



Barriers Teachers Face in Implementing Inclusive Practices in Their Classrooms in Mountainous Region of Pakistan

Kausar Parween Malik

PhD Scholar, Department of Education, Metropolitan University, Karachi. Pakistan
kausar.waqar@aku.edu

Prof. Dr. Shahida Sajjad

Department of Education, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences,
Metropolitan University, Karachi. Pakistan
Shahida_sajjad75270@yahoo.com

Abstract

The geographical location of Gilgit Baltistan makes it difficult to reach. Prevalence of disability in Gilgit-Baltistan surpasses national averages, yet the educational architecture remains un-inclusive. Disabled people face challenges in leading a life of dignity. In recent times, Inclusive Education has emerged, not just a concept or a policy, but a fundamental human right. The study aims to identify barriers teachers face in implementing inclusive practices in their classrooms. Cultural values sometimes prevent families from reporting impairments. Physical infrastructure like ramps, accessible latrines, and transport systems are lacking or absent most times. The study combined in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and classroom observations. The sample consisted of 20 teachers, 10 parents, and 20 schools, selected using purposive and snowball sampling techniques to ensure relevance and depth. Thematic analysis was used to make sense of complexity. From the fieldwork, four major categories of barriers emerged: physical and infrastructural barriers, social and cultural barriers, teacher training and capacity gaps, and policy and resource limitations. Each of these barriers interacts with the others, creating a cycle of exclusion that many children cannot escape. Four major areas of challenge teachers face emerged: Lack of Training and Preparedness, Managing Overcrowded and Diverse Classrooms, Limited Resources and Institutional Support, and Emotional Burdens, Burnout, and Resilience. Despite these challenges, some teachers demonstrated extraordinary creativity and commitment, finding small but meaningful ways to include children with disabilities. Three notable practices emerged: peer assisted learning, visual and hands on methods, personalized attention. Insights emerged from the study that teachers have high willingness and low preparedness. Second, systemic neglect amplifies challenges, and third, teachers hold transformative power; despite structural barriers, many take extraordinary steps to adapt their teaching and advocate for students. The study recommends schools build/retrofit ramps, railings, and accessible toilets using local low-cost materials and labor. Simple pedagogy and inclusion of visual/tactile scaffolds ensured in every lesson, and short cycles of practice-based training with follow-up coaching to be ensured for teachers. Need for ongoing training is explicit in findings. Future research should examine integrated sets of solutions instead of individual interventions.

Key Words: Inclusion, Children, Children with Disabilities, Government Primary Schools, Barriers, Teachers



Introduction

Gilgit-Baltistan sits at the outer edges of Pakistan's educational landscape, geographically remote, structurally neglected, and socially overlooked. Its geographical location, set within the three great mountain ranges of the Karakoram, Hindukush, and the Himalayas, makes it difficult to reach. Moreover, the cities, villages, and settlements are scattered, due to which the population finds educational, health, and socialization facilities inaccessible. Although the population numbers living with disabilities are substantial, the corresponding governmental and societal readiness to mitigate their difficulties is woefully inadequate. As the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (2023) reveals, the prevalence of disability in Gilgit-Baltistan surpasses national averages, yet the educational architecture remains unchanged, unresponsive, and un-inclusive.

Since the beginning of human existence, disabled people have faced challenges in leading a life of dignity. These include ignorance about their lived experiences, prejudice, harmful customs, inhumane treatment, and poverty (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Ali et al., 2024). Their families and society have misunderstood them and denied their rights, and educational, social, and cultural opportunities and experiences.

UNESCO (2023) explained that opportunities in education are limited by experiences of discrimination. Each person within them carries multiple identities and characteristics that are linked to experiences of discrimination. These include, but are not limited to, ability, disability, gender, class, ethnicity, language, and sexual orientation. When these identities intersect, which means when some of these are present in a single person, the level of vulnerability increases exponentially. Indeed, these intersections further exacerbate and complicate the experience of discrimination. In recent times, IE has emerged, not just a concept or a policy, but a fundamental human right (Bashir, et. al., 2023).

The research highlighted that teachers should use flexible and reflective teaching methods embedded in the theory of differentiated learning. Instead of expecting all students to do the same things at the same pace, schools ought to give different options and build a robust support mechanism; through this approach, many more students can succeed and feel confident.

The schools promoting the status quo, inaccessible school buildings, inadequate teaching and learning material, and untrained teachers block the pathway to inclusion – social and educational (Sharma et al., 2020). Untrained teachers fail to detect and understand the learning needs of learners, thus not just delaying inclusion but blocking it (McLeod 2017; O'Connor 2017). Loreman and Deppeler (2020) argued that without targeted, customized teacher training, schools cannot create a truly equitable environment for diverse learners.

Similarly, Ali (2024) discusses the importance of teaching in a way that is culturally responsive. He suggested that education should respect and reflect local norms, helping children with disabilities feel seen, heard, and valued. By making education relevant and flexible, schools can begin to see every child as a unique individual with potential.

It is apparent that while the world has taken up the challenge of bringing quality education to all children, the situation in Pakistan is quite grim. Teacher practice and training, and social stigma are the challenges in the rest of Pakistan. However, the challenges in mountainous



regions of Gilgit Baltistan and an all-encompassing story is still to be discovered. This study does a deep dive into these challenges and tries to identify contextual solutions to the specific problems of the area. It aims to explore the practice of IE in government primary schools in the Gilgit-Baltistan region of Pakistan.

Research Objective

1. To identify the barriers teachers, face in implementing inclusive practices in their classrooms.

Research Question

The study was guided by the following research question:

1. What barriers do teachers face in implementing inclusive practices in their classrooms?

Literature Review

Barriers to Inclusive Education

In a developing country like Pakistan, the education sector has encountered a vast range of challenges, which include unavailability of qualified teachers, specifically female teaching staff. The reason behind these challenges is the lack of implementation of relevant policies and plans to meet the requirements of qualified teachers. Students studying in government schools are highly affected by these shortcomings. Because of low budget designated for the public education sector, qualified teachers prefer to work in the private sector (Akram & Yang, 2021). Further, literature revealed that the lack of awareness, shortage of societal and government support, conceptions of society regarding children with disabilities, inappropriate training, and inefficient education programs for teachers as some of the major obstacles (Bahir et al., 2023; Forlin, 2018; Gathumbi et al., 2015)

Environmental Impediments and Infrastructural Barriers

Infrastructure is a building block of every system of education, and for people with disabilities, the existence or absence of accessible environments helps determine success or failure of inclusion (Sims & Desmarais 2020). Physical infrastructure like ramps, elevators, spacious doors, accessible latrines, and transport systems are absent most times. Adaptation technologies, and assistive learning environments are also absent. The two deficiencies together represent and perpetuate systemic neglect. Sarkar and Parween (2021) reported the extreme effects of infrastructural neglect in Bhutan, where students in rural areas experience the absence of accessible structures in addition to the lack of experience on the part of educators in the field of inclusive design (Sarkar & Parween, 2021).

Schools' architecture is designed and developed with the absence of the possibility of disability on the mind. This is analogous to the larger ableist presumption that disabled students exist as anomalies and not as active and equal members of the academic community. Similarly, Sharma et al. (2020) examined the state of the Pacific Islands. Their research concludes that schools not only do not possess even the most basic facilities but also experience substandard maintenance and monitoring.



Kilinc's (2022) conducted qualitative study in the Republic of Turkey and showed that parents of children who do not have disabilities also oppose inclusive policies not only out of prejudice but also out of fear that inadequately equipped infrastructure will compromise academic standards for all children. This perpetuates attitudinal barriers by viewing inclusion as a setback and not a right (Kilinc, 2022).

Environmental exclusion extends far beyond the school gate. Transport systems, pedestrian infrastructure, and residence all contribute to the frequency with which a child reports for school. Inaccessible public infrastructure translates into even well-prepared schools still having numerous students who cannot take part due to logistical exclusion. Professionals advocate for a UDL orientation that designs spaces and technologies with diversity from the outset. This accommodates the needs of children with disabilities but also makes the environment accessible to a higher proportion of the population. Legislative regulation, political prioritization of the line item in the budgetary line matrix, and inclusive planning all matters to ensure infrastructure supports and does not disable inclusive schooling.

Societal Stigma and Attitudinal Barriers

Orcan (2022) studied the situation in Ghana, revealing that discrimination affects even people who may have more access to resources, and internalize social exclusion. Stigma also affects how teachers view and affect student behavior and potential. Teachers who are unfamiliar with handicap issues may misinterpret classroom difficulties. This may lead to punitive actions. These inaccurate views are reinforced by a lack of training in inclusive teaching techniques (Orcan, 2022). Ahmed et al. (2022) used a regional approach to investigate the links between prejudice and religious and cultural beliefs in the Asia Pacific area. In certain cultures, disability is seen as a type of punishment or karmic payback, causing social segregation for handicapped children and their families. These cultural values sometimes prevent families from reporting impairments, resulting in under-identification and delaying the assistance that these children need to succeed in their education.

Kilinc (2022) demonstrated how inadequate infrastructure is sometimes used to justify these concerns, resulting in a feedback cycle in which prejudice and physical exclusion reinforce each other. To overcome these ingrained habits, educational institutions must address stigma at all levels. This includes changing the curriculum to teach about disability rights, providing training for teachers to cultivate compassion and inclusive practices, and launching public campaigns to normalize handicap as a natural element of human diversity. Wexler (2016) investigated how performative inclusion in the arts might conceal underlying ideas about normality and ability, while Ahmed et al. (2022) showed that stigma and parental views continue to hinder inclusive education despite regulatory structures.

Inadequate Teacher Training

Teacher capacity is consistently highlighted as a bottleneck in inclusive reform. Underprepared teachers default to exclusionary tactics masked as differentiated instruction (Reeves et al., 2022). Direct accounts from Zimbabwe showed that untrained teachers exacerbate stigma and limit educational continuity for students with disabilities (Tahreem et al., 2025). Ahmed et al.



highlight both the lack of rigor and regional disparities in training resources (Ahmed et al., 2022).

Exclusionary Practices

Inclusive schools frequently reproduce exclusion through pedagogical practices. Done & Andrews explored how labelling and special educational needs coding systems, such as the SEND Code, often reinforce categorical segregation (Done & Andrews, 2020). Reeves et al. described how classroom structures and curricula reinforce ableist standards, enabling the covert marginalization of disabled students (Reeves et al., 2022). Hayes and Bulat argued that unless practices such as grouping, curriculum pacing, and assessment structures are reimaged, inclusion remains superficial (Hayes & Bulat, 2017).

Technology and Inclusive Pedagogies

Salas et al. (2022) cited assistive technologies, including text-to-speech software, communication devices, and screen readers, which enhance participation opportunities for students with diverse disabilities. Nevertheless, these tools are frequently inaccessible because of economic limitations or insufficient institutional knowledge. The UDL framework has emerged as a strong pedagogical strategy as it provides adaptability in the presentation of content, fostering student engagement, and employing various assessment techniques (Hayes & Bulat, 2017). Sharma et al., observe that insufficient teacher training and inadequate digital literacy frequently lead to the underutilization or misapplication of technology within inclusive environments (Sharma et al., 2019). In low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), where internet penetration and hardware availability are still inconsistent, these issues are intensified. To effectively leverage the inclusive potential of technology, a more strategic methodology is necessary. In this process, technology has the potential to transition from a privilege to an essential instrument for achieving equity in education.

Key Insights from Literature

Inclusive education does not take place in a vacuum. Several contextual elements determine its results. Globally, individuals with disabilities encounter many challenges in gaining inclusive and high-quality learning. The literature presented particularly highlighted the under-resourced and marginalized contexts and points out several important issues and factors about the implementation of inclusive education. These ideas not only framed the general background of this study but also directly informed the development of research questions and the qualitative, community-oriented approach followed here.

Figure 1
 Key Themes of the Literature Review



Materials and Methods

Research Design

Qualitative research design was used in this study since it is most suited for investigating the educational experiences of teachers, parents, and community members engaged in inclusive education. Qualitative research methods allow the researcher to explore a single phenomenon from multiple directions through different theoretical lenses (Seidman, 2013). To acquire comprehensive information on the difficulties children with disabilities experience, the support they get, and how they traverse the educational system, the study combined in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and classroom observations.

The study used interpretivist approach, which emphasizes that reality is shaped by individual perceptions, experiences, and social interactions, instead of looking for objective truths or universal realities (Putnam, 2017). This approach especially fits well for this research, as it highlights the views of teachers, parents, and community members on how they navigate and perceive inclusive education in the under-resourced areas. Another reason for adopting this method is rooted in the alignment of Interpretivism with the use of qualitative methods, such as observations, focus groups, and interviews that allow participants to express their realities in their own words, shaped by their cultural values, social roles, and day-to-day interactions.



Targeted Population

Gilgit-Baltistan, a mountainous region of Pakistan, is the research site. Its geographic isolation, poverty, and scarcity of inclusive educational resources were the reasons for selecting this area.

Table 1

Gilgit and Skardu Population, People with Disabilities, number of Government Primary Schools and Teachers

City	Gilgit	Skardu
Population	216,760	75,000
People with Disabilities	3,900 – 4,500	1,300 – 1,600
Government Primary Schools	120	95
Primary School Teachers	650	480

Table 1 explains that Gilgit has an estimated population of 216,760, while Skardu has around 75,000 residents. Among these populations, approximately 3,900 to 4,500 people in Gilgit and about 1,300 to 1,600 people in Skardu are estimated to be living with disabilities. In terms of education infrastructure, Gilgit has about 120 government primary schools with approximately 650 primary school teachers, whereas Skardu has around 95 government primary schools supported by roughly 480 primary school teachers (Government of Gilgit-Baltistan, 2024).

Sample Size

The sample consisted of 20 teachers, 10 parents, and 20 schools, selected using purposive and snowball sampling techniques to ensure relevance and depth.

The study also observed 20 schools and classrooms, 10 from each region, to gain insight into how inclusive education is practiced in these rural settings. These schools are the same where those teachers teach. Over six months, each school was monitored for 1 to 2 hours, focusing on how children with disabilities were included in activities, how teachers adapted their methods, and how the classroom environment facilitated or hindered inclusion. Schools not serving children with disabilities were excluded, as were teachers with no direct experience. Key aspects of the study included examining teacher practice, classroom environments, school infrastructure.

Data Collection Tools

The study used interviews, focus group discussions, and classroom observations for collecting the data. These methods helped to gather useful information from teachers, students, and parents. To do this, the researcher developed self-structured, semi-structured interview guides for FGD. The interview and FGD instruments were intentionally semi-structured, allowing flexibility in both the questions asked and the direction of the dialogue. This approach supported the interpretivist nature of the study, which values the way individuals interpret their own experiences.

Real-time inclusive education practices in schools were evaluated by the researcher using classroom observations, through a self-developed checklist which helped to understand how teachers modify their techniques and how children with disabilities participate in class



activities. An observation checklist designed to understand the accessibility of school infrastructure was used.

Several steps were taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the instruments and the data collected. Credibility was ensured by using participants' native languages and encouraging open dialogue, the instruments allowed people to speak naturally and authentically. The questions were grounded in real-world concerns common across many rural education settings, increasing the relevance of the findings beyond the immediate sample. The development process, including expert review and pilot testing, ensured that the instruments were consistent and thoughtfully constructed ensuring dependability. Confirmability was taken care of by keeping field notes, recorded reflections, and allowing participants to clarify or expand on their responses, ensuring the data truly represented their perspectives.

Data Analysis and Procedure

To make sense of these diverse experiences, the researcher used thematic analysis, following the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic design, which involved transcribing the data, generating codes, identifying key themes, and interpreting the findings. This allowed her to organize participants' stories into clear, meaningful themes while staying grounded in their voices.

Thematic analysis helped the researcher make sense of complexity by allowing flexibility in exploring different perspectives. Capturing patterns of meaning across interviews, FGDs, and classroom observations and ensuring that participants' voices remained central to the interpretation of findings. Each theme was carefully defined to capture its central meaning without the use of jargons. For example, "Barriers to Inclusive Education" instead of "Systemic Limitations." This choice kept the findings accessible and grounded.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring they understand the purpose of the study and their rights. Ethical standards were strictly upheld throughout the study, and all the required steps were taken to ensure the maintenance of participant confidentiality, respect cultural norms, and lessen any potential harm during the research process.

Results

This study aimed to explore the practices of teachers who are directly involved in educating children with disabilities. It sought to understand how teachers understand their role and what challenges they face in IE. As Sharma et al. (2020) suggest, teacher preparedness is often a significant barrier to successful IE.

Barriers to Inclusive Education

From the fieldwork, four major categories of barriers emerged: physical and infrastructural barriers, social and cultural barriers, teacher training and capacity gaps, and policy and resource limitations. Each of these barriers interacts with the others, creating a cycle of exclusion that many children cannot escape. Through the voices of teachers, this section explores these barriers in depth.



Physical and Infrastructural Barriers. In nearly every school the researcher visited, participants described the same reality: classrooms, school buildings, and learning environments are not designed for children with disabilities. These limitations go beyond inconvenience; they actively exclude children from participating.

Inaccessible School Buildings. In 19 of the 20 schools observed, there were no ramps, railings, or adapted toilets. Some classrooms were located on upper floors with steep, narrow staircases. In another school in Baltistan, a boy with limited mobility was observed crawling up the stairs while two classmates tried to help him. A teacher being emotional, explained: *“I’ve asked for ramps many times, but there is no budget. We make do with what we have, but it breaks my heart to see him struggle like this.”* (Baltistan, Res23, IDI).

Lack of Assistive Devices and Learning Materials. Inclusive education requires more than just physical access it also depends on accessible learning tools. Yet observations across all schools visited, no braille books, no hearing aids, no visual aids, and no assistive technologies were found. One teacher explained, *“I have a student who is almost deaf. I try to write everything on the board for him, but I don’t know if he understands. If we had even basic devices, his life could change.”* (Baltistan, Res 24, IDI).

Teachers reported that parents have to buy their own adaptive resources, but for many families in rural villages, even the information about sourcing i.e., where to buy, what to buy is not available. Quality products are not available in these far-flung places. Parents must travel to bigger cities or even to other provinces.

Long Travel Distances. For families living in remote mountain villages, getting to school is itself a barrier. Children with disabilities often walk several kilometers on uneven paths or rely on parents to carry them. A father shared, *“The school is almost six kilometers away, and there is no transport. For my son, it is impossible to walk. Most days, he stays home.”* (Gilgit, Res33, FGD).

This highlights how geography and poverty intersect to reinforce exclusion.

Impact on Enrolment and Attendance. These infrastructural issues have direct consequences: many children drop out or are never enrolled at all. Even among those who attend, irregular attendance is common due to the physical exhaustion of accessing school buildings daily. From field observations: Many enrolled children with disabilities miss school at least once a week.

A teacher recounted the experience thus:

“Whenever the temperature drops, or rains start, our attendance is affected, especially these children (CWD) stop coming. What can these poor creatures do also, how can they and their parents manage. We also do not penalize them, as we understand their problems” (Baltistan Res 21, IDI).

Social and Cultural Barriers. Beyond infrastructure, deep-rooted social attitudes significantly shape the experience of children with disabilities. Across interviews and FGDs, the researcher found widespread evidence of stigma, discrimination, and isolation within families, schools, and communities.



Stigma and Shame

Teachers shared that low enrollment among children with disabilities often stems from parental fear of social ridicule. A teacher described the situation,

“Parents are also right. How can they send their children who look different to school, when people stare and other children make fun of them. We try to protect these children, but to be honest we are not successful. How can we protect them on the way. Only teachers cannot do much. Everyone must cooperate.” (Baltistan, Res22, IDI).

Bullying and Peer Exclusion. Despite children's enrolment in educational programs, acceptance by their peers is not assured. Some educators documented occurrences of taunting, ostracization, or complete exclusion. A teacher noted, *“Certain students decline to associate with a peer who exhibits a distinct feature or gait. While we endeavour to mitigate the matter; these attitudes are often rooted in familial influences and prove challenging to alter.” (Baltistan, Res24, IDI).*

These experiences become especially heartbreaking for CWD during social events at schools. Bullying exacerbates school dropout rates and adversely impacts children's emotional health, thereby intensifying the educational difficulties they are currently experiencing.

Cultural and Religious Beliefs. While many participants linked faith with compassion, others noted that traditional beliefs sometimes fuel exclusion.

A teacher reflected, *“Allah has asked us to be merciful to all His creations. We must care about them (CWD) also” (Gilgit Res 10, FGD)*

This highlights the importance of community awareness programs to challenge misconceptions and promote inclusive values.

Policy and Resource Limitations

Although Pakistan has inclusive education policies and a Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2020) participants across all groups agreed on one thing: policies exist only on paper in these regions.

Funding Gaps. Schools had no dedicated budgets for inclusive education. Teachers often bought materials with their own money, while parents struggled to afford assistive devices and transportation. A teacher reflected, *“We used to have transport for our students through an NGO, but not anymore. This has affected CWD much more” (Baltistan, Res 21, IDI).*

Lack of Implementation. The researcher observed that even when policies mandate accessibility, there is no monitoring or enforcement. Although Government schools cannot refuse admission to any child, they do not do so in practice, instead advising parents to take the child to special schools. One teacher described repeated requests for structural improvements: *“Our Head has written letters for three years asking for ramps and toilets. We are still waiting. Until there is accountability, nothing will change.” (Baltistan, Res 25, IDI).*

Dependence on NGOs. A handful of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) provide resources, but their support is inconsistent and limited. Out of the 20 schools visited, only 3 received external funding or equipment. Most relied entirely on local efforts. A teacher working



with social welfare shared, *“They cannot fulfill the needs here. their efforts fall short. How can they fulfill all the needs? The area has so much poverty. The needs of people are too much. We cannot reach children with disabilities.”* (Gilgit, Res 7, FGD).

Teachers’ Challenges and Practices

Teachers are at the heart of inclusive education. They are expected to welcome all learners, differentiate instruction, and foster belonging for children with diverse needs yet they do so within under-resourced schools, overcrowded classrooms, and systemic neglect.

From interviews, FGDs, and 20 classroom observations, four major areas of challenge emerged: Lack of Training and Preparedness, Managing Overcrowded and Diverse Classrooms, Limited Resources and Institutional Support, and Emotional Burdens, Burnout, and Resilience

Despite these challenges, some teachers demonstrated extraordinary creativity and commitment, finding small but meaningful ways to include children with disabilities.

Lack of Training and Preparedness. Across the 20 teachers interviewed, only three had ever received some form of training in inclusive education. Most learned through trial and error, relying on peer support, online searches, and instinct. A teacher confessed, *“I was never trained to teach children with disabilities. I use whatever I can find sometimes I ask colleagues, sometimes I search YouTube. But I know it’s not enough.”* (Gilgit, Res 10, IDI).

A teacher admitted, *“I had no idea how to teach a child with a visual impairment. I searched online and asked other teachers for advice. We are doing our best, but we are unprepared.”* (Gilgit, Res5, IDI).

Another teacher explained, *“How can one week training prepare me to take up such a difficult task. This is too much to ask of me, that I will be able to take care of teaching to inclusive children.”* (Baltistan, Res 29, IDI)

In observations, IDIs and informal discussions, teachers repeatedly expressed frustration at not knowing how to adapt their teaching methods. For example, teachers struggled with sign language for students with hearing impairments, they lacked strategies for children with visual or cognitive disabilities, they were unaware of techniques for differentiated learning, and this lack of preparedness left teachers feeling inadequate and, in some cases, guilty for not being able to support their students fully. One teacher put it all in one perspective, *“if only we had received good training, we would have known how to deal with children with hearing issues, eye issues, and learning issues”* (Gilgit, Res 4, IDI)

Managing Overcrowded and Diverse Classrooms. One of the strongest findings was that inclusive classrooms are overwhelming without structural support. Teachers routinely managed more than 40 students in small, poorly ventilated classrooms — often with only one blackboard and no other teaching aid. A teacher shared, *“I want to give special attention to children who need it, but when you have 45 students, it is impossible. I end up focusing on the majority, and that breaks my heart.”* (Baltistan, Res 29, FGD).

Another teacher had a different experience,



“The learning needs of children in my class are so much in every direction, I don’t know what to do – look after a child drooling from mouth, or one who may have a heart condition (Down Syndrome), I am not a doctor and no doctor told me how I can look after these children in my classroom and teach the rest of the students also. I only have two hands and one brain” (Baltistan, Res 23, IDI)

During field observations it has been seen that, teachers spent significant time maintaining discipline, reducing time available for individualized instruction. Children with disabilities were often seated at the back, making engagement even harder and lessons were typically textbook-driven, with little scope for adapting material. This creates a paradox: inclusive enrollment without inclusive practice, where students are technically “included” but left behind in learning outcomes.

The researcher observed that not only were there a big number in each class, but there was also a multigrade situation as well. One teacher was expected to teach two grades in the same room. This compounded the teachers’ difficulties. A teacher described feeling overwhelmed and under-supported. *“I have 42 students. Two of them need constant help. I can’t leave the others unattended, so those two often fall behind,” (Gilgit, Res 6, IDI).*

Limited Resources and Institutional Support. Teachers repeatedly highlighted the scarcity of teaching aids, assistive devices, and adaptive materials. Schools lack braille books, large-print resources, hearing aids, visual learning aids, and assistive technologies.

During an interview with the teacher, *“We improvise. I draw pictures on the board when I can. Sometimes I make flashcards using scrap paper. But I dream of having even basic tools they could change everything.” (Baltistan, Res 22, IDI).*

The researcher observed that all schools lacked teaching assistants, special educators, or counselors. Sometimes there were only one or two teachers in a school. Teachers often worked alone, handling administration, instruction, and classroom management simultaneously. This left little room for adapting lessons to diverse learning needs. *“I have no support in my class. Sometimes I feel so exhausted and confused. I don’t have anybody to guide me. I wish I could ask someone who knows this stuff.” (Baltistan, Res 25, IDI).*

Additionally, teachers bought materials with their own money in 7 out of 20 schools visited. This leaves teachers isolated and overburdened, expected to achieve inclusion without the resources to make it possible. One teacher explained the feeling thus, *“I feel I am as alone as this child with disability” (Baltistan, Res 26, IDI)*

“There is too much work in my school. It is impossible to cope alone with this. I have learned some strategies during my one-week training, but I can’t apply them as there is too much to do. (Gilgit, Res 1, IDI)

Emotional Burden, Burnout and Resilience. Perhaps the most striking finding was the emotional toll inclusive teaching takes on teachers. Many described feelings of frustration, exhaustion, guilt, and helplessness. A teacher in the interview, *“I go home every day and think about the children I couldn’t reach. I know they are falling behind, but I have no training, no assistant, no tools. It feels like I’m failing them.” (Gilgit, Res 8, IDI).*



Several teachers reported experiencing burnout from balancing multiple roles including instructor, counselor, administrator, and advocate. In addition, they face pressure from parents for better results without institutional backing. Teachers also work long hours while preparing individualized strategies outside school. A teacher in the interview, *“This is too much, how can I do all this. And on top of everything, the parents think we can work miracles in school. We cannot do miracles.”* (Baltistan, Res 29, IDI).

Despite this, the researcher observed incredible resilience. Some teachers stayed after hours to give one-on-one support. Others organized informal peer-learning groups where students supported each other. These acts of dedication stood out as bright spots of hope in otherwise challenging circumstances.

Adaptive Teaching Practices. Amidst limited training and resources, many teachers demonstrated creativity and innovation. Three notable practices emerged:

Peer-Assisted Learning. In several classrooms, teachers paired children with disabilities with supportive peers, turning students into learning partners. Teachers reported that this not only improved participation but also reduced stigma and built friendships. A teacher shared her strategy in the interview,

“I found that if I give him (student with learning problems) the seat next to good student, it helps. They both form friendship and help. But I have to change to the good student after a little time. You know the parents come and complain that my child time is being wasted.” (Baltistan, Res 27, IDI).

Visual and Hands-On Methods. Teachers improvised by using pictures, diagrams, and real objects to explain concepts especially for students struggling with literacy. The researcher observed one teacher in Gilgit even brought vegetables from home to teach fractions, making the lesson accessible for all students, including those with learning difficulties. Another teacher explained, *“When we make them do something in our class, they remember and learn. Only lecture method does not work with them”* (Baltistan, Res 28, IDI).

Personalized Attention. In a school in Skurdu - Baltistan, a teacher stayed 15 minutes after class each day to support a boy with a learning disability, According to the teacher, *“I cannot leave him behind. If I work with him slowly, one day he will be at the same level as his peers.”* (Baltistan, Res 25, IDI).

These adaptive strategies demonstrate how teacher commitment can partially compensate for systemic gaps but they are not sustainable without institutional change.

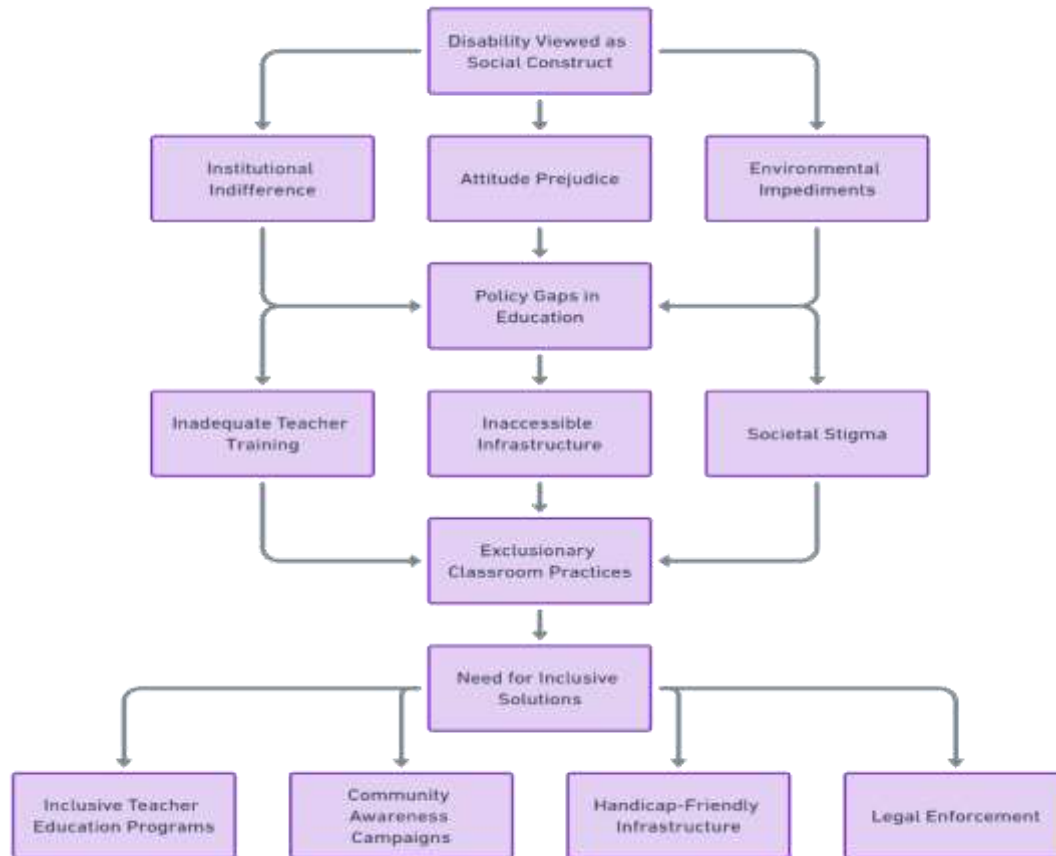
Teachers as Advocates for Inclusion. Interestingly, teachers are not only educators but also advocates. Many spoke passionately about challenging stigma in their communities. Some parents organized parent meetings to discuss disability rights, others visited homes to convince families to enroll their children, and a few reached out to local NGOs to request assistive devices or learning materials.

In interview a teacher expressed openly, *“Sometimes, we are the only voice for these children. If we stay silent, nothing will change.”* (Baltistan, Res 26, IDI).

This advocacy role shows that teachers are central to transforming attitudes — but expecting them to carry this burden alone risks overwhelming an already fragile system.

This advocacy role shows that teachers are central to transforming attitudes — but expecting them to carry this burden alone risks overwhelming an already fragile system.

Figure 2



Conclusion and Discussion

Discussion

From the teachers’ narratives and observations, three key insights emerged. First is high willingness, low preparedness. This pans out as teachers want to include children with disabilities but lacking the skills, training, and tools. Second, systemic neglect amplifies challenges. Without institutional support, even motivated teachers struggle to provide meaningful inclusion. Third, teachers hold transformative power, despite structural barriers, many take extraordinary steps to adapt their teaching and advocate for students.

Barrier domains are considered across four domains—physical (buildings, transport, terrain), instructional (pedagogy, materials, assessment), social (attitudes, stigma, peer dynamics), and systemic (policies, budgets, staffing, data). Feasibility lens is applied when identifying pathways, and feasibility is judged by cost realism, local material/skills availability, implementer ownership, terrain/weather resilience, and equity (benefits across disability types and for girls and the most remote households). Outcome is focused across objectives, and



emphasis is placed on moving from placement toward participation and learning i.e., whether students are safe, engaged, supported, and making progress, not only whether they are enrolled.

Geography is a distinctive amplifier in this context. Long distances, steep terrain, and winter hazards intensify routine barriers (attendance, fatigue, safety) and raise the threshold for “basic access.” Access fixes first, then routines. Prioritize ramps/railings, accessible toilets, and safe entry points; pair each fix with a classroom routine (front-row seating, buddy support, exit tickets or quick checks for understanding) so access translates into learning. Low-cost, high-frequency supports. Normalize visual scaffolds, chunked instructions, and predictable lesson structures. Use peer tutors and rotating buddies to share support without singling out students. Micro-coaching over one-off training. Short, iterative coaching cycles (plan–try–reflect) help teachers integrate strategies under real constraints Attendance stabilization. Coordinate with families on travel plans, assign a contact person for each child with a disability, and track simple indicators (days present; engagement notes) to catch slippage early.

When educational institutions, district administrators, local communities, and collaborative partners fulfill their respective roles, beginning with "no regret" initiatives and expanding therefrom, placement will transform into participation, and participation will evolve into learning. The contribution of this study serves as a viable foundation.

At school level, physical inaccessibility and scarce assistive materials limit entry and persistence. But the classroom is where exclusion becomes visible. Without structured differentiation, cues that reduce cognitive load, and peer supports, children who arrive at school remain peripheral to instruction (Asri et al., 2021) Observed improvisations (peer buddies, front-row seating, teacher-made visuals) show that participation can improve quickly with low-cost changes, yet the effort is difficult to sustain without coaching, time, and materials. The pattern suggests that small, reliable routines more than expensive, one-off inputs shift daily experience.

The findings also engage with the conceptual debate about what counts as inclusion. Some literature equates inclusion with co-location; others argue for belonging, participation, and learning outcomes. Evidence from this study supports the latter: presence without engagement produces limited gains and sometimes backfires by normalizing passive participation. Framing inclusion as participatory capability the capacity of learners to engage, express understanding, and progress aligns more closely with what families and teachers value on the ground (Shutaleva et al., 2023).

The study translates its findings into an actionable plan for schools, districts, and communities in Gilgit Baltistan. It prioritizes basic access improvements paired with simple classroom routines, so presence becomes participation. It favours low-cost support and iterative coaching, with attendance stabilized through family coordination and simple tracking. Conceptually, it shifts the lens from placement to participatory capability and highlights complementary bundles shaped by terrain, season, and social norms.

It can be summarized that the study centered on uncovering and scrutinizing the foremost deterrents to IE for CWD in Gilgit-Baltistan. It highlighted that there is a pedagogical void in teacher preparedness, as many educators lack exposure to specialized instruction techniques



and inclusive frameworks (Loreman & Deppeler, 2020). The cultural resistance is rooted in entrenched stigma, where disabilities are viewed through a lens of shame, leading to educational invisibility (Shields et al., 2020). The architectural unfit of school environments, including the scarcity of ramps, lifts, and adaptive facilities, physically blocks access for learners with disabilities (Khan & Malik, 2021).

Conclusion

The researcher found the experience of conducting this study to be very informative and illuminating. Having conducted the extensive field work and analysed the data she concluded that achieving true inclusion in mountainous regions requires a big shift in perspectives and practices. This is a shift from simply providing access to CWD to classrooms, curricula and social life, to ensuring sustained active participation notwithstanding the harsh landscape. The major barriers to sustained inclusion were found to be inaccessibility, device/material scarcity, travel burdens, stigma, and weak implementation. These intersect with each other and jointly depress participation and attendance. Teachers need support which can be provided in the form of peer coaching. Moving forward, the focus must remain on using participation data to trigger support and, ensuring that every child, regardless of the landscape, has a reliable and dignified road map to learning and an empowered life.

Teachers and schools are innovating (peer support, improvised aids, inclusive circles), but these practices are fragile without resources and training. The findings show that these challenges are interconnected: A child may be enrolled (policy inclusion) but cannot enter the classroom (physical exclusion) and receives no tailored teaching (pedagogical exclusion). A teacher may be motivated but lacks training, resources, and institutional support. Families may want to send children to school but are discouraged by community stigma and inaccessible infrastructure. Without simultaneous solutions addressing physical, social, educational, and systemic barriers, inclusive education cannot move beyond aspiration.

Recommendations

The first recommendation for schools is to build/retrofit ramps, railings, and accessible toilets using local materials and labor. This can be low-cost initiative taken with the help of local community. A simple strategy of front-row placement of children with hearing/vision needs and putting peer-buddy systems be put in place. Visual/tactile scaffolds ensured in every lesson, and short cycles of practice-based training with follow-up coaching to be ensured for teachers. Teachers and schools prioritize sign-supported communication, UDL-style differentiation, and low-tech assistive strategies. Need for ongoing training is explicit in findings.

Future research should examine integrated sets of solutions instead of individual interventions, facilitating an understanding of what is effective in actual educational environments with genuine constraints. A practical, cluster design ideally a stepped-wedge trial involving 24–36 schools may facilitate the comparison of a low-cost package that includes (a) a ramp, handrails, and an accessible restroom, (b) peer buddy system, and (c) monthly coaching cycles for educators in contrast to standard practices. Primary outcomes should encompass (i) attendance consistency for children with disabilities (measured by days present per term and the proportion attending $\geq 80\%$ of days), and (ii) classroom engagement. (i) index (observed engagement,



opportunities for response, peer interaction), and (iii) safety/dignity indicators (access to toilet facilities, instances of bullying). Secondary outcomes may monitor the fidelity of teacher practices, as well as caregiver burden (time/cost) as well as straightforward assessments correlated with grade-level competencies. Conduct the study for a minimum of one complete winter term to account for seasonal variations. Incorporate a process evaluation (implementation logs, coaching notes, fidelity rubrics) to elucidate the variation in effects and to record the elements necessary for the sustainability of routines.

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