



Equity and Access in Education: A Comparative Study of Inclusive Education Policies Aligned with UNESCO Standards

Dr. Ali Gul Bugti¹, Tahreem Khalid², Rizwana Abdul Hakeem³

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Education, University of Sufism and Modern Sciences, Bhitshah. dr.aligul@usms.edu.pk

²Teaching Assistant, Department of Education, University of Sufism and Modern Sciences, Bhitshah. tehreemkhalid33@gmail.com

³Subject Specialist, Government Girls College of Elementary Education, Sibi, Balochistan. rizwanaabdul23@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received: July 24, 2026

Revised: August 3, 2026

Accepted: August 13, 2026

Available Online:

Keywords: Equity, access, inclusive education, educational policy, UNESCO.

Corresponding Author:

Dr. Ali Gul Bugti

Email: dr.aligul@usms.edu.pk

ISSN Print: 3005 - 5644

ISSN Online: 3005 - 5652

Volume 4, No. 1, 2026, Pages 151 – 170

Home Page: <https://journals.sbbusba.edu.pk>

ABSTRACT

Education is an important right of every person and acts as a driver of sustainable development goal (United Nations, 1948; UNESCO, 2020). Even though there are a lot of international and domestic initiatives, still many educational barriers imbue children from the poor communities thus denying them from quality education (UNESCO, 2020). In order to address these problems, Inclusive Education has introduced index of inclusive practice which can eliminate all barriers preventing children from gaining successful education. It is very important to mention that role of UNESCO's involvement into Inclusive Education promotion is very significant. The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994); The Policy Guidelines on Inclusion in Education (UNESCO, 2009); and Sustainable Development Goal 4 (United Nations, 2015) should be also discussed. This paper assesses the concept of equity and access in education in the comparative light of Inclusive Education policies. The paper pays special attention to relevance of educational policies on international level.

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INTRODUCTION

The fact that education has been proved the only source for improving the economic growth, social interactions and democracy cannot be contested (United Nations, 2015). At the same time, equal education opportunities remain unavailable to many groups of students across the world. For example, children with special needs, girls from disadvantaged communities, ethnic minorities and people who live below the poverty line do not get proper opportunities to obtain education (UNESCO, 2020; World Bank, 2018). The concept of inclusive education does not only mean educating children with special needs in typical classrooms but provides for restructuring educational system so that it can meet the expectations and needs of all students (UNESCO, 2009). Inclusive Education is aimed at breaking all the barriers, and making education accessible for everyone (Ainscow, 2020). Equity is not the same as equality in the field of education. Equality includes the fact that all children receive equal treatment as far as the resources are concerned, while equity is about making all equal guarantees of various forms of assistance and support in order to get what they want (OECD, 2018)

LITERATURE REVIEW

The meaning of Inclusive Education means that the disabled persons are no longer regarded only from the viewpoint of impairment but rather as new both philosophy in education concerning diversity and plurality of children. In accordance with UNESCO (2009), Inclusive education implies the elimination of all barriers for the participation and learning through ensuring that educational system corresponds to the needs of all children. The Salamanca Conference (UNESCO, 1994) proposed that the ordinary schools should teach children of all types and this class should be one for all. The notion of educational equity has attracted a lot of attention in research sphere. As reported by UNESCO (2020), inclusive education is closely connected to educational equity, social justice, and human rights in the field of education. According to Ainscow (2020), systems reform plays a significant role in setting up inclusive education through school leadership, development of the curriculum, teacher preparation, involvement of the community, and educational governance. Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) state that inclusive pedagogy requires teachers to develop teaching practices that promote participation of all students regardless of their learning difficulties. International studies show that the systems of inclusive education differ widely across various countries. For instance, Finland is known for establishing individualized support services within its regular

schools, while ensuring quality of education (Sahlberg, 2015). Provinces in Canada focus on differentiated teaching, Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), and partnership between schools and families in the implementation of inclusive education (CMEC, 2020). Furthermore, Australia has provided inclusive education through law and expanded curriculum provision and allocations for students who need more assistance in their education (Australian Government Department of Education, 2020). In Pakistan, Article 25-A of the constitution highlights the college commitment to the establishment of inclusive education (Government of Pakistan, 2017; UNICEF Pakistan, 2018). However, the implementation of inclusive education in Pakistan has not been effective due to the lack of infrastructure and teacher training on inclusive education. According to research, there are still many obstacles impeding the educational needs of children with special needs, girls, and students in remote and low-income communities (World Bank, 2018). The situation in Sindh Province is made worse by economic inequalities, geographical marginalization, and inadequacies in the supply of qualified personnel (Government of Sindh, 2022). In addition, research shows that while Pakistan has embraced the theories underpinning international commitments, there are still a number of challenges that hinder translating the theory into practice. It is worth pointing out that the review of literature indicates that inclusive education is much more than special education; thus, it constitutes a full-fledged reform process with regard to inclusive education and hence the need for comprehensive approaches that include legislation, training of teachers, policy making, curriculum development among other factors. This essay analyzes the main components of the existing research literature and compares it with international policy and its effects on Pakistan in general and Sindh Province in particular.

UNESCO guidelines for Inclusive Education

UNESCO has created elaborate guidelines that assist nations in setting up inclusive educational systems. The guidelines affirm that education must be available, accessible, acceptable, and adaptable to everyone (UNESCO, 2009). The Salamanca Statement achieved a great international milestone in suggesting that regular schools must accept all pupils no matter their special needs, socio-economic status, and many other factors which means that education must include children with special needs (UNESCO, 1994). The UNESCO Principles for Inclusion in Education suggest that there are a number of crucial elements which should be included in the inclusive education system such as Equal educational opportunities for all learners, the elimination of discrimination, Flexibility of curriculum development, inclusive teaching methods, and professional training of teachers (UNESCO, 2009). It is for

this reason that UNESCO maintains that the notion of inclusive education is not limited to special needs but also includes social circumstances, language, migration, ethnicity, gender, and geographical location (UNESCO, 2020).

METHODOLOGY

The research relies heavily on secondary data that were collected from different types of internationally authoritative documents from either the government or the academic literature. The researcher hypothesized that documents would make an appropriate research approach due to their capability of enabling the systematic comparison of the educational policies based on their objectives and processes (Bowen, 2009). The research also examines some of the key documents on inclusive education published by UNESCO. Some of the primary documents include the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994), the Policy Guidelines on Inclusion in Education (UNESCO, 2009), and the Global Education Monitoring report of 2020 among others. The study makes it possible to contrast these findings with the current policy in other countries such as Finland, Canada, Australia, and Pakistan. The reason for choosing them is related to the differences between different educational policies of these countries as well as the level of practice of inclusive education there.

In this comparative analysis, the researchers used various indicators, according to UNESCO's inclusive education framework. The indicators include issues such as equity in education, accessibility of education, presence of laws related to inclusive education, teacher training issues, curriculum flexibility in schools, physical accessibility of schools, accountability in implementation of policies, involvement of all stakeholders in the education system, and educational policy implementation. The research methodology employed qualitative content analysis for data collection. Policy documents and related literature were used to conduct qualitative content analysis in order to ascertain the differences, similarities, strengths, and weaknesses in implementation of inclusive education policies among the selected countries. Recommendations were made based on the findings of the study with respect to development of inclusive education policies in Pakistan and formulation of education policies at the provincial level as per the standards developed by UNESCO.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION POLICIES

Finland

Finland has gained recognition across the globe for establishing an education system that is known for its fairness and inclusiveness. Unlike several nations that depend on separating students' profiles based on fixed traits, Finland has structured a basic educational set-up in which learners, irrespective of their financial status, communication difficulties, or differently abled, gain equal access to learning opportunities (Sahlberg, 2015, 2021). The education system of Finland is based on values that emphasize equity, trust, social justice, and inclusion instead of the principle of competition and standardized exams (Aho, Pitkänen, & Sahlberg, 2006). This system has enabled Finland to attain high academic performance while minimizing the gaps in performance among students around the world (OECD, 2018; OECD, 2023). One of the distinctive features of the education system of Finland is the approach of ensuring inclusive education through early identification of among students facing challenges. Instead of waiting for learners to face academic failures, schools have created a three-level assistance mechanism that includes basic help, advanced help, and specialized help. As a result, all students can receive assistance in terms of educational, psychological, and social needs early enough and remain in the mainstream educational environment (Halinen & Järvinen, 2008; Honkasilta et al., 2019).

This method reduces exclusion and increases educational fairness since learning obstacles are tackled before they turn into real performance barriers (Saloviita, 2018). Teachers in Finland constitute yet another pillar of the country's educational achievement. Finnish teachers obtain a master's degree that is based on research before becoming teachers, which allows ensuring that they have relevant skills in teaching theory, research, and practice (Sahlberg, 2015; Niemi, Toom, & Kallioniemi, 2016). Education for teachers is aimed at refinement practices, researching classrooms, producing curricula, and solving problems based on evidence. As a result, teachers can implement the curricula, evaluate students and design classes considering the needs of individual pupils (Darling-Hammond, 2017; OECD, 2018). In comparison to other OECD countries, Finland has significantly improved socioeconomic indicators compared to most OECD countries (OECD, 2018, 2023). Experts link these achievements to a number of educational system reforms, fair distribution of resources, well-educated teachers, a variety of options for students to receive proper care, as well as an adequate

educational program giving priority to student development instead of competition (Schleicher, 2019; Sahlberg, 2021). The recent studies point to digital transformation as an institution of equality in education. It should be noted that Finland has already developed multiple uses of the new technologies in teaching with the help of teachers' development programs and limited access to digital resources (European Commission, 2023). The emergence of the concept of digital competence is due to the fact that digital elements are implemented into teacher education, which provides teachers with innovative techniques to take advantage of technological advancement in education and, thereby, to improve the inclusion process (Redecker, 2017). However, researchers note that proper digital transformation depends on infrastructure and teacher development policies that help to overcome educational gaps (OECD, 2023). Despite the lessons Finland can offer to important educational systems across the globe, experts say that it is not realistically or properly possible to implement policies from one country into another as many reforms are influenced by culture, politics, and socioeconomic conditions (Steiner-Khamsi, 2014). As a result, researchers in the field of comparative studies recommend focusing on policy adaptation instead of policy borrowing, as it is crucial to take into account the peculiarities of educational realities of a given country.

Canada

Canada has earned international acclaim for its dedication to the notion of inclusive education underpinned by the principles of equity, diversity, accessibility, and equal opportunities in education for all learners regardless of learning type. Though education is a constitutional responsibility of provinces and territories, the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) creates a national framework promoting the idea of inclusive and equitable quality education altogether with Sustainable Development Goals 4 (CMEC, 2020). Across Canada provincial educational systems develop policies promoting educating students with different needs and those with learning diversity in local schools and regular classrooms whenever possible, with particular emphasis being made on making individual special educational adjustments and supports available for educational and social activities (CMEC, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). The Canadian inclusive education model is based on decentralized governance, which allows provinces and territories to develop legislation and policies according to the goals of common equity principles and human rights, while also allowing for their compliance with local education reality. Thus, special education services are provided by provincial ministries that develop IEPs, conduct multidisciplinary assessments with the help of

specialists, provide educational assistance, and invite school psychologists, speech therapists, and other specialists to provide education (Katz, 2013; Loreman, 2014).

According to studies demonstrating successful inclusion in Canada, this does not only depend on children being placed in regular classrooms but also on cooperation between teachers, school administrators, parents, and specialists and finding the ways for teachers' further improvement, in terms of their professions (Loreman, Deppeler, & Harvey, 2011; Katz, 2013). Moreover, the inclusive education policies in Canada are influenced by the country's commitment to various human rights and conventions for international law, especially by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), which guarantees the above-mentioned principle. As a result, provinces in Canada have created regulations and policies connected with the above notion (UNESCO, 2020; CMEC, 2024). All the measures described above have been observed to yield diverse outcomes in different provinces of Canada, as the policy implementation varies.

Australia

Australia has instituted comprehensive legislative frameworks, national education policies, and targeted support services aimed at the care of persons with special needs and inclusive education. The Disability Standards for Education 2005 have been implemented by the Australian government under the Disability Discrimination Act 1992. These standards ensure that schools and other educational institutions comply with the law by granting students with special needs equal access to education on the same conditions as other students. In addition, these standards outline many key elements related to the rights of students with special needs in terms of the responsibilities of educational providers regarding enrolment, course materials, participation, support services, and preventing discrimination. Apart from only the legislative framework related to inclusive education, the inclusive education policy of Australia is further supported by the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration. The declaration emphasizes excellence and inclusiveness. Curriculum adjustments in schools incorporated in the national program have also incorporated flexible pathways for learning, ways of differentiation of the instruction and ways of assessing students in the inclusive style to allow enabling of teachers to deal with the issues of students' learning in the traditional classroom (Australian Curriculum, Assessment, and Reporting Authority (ACARA, 2022). In addition to that, the Australian government supports education in that sphere by providing finances through the initiatives like the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data (NCCD) on

School Students with special needs helping the states allocate finances and permit educational institutions to implement appropriate pedagogic adjustments and afford professionals who specialize in therapy (Australian Government Department of Education, 2023). Although there have been advancements in inclusive education, research shows that the application of this concept occurs in an inconsistent way in different territories of Australia. Education is regulated individually in states, which leads to some issues related to finances, the quality of training of teachers, and availability of certain resources (Graham et al., 2020; Australian Government Department of Education, 2023). Another issue noted by researchers is lack of adequate number of professionals, not enough provided educational adjustments, and the differences in the education in metropolitan, rural, and remote schools.

Pakistan

Pakistan has increasingly acknowledged inclusive education as a key path toward creating equitable and quality education in accordance with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) which aims to guarantee quality and inclusive education and provide lifelong learning opportunities to all people. The Government of Pakistan has implemented numerous national policies and laws during the last twenty years that are supposed to enhance educational possibilities of children with special needs and other disenfranchised groups. National Education Policy (2017–2025) lays special emphasis on equitable education access, inclusive education, and incorporation of children with special needs into ordinary educational institutions as much as possible (Government of Pakistan, 2017). In addition, National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (2002) and subsequent provincial legislation in connection with the 18th Constitutional Amendment have also aimed at improving educational rights of people with special needs in terms of accessibility, non-discrimination, and equality in education. Furthermore, Pakistan's support for inclusive education is proven by its signing of international treaties like the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

This can be a necessity for a country to provide an educational system that considers diversity in learning, eradicates discrimination, and offers suitable services for kids with special education needs, as demonstrated in earlier scholarly works (United Nations, 2006; UNESCO, 2020). More recently, provincial authorities have started integrating inclusive education into their provincial education sector reforms inside the Pakistan Education Statistics framework; this change indicates changes in people's attitude towards inclusive education. Nevertheless,

despite existing policies, the implementation of inclusive education in Pakistan remains lacking and inconsistent. Numerous academic works have documented the existence of a major gap between theory and practice, especially when it comes to allocation of resources, institutional capacity, and policies (UNICEF Pakistan, 2021; World Bank, 2018). Financial reasons are still the biggest impediment towards successful implementation. Historically, the allocated budget for education is much less than it is in other countries due to which there is not enough money for some things, like ramps, adapted toilets, learning aids, etc. Teacher preparation constitutes yet another significant challenge. Despite the fact that inclusive education requires teachers to develop skills in differentiated methods of teaching, classroom management, and developing personalized educational programs, not many teacher education institutions in Pakistan provide training in the mentioned areas. Both pre-service and in-service teacher training programs often lack modules on inclusive teaching methodologies, which results in teachers being incompetent and unable to deal with the educational needs of students with special needs (UNICEF Pakistan, 2021; Ainscow, 2020). Research consistently shows that many teachers feel unprepared to implement inclusive processes due to a lack of professional development opportunities, big class sizes, and a lack of experts' support (Malik, 2019; Shah, 2021). Institutional and infrastructural restrictions also have a negative effect on inclusive education implementation. Although some urban schools start implementing inclusive education much more actively, there are public schools, especially in rural areas, that still lack vital services such as educational psychologists, speech therapists, and assistive devices. As a result, many students with special needs do not get a chance to be educated in an inclusive environment and are still being educated in segregated educational institutions (UNICEF Pakistan, 2021).

Despite some provincial administrations undertaking inclusive education programs as part of their education action plans, there is still uneven implementation of the plans due to the differences in the institutional capacities, monitoring systems, and availability of resources. Researchers assert that better cooperation among federal and provincial governments and clearer mechanisms of accountability and monitoring are required for the realization of policy proposals (Government of Pakistan, 2017; UNESCO, 2020). Digital inclusion poses both a problem and a chance for the educational system of Pakistan. The COVID-19 pandemic has served to reveal the considerable disparities between students in connection with access to digital technologies and the Internet, as well as various online learning resources, especially in the case of students with special needs from rural areas. Although there are some programs that partially solve this problem like Tele School, other distance educational projects, and digital

education reforms, children with special needs are still often neglected due to inaccessible digital content, lack of assistive technologies, and unprepared teachers who are supposed to provide online instruction (World Bank, 2022). Therefore, more studies suggest that future inclusive education actions should be focused on digital accessibility, assistive technologies, and the digital competence of teachers. According to various publications by researchers, it becomes evident that implementing inclusive education reform in Pakistan must be done through a well-planned, multi-faceted strategy including an increase in public expenditure, reform of the curriculum, and implementation of teacher training courses that include teaching on differently abled, development of infrastructure, training on early identification, and reaching community awareness raising (UNESCO, 2020; UNICEF Pakistan, 2021; World Bank, 2022). These changes will ensure educational participation from students with special needs while contributing to the achievement of SDG-4.

Equity and Access in Sindh Province

Despite advances in school enrollment and educational policy within the last decade, educational inequalities in Sindh, one of the largest and most populous provinces of Pakistan, persist. The differences in access to high-quality education, educational facilities, availability of teachers, and educational outcomes can be observed in both urban and rural areas. There are many obstacles for children belonging to disadvantaged sections of the society such as children with special needs, girls, children from low-income families, living in isolated districts like Tharparkar, Kashmore, and Jacobabad to access and achieve education (Govt. of Sindh, 2023; UNICEF Pakistan, 2021). To reduce educational inequality and improve quality of education, the Department of School Education and Literacy (SLED) of Sindh Government introduced several reforms. The reforms include the execution of the Sindh Education Sector Plan (SESP), development of school facilities, transparent recruitment of teachers, revamping curricula in accordance with the Single National Curriculum (SNC), consolidation of schools, digital learning establishments, and starting early childhood education. Finally, the Government of Sindh has also emphasized inclusive education by allowing children with special needs to receive education equally.

Sindh is taking steps to implement policies that address the issues faced by students with special needs and promote their integration into mainstream education. Some of the goals of these policies include improving access to schools, creating partnerships with specialized education centers, and maximizing the integration of children with special needs into traditional

classrooms. Moreover, education policies of the province stress the significance of customized assistance, accessible learning environments, and cooperation between teachers, parents, healthcare providers, and local institutions to achieve inclusive education. However, it should be noted that not all districts of Sindh have successfully adopted inclusive education policies due to the disparity in the available capacities and resources (UNICEF Pakistan, 2021). While the policy changes seem to be effective, a lot of difficulties in practical application prevent the full-scale adoption of inclusive education in Sindh. For instance, lack of funding, excessive number of students, insufficient number of qualified staff, lack of necessary education and training in inclusive education methods, inadequate provisions of assistive technologies, and unfeasible monitoring and evaluation system hinder the implementation of education policies (World Bank, 2022). Several public schools, especially those located in rural areas, still do not have necessary facilities such as usable classrooms, ramps, inclusive sanitation facilities, resource rooms, teaching resources, and special educational support services for disabled students. Moreover, high student-teacher ratios and a lack of professional development opportunities affect teachers' ability to effectively apply differentiated instruction and learner-centered teaching methods. Preparation of teachers remains one of the biggest problems in education in Sindh province. Studies have shown that many teachers lack knowledge about inclusive education principles, inclusive teaching methods, classroom accommodations, and personalized instruction. As a result, students with different educational needs often lack the necessary support for their effective participation in mainstream education (UNICEF Pakistan, 2021; UNESCO, 2020). Continuous training, mentoring, and in-school professional learning groups play a significant role in improving inclusive teaching methods.

Governance and accountability played a significant role in the success of education reform in Sindh. The School Education and Literacy Department has launched planning based on reliable data, school monitoring systems, and performance indicators, but according to researchers, successful policy implementation requires effective coordination between provincial departments, district education authorities, development partners, and local communities. Sustainable financing, transparent governance, regular monitoring, and decision-making based on facts and data are widely accepted tools for improving education quality and achieving equitable learning results in the province (Government of Sindh, 2023; World Bank, 2022). For the time being, Sindh has adopted strong policies aimed at increasing educational access and promoting inclusive education, but the implementation of these policies in practice faces many obstacles. Efforts should focus on solving the problem of infrastructural

imbalances, teacher skills, funding for education, specific services for differently abled children, and governance.

CHALLENGES TO INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Developed inclusive education policies and laws in many countries are failing to resolve issues related to implementation because many low and middle-income countries lack the capability and resources to implement such policies. Studies support the conclusion that adoption of inclusive education policies does not automatically lead to their implementation. Insufficient financial resources is among the most discussed challenges faced by education systems in enabling inclusive education. Limited education budgets affect the ability of governments and educational institutions to provide infrastructure, relevant technologies, and professional support for proper implementation of inclusive education.

Another grave concern is teacher preparedness. Evidence suggests that most teachers fail to get adequate training before and during their service, especially in terms of inclusive pedagogy, differentiation, classroom accommodations, UDL, behavior management, and individualized education planning (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Ainscow, 2020). As a result, teachers do not possess confidence, knowledge, and practical skills to effectively manage a diverse classroom and therefore do not ensure adequate educational experiences for students with special needs. Stigmas and socially negative attitudes towards special needs present formidable obstacles on the way to inclusive education. The prevailing attitudes toward differently abled can be regarded as medical or charitable perspectives, which again prevents people from recognizing differently able as a rights issue and leads to discrimination, marginalization, low expectations, social exclusion, and limited participation in education (UNESCO, 2020; United Nations, 2006). These attitudes affect policy implementation, school culture, parental involvement, and community support, contributing to other hindrances for children with special needs. Finally, inclusive education is also affected by several school conditions. The overcrowded classrooms, the teacher-to-student ratio, poor school infrastructure, and lack of accessible buildings, educational materials, and assistive technologies hinder teachers' ability to ensure individual instruction and student participation (World Bank, 2018; UNICEF, 2021).

Numerous developing countries have institutions that are still not equipped with ramps, accessible toilets, Braille materials, sign language, digital accessibility, and so on. Weak governance and implementation contribute to the gap between theory and practice. Various

bodies in the education sector do not have effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, inter-sector cooperation, and accountability systems. Moreover, there is no reliable education data regarding children with special needs. The absence of comprehensive differently abled-disaggregated data limits the ability of various states to identify the educational needs of children with special needs, distribute resources correctly and effectively, and follow the progress toward the inclusive education idea (UNESCO, 2020; UNICEF, 2021). Another challenge is geographical disparities. Children residing in rural and remote areas often have less access to education than children living in cities (World Bank, 2018). This affects various social groups: children with special needs, girls, and children from poor families.

The case has been made that a systematic approach, rather than a fragmented one, must be adopted in order to meet these challenges. According to UNESCO (2020), inclusive education cannot be achieved through stand-alone measures or initiatives by individual schools; rather, it requires systemic change. This change should include inclusive legislation, fair distribution of financial resources, curriculum reform, teacher education, accessible infrastructure and assessment mechanisms, leadership, community involvement, as well as continuous system monitoring and evaluation. Similarly, Ainscow (2020) has pointed out that sustainability of inclusive education relies on modifying educational policies, institutional culture and classroom practices in order to eliminate obstacles for learning and participation for all students. So, successful implementation of inclusive education will require consistent and coordinated efforts by all stakeholders, including governments, educational institutions, teachers, families, and communities, in order to achieve learning environment where every student can learn and thrive regardless of differently abled, gender, social status, ethnicity and country of origin.

CONCLUSION

It is well established that inclusive education constitutes not just an essential human right, but also an effective tool in the fight for social justice, educational equity and sustainable development. Its goal is to ensure that all students can benefit from good quality education no matter if they have differently abled, what gender, ethnicity, language or religion they conduct, or geographical position they have. Inclusive education is not just about concordance of children with special needs in mainstream classes but requires educational practices, curricula and educational policy to be changed in order to meet all learners' needs and take their diversity into account (UNESCO, 2020; United Nations, 2006). As UNESCO (2020) states, the process

of inclusion implies constant work on barriers in education that prevent learners from getting access to quality education. Inclusivity implies deep systemic reforms in education. Instead of concentrating on certain learners, inclusive education aims at creating a learning environment for all students together. The present method is key to realizing the Sustainable Development Goal No. 4 (SDG 4), which includes equitable and inclusive education and lifelong learning for all. As evidenced by the successful education system, the general principle of applying inclusive education requires continuous investments in educational quality and equity. The countries with effective education systems can demonstrate that equity in education is characterized by having well-trained teachers, inclusive curriculum programs, effective school leadership, accessible educational environment, different support services for students, and effective management (OECD, 2018, 2023; Sahlberg, 2021). There is a lot of data showing that the quality of teachers is one of the most influencing factors on successful inclusion outcomes and indicates that well-trained professionals need to be well-prepared in terms of pre-service training and in-service training (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Pakistan has shown its growing commitment to inclusive education by implementing national educational reforms, enacting laws related to differently abled issues, and fulfilling obligations described in the National Education Policy Framework, the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities, and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Government of Pakistan, 2017; United Nations, 2006). Despite these efforts, it still faces serious implementation problems. Some of these problems include lack of public finance, low institutional capacity, insufficient teacher training, poor school infrastructure, lack of educational aids, ineffective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, disorganized governance, and persistent socioeconomic inequalities experienced by children with special needs and other marginalized groups (UNESCO, 2020; UNICEF Pakistan, 2021; World Bank, 2022). The literature emphasizes the importance of coordinated implementation of inclusive education. Adequate financing is necessary but not sufficient for achieving success. It should be complemented by a competent leadership, evidence-based policymaking, inclusive teacher training, inclusive learning conditions, efficient accountability systems, and continuous monitoring and evaluation. If such coordinated and sustained effort is not made, the gap between inclusive education policy and practice is likely to remain. In view of this background, this paper explores the implementation of inclusive education policies in Pakistan; it attempts to identify factors that affect the success of the different policies. More specifically, the research investigates the influence of funding, institutional capacity building, teacher training, leadership and governance, and the monitoring and evaluation process on the successful

implementation of inclusive education. Through the identification of strengths and weaknesses in the implementation process, this study aims to provide some recommendations that will help the decision-makers, administrators, and practitioners in improving inclusive education in the country.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations are aimed at improving inclusive education. The guidelines below are based on the suggestions made by UNESCO and World Bank.

1. The investment in inclusive education should be increased to ensure that every child has the opportunity to access education.
2. There must be regular Continuous Professional Development programs organized to sensitize people on the issue concerning inclusive education.
3. Schools must practice the principles of Universal Design in order to enhance access to inclusive education.
4. The school curricula must be flexible enough to meet the different learning needs of the students.
5. Parents must be sensitized on the issue of the importance of inclusive education.
6. There should be accountability in the implementation of policies on inclusive education.
7. Link the provincial policies with UNESCO policies in order to achieve Sustainable Development Goals.

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