Exploring the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) for Quality Inclusion of Special Needs in Pakistan: Needs, Policies, and Practice

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ABSTRACT

The inclusion of Special Education Needs (SEN) students in mainstream schooling is well anticipated in developed countries. Segregated forms of education for SEN incur huge financial costs and give also room for social segregation for SEN. The Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) is a pre-condition for the inclusion of SEN. The LRE is an ideal environment that copes with the needs of SEN in mainstream schooling. Through this exploratory qualitative study, we explored the Pakistan context while examining documents describing policies related to the inclusion of SEN addressing LRE. The study conducted 10 interviews with teachers & heads of mainstream schools, teachers & heads of Special Education Schools, and parents of both Normal and Special Students as well. The sample was selected purposely from the Sargodha division. Qualitative data reflected about ongoing practices of proponents' stakeholders. For all this, the study also examined the allocation of funds to ensure LRE in Punjab Public Schools. The qualitative data reflected core themes: possibility, accessibility, opportunities & survival, accommodation, infrastructure, policy provisions, and resources. We proposed that policy and practice gaps must be addressed. To make schools of mainstream education accessible, there is a need to furnish a friendly school structure. In Pakistan as compared to other countries, the idea of inclusion could not gain reasonable attention because of various factors. The behavior of stakeholders has not been so good for this idea. Therefore, there is a need to conduct seminars, conferences, and public campaigns

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1.   Introduction

The idea of inclusive education is novel, and some institutions are attempting to establish an inclusive atmosphere by utilizing various strategies (Miles & Singal, 2010). To keep children with special needs in regular schools, albeit in different classrooms, these strategies include establishing new inclusive schools, enrolling children with disabilities in current schools, persuading non-disabled children to enroll in special education institutions, and providing class classroom support (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014). The majority of schools in Pakistan are underfunded and overcrowded (Amir et al., 2020). The teaching methods applied in mainstream, special and inclusive schools are mainly copying and memorizing (Fazal, 2012; Florian & Linklater, 2010). The teaching and learning process limitedly caters to children's individual learning needs, leaving little room for creativity or critical thinking. Students should obey their teachers (Christie, Beames, & Higgins, 2016). Corporal punishment is still used in some schools (Holden & Ashraf, 2016).

Recognizing that all people are one despite having unique talents and shortcomings is inclusion (Haug, 2017). It is a phrase that permits combating the "curse of inclusion," which leads to discrimination against people with disabilities and their peers without impairments (Mittler, 2012). It is crucial to guarantee that there is a support structure in place for inclusion,

and it is everyone's social obligation to work for inclusion (Asante, 2002). The cooperation of the teachers, a collaborative culture, the love, care, interest, and engagement of the children, as well as the interests of the parents and the community at large, are themes that must be identified (Thomas, 2013). These particular concerns go well beyond the currently constrained notions of inclusion. On the other hand, it is important to try to broaden inclusiveness in the field of democratic leadership. The institution's complete staff must work together to exercise leadership; it cannot be done by one person. According to various leadership responsibilities, distributed leadership is more closely tied to inclusive education (Srivastava, De Boer, & Pijl, 2015).

Lack of access to education for students with disabilities is a serious issue in the realm of disabilities (Rousso, 2015). The International Declaration of Human Rights states that all people have the fundamental right to an education. This right is also guaranteed by numerous international agreements, and it is a very serious matter (Ramcharan, 2021). There are significant differences between the educational opportunities offered to pupils with disabilities and those who are not disabled in a number of different countries. If we are unable to make changes to the current situation, we will be unable to work toward the objective of Education for All (Peters, 2004). Many kids with impairments are not given the chance to attend elementary and secondary schools, which results in significant educational gaps. Disability, poverty, and exclusion are all closely related (Opertti, Walker, & Zhang, 2014). In addition to enhancing people's talents and choices, education is regarded as a tool for developing human resources that will boost economic performance. Losing access to education might result in less freedom and reduced labour market productivity. The international community has committed to an action plan that addresses this right, acknowledging that education is a fundamental right of every child in the context of policymaking (Peters, 2003). The social structure is improved through inclusive education, and it also increases the opportunity to foster a favourable atmosphere. The school administration, which consists of the employees, can carry out this task. If the leaders educate the teachers about inclusion, it can be put into practise (Sharma, Forlin, Deppeler, & Yang, 2013). For leaders to effectively promote inclusion for students with any form of impairment, they must remain steadfast in their commitment to the inclusion philosophy. Also, leaders need to ensure that instructors have a clear knowledge of what inclusion is. The authorities of the school should provide a support system for the teachers so that they are aware of their obligations to mentor the less fortunate children. Another responsibility of instructors is to encourage variety among all students and not to single out any student because of their weaknesses. Leaders also help to strengthen linkages between the community and the schools (Angelides, Antoniou, & Charalambous, 2010).

The Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities was ratified by Pakistan in 2011. In addition, the 2002 National Policy for People with Disabilities emphasizes that 'ensuring better access of children with mild and moderate disabilities to mainstream and local education is vital to achieving defined goals. Following the strategy, an action plan from 2006 was created (Furrukh & Anjum, 2020).

Disability laws are present in all four provinces. Non-discrimination in education is a goal that has been outlined in the Balochistan Disabled Persons Act of 2017 and the Sindh Disabled Persons Empowerment Act of 2018 as important. As of 2019, the Punjabi government's Department of School Education has a Province Inclusive Education Strategy (Manzoor, Hameed, & Nabeel, 2016). Children with impairments in Punjab are given free pick-up, free uniforms, stipends, literature in Braille, recreational opportunities, and physical instruction through the special education department (Hassan, Khalid, Arshad, & Qursam, 2020). For students with disabilities to be able to attend regular schools, the provincial government has also implemented the Punjab Inclusive Education Program in two areas of the state. A policy framework for an inclusive education system for kids with mild and moderate disabilities was adopted by the Punjabi government in 2012. It states that teachers at these schools will be taught by senior trainers from the special education department and that kids with special needs will be accepted to classes in primary and secondary schools.

The non-government sector also contributes to providing inclusive education through projects like USAID's engagement project in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the Inclusive Assessments pilot project by Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi (ITA) in Punjab and Sindh, Comprehensive Health and Education Forum (CHEF) in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Ghazali Education Trust's Rural Inclusive

Education Program for children with disabilities in Pakistani villages (Idrees & Ilyas, 2012). The Network of Organizations Working with People with Disabilities has also created a vocational training program for young students with impairments in an effort to integrate them into mainstream economic activity (Fazal, 2012).

Children can achieve their maximum potential in school when they are in the least restrictive environment (LRE) (McGovern, 2015). They get the chance to learn alongside their classmates, and it offers advantages beyond academic advancement. The LRE enables students with disabilities to take advantage of an Individualized Education Program (IEP) without sacrificing learning from peers without disabilities. The least restrictive environment is an important part of a child's IEP. In order to provide the best possible education to students with disabilities, LRE places these students in the same classes as students without disabilities whenever possible. Even if this is not possible, LRE strives to involve students in their schools and communities. LRE itself is not a place. Rather, it is the overall environment in which the child learns. Sometimes the least restrictive environment is in a classroom 24/7. Other times, students may spend time in special education classrooms. LRE does not necessarily mean that a child's education takes place in the classroom. Sometimes their disabilities mean they cannot go to school in person. In this case, the LRE can be their home or hospital. It all depends on the needs of each child and what gives them the best education possible. Pakistan is working hard to implement this idea. Policy measures have been adopted and implemented at the government level. It is unclear how this policy determination to ensure quality records, and especially the basic requirements of LREs, are being addressed at the grassroots level. The study could provide an overview of the current state of LRE both in policy terms and in practice. This study may further help mobilize relevant institutions to improve practices to ensure LRE. This study may provide the latest information and direction for further research.

1.1. The rationale of the Study

An inclusive model is emerging and widely discussed in educational circles to fulfill special education needs (SEN) educational requirements. The integration of special persons in society is a vital requirement to meet the equitable education opportunities agenda of sustainable development goals. Inclusive education is under discussion in Pakistan these days. The Government of Pakistan along with the provincial government and different NGOs launched inclusive education schooling on a trial basis. The implementation of an inclusive model required plenty of arrangements and consensus among stakeholders. The debate is ongoing with positive and negative arguments. There is a need to have a study to gauge the debating zones and current practices of Pakistan regarding the implementation of an inclusive education model.

1.2. Objectives of the Study

1. To examine policy documents addressing the inclusion of Special Education needs (SEN) and ensuring the least restrictive environment.
2. Exploring on-ground practices of proponent stakeholders and agencies of inclusion of SEN and ensuring LRE.
3. To explore financial allocations by the Government to ensure LRE in educational institutions.

1.3. Research Questions

1. How inclusion and LRE are addressed in policy documents?
2. What are provisions, guidelines, and resource allocation to ensure LRE for quality inclusion?
3. What is on ground practices of stakeholders to ensure LRE?
4. What are the financial provisions to make sure LRE in educational institutions?

2. Methodology

We used a qualitative exploratory approach to conduct in-depth interviews with stakeholders and a thematic approach was applied for document analysis. We examined policy documents available and subject to inclusive steps proposed, taken or the case may be. Depth qualitative interviews were conducted with Heads and Teachers of the Department of Education & Special Education Government of Punjab and parents of normal students. To select the interviewees, our study employed a purposive sampling technique. All public General and Special Education Schools/ Centers situated in the Sargodha division were the population of the study.

The interviews continued until the new information stopped or the data started to saturate. Heads of concerned public offices were requested to provide policy documents for research purposes. The researcher will visit the offices of concerned Heads, Teachers, parents of normal students, and other concerned officials or officers in person to conduct interviews. The Data was analyzed by using NVIVO trial version software.
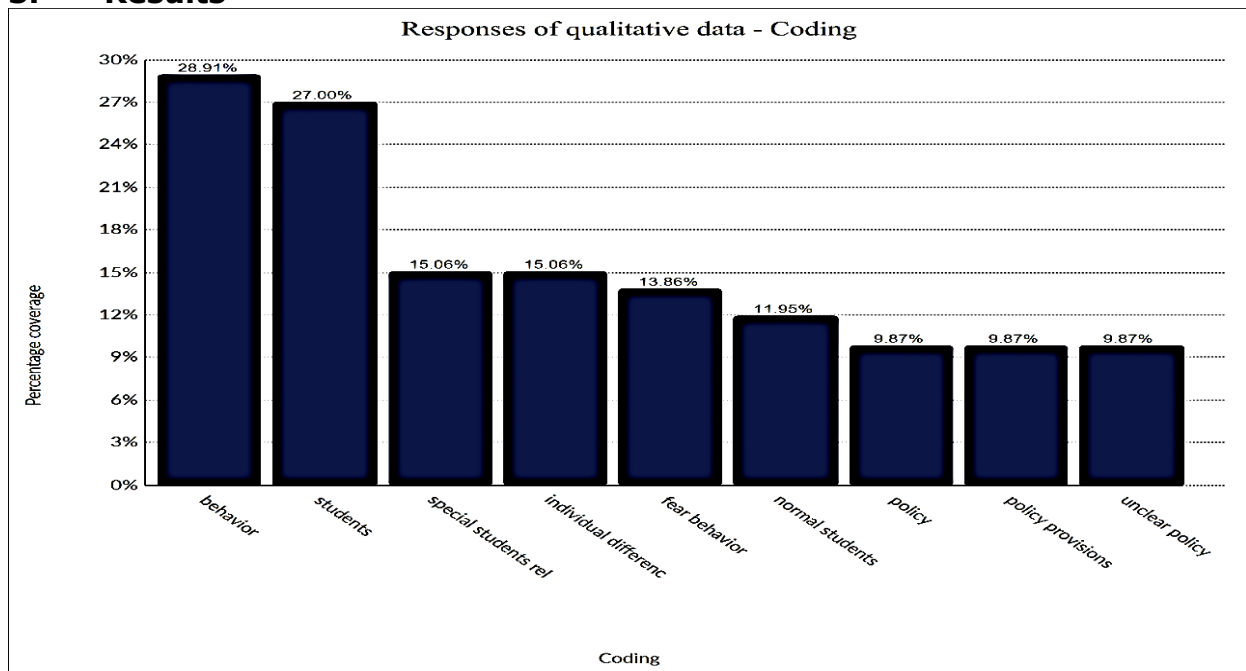

Figure: 1. Word Cloud

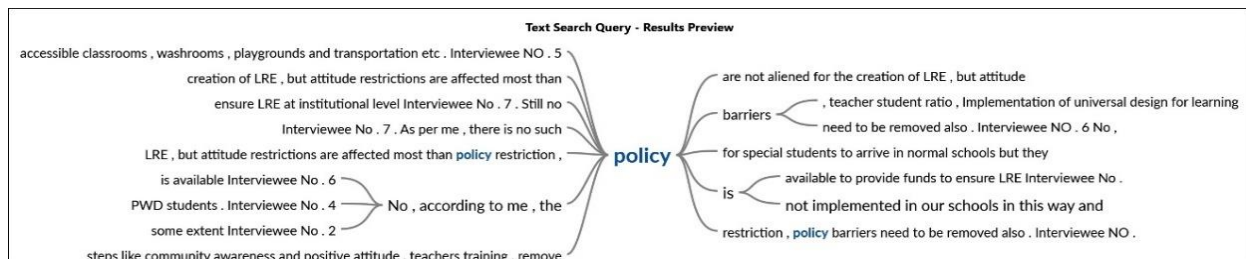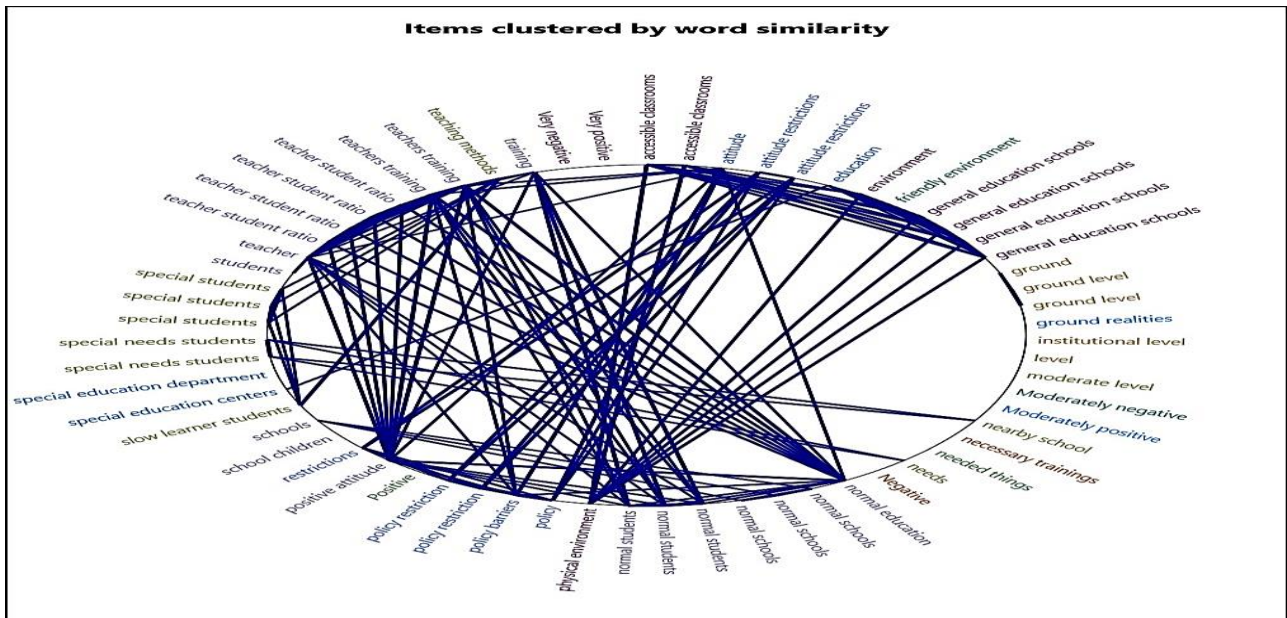## 3. Results

Figure 2: Bar Chart

Figure: 3. Cluster Chart

Table 1: Thematic presentation of qualitative data

Probing Questions	Themes	Sub-themes
Do you believe SEN should be taught to normal students?	Possibility	• Professional expertise • Stigmatization • Acceptance • Safety of special students
(This question shows the possibility of inclusion)		• Reluctance of parents • Individual differences • Behavior of peers
Do you think SEN students can easily come to normal schools?	Accessibility	• School structures • Access to information • Awareness • Curriculum
(This question reflects the accessibility of SEN in normal schools)		• Learning materials • Assistive devices • Support services • Mobility training
What is your belief if SEN students are provided chances to enroll in normal school and they can survive for learning? (The question shows the academic survival of SEN).	Opportunities / Survival	• Interaction • Rapport building • Peer collaboration
Do you think normal students allow SEN to sit in class with them and they may feel calm? (This question shows the accommodation of SEN).	Accommodation	• Classroom settings • Teaching techniques • Flexible Assessment Evaluation • Fear behavior
Do you think that normal school structures, buildings, and washrooms are accessible for SEN students? (This question shows the Infrastructure of normal schools for SEN).	Infra-Structure	• Ramps • Safety measures • Guiding signs
Do you think policies are aligned to create LRE in educational institutions? (This question shows the policy provisions for SEN).	Policy Provisions	• Unclear policy • Developing phase • Un-realistic practices • Policy in the Shadow of the international agenda.
What financial support or budgetary support is provided by the Government to your office to make sure LRE? (The question shows the resources/funding to ensure LRE).	Resources/ Funding	• Unplanned allocation • Inappropriate • Insufficient

4.   Discussions

The qualitative data reflected core themes i.e., possibility, accessibility, opportunities & survival, accommodation, infrastructure, policy provisions, and resources or funding. The education sector in Pakistan faces multi-dimensional issues (Maqsood, Abbas, Rehman, & Mubeen, 2021). The approach of the Government sector is not static. Policies are only devised but the implementation of those policies is not up to the mark (Rehman, Jingdong, & Hussain, 2015). This is due to the instability of the political culture and other factors (Majoka & Khan, 2017). Special needs education followed through different core fundamental concepts i.e., the medical rehabilitation model, social integration model, and vocational & skills development model (Wang, 2019). Special Education Departments of Central Government and Provincial Governments are adopting all three models at once. This shows unclarity in policies and a confused approach. The question arises on the possibility of inclusion of special needs in mainstream schooling. Mainstream schools required various kinds of arrangements to ensure the least restrictive environment for SEN for the possibility of integration. Every placement outside of a general education classroom must be supported by the child's specific needs. Students must have meaningful access to peers their own age who are not disabled, where appropriate. Schools must consider any assistance needed for inclusion in general education classes and other integrated settings (Crockett & Kauffman, 2013).

Different stakeholders/respondents reflected different requirements for proper inclusion and ensuring the least restrictive environment like professional expertise, stigmatization, acceptance, the safety of special students, parents' reluctance, individual differences, and peers' behaviors. Inclusion core strategies were identified in the literature as having clear minimum standards for behavior, consistently enforcing those standards, handling low-level disruption sensitively, providing opportunities for all children to be heard, using a "scaffolded" approach to learning, and being aware of the unique needs of each child lass (Nilholm & Alm, 2010).

The question of the accessibility of SEN in normal schools for a friendly environment for academic activities. Respondents narrated and focused on different aspects related to the accessibility of the SEN i.e., access to information, awareness, flexible curriculum, learning materials, assistive devices, support services, and mobility training. Factors discussed by the respondents related to LRE like interaction, rapport building, and peer collaboration are also very important to consider to ensure LRE. Accommodation of SEN in classroom settings, content delivery, evaluation, and flexible behavior of both peers and teachers is regarded by the respondents.

Infrastructural needs of SEN like ramps, safety measures, and guiding signs are considered necessary to ensure LRE. It has been observed in the data that there are flaws in the Policy Provisions like unclear policy developing phase un-realistic practices. Respondents reflected that often policy is devised in the shadow of the international agenda. For all of the above, funding is the key element for LRE. The responses revealed that allocations are unplanned inappropriate insufficient

5.   Conclusions and Recommendations

The least restrictive environment is a pre-condition for the inclusion of SEN. We explored the Pakistan context while examining documents describing policies related to LRE. We conducted interviews with teachers & heads of mainstream schools, teachers & heads of special education schools, and parents of normal and special students. We also explored on ground practices of proponents of stakeholders. For all this, we examine the allocation of funds to ensure LRE in Punjab Public schools. The qualitative data reflected core themes: possibility, accessibility, opportunities & survival, accommodation, infrastructure, policy provisions, and resources or funding. The question of inclusion of special needs in mainstream schooling was discussed, with different stakeholders/respondents reflecting on different requirements of the proper inclusion and ensuring the least restrictive environment. Access to information, awareness, flexible curriculum, learning materials, assistive devices, support services, and mobility training was also discussed. Infrastructure needs of SEN like ramps, safety measures, and guiding signs were considered necessary to ensure LRE. Funding is the key element for LRE, with unplanned and insufficient allocations. On the basis of the findings of the study, we propose that policy and practice gaps must be addressed. To make schools of mainstream education accessible, there is a need to furnish a friendly school structure. In Pakistan as compared to other countries, the idea of inclusion could not gain reasonable attention because of various factors. The behavior of

stakeholders has not been so good for this idea. Therefore, there is a need to conduct seminars, conferences, and public campaigns.

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