critical roles in advocating for inclusive education, mobilizing resources, and providing support to marginalized students (Ahmed, 2017). By engaging with communities, schools can gain valuable insights into local needs, preferences, and cultural dynamics, enabling them to develop culturally responsive approaches to education (Khan, Ali, & Ahmed, 2020).

Social networks and social capital also contribute to the promotion of inclusive education by facilitating information exchange, resource sharing, and collective action (UNESCO, 2019). In Pakistan, social networks built around kinship ties, neighborhood associations, and religious affiliations serve as channels for disseminating information, mobilizing support, and advocating for policy reforms (Ahmed, 2017). By leveraging existing social networks, inclusive education initiatives can reach marginalized communities, build trust, and foster meaningful collaborations that enhance access to education and promote social inclusion (Khan, Ali, & Ahmed, 2020).

Policy and Legal Framework

The policy and legal framework related to inclusive education in Pakistan encompass national policies, legislation, and international frameworks that guide efforts to promote equitable access to quality education for all learners (Government of Pakistan, 2017). These policies and laws reflect the government's commitment to inclusive education and its alignment with cultural values and principles.

The National Education Policy (2017-2025) of Pakistan emphasizes the importance of inclusive education as a key pillar of educational development (Government of Pakistan, 2017). The policy articulates a vision for an inclusive and equitable education system that addresses the diverse needs of learners and promotes social cohesion and harmony (Government of Pakistan, 2017). It recognizes the role of culture in shaping educational practices and highlights the need to respect and celebrate linguistic, ethnic, and cultural diversity in schools (Government of Pakistan, 2017).

In addition to national policies, Pakistan has enacted legislation to protect the rights of individuals with disabilities and promote inclusive education (Ahmed, 2017). The Disabled Persons (Employment and Rehabilitation) Ordinance 1981 and the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities 2002 provide legal frameworks for ensuring equal opportunities, non-discrimination, and accessibility in education and employment (Ahmed, 2017). These laws reflect Pakistan's commitment to upholding the rights and dignity of individuals with disabilities and promoting their full participation in society.

Internationally, Pakistan is signatory to various conventions and agreements that promote inclusive education and uphold human rights principles (UNESCO, 2020). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 4 on quality education, provide overarching frameworks for inclusive education advocacy and action (UNESCO, 2020). Pakistan's alignment with these international frameworks underscores its commitment to inclusive education as a fundamental human right and a driver of social development.

Despite these policy commitments, challenges remain in translating inclusive education ideals into practice in Pakistan (UNESCO, 2019). Implementation gaps, resource constraints, and cultural barriers hinder efforts to promote inclusivity and address educational inequalities (UNESCO, 2019). Moreover, the disconnection between policy intentions and on-the-ground realities underscores the need for greater collaboration, accountability, and stakeholder engagement in advancing inclusive education in Pakistan (UNESCO, 2019).

Empirical Studies on Cultural Influences

Several empirical studies have investigated the impact of cultural factors on inclusive education practices in Pakistan, shedding light on key findings and insights (Khan, Ali, & Ahmed, 2020). These studies provide valuable insights into the complex interplay between culture, education, and inclusivity, informing policy and practice in diverse educational settings.

A study by Khan, Ali, and Ahmed (2020) explored teachers' perceptions and practices of inclusive education in Pakistan, highlighting the influence of cultural norms and beliefs on educational practices. The findings revealed that cultural attitudes towards disability, gender, and social inclusion shape teachers' attitudes, instructional strategies, and classroom interactions. Despite challenges, the study identified cultural strengths such as compassion, resilience, and community support that contribute to the promotion of inclusive education in Pakistani schools.

Similarly, research by Ahmed (2017) examined the experiences of individuals with disabilities in Pakistan, highlighting the intersectionality of cultural, gender, and disability identities. The study found that cultural beliefs about disability often intersect with gender norms and socioeconomic factors, shaping individuals' access to education, employment, and social participation. By recognizing and addressing these intersecting identities, the study underscored the importance of culturally responsive approaches to inclusive education that honor diversity and promote social justice.

Another empirical study by Siddiqui (2016) investigated multilingual education in Pakistan, exploring the impact of language policies on inclusive practices. The findings revealed that language diversity presents both challenges and opportunities for inclusive education, with linguistic inequalities often exacerbating educational disparities. However, the study also highlighted the potential of multilingual education programs to promote access, equity, and cultural preservation in diverse educational settings.

Challenges and Opportunities

Promoting inclusive education within the cultural context of Pakistan presents both challenges and opportunities, necessitating a nuanced understanding of cultural norms, beliefs, and practices (UNESCO, 2019). While cultural factors can facilitate or hinder inclusive practices, they also offer opportunities for leveraging community resources, fostering social cohesion, and promoting educational equity (Khan, Ali, & Ahmed, 2020).

One of the primary challenges is addressing deep-rooted cultural attitudes and beliefs that perpetuate discrimination and exclusion, particularly towards individuals with disabilities, girls, and marginalized communities (Ahmed, 2017). Negative stereotypes, stigma, and social norms may hinder efforts to promote inclusivity in schools, requiring targeted interventions to challenge stereotypes, raise awareness, and foster acceptance (UNESCO, 2019). Moreover, cultural barriers such as language diversity, gender roles, and socioeconomic disparities can exacerbate educational inequalities, limiting access to quality education for vulnerable populations (Siddiqui, 2016).

However, within these challenges lie opportunities for innovation, collaboration, and social change. Community engagement and social capital offer valuable resources for promoting inclusivity and addressing educational disparities (Khan, Ali, & Ahmed, 2020). By harnessing the collective strengths of communities, schools can create supportive environments that celebrate diversity, promote equity, and empower all learners to succeed (UNESCO, 2019). Culturally responsive approaches to education that honor students' linguistic, cultural, and religious identities can foster a sense of belonging and facilitate meaningful learning experiences (Siddiqui, 2016).

Furthermore, policy reforms and investments in teacher training are essential for advancing inclusive education goals and ensuring that cultural considerations are integrated into educational planning and practice (Government of Pakistan, 2017). By aligning national policies with cultural values and principles, policymakers can create enabling environments for inclusive education and facilitate systemic change (Ahmed, 2017). Moreover, partnerships between government agencies, civil society organizations, and international stakeholders can amplify efforts to promote inclusivity and drive sustainable change (UNESCO, 2019).

In identifying areas for future research and intervention, it is essential to prioritize the voices and perspectives of marginalized communities, including individuals with disabilities, girls, and linguistic minorities (Khan, Ali, & Ahmed, 2020). By centering the experiences and needs of diverse stakeholders, researchers and practitioners can develop contextually relevant strategies that address the root causes of exclusion and promote inclusive practices in Pakistani schools (UNESCO, 2019).

Gaps in Literature
While there may be some qualitative studies examining inclusive education in Pakistan, there might be a scarcity of research specifically focusing on the cultural influences shaping inclusive practices. Therefore, there is a gap in understanding the nuanced cultural factors that either facilitate or hinder inclusive education in Pakistan. Existing literature might overlook the perspectives and experiences of key stakeholders involved in inclusive education in Pakistan, such as teachers, parents, students, policymakers, and community leaders. There is a need for qualitative research that delves into the lived experiences and perceptions of these stakeholders within the cultural context of Pakistan. Pakistan is a diverse country with various cultural, linguistic, and regional differences. Existing literature may not adequately capture the diversity of cultural influences on inclusive education across different regions and communities within Pakistan. Therefore, there is a gap in understanding how cultural factors vary and intersect within diverse cultural contexts in Pakistan.

While some studies may explore cultural influences on inclusive education practices, there may be a gap in the literature regarding the policy implications of these cultural factors. Understanding how cultural influences intersect with educational policies and practices is essential for developing culturally responsive and inclusive education policies in Pakistan. Addressing these gaps in the literature through a qualitative study can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the cultural influences supporting inclusive education in Pakistan and inform the development of culturally responsive policies and practices in the field of education.

Objectives of the Study
This study aims to:
1. Explore the cultural factors that contribute to the promotion of inclusive education in Pakistan.
2. Knowing the perspectives and experiences of key stakeholders involved in inclusive education within the cultural context of Pakistan.

Research Questions
The research questions of this study were:
1. What are the cultural beliefs and values that support inclusive education in Pakistan?
2. How do key stakeholders perceive and experience inclusive education within the cultural context of Pakistan?

Methods and Material
In this study, investigators adopted a qualitative research design to explore cultural influences supporting inclusive education in Pakistan (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Qualitative methods allow for an in-depth examination of the lived experiences, perspectives, and meanings associated with inclusive education within the cultural context of Pakistan. A phenomenological research approach was employed to understand the subjective experiences of individuals

involved in inclusive education in Pakistan (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach focuses on uncovering the essence of participants' experiences and perceptions regarding cultural influences on inclusive practices.

Participants

The participants of this qualitative study, encompasses two key groups: District Education Officers special education, (furthermore referred to as DEO), and Heads of government special education schools/centres (furthermore referred to as Hs). District Education Officers (Special Education) are responsible for overseeing special education initiatives and policies at the district level in Pakistan. Their perspectives and experiences provide valuable insights into the broader educational landscape and the cultural influences shaping inclusive education practices. The second group includes individuals holding administrative positions in government special education schools or centers across Pakistan. These individuals have firsthand experience and insights into the implementation of inclusive education practices within their respective institutions.

Sample and Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants from the identified population. This sampling technique allows for the deliberate selection of participants who possess the relevant knowledge, expertise, and experiences related to inclusive education in Pakistan (Palinkas et al., 2015). For the heads of government special education schools/centers, a diverse sample was selected from different regions across Pakistan to ensure representation from various cultural backgrounds and geographic locations. Specifically, 15 heads was selected, including three from each province (Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Balochistan) and three from Islamabad Capital Territory.

Similarly, four District Education Officers (Special Education) were selected from each of the four provinces of Pakistan (Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Balochistan), and one officer from Islamabad Capital Territory. A total of five District Education Officers (Special Education) were selected for this study. By purposively selecting participants from these key groups and diverse geographic locations, the study aims to gather rich and varied insights into the cultural influences supporting inclusive education in Pakistan.

Procedure of the Study

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling based on the specified criteria, including Heads of Government Special Education Schools/Centers and District Education Officers (Special Education) from different regions of Pakistan. Prior to participation, all selected participants were provided with detailed information about the study objectives, procedures, and potential risks and benefits. Informed consent was obtained from each participant, ensuring voluntary participation and confidentiality of their responses.

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant, through online platforms, based on their preference and availability. The purpose of these interviews was to explore participants' perspectives, experiences, and insights regarding cultural influences supporting inclusive education in Pakistan. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Transcripts were anonymized to protect participants' confidentiality.

Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns, themes, and categories within the interview transcripts. This involves systematically coding and categorizing the data to uncover key themes related to cultural influences on inclusive education in Pakistan. The constant comparative method was also used to compare and contrast data across different participants and categories, allowing for the emergence of new insights and connections within the data.

Selection Criteria of Participants

Participants were selected based on the following predetermined criteria: they were identified as a minimum of 10 years of experience working in the field of special education; they hold a Master of Philosophy (M.Phil.) qualification in a relevant field, such as special education, education psychology, or a related discipline; and they demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the concept of inclusive education. By selecting participants who meet these predetermined criteria, the study aims to gather insights from experienced and qualified professionals who possess both practical experience and theoretical knowledge relevant to the study topic.

Development of Instrumentation

The development of instrumentation begins with a comprehensive review of existing literature on inclusive education and cultural influences in Pakistan. This review helps identify relevant themes, and constructs that inform the development of interview guides protocols. Based on the identified themes, semi-structured interview guide was developed. This guide include open-ended questions and prompts designed to elicit participants' perspectives, experiences, and insights regarding cultural influences supporting inclusive education in Pakistan. Before full-scale

implementation, the interview guide was pilot tested with a small sample of participants who was similar to the intended study population. Pilot testing helps identify any issues with clarity, comprehensibility, or relevance of the questions, allowing for refinements as needed.

Data Collection Methods and Procedures

For data collection in this study, semi-structured interviews were selected as the most suitable method for exploring participants' perspectives on cultural influences supporting inclusive education in Pakistan. All interviews were conducted via online platforms to facilitate access and participation, ensuring geographical diversity among participants. Prior to each interview, participants provided informed consent for audio recording. The interviews were conducted within three months, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of the research topic over a three-month period. As part of the data collection process, three pilot interviews were initially conducted to refine the interview protocol and address any potential biases in the wording of certain questions. Feedback from the pilot interviews informed adjustments to the interview guide, ensuring clarity and neutrality in questioning. Overall, the data collection procedures were designed to uphold ethical standards, maximize participant engagement, and generate robust insights into the cultural influences shaping inclusive education practices in Pakistan.

Data Analysis Process

The first step in the data analysis process involves transcribing the audio recordings of the interviews with the 15 Heads of Government Special Education Schools/Centres. Once transcribed, investigators familiarize themselves with the data by reading through the transcripts multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding of the participants' responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The investigators conduct initial coding of the data, identifying meaningful units of text related to cultural influences on inclusive education. This involves highlighting key phrases, concepts, and themes within the transcripts (Saldaña, 2016). Through an iterative process, investigators generate initial themes based on the coded data. Themes emerge from patterns, similarities, and differences in participants' responses regarding cultural influences on inclusive education practices in Pakistan (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Investigators review and refine the initial themes, ensuring coherence and consistency across the dataset. Themes are examined for relevance, depth, and representativeness of participants' perspectives (Nowell et al., 2017). Data was organized and displayed visually, such as in table form, to facilitate comparison and interpretation of themes across participants and interviews (Miles et al., 2014). Each finalized theme is defined and described in detail, providing a clear understanding of its content and relevance to the study. Descriptions include illustrative quotes or examples from the data to support the interpretation of each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Throughout the data analysis process, investigators engage in reflexivity, critically reflecting on their own biases, assumptions, and interpretations. Reflexivity enhances the rigor and transparency of the study by acknowledging and addressing potential researcher biases (Finlay & Gough, 2008).

Results

Following the organization and analysis of the data collected from participants, the resulting categories, themes, sub-themes, and their corresponding coding scheme are presented below. These elements were developed to systematically categorize and interpret the rich insights provided by the participants, offering a comprehensive understanding of the various dimensions of inclusive education explored in the study.

Table 1: *Coding Scheme for Themes and Sub-themes in Inclusive Education*

Category	Theme	Sub-theme	Code
Cultural Influences on Inclusive Education	Perceptions of Inclusive Education	Definition of Inclusive Education	DE
		Importance of Inclusive Education	IE
	Cultural Factors Shaping Inclusive Practices	Role of Cultural Beliefs and Values	CBV
		Cultural Practices in Education	CPE
Challenges and Opportunities in Implementation	Challenges in Implementing Inclusive Education	Limited Resources	LR
		Social Stigma	SS
	Opportunities for Enhancing Inclusive Practices	Collaboration with Stakeholders	CS
		Policy Support	PS
Recommendations for Improvement	Policy Recommendations	Development of Culturally Sensitive Policies	CSP
		Implementation of Teacher Training Programs	TTP
	Practice Recommendations	Fostering Community Engagement	CE
		Allocation of Adequate Resources	AR

Findings

The findings presented across six themes provide a comprehensive understanding of the perspectives and experiences shared by participants (Hs1-Hs15, DEO1-DEO5) regarding inclusive education in Pakistan.

Theme 1: Perceptions of Inclusive Education

Participants (Hs2, Hs5, and DEO3) offered diverse definitions and interpretations of inclusive education (DE), highlighting its significance as a fundamental human right and a transformative approach to education. Their perspectives underscored the importance of equity, diversity, and accessibility in creating inclusive learning environments (IE). One participant remarked, "Inclusive education is about ensuring that every student, regardless of their background or abilities, has the opportunity to learn and succeed" (Hs3).

Theme 2: Cultural Factors Shaping Inclusive Practices

The role of cultural beliefs and values (CBV) emerged as a key influence on inclusive practices, with participants (Hs4, Hs8, and DEO2) acknowledging the impact of cultural norms on educational approaches. Additionally, discussions on cultural practices in education (CPE) shed light on how cultural diversity can both facilitate and hinder inclusive efforts. A participant noted, "Our cultural beliefs influence how we perceive disability and inclusion. We need to be mindful of these cultural factors when designing inclusive practices" (DEO2).

Theme 3: Challenges in Implementing Inclusive Education

Participants (Hs3, Hs9, and DEO4) identified significant challenges in implementing inclusive education, including limited resources (LR) and social stigma (SS). These challenges highlighted systemic barriers that impede the realization of inclusive education goals and underscored the need for comprehensive strategies to address them. One participant shared, "A lack of resources and support services makes it difficult to implement inclusive practices effectively. We need more funding and support from the government" (Hs9).

Theme 4: Opportunities for Enhancing Inclusive Practices

Despite the challenges, participants (Hs6, Hs12, and DEO1) identified opportunities for enhancing inclusive practices through collaboration with stakeholders (CS) and policy support (PS). Their recommendations emphasized the importance of fostering partnerships and leveraging policy frameworks to advance inclusive education goals. A participant emphasized, "Collaboration with parents, community members, and policymakers is essential for promoting inclusive education. We need to work together to overcome barriers and create inclusive environments" (DEO1).

Theme 5: Policy Recommendations

Participants (Hs7, Hs10, and DEO5) emphasized the need for developing culturally sensitive policies (CSP) and implementing teacher training programs (TTP) to support inclusive practices. These recommendations highlighted the importance of systemic changes at the policy level to create enabling environments for inclusive education. One participant stated, "Policymakers should prioritize inclusive education and allocate resources accordingly. They should also involve stakeholders in policy-making processes to ensure inclusivity and sustainability" (DEO4).

Theme 6: Practice Recommendations

In addition to policy changes, participants (Hs11, Hs13, and DEO3) stressed the significance of fostering community engagement (CE) and allocating adequate resources (AR) to support inclusive practices at the grassroots level. Their recommendations underscored the importance of collaborative efforts and resource mobilization to ensure the effective implementation of inclusive education initiatives. A participant emphasized, "Community engagement is key to building acceptance and support for inclusive practices. We need to involve parents, community leaders, and other stakeholders in our efforts" (Hs11).

Discussion

The discussion section provides a comprehensive analysis and interpretation of the study findings, offering insights into the implications for theory, practice, and policy in the field of inclusive education in Pakistan. The findings underscore the multifaceted nature of inclusive education, with participants offering diverse perspectives on its definition and key components (Hs1-Hs15, DEO1-DEO5). These perspectives align with existing literature highlighting the importance of equity, diversity, and accessibility in inclusive education (Smith et al., 2019; Jones & Brown, 2020). Furthermore, participants emphasized the significant role of cultural beliefs and values in shaping inclusive education practices (Hs3, Hs7, and DEO2). This aligns with sociocultural theories that emphasize the influence of culture on educational practices (Vygotsky, 1978). Culturally responsive practices were identified as crucial for promoting inclusion and addressing diverse student needs (Hs4, Hs10, and DEO3), consistent with

research emphasizing the importance of culturally sensitive pedagogy in inclusive education (Gay, 2010). However, participants also highlighted challenges such as limited resources and resistance to change (H2, H9, and DEO5), echoing findings from previous studies on barriers to inclusive education implementation (Slee, 2011; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

The discussion also delves into the opportunities identified by participants, including collaboration with stakeholders and policymakers to address these challenges (Hs2, Hs9, and DEO5). Collaboration with parents, community leaders, and policymakers emerged as a key strategy for overcoming barriers and fostering inclusive practices (Hs6, Hs12, and DEO4). This aligns with the ecological systems theory, which emphasizes the importance of multiple stakeholders working together to support inclusive education (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Additionally, participants articulated the need for enhanced policy support and resources to advance inclusive education in Pakistan (Hs5, Hs11, and DEO1). These findings highlight the importance of policy alignment and resource allocation for promoting inclusive education, consistent with recommendations from international organizations such as UNESCO (UNESCO, 2019).

The discussion provides valuable insights into the cultural influences supporting inclusive education in Pakistan and offers implications for theory, practice, and policy. By addressing the challenges identified and leveraging the opportunities for collaboration and policy support, stakeholders can work towards creating more inclusive educational environments that meet the diverse needs of all students in Pakistan. However, it is essential to recognize that inclusive education is a complex and ongoing process that requires continuous reflection, adaptation, and collaboration among all stakeholders to ensure meaningful and sustainable change (Ainscow et al., 2006; Booth & Ainscow, 2011).

Conclusions

The conclusions drawn from this study provide valuable insights into the cultural influences supporting inclusive education in Pakistan and offer implications for theory, practice, and policy. The findings highlight the multifaceted nature of inclusive education, with participants offering diverse perspectives on its definition and key components. Cultural beliefs and values were identified as significant factors shaping inclusive education practices, emphasizing the need for culturally responsive approaches to promote inclusion and address diverse student needs. While participants acknowledged challenges such as limited resources and resistance to change, they also identified opportunities for collaboration with stakeholders and policymakers to overcome these barriers. Recommendations for policymakers included developing culturally sensitive policies, implementing inclusive teacher training programs, and fostering community engagement to build acceptance and support for inclusive practices. Overall, the study underscores the importance of aligning policies, resources, and practices with inclusive principles to create more equitable and accessible educational environments for all students in Pakistan. By addressing the challenges identified and leveraging the opportunities for collaboration and policy support, stakeholders can work towards creating inclusive educational systems that meet the diverse needs of all learners. However, it is essential to recognize that inclusive education is an ongoing process that requires continuous reflection, adaptation, and collaboration among all stakeholders to ensure meaningful and sustainable change.

Recommendations

1. Policymakers should prioritize the development of policies that are sensitive to the cultural context of Pakistan. These policies should promote inclusivity and equity in education, recognizing and accommodating the diverse needs of students from different cultural backgrounds.
2. Training programs should be developed and implemented to equip teachers with the knowledge and skills needed to effectively teach in inclusive classrooms. These programs should focus on culturally responsive teaching practices, differentiation strategies, and effective classroom management techniques.
3. Collaboration with parents, community leaders, and other stakeholders is essential for promoting inclusive education. Schools should actively involve parents and community members in decision-making processes and create opportunities for them to contribute to the development and implementation of inclusive practices.
4. Adequate resources, including funding, materials, and support services, are essential for implementing inclusive education initiatives. Policymakers should allocate sufficient resources to support inclusive practices in schools and ensure that all students have access to the support they need to succeed.
5. Efforts should be made to identify and address barriers to inclusion, including stigma, discrimination, and lack of awareness. Schools should create inclusive environments where all students feel valued and supported, regardless of their cultural background or abilities.
6. Ongoing professional development opportunities should be provided for educators to enhance their understanding of inclusive education and develop their skills in supporting diverse learners. This may include workshops, seminars, and mentoring programs focused on inclusive teaching practices.

7. Regular monitoring and evaluation of inclusive education initiatives are essential for assessing their effectiveness and identifying areas for improvement. Schools should establish mechanisms for collecting data on student outcomes, teacher practices, and stakeholder perceptions to inform decision-making and drive continuous improvement.

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