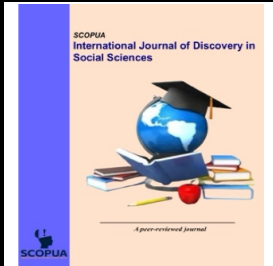




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Special Education Teachers' Experiences of Inclusive Practice for Students with Physical Disabilities in Punjab's Public Schools

Muhammad Atif^{*}

¹Bahria University, Islamabad, Pakistan

* Corresponding Email: atifkhanmarwat9116@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative phenomenological study aims to understand the lived experiences of special education teachers who are using inclusive practices with physically challenged students in public sector schools in Punjab, Pakistan. Although inclusive education is included in national and provincial policies, there is a gap between the national and classroom level, and special education teachers are key implementers of these policies but currently little known in the literature. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used to gather data from 10 purposively selected special education teachers who had at least three years of special education experience teaching students with physical disabilities, using a descriptive Husserlian phenomenological design. Colaizzi's seven-step method was used to analyze the data. Five major themes emerged: teachers' varied understanding and interpretation of inclusive practices, structural and resource related challenges to implementing inclusive practices, expressions of emotional and professional challenges and/or resilience, informal coping and adaptive practices in the absence of formal practices, and inconsistent institutional and administrative support dependent largely on individual leadership rather than systemic enforcement. The results are discussed using the Social Model of Disability, which focuses on the barriers to inclusion in the environment and in institutions as opposed to the impairment of the student. The study provides practical suggestions for teacher training reform, allocation of resources and policy revision in order to bridge the gap between inclusive education policy and practice in public sector schools of Punjab.

Keywords: Inclusive education; Special education teachers; Physical disabilities; Lived experiences; Phenomenological study; Public sector schools

1. Introduction

The concept of inclusive education has become a significant policy priority in education in most countries around the world, and a key focus of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 agenda, which aims to ensure equitable and quality education for all learners, including those with disabilities (Ydesen & Elfert, 2026). The commitment made at the global level in Pakistan has been reflected in national policies that acknowledge children with disabilities have a right to education, and that they should be integrated into mainstream public schools. In many developing education systems, however, policy formulation has overtaken effective mechanisms to implement it (Somad et al., 2024). Although the Special Education policies are forward-looking and are progressive in terms of the language used, they are more vague in their practical implementation, funding mechanisms and monitoring mechanisms to make this policy come to life in the schools (Akhtar, 2025).

This is not a phenomenon peculiar to Pakistan. The conceptualisation of inclusive education has been found to be clear at the policy level in varying contexts such as the United Kingdom, South Africa and Indonesia (Atanasova & Papen, 2026; Walton & Engelbrecht, 2024). But not consistently at the institutional and classroom levels. Walton and Engelbrecht (2024) refer to this as path dependency: the way in which inclusion is actually implemented is influenced by the history of the school, limited resources and institutional cultures. Likewise, Rapp and Corral-Granados (2024) see inclusive education not as a static concept but rather as a constantly evolving system, influenced by many actors, with the classroom teacher being perhaps the most critical.



This is where the role of the special education teacher is especially challenging. They are the ones on the frontline and are expected to take the abstract promises of policy and translate them into everyday pedagogical practice, which frequently involves insufficient training, few assistive resources and little institutional support (Kamran & Bano, 2025). The lived experience of them thus provides important insights into the reality of inclusive education in practice – or how it does not work. However, the majority of previous studies in Pakistan have concerned themselves with policy analysis or quantitative assessment of teachers' attitudes, and there has been a lack of understanding of the lived reality of teachers in inclusive classrooms (Kamran & Bano, 2025).

This study is limited to students with physical disabilities, a population that has particular implementation difficulties when compared to other populations with disabilities. Physical disabilities may require structural and environmental adaptations, like accessible infrastructure, mobility aids, or modified classroom arrangements, which may not be available in the public sector schools in Punjab. It is a specific challenge for teachers to balance inclusive pedagogical practices with material and institutional constraints.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Although policy statement on inclusive education in public schools has been made in Punjab, there is not much qualitative understanding of the experience and navigation of inclusive practices by teachers of special education in public schools for students with physical disabilities. Little is known about the first-person experiences of these teachers, such as their challenges, coping strategies, and experiences in their professional lives (Akhtar, 2025). This study is a qualitative study which adds to the few studies conducted on inclusive education in Pakistan from the perspective of the special education teachers themselves. The results of its research can be used to support teacher training programmes, decisions on resource allocation and policy changes to reduce the disparities between policy and practice of inclusive education in the public school system.

1.2 Research Questions

1. What are the experiences of special education teachers in the context of implementing inclusive practice in the public sector schools of Punjab with respect to students having physical disabilities?
2. What are these teachers' challenges in implementing inclusive education policy in the classroom?
3. How do teachers respond to and adjust to these challenges in their professional lives?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Global Perspective on Inclusive Education for Physical Disabilities

Inclusive education has been a global commitment that is widely accepted, but there are significant differences in how it is implemented with students with physical disabilities across contexts. A systematic review of inclusive education interventions in low and lower middle income countries by Mendoza and Heymann (2024) revealed that although there has been a significant growth in policy adoption, the implementation of inclusive education at the classroom level has not been uniform across the countries, likely because of limited resources and inadequate enforcement. Jardinez and Natividad (2024) highlight the fact that inclusive education has been an equitable goal, but that there are ongoing challenges of accessibility, curriculum adaptations, and teacher capacity. Sijuola and Davidova (2022) also state that developing countries in particular have been facing the practical challenges of inclusion, as they are likely to have fewer of the specialized personnel and infrastructure needed to facilitate inclusion. As Toyokawa et al. (2023) show in their research of inclusive practices in Japan, even in technologically sophisticated settings, there are still significant pedagogical and structural elements that need to be scaffolded to make the innovations fully inclusive, like AI-assisted learning tools.

2.2 Pakistan and Punjab Specific Policy and Practice Literature

The studies conducted in Pakistan consistently reveal a gap between the vision of special and inclusive education policy and classroom practice. Khalid et al. (2023) carried out a qualitative study that revealed significant disparities between the general and special education policy frameworks in Pakistan, which can cause confusion at the implementation level and leave general education teachers without clear guidance on how to operate and execute the policy. This is exacerbated by attitudinal and institutional constraints from the local literature which reveal that policy intent is often not matched with adequate resource provision or institutional support in public sector schools (Khalid et al., 2023). The results highlight the need for a focus on the experience and implementation of policies as well as on policy content.

2.3 Teacher Preparedness, Training, and Attitudes Toward Inclusion

There is a considerable amount of literature that pinpoints teacher preparedness and attitude as key factors in the success of inclusive education. Kamran et al. (2023) discovered that teachers' attitudes have a significant impact on the level of meaningful inclusion of students with learning disabilities in mainstream classrooms. Amjad et al. (2023) also point out that teachers frequently have multi-dimensional and sometimes contradictory attitudes toward inclusion, which are influenced by their training experiences as well as previous experiences with students with disabilities. The issue of preparedness is also reflected internationally, as Alabay (2026) notes that the initial teacher training programs often do not provide teachers with the necessary skills to work in an inclusive classroom, and there is still a gap between initial training and practice.



Similar findings were found by Arias-Pastor et al. (2023) when studying secondary teacher trainees, finding that the perceived preparedness for inclusion remained low, even after exposure to formal training. Ginja and Chen (2023) further note that teacher attitudes and teacher training are intertwined: teachers' attitudes to inclusion tend to be more positive when they have more structured training opportunities. Gal et al. (2025) also highlight certain elements influencing these attitudes such as prior experience, self-efficacy and institutional culture.

2.4 Barriers: Infrastructure, Resources, Class Size, and Administrative Support

In addition to teacher attitudes, structural barriers continue to be a prominent theme in the inclusive education literature. Arnaiz-Sanchez et al. (2023) highlight initial teacher training as a place of barriers, indicating a lack of practical experience in disability inclusive pedagogy. Large class sizes, lack of assistive infrastructure and administrative support are often reported as challenges that hinder even good intentions to implement inclusive practices at the school level (Sijuola & Davidova, 2022).

2.5 Theoretical Framework

The Social Model of Disability is used as a theoretical framework in this study. Macmbinji (2023) outlines this model, which is based on the notion that disability does not reside in a person, but in social and environmental factors that limit participation, which has clear implications for the design and implementation of inclusive practices in schools. Chalise (2024) also places the social model alongside other disability models, making the case that it provides the most "actionable" model for inclusive education research as it focuses on addressing structural barriers rather than on remediating the person. Building on this, Selisko et al. (2024) suggest that models of disability are a theoretical variable that differentiates in the literature on inclusive education and influence the way researchers and practitioners view the problem and what solutions they propose.

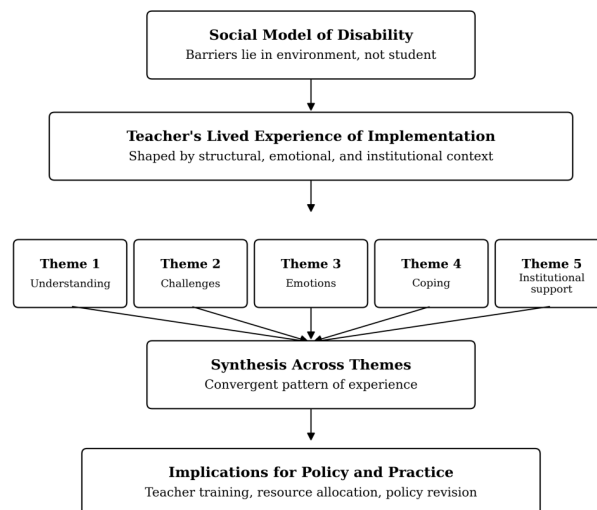


Figure 1: Conceptual framework of the study, grounded in the Social Model of Disability

Although the policy gap and teacher attitudes and structural barriers have been explored, there is minimal qualitative research on the lived experiences of special education teachers in public sector schools serving students with physical disabilities in Punjab. This study fills that void in the literature by focusing on teachers' first person accounts of implementation.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study uses a qualitative research design that is descriptive and phenomenological, which is in line with the philosophy of Husserl. A descriptive phenomenological approach was chosen over an interpretive or hermeneutic approach because the dominant objective of this study is to describe, as closely as possible, what special education teachers' experiences are, as they perceive and articulate them, rather than to produce an interpretive account in which the researcher's theoretical positioning has shaped the analysis and interpretation of the data. Following the Husserlian method, the researcher bracketed (epoche), or set aside, their own preconceptions, previous experiences and assumptions about inclusive education to listen to the participants' accounts in an open and non-judgemental way. The goal of this design was to gain an understanding of what it means to be a teacher implementing inclusive practices with students with physical disability, and this approach is appropriate for that purpose.

3.2 Population and Sampling

This study involved special education teachers having direct contact with the students with physical disability in Pakistani public sector schools of Punjab. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that the participants had experience that was relevant



to the phenomenon being studied. Inclusion criteria included having at least three years of teaching experience, and being directly and continuously responsible for teaching students with physical disability in an inclusive or special education class in a public sector school who were willing to provide detailed descriptions of their professional experiences. The sample did not include teachers teaching in private schools or teachers with no first-hand experience of teaching students with physical disabilities.

3.3 Sample Size

In keeping with the convention in phenomenological studies, the ten participants were sampled for this research. Phenomenological inquiry tends to use relatively few participants, usually between 8 and 12, to enable the depth and richness of engagement with each participant's account that this method calls for. The researcher judged the depth and richness of the participant narratives to be sufficiently reached and adequate to answer research questions, allowing for the recruitment to continue until this point.

3.4 Data Collection

Semi-structured in-depth interviews, as individual interviews, were used to collect data. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions that were developed from the research questions and further refined after conducting a pilot interview to make the questions clearer and relevant. The duration of each interview was around 45-60 minutes and was held in a place that was both convenient and comfortable to the interviewee, either within the school or other mutually agreed place. All interviews were verbatim, audiorecorded with the participant's full consent and then transcribed verbatim to ensure the integrity of the participants' language and expression. Field notes were also kept during and after each interview to record non-verbal and contextual information that might be useful in subsequent analysis.

3.5 Data Analysis

The analysis of the data was carried out with Colaizzi's seven steps method, which is a commonly used analytical method in descriptive phenomenological research. This process included repeated reading of each transcript, identification of significant statements directly relevant to the phenomenon of implementing inclusive practices, developing meaning from these significant statements and structuring the formulated meaning in clusters of themes. These theme clusters were then incorporated into an exhaustive description of the phenomenon, and from which the basic structure of the phenomenon was determined. Finally, validation was attempted by returning the results to participants to ensure that the synthesized description was valid in capturing their experiences. This process was ongoing and systematic, to ensure the themes were as close as possible to the words and meanings of the participants and not interpreted before the participants were ready.

3.6 Trustworthiness

The four criteria recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1994) namely, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were used throughout the research process in establishing the trustworthiness of this study (Enworo, 2023). Member checking was carried out as a means of enhancing credibility, whereby emerging themes and interpretations were given to the participants for their accuracy. To make the transferability of the findings possible, a thick description of the research context, participants' characteristics and data collection processes were provided, which enabled readers to assess the transferability of findings to other similar contexts (Stalmeijer et al., 2024). The researcher's continual reflexive journaling and bracketing practices and the clear audit trail of methodological decisions addressed dependability and enhanced confirmability by helping to ensure that findings were based on the experiences of participants rather than the researcher's bias.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

This study received approval from the appropriate institutional review board before data collection. Every participant received an informed consent form that explained the purpose of the study, informed their right to participate and the right to withdraw from the study at any time without repercussion. Confidentiality and anonymity was preserved throughout the research process by using pseudonyms or numbers e.g. P1 and P2 as identifiers for the participants instead of their actual names. The audio recordings and transcripts were kept safely and only available to the research team, following institutional data protection procedures.

4. Findings/Results

Themes were discovered through analysis of participants interviews using Colaizzi's method which revealed five interrelated themes that documented the lived experience of special education teachers with students with physical disabilities in the public sector schools of Punjab.

A total of 10 special education teachers from public sector schools in Punjab were involved in the study. The characteristics of the participants and the data collection and analysis methods used to obtain the findings are summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1: *Study and Participant Characteristics*

Characteristic	Description
Participants	10 special education teachers (coded P1 to P10)
Setting	Public sector schools, Punjab, Pakistan
Sampling	Purposive sampling



Characteristic	Description
Inclusion criteria	Minimum 3 years of teaching experience; direct and ongoing responsibility for students with physical disabilities in an inclusive or special education classroom; willingness to share detailed accounts
Exclusion criteria	Teachers working exclusively in private institutions; teachers without direct experience of teaching students with physical disabilities
Design	Descriptive (Husserlian) phenomenology with bracketing
Data collection	Individual semi-structured, in-depth interviews; guide refined through a pilot interview
Interview duration	45 to 60 minutes per interview
Data recording	Audio recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, supplemented by field notes
Analysis	Colaizzi's seven-step method
Trustworthiness	Member checking, thick description, audit trail, reflexive journaling
Outcome of analysis	15 subthemes organized into 5 emergent themes

Note. Participant codes replace names to preserve anonymity.

The analysis followed the seven stages of Colaizzi's method, as shown in Figure 2. Significant statements were extracted from the verbatim transcripts, meanings were formulated, and the formulated meanings were organized into theme clusters and emergent themes.

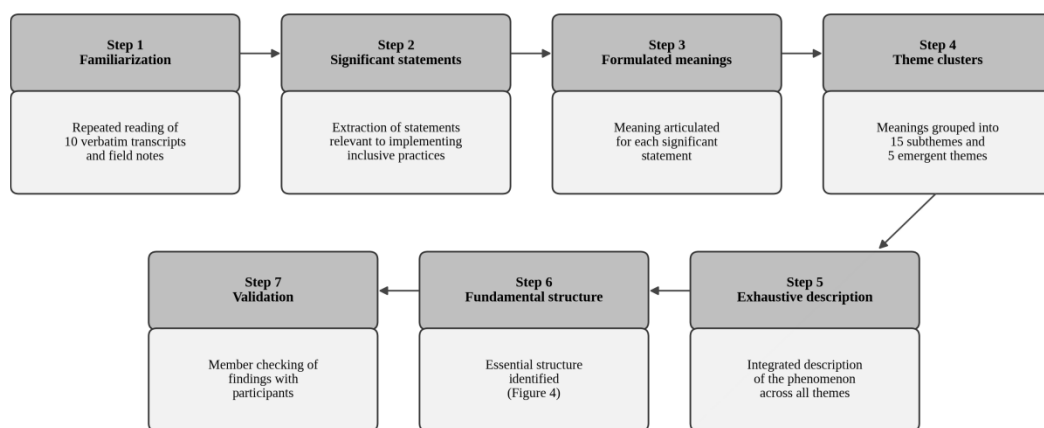


Figure 2. Application of Colaizzi's seven-step method in the present study.

Note. Steps 1 to 4 were conducted separately for each transcript before meanings were pooled across participants. Table 2 illustrates this analytic process using exemplar statements from each participant.

Table 2 Audit Trail of Colaizzi's Analysis: From Significant Statements to Emergent Themes

Significant statement	Formulated meaning	Theme cluster	Emergent theme
"For us, inclusion means the child is sitting in the same classroom as other children. Whether they are truly part of the lesson, that is a different question." (P3)	Inclusion is understood mainly as physical placement; meaningful participation remains uncertain.	Inclusion as access	Theme 1
"Inclusion is not just letting the child sit there. It means changing how I teach, how I explain, how I involve them in every activity." (P7)	Inclusion requires active adaptation of teaching and participation in all activities.	Inclusion as pedagogical adaptation	Theme 1
"Our school building was never designed for a child using a wheelchair. Every day is a struggle just to get him from the gate to the classroom." (P2)	Inaccessible buildings create daily mobility barriers for students.	Inaccessible infrastructure	Theme 2
"We do not have the tools we need. I have made adjustments myself, using whatever is available, because the school cannot provide assistive devices." (P5)	Absence of assistive devices forces teachers to improvise.	Lack of assistive resources	Theme 2



Significant statement	Formulated meaning	Theme cluster	Emergent theme
“Some days I go home feeling like I have failed this child, not because I do not care, but because the system does not give me what I need to help him properly.” (P8)	Systemic constraints produce feelings of professional failure despite commitment.	Frustration and sense of failure	Theme 3
“When I see even small progress, when he manages something on his own that he could not do before, that keeps me going. This is why I stay in this profession.” (P1)	Student progress sustains motivation and professional commitment.	Resilience and moral purpose	Theme 3
“There is no formal system to help us, so we help each other. If another teacher has faced a similar situation, we share what worked.” (P4)	Teachers substitute peer exchange for absent formal support.	Informal peer support	Theme 4
“I rearranged my classroom on my own, moved desks around, created more space near the door. Nobody told me to do this, I just knew it was necessary.” (P6)	Teachers independently modify the physical environment to enable access.	Self-directed classroom adaptation	Theme 4
“We hear about inclusive education policies in meetings, but when it comes to actual support, funding, training, equipment, there is very little that reaches the classroom.” (P9)	Policy rhetoric is not matched by resources reaching classrooms.	Policy without resources	Theme 5
“Our head teacher has been very supportive, she pushes for what we need, but I know this depends on her, not on any guaranteed system.” (P10)	Support depends on individual leaders rather than guaranteed systems.	Leadership-dependent support	Theme 5

Note. Statements are reproduced verbatim from interview transcripts. Theme 1 = Understanding and interpretation of inclusive practices; Theme 2 = Challenges in implementation; Theme 3 = Emotional and professional experiences; Theme 4 = Coping strategies and adaptive practices; Theme 5 = Perceived institutional and administrative support.

Five themes and fifteen subthemes emerged from the analysis. Figure 3 presents the thematic map, and Table 3 summarizes each theme, its subthemes, their core meanings, the number of participants contributing to each theme, and the participants whose statements exemplify them.

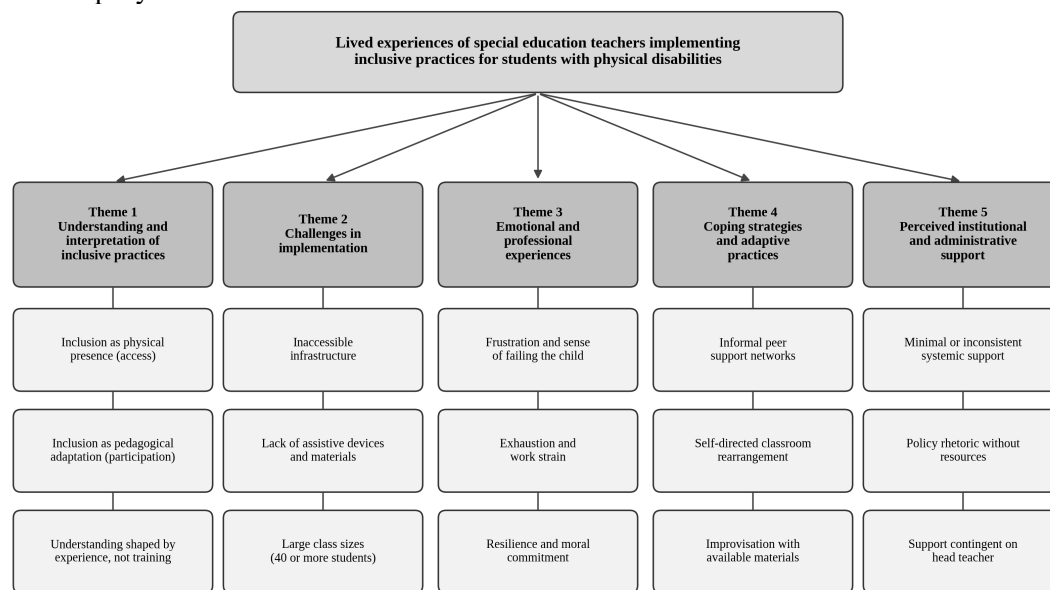


Figure 3: Thematic map of teachers' lived experiences of implementing inclusive practices

Note. Grey boxes represent the five emergent themes; light boxes represent subthemes derived through Colaizzi's analysis.

Table 3: Summary of Themes, Subthemes, Core Meanings, and Participant Contribution

Theme	n (%)	Subtheme	Core meaning	Exemplar sources
Theme 1: Understanding and interpretation of inclusive practices	7 (70)	1a. Inclusion as physical presence (access)	Inclusion equated with placement in the mainstream classroom	P3



Theme	n (%)	Subtheme	Core meaning	Exemplar sources
Theme 2: Challenges in implementation	10 (100)	1b. Inclusion as pedagogical adaptation (participation)	Inclusion requires changing teaching methods and involvement	P7
		1c. Understanding shaped by experience rather than training	Conceptions formed through reflection and practice	P3, P7
		2a. Inaccessible infrastructure	No ramps, adapted washrooms, or suitable furniture	P2
		2b. Lack of assistive devices and materials	Reliance on improvisation instead of equipment	P5
		2c. Large class sizes	Classes of 40 or more limit individual attention	Section narrative 4.2
Theme 3: Emotional and professional experiences	9 (90)	3a. Frustration and sense of failure	Gap between what teachers want to provide and what the system allows	P8
		3b. Exhaustion and work strain	Emotional and physical demands of inclusive teaching	Section narrative 4.3
		3c. Resilience and moral commitment	Student progress sustains professional purpose	P1
Theme 4: Coping strategies and adaptive practices	8 (80)	4a. Informal peer support networks	Colleagues share solutions in the absence of formal systems	P4
		4b. Self-directed classroom rearrangement	Teachers modify space and seating on their own initiative	P6
		4c. Improvisation with available materials	Teacher-made adaptations replace assistive devices	P5
		5a. Minimal or inconsistent systemic support	Limited follow-through on policy commitments	P9
Theme 5: Perceived institutional and administrative support	9 (90)	5b. Policy rhetoric without resources	Funding, training, and equipment rarely reach classrooms	P9
		5c. Support contingent on head teacher	Supportive leadership as exception, not system	P10

Note. n = number of participants (of 10) referencing the theme (see Figure 5). Exemplar sources indicate the participants whose verbatim statements illustrate each subtheme in Sections 4.1 to 4.5.

4.1 Theme 1: Understanding and Interpretation of Inclusive Practices

Participants generally understood inclusion as the physical presence of students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms, though their interpretations of what meaningful inclusion required varied considerably. Several teachers described inclusion primarily in terms of access rather than participation, suggesting a surface level engagement with the concept as promoted in policy documents. One participant explained:

"For us, inclusion means the child is sitting in the same classroom as other children. Whether they are truly part of the lesson, that is a different question." (P3)

Others expressed a more developed understanding, recognizing that inclusion demanded active pedagogical adaptation rather than passive accommodation:

"Inclusion is not just letting the child sit there. It means changing how I teach, how I explain, how I involve them in every activity." (P7)

This variation suggests that teachers' conceptual grasp of inclusive practice is shaped less by formal training and more by individual reflection and experience, echoing the disconnect between policy language and practitioner understanding discussed in the literature.

4.2 Theme 2: Challenges in Implementation

Nearly all participants identified structural and resource related barriers as the most immediate obstacles to effective inclusion. Inaccessible school infrastructure, including the absence of ramps, adapted washrooms, and appropriately sized furniture, emerged as a recurring concern:

"Our school building was never designed for a child using a wheelchair. Every day is a struggle just to get him from the gate to the classroom." (P2)



The lack of assistive devices and specialized teaching materials compounded these difficulties, with several teachers noting they relied on improvisation rather than proper equipment:

"We do not have the tools we need. I have made adjustments myself, using whatever is available, because the school cannot provide assistive devices." (P5)

Large class sizes further constrained teachers' ability to give individualized attention, with participants describing classes of forty or more students where a single teacher was expected to accommodate significant physical accessibility needs alongside standard curriculum demands.

4.3 Theme 3: Emotional and Professional Experiences

Participants described a complex emotional landscape characterized by frustration, exhaustion, and, simultaneously, a strong sense of professional purpose. Frustration was frequently linked to the gap between what teachers felt they should be able to provide and what systemic constraints actually allowed:

"Some days I go home feeling like I have failed this child, not because I do not care, but because the system does not give me what I need to help him properly." (P8)

Despite these difficulties, many participants expressed resilience and a deep commitment to their students, framing their work in terms of moral responsibility rather than professional obligation alone:

"When I see even small progress, when he manages something on his own that he could not do before, that keeps me going. This is why I stay in this profession." (P1)

This coexistence of frustration and resilience reflects the emotionally demanding nature of inclusive teaching in under resourced contexts, where professional purpose often functions as a buffer against systemic shortcomings.

4.4 Theme 4: Coping Strategies and Adaptive Practices

In response to the challenges described above, participants developed a range of informal coping strategies and adaptive practices. Many teachers reported relying on peer support networks, informally consulting colleagues for advice on managing specific accessibility challenges:

"There is no formal system to help us, so we help each other. If another teacher has faced a similar situation, we share what worked." (P4)

Others described modifying lesson delivery and classroom arrangement independently, without institutional guidance, to better accommodate students' physical needs:

"I rearranged my classroom on my own, moved desks around, created more space near the door. Nobody told me to do this, I just knew it was necessary." (P6)

These findings suggest that where formal institutional support is lacking, teachers assume significant individual responsibility for developing practical solutions, often at considerable personal and professional cost.

4.5 Theme 5: Perceived Institutional and Administrative Support

The final theme concerns teachers' perceptions of the support, or lack thereof, provided by school administration and the broader education system. The majority of participants described institutional support as minimal or inconsistent, with limited follow through on policy commitments:

"We hear about inclusive education policies in meetings, but when it comes to actual support, funding, training, equipment, there is very little that reaches the classroom." (P9)

A smaller number of participants noted more positive experiences with supportive head teachers who advocated for resources on their behalf, suggesting that individual leadership, rather than systemic policy enforcement, often determined the level of support available:

"Our head teacher has been very supportive, she pushes for what we need, but I know this depends on her, not on any guaranteed system." (P10)

This theme underscores a broader pattern identified across the interviews: that meaningful inclusive practice in Punjab's public sector schools currently depends heavily on individual teacher initiative and, at times, individual administrative goodwill, rather than on consistent institutional infrastructure or policy enforcement.

4.6 Synthesis of Findings

Table 4 maps each theme to the research questions and to the type of barrier it reflects under the Social Model of Disability, showing that the barriers teachers described were environmental and institutional rather than located in the students themselves.

Table 4: Alignment of Emergent Themes With Research Questions and the Social Model of Disability

Theme	Research question	Barrier type (Social Model)	Interpretation
Theme 1: Understanding and interpretation	RQ1	Attitudinal and conceptual	Absent shared definition of inclusion leaves teachers to construct their own



Theme	Research question	Barrier type (Social Model)	Interpretation
Theme 2: Challenges in implementation	RQ2	Environmental and material	Building design and lack of devices, not impairment, restrict participation
Theme 3: Emotional and professional experiences	RQ1	Institutional (indirect)	Emotional strain fluctuates with systemic conditions
Theme 4: Coping strategies and adaptive practices	RQ3	Response to environmental barriers	Teachers remove barriers informally through peer support and adaptation
Theme 5: Perceived institutional support	RQ1, RQ2	Institutional and policy	Support depends on individual leadership rather than enforcement

Note. RQ1 = lived experience of implementation; RQ2 = challenges in translating policy into practice; RQ3 = coping and adaptation.

Table 5 links the barriers described by participants to the adaptive responses they developed and to the corresponding implications for policy and practice.

Table 5: *Barriers, Teachers' Adaptive Responses, and Implications for Policy and Practice*

Barrier reported	Teachers' adaptive response	Implication
Inaccessible infrastructure (ramps, washrooms, furniture)	Physically assisting students; rearranging desks and space near the door	Budgeted accessibility modification of public school buildings
Absence of assistive devices and materials	Improvising with available materials; teacher-made adaptations	Formal procurement of assistive devices as a policy priority
Large class sizes (40 or more students)	Prioritizing individual attention within limited time	Revised pupil-teacher norms for inclusive classrooms
Limited or generic training	Learning through experience and reflection; consulting colleagues	Sustained, practice-based training on physical disability inclusion
Inconsistent administrative support	Relying on supportive head teachers; peer networks	Accountability and monitoring mechanisms; structured peer mentoring

Figure 4 presents the essential structure of the phenomenon, the final stage of Colaizzi's method, showing how policy commitments pass through structural barriers and teachers' emotional and adaptive responses before reaching the classroom.

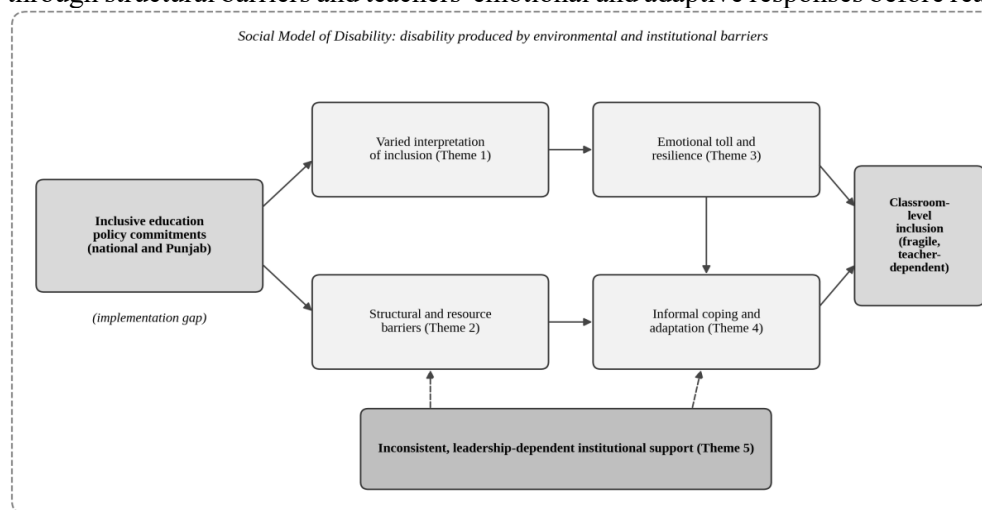


Figure 4: *Essential structure of the phenomenon interpreted through the Social Model of Disability*

Note. Solid arrows indicate the sequence described by participants; dashed arrows indicate the moderating influence of institutional support on barriers and coping.

5. Discussion

The results of this study provide an in-depth understanding of the implementation of inclusive practices for the students with physical disabilities in the public sector schools of Punjab, and also extend previous literature reviewed.

In Theme 1, the conceptual understanding of inclusion shown by teachers ranged from simply being physically present to actively adapting their pedagogical practices, which is in line with Rapp and Corral-Granados (2024) argument that inclusive



education is not a set entity but rather a dynamic entity, which is formed by the actors who enact it. This lack of coherence in the concept of inclusion also indicates that policy documents do not give rise to a common practitioner understanding of inclusion, which is also reflected in the analysis by Khalid et al. (2023) of the gap between the general education and special education policy frameworks in Pakistan. When policy does not result in a clear and unambiguous definition of inclusive practice, teachers seem to be developing their own understanding of inclusive practice from their own experiences, rather than formal training.

The barriers to inclusive education that were identified in Theme 2, such as inaccessible infrastructure, lack of assistive devices, and oversized classes, are all barriers that have been reported in the study carried out by Sijuola and Davidova (2022) on the implementation of inclusive education in developing country contexts. The results further confirm Mendoza and Heymann's (2024) observation that policy adoption often lags policy resource allocation to implement policies in low and lower middle income countries. These results have special relevance when viewed from the perspective of the Social Model of Disability which places disability in the environmental and social barriers, not in the person of the disability (Macmbinji, 2023). As participants describe obstacles as not being reflective of the students themselves but rather of poorly designed physical environments and poorly resourced institutions, the social model is appropriately used as a theoretical lens for this study.

The emotional aspects presented in Theme 3, especially the combination of frustration and resilience, continue the discussion on the part of teacher attitude in inclusive education as presented by Kamran et al. (2023) and Gal et al. (2025). The literature tends to focus on attitude as a relatively stable factor that predicts inclusive practice; however, the present results indicate that the relationship between attitude and inclusive practice is more complex, with teachers' emotional reactions varying in line with varying systemic conditions, but not necessarily reflecting a pre-established attitude toward inclusive practice. This is a relatively new contribution compared to previous research that has focused on attitude measurement quantitatively and not on this context-dependent, variable emotional state.

The informal coping skills of teachers (Theme 4) is a finding that is in contrast to most of the international literature that views teacher preparedness mainly as a product of formal training programmes (Alabay, 2026; Arias-Pastor et al., 2023). In this study, however, participants used much more informal peer networks and self-directed classroom adaptation than structured institutional training. It is important to note that in the context of the public sector in the Punjab, the capacity for inclusive teaching is being cultivated outside the formal system of teacher preparation, with implications for the redesign of teacher preparation programs.

Finally, the pattern found in Theme 5, of the head teacher's role being described as inconsistent, and dependent on their own leadership than on the systematic implementation of the policy, is similar to Walton and Engelbrecht's (2024) notion of path dependency, where the outcomes of inclusion are more influenced by the institutional structures and leadership variability rather than the policy itself. It reinforces Akhtar's (2025) comparative finding that Pakistan's special education policies are progressive in theory, but not in practice due to the lack of operational and monitoring mechanisms found in its stronger counterparts.

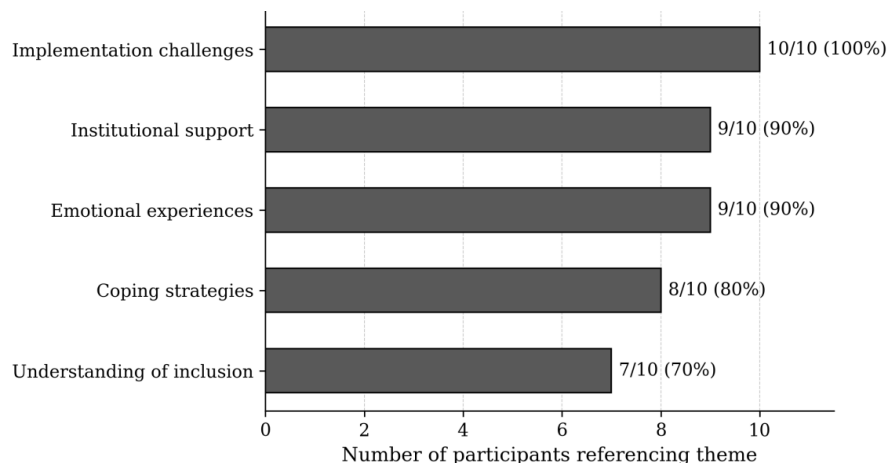


Figure 5: Frequency of emergent themes across participant interviews (N = 10).

The overall results have several policy and practice implications. First, teacher training programmes need to shift from generic awareness-raising workshops to more focused and ongoing preparation for the inclusion of physical disability. Second, funding for assistive devices and infrastructure modification should be considered as a policy priority and not a discretionary item for individual schools. Thirdly, the formal peer support and mentorship activities that teachers have organically developed themselves should be recognized and structured as an institutional activity. Lastly, there is a need for administrative accountability systems to ensure that inclusive education support is not restricted to the discretion of



individual head teachers, but is made a reality through regular monitoring of the implementation of inclusive education policies in all public sector schools in Punjab.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study aimed to investigate the experiences of special education teachers who were engaged in inclusive practices with students having physical disability in public sector schools of Punjab. The results highlight a nuanced picture where teachers' conceptual understanding of inclusion is not always consistent, structural and resource obstacles have a strong impact on the implementation of inclusion, and emotional encounters are sometimes frustrating and sometimes resilient depending on the system. Without strong institutional support, teachers have largely resorted to creating their own informal coping strategies and adaptive practices, and use informal networks and self-directed problem solving instead of formal training or administrative guidance. Support from institutions was also identified as inconsistent and dependent on the head teacher's initiative rather than a consistent policy. Together, these results show that the difference between the policy and the practice of inclusive education as described in the wider literature is not just administrative, but also lived, and it impacts the daily professional and emotional lives of the teachers who implement it.

To support these findings, some practical recommendations are provided. Teacher training programmes need to be restructured to incorporate long-term, practice related blocks on physical disability inclusion, not short awareness sessions. The use of assistive devices, accessible infrastructure and classroom adaptations should be a policy priority and be budgeted, not left to individual school discretion. Further, the revision of policy should provide clear operational guidance and monitoring processes as to how the commitment to inclusive education is consistently translated at the classroom level, decreasing reliance on the goodwill of individual administrators.

6.1 Limitations

There are some limitations to this study. The results of this qualitative, phenomenological study with a relatively small number of purposive samples are not meant to be statistically generalizable, but rather to provide transferable insight into similar situations. Self-reported interview information also may lead to social desirability bias, and the geographic focus of the research on Punjab may not directly apply to other provinces that have different resource and policy contexts.

6.2 Future Directions

Comparative studies between provinces to explore the diversity in the implementation of inclusive education and further studies which are longitudinal to explore the changes in teachers' experiences and coping strategies over time should be explored in future research. Other research could also include those of students with physical disabilities and their parents to develop a clearer picture of inclusive practice from a variety of perspectives.

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