



## Navigating Complexity: Overcoming Challenges in Qualitative Research for Special Education in Pakistan

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### Abstract

*This paper aims to identify some of the challenges of qualitative research in special education in Pakistan and how such challenges could be effectively handled. It discusses the contemporary state of affairs concerning this type of education and the importance of using qualitative research strategies to study education-related processes in the country. This paper presents several issues, which could be methodological, ethical, linguistic, institutional, and specific to the researcher. Approaches for overcoming these challenges are enumerated, such as formulating culturally appropriate research models, addressing ethical issues, involving the host community members, and availing necessary expert assistance to the research workers. The paper also describes possible recommendations for further qualitative research of special education in Pakistan: The relation to novel qualitative approaches and the requirement of policy encouragement. Despite these challenges, by addressing them and implementing the assessed strategies, qualitative research can greatly support improving the special education practices and policies in Pakistan, thus positively impacting the education of students with disabilities.*

**Keywords:** *qualitative research, special education, Pakistan, research challenges, cultural sensitivity, ethical considerations, inclusive education*



## **Introduction**

Special education in Pakistan has undergone significant transformations since the country's independence in 1947 (Ahmad & Yousaf, 2011). However, several issues still prevail in addressing the needs of students with disabilities in the field to this date (Pasha, 2012). The above discussion shows that the development of special education in Pakistan is socially and culturally constructed and reflects the general tendencies of the country's development.

Qualitative research is very important for improving special education practices and policies (Peterson-Ahmad et al., 2024). Moreover, unlike quantitative research, qualitative research provides in-depth analysis of students,' educators,' and families' experiences in special education (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hott et al., 2024). These methodologies are very useful, especially in the Pakistani context, because the culture and beliefs of the society strongly impact the education practice.

However, certain challenges are found while conducting qualitative research in Pakistan's special education. Researchers inevitably face challenges in people sampling, data acquisition, and data credibility (Aziz et al., 2015). However, issues of ethics, language, and culture, as well as bureaucratic structures, act as a real hurdle to the research endeavor (Muhammad & Brett, 2015).

Thus, this paper will examine the various complexities evident in qualitative research in special education in Pakistan and further recommend ways to deal with these difficulties. Analyzing the current state of special education and understanding the main limitations influencing the field will help outline strategies for improving qualitative research in Pakistan.

## **Literature Review**

### **The Landscape of Special Education in Pakistan**

The situation of special education in Pakistan today can be described as a development of the system and its problems at the same time. Though in the recent past, awareness has been created, and governments across the world are devoting more resources to special education, major disparities exist in terms of service delivery and quality, which is also evident in Pakistan (Fazil & Amin, 2016). According to the latest statistics, the number of children with disabilities in Pakistan who have access to proper educational services is negligible, and therefore, it is high time that this area of essential requirement receives amplification and



enhancement.

The legal and policy framework governing special education in Pakistan has evolved considerably over the past few decades. The National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (2002) and the National Plan of Action (2006) paved the way for the implementation and protection of the rights of disabled people regarding the promotion of inclusive education (Government of Pakistan, 2006). Subsequently, the Inclusive Education Strategy and Action Plan (2019) reiterated that education authorities continue to promote the inclusion of learners with disabilities into ordinary classrooms. However, the experience of its application is characterized by considerable regional differences (Ahmad & Yousaf, 2011).

Cultural perceptions and societal attitudes towards disability in Pakistan have a big impact on special education. Societal beliefs and prejudice, as well as misconceptions about disabilities, lead to the exclusion of people with this condition (Haider, 2008). Such attitudes may serve as a barrier to education or support service choices and affect families' predisposition towards participation in special education.

Special education facilities and tools in Pakistan also depend on geographical location and, therefore, can be divided into urban and rural ones. Tertiary and secondary education institutions may be better equipped with improved schools and experienced teachers in large cities, while the villages remain deprived of even a minimum of such amenities. This disparity also applies to the provision of assistive technologies, adapted learning content, and services; this presents numerous difficulties to the teachers and researchers in the given area.

The situation in Pakistan shows, therefore, that although the laws are progressive, the implementation of the special education systems is hampered by practical challenges. This explains why qualitative research is crucial to address the intricate matters surrounding special education provision and discover strengths that enhance its efficiency.

### **Qualitative Research in Special Education: Significance and Approaches**

While quantitative research strategies are beneficial in special education and provide data in the form of quantity, qualitative data is equally significant for its focus on quality attributed to educational processes and phenomena. These methods generate qualitative information within the context that reveals patterns in the lives of learners with disabilities, their affiliated families, and teachers (Brantlinger et al., 2005). Due to its emphasis on individual experiences and interpretations, qualitative research can reveal the nuances of teaching and



learning processes, social interactions, and organizational factors that influence children with disabilities' learning in Pakistan.

The following are conventional qualitative research techniques frequently used in special education research. Ethnography allows the researcher to be a part of the educational context and offer thorough documentation concerning the cultural practices and social relations occurring in the environment (Trainor & Graue, 2014). Phenomenology reveals the intention to determine the meaning of the phenomenon at the experiential level or to describe the phenomenon as regards its lived experience; thus, it is appropriate when analyzing the voice of students with a disability or their careers (Paley, 2016). Case studies present detailed evaluations of particular programs, interventions, or individuals, and the findings can be applied across the board (Stake, 2013; Thomas, 2021; Yin, 2017). Grounded theory involves the structural analysis of collected data to develop theories that could help in the creation of context-sensitive models regarding the delivery of special education (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Saliya, 2023; Urquhart, 2022).

Implementing and researching practice in education using action research, which involves educators as co-researchers, has gained traction in special education nationally and globally (Kemmis et al., 2014; Stringer, 2014). This methodology entails the teachers being major participants as co-researchers, enabling reflective practice and consequent application of study outcomes in a more systematic action research appraisal (Noffke & Somekh, 2009). Moreover, narrative inquiry entails recognizing and developing a research method for the study of the stories of the participants involved in special education, thus enabling a review of personal and professional life stories (Caine et al., 2022; Clandinin & Connelly, 2004; Riessman, 2008).

The overall value of qualitative methods of research to policy and practice or special education has the following benefits: Qualitative designs afford the researcher a platform to describe education experiences that can, in turn, help to educate the policymakers on the effects of currently existing legislation as well as aid in the creation of appropriate, efficient policies (Kozleski, 2017). These designs can also identify the implementation of better practices and other novel methods that are found in a specific context and applied to mainstream it.

Moreover, qualitative research may contribute to the enhancement of education by focusing on empowerment and raising the status of oppressed and disabled individuals and by



providing critical perspectives in practice. Hence, qualitative research studies are helpful in portraying the various opportunities and difficulties associated with special education so as to facilitate the improvement of the processes of education in a more significant and culturally sensitive manner.

Therefore, in the context of the country under analysis, which demonstrates fairly moderate active development of environments for special education, the use of qualitative research approaches can provide an opportunity to record the shifting processes and evaluate the efficiency of interventions aimed at discovering improvement requirements. It is inherent within this approach of research to provide academic knowledge and to incorporate the potential of improving the quality of life of students with disabilities and the environment around them into this approach.

### **Methodological challenges**

Recruiting participants for special education research in Pakistan can, however, be a problem. Families may not agree to participate due to the existing cultural taboos surrounding disability, especially in developing areas, particularly in rural areas (Fazil & Amin, 2016). Further, multiple barriers exist to entering special education institutions or schools for children, accompanied by rigorous procedural methods. Some common challenges that the researchers encounter include the problems of finding and accessing the participants, especially those from hard-to-reach groups or geographically isolated areas (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Depending on the particular context of Pakistan, it is possible that some of the traditional ways of collecting qualitative data may be slightly modified. For example, gathering interviews or focus group discussions could be complicated because of the culture that does not allow women to be involved or talk to men or any of them in front of others (Haider, 2008). Observational studies in the classroom may appear as research, and this may lead to changes in normal behavior. Additionally, being recorded, whether it be through audio or video recording instruments, may also be disapproved, hence resulting in the need to resort to other methods of recording.

When it comes to qualifying and proving the trustworthiness or reliability of data gathered in the special education context of Pakistan, certain obstacles can be noted. A possible challenge that can be faced is the social desirability bias, where subjects will respond in ways that are considered socially appropriate rather than what is truthful (Aziz et al., 2015). Furthermore,



using the multiple perspectives method, it addresses the weakness of transferability and dependability of the research findings due to the socially diverse nature of Pakistan in terms of regions and economic strata.

### **Ethical considerations**

It is rather challenging to acquire informed consent for special education research in the context of Pakistan. Some of the participants may have poor literacy levels, a fact that would require the use of other methods of communicating the process of the study to those able to genuinely comprehend it (Government of Pakistan, 2017). However, since students with intellectual disabilities may also present certain challenges, such as establishing their capacity to consent and addressing guardians' roles, the involvement of the latter is an additional issue (Pasha, 2012).

Adhering to the requirement of preserving participants' confidentiality and anonymity in a society with close-knit community systems and high levels of social interaction may be difficult. The researchers need to balance cultural sensitivity while maintaining participant anonymity, which can be rather challenging when participants are recruited from small communities where the chances of participants' recognition are rather high (Fazil & Amin, 2016).

The subordination of participants to the researchers is a natural occurrence in research work because participants are, in many ways, subjected to the authority of the researchers. This may be magnified in the Pakistani context given other factors such as education level, social status, and perceived authority of academics. This dynamic could affect the participant's response or their willingness to provide key data that informs studies, thus biasing researchers' results (Haider, 2008).

### **Cultural and linguistic barriers**

Pakistan's language scenario complicates the methodological issues, especially for qualitative researchers. Given more than seventy languages are documented in Pakistan, it could be challenging to either conduct the research in the participant's native language or to find an adequate interpreter (Rahman, 2006). It is, therefore, possible for details to be lost in translation, distorting the results obtained from data analysis.

Cultural factors play a tremendous role when it comes to the study of special education. There are many cultural taboos in society, and thus, researchers end up balancing between the



subjects they choose to research and the cultural practices that prohibit such research. Some topics are cultural taboos and may be embarrassing to discuss, such as issues relating to disabilities and family issues. This makes it difficult to access good data (Pasha, 2012). Realizing these cultural differences and being sensitive to them while carrying out the research is very important and needs cultural sensitivity.

In general, it has been identified that the analysis of qualitative data in the Pakistani context must be grounded in comprehending culture-specific norms, expressions, and non-verbal cues. Behaviors or statements that might seem straightforward to an outsider researcher may have layered meanings rooted in cultural contexts, thus necessitating careful analysis and often local expertise (Haider, 2008).

### **Institutional and systemic obstacles**

Finance is one of the most critical areas of the research conducted on special education in Pakistan, and it is frequently faced with inadequate funding challenges. While carrying out the current study, the authors noted that there were very few funds available in the context of a developing economy, the bulk of which go to quantitative studies to support government education research efforts (Alderman et al., 2001). It is not uncommon for the lack of these funds to affect the extent, timeliness, and intensity of various research.

Many educational institutions in Pakistan lack robust research support systems. It is also significant to note that most educational institutions in Pakistan do not have efficient research libraries and information services sections. Problems with the IRBs and the lack of prominent specialized committees in the field of special education may hamper the approval of qualitative research and its oversight (Shamim & Qureshi, 2013). Moreover, due to the shortage of specialized research training or mentorship in qualitative methodologies for special education, the quality of the research may be compromised.

Navigating the bureaucratic landscape to conduct research in special education settings can be time-consuming and complex. Policies and administrative procedures to get access to special education schools to research are always a lengthy and tiresome process. Gaining permission from different levels of authorities, schools, and other related bodies takes a lot of time and, at times, is a bottleneck in research (Pasha, 2012). These are compounded by the fact that there are still no efficient practices of research approval in many organizations.



### **Researcher-specific challenges**

Researchers engaging in qualitative studies in Pakistani special education contexts must continually reflect on and address their own biases and preconceptions. These may derive from the socialization or education that they undergo, which may not prepare them for the real research setting (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). These are biases that are very crucial to know and which, if reduced or eliminated, will enhance the accuracy and relevance of the study.

Qualitative research in special education often involves engaging with vulnerable populations and encountering challenging situations. There is always a conflict of interest among the participants in qualitative research in special education since most of the participants are persons with disabilities, and the researcher, in the course of the research, is bound to encounter some of the worst moments in life. The learners among the study participants may develop emotional problems when narrating their life stories, especially when it comes to challenging experiences, discrimination, or ineffectiveness of support (Trainor & Graue, 2014). Managing this emotional toll side by side with maintaining professional boundaries may turn out to be challenging in a setting that values emotional expression and personal connections.

This is especially so with qualitative researchers because while their primary allegiance is with the participant, they are always torn between this loyalty and this emic mode of research. Regarding establishing and maintaining this balance, in the social context of Pakistan, where interpersonal relations and people's love and dependence (Haider, 2008) are important, researchers can experience this problem. The possibility of protecting the participants or becoming involved in the troubles observed during the research may contribute to the bias to interfere with the outcomes.

Thus, the complex process of conducting qualitative research in special education in Pakistan can be regarded as containing several layers of issues. Starting from the choice of the method and the principles of ethical conduct to cultural, institutional, and personal challenges, a researcher has quite a challenging time. Solving these problems presupposes an appreciation of Pakistan's environment, creativity in the conduct of the research, and the use of appropriate research methodologies that are professional, ethical, and culturally sensitive.





## Strategies for Overcoming Challenges

### Methodological strategies

To address the unique cultural context of Pakistan, researchers should prioritize developing culturally sensitive research designs. This requires an extensive amount of preliminary fieldwork and data gathering to understand the norms, values, and practices of the research participants of the study site (Liamputtong, 2010). To an extent, the existing research has suggested several ways through which researchers can involve community members and local experts in the design process, hence improving the identification of the relevance and applicability of the intervention (Pasha, 2012). This can turn to certain techniques, for example, telling a story or holding a discussion in cultures where such techniques may be admissible to raise the level of participation among the participants and, as a result, the amount of the provided information.

It is useful to apply the integration of quantitative components with qualitative research in studying the prospects of special education in Pakistan since it directly pertains to the problems of the country. This means that both quantitative and qualitative research may be useful in substantiating findings from different origins, which is more advantageous in the process of excluding the bias that comes with the application of certain methods (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Leavy, 2022; Taheri & Okumus, 2024). For instance, cases where the details of special education experience can also involve the use of both interviews and the survey, which could be used to gain insight into lived experience of special education and the trends as well (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Leavy, 2022; Taheri & Okumus, 2024).

The use of technology can help overcome some of the problems indicated in the field of logistics of data collection and analysis. Mobile devices and apps can be of great use for remote data collection in far-reaching places (Salmons, 2021; Tomlinson et al., 2009). Using software and emerging technologies to analyze qualitative data can help make the process more methodical and efficient. Nevertheless, the researcher needs to be careful about the digital divide, which is still a real problem in the Pakistani context. Therefore, researchers should ensure that technology use does not inadvertently exclude some segments of the population.



### **Ethical considerations**

Because of the various aspects that come into play while seeking informed consent in the Pakistani context, one has no option but to design good and proper consent procedures. This may employ the use of visual aids, plain language, and speaking to the participants where the study involves the use of documents whose content some of the participants might not understand due to illiteracy (Pasha, 2012). It is especially important to explain the need for consent. Involving community leaders or respected figures in the consent process can help build trust and understanding.

The institutions should strive to develop special ethical review boards that are acquainted with the peculiarities of special education in Pakistan. These boards can give recommendations on appropriate ethical issues, assuring the safety of vulnerable participants and preserving the standards of research (Shamim & Qureshi, 2013).

The authorities of Pakistani special education institutions must provide their workers with extensive research ethics training programs appropriate for the Pakistani context. These programs should include factors like multiculturalism, how to work with special groups, and private space manners in close-knit communities.

### **Addressing cultural and linguistic barriers**

Making direct contact with the local cultural mediators and professional interpreters is always helpful in removing the language and cultural barriers in a study. These individuals will have the capacity to offer excellent information concerning cultural differences and support communications—plus nurture trust among the participants (Liamputtong, 2010). Consistent efforts should be made by the researchers to train those individuals and have a close professional relationship with the above-stated collaborators to avoid errors arising from data interpretation and analysis due to a lack of understanding of different cultures.

The interview schedules or observation schedules used in the field should preferably be pilot-tested or constructed in Pakistan in relation to the culture and language of the country. Such a process should entail a consultation with local professionals and a pilot study to establish the relevance and coherence of the material. The development of instruments should involve the awareness that researchers might need to make alterations in later stages of the study by modifying the instruments in some ways according to the respondents' feedback and results observed during the pilot study.



Reflexivity should be another process that should be carried out by researchers constantly as they evaluate their cultural paradigms and prejudices in the research processes. Reviewing one's notes and journals, peer debriefing, and asking for feedback from the participants not only lead to increased insight into how the research promotes bias but also helps to minimize such bias (Berger, 2015).

### **Navigating institutional and systemic obstacles**

Working with educational institutions, NGOs, and community organizations can be useful in tackling bureaucratic issues and finding participants. Such linkages can help to provide legitimacy to research activities, acquire funds and equipment, and promote the communication of results amongst the target audience (Alderman et al., 2001).

The researchers and the institutions should also start awareness and lobbying for more funds and support for special education research in Pakistan. It can include a call for research to policymakers and convincing the audiences of the efficiency of evidence-based practices in special education and the probable impact of qualitative research on the improvement of educational outcomes (Fazil & Amin, 2016).

Some efforts should be made to streamline the research approval processes to ensure that they are less complicated for the various institutions, government departments, and researchers. In this regard, some of the preventive measures can be endorsed, such as producing specific protocols, enhancing centralized forms of review, and outrightly supporting the maintenance of transparent procedures of approval (Shamim & Qureshi, 2013).

### **Supporting researchers**

The researchers conducting qualitative research should be provided with the best available training courses to enhance the existing comprehensive awareness of various qualitative research methodologies particularly suitable for the context of special education in Pakistan. These programs should include qualitative methods at an advanced level, cultural awareness, and approaches to handling challenges due to the social context (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

Organizing groups or forums of special education qualitative researchers that would enable people to help each other with their problems, both social and professional, will be useful in this regard. Such networks can include information sharing, problem-solving, co-soliciting solutions to problems, and mentoring, among other functions (Trainor & Graue, 2014).



The institutions promoting research in special education must have some consideration over the impact on the mental health of the researcher, and proper policy measures should be formulated that help in attaining better mental health of the persons who are assigned to work on the research in the special education field. This may cover offering counseling, an emotional stress management workshop, or advocacy for daily debriefing, among others (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009).

Thus, in sum, it is relevant to state that meeting the demands characteristic of qualitative research in special education in Pakistan calls for a multipronged strategy. It is with the help of these strategies that research can be improved in terms of quality, ethical consideration, and transformation to better suit cultural contexts. What must be stressed here is that such initiatives help in improving the research endeavor and may aid in the growth of a stronger and more significant base of knowledge in the field of special education in Pakistan.

### **Future Directions and Recommendations**

Qualitative research in special education is progressing more dynamically, and there are trends that can be promising for the Pakistani context. Paradigms like participative action research, where the subjects of the study play an active role in the research process, are becoming popular as a way of enhancing communities' capacity and coming up with solutions (Kemmis et al., 2014). Besides, the use of digital storytelling and photovoice methodologies is another effective way of storytelling, given that special needs may hinder the use of interviews among the targeted disabled population (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

To promote the support of qualitative research in special education, policymakers should develop dedicated research funding for such kinds of studies. Policies that require the incorporation of qualitative elements into the assessments of educational programs might also enhance the status of this method of research (Kozleski, 2017). Also, creating ethical rules for special education research at a national level means creating norms for ethical behavior to protect the potentially vulnerable participants.

Future research could be laid more on identifying other gaps in the Pakistani context of special education, including—the transition of students with disability, the current implementation of inclusive education for students with disability, and the use of IT in teaching and learning in special education. Longitudinal studies, which involve exploring the effects of different interventions, also require research. Finding out how disability intersects



with other characteristics—for instance, gender, economic status, or regional origin—can be useful for understanding Pakistan’s special education needs (Trainor & Bal, 2014).

## Conclusion

This paper identifies specific challenges to carrying out qualitative research in special education in Pakistan in terms of methods and procedures, ethics and culture, language, academic institution, and the researcher. However, if measures for the foreseeable challenges are properly addressed, then researchers can go ahead with these measures to overcome challenges. Culturally sensitive research designs, ethical consideration, cooperation and consultation with local people and researchers, and support services for researchers can minimize these challenges.

Still, it is necessary to persevere in conducting qualitative research so as to continue the qualitative research that aims to improve the status of special education in Pakistan. These studies offer an important qualitative understanding of the lived experiences of the students, teachers, and families; thus, they contribute to the policies and practices in ways that quantitative research alone cannot achieve (Brantlinger et al., 2005).

Rigorous qualitative research is most promising for enhancing special education in Pakistan through exploring the context factors that influence education, identifying effective practices, and providing an advocacy voice to the oppressed groups. When research procedures are fine-tuned and issues are resolved, such approaches can help in the development of more inclusive, effective, and culturally responsive special education systems—thus making a positive difference in the lives of persons with disabilities.

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