

Challenges Parents Face in Inclusive Education of Their Children in Mountainous Region of Pakistan

Kausar Parween Malik

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

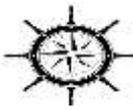
Prof. Dr. Shahida Sajjad

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

Abstract

Inclusive Education is an important human right. Inclusion is a concept that views children with disability as true full-time participants and members of their neighbourhood schools and communities. In Gilgit-Baltistan, a mountainous region in the North of Pakistan, the landscape of exclusion is physical, societal, institutional, and encoded in the very architecture of belief, that mark disability as misfortune. The barriers are not just concrete but cognitive and stigma replaces support. How parents view disability matters, if disability is not seen as a different way of learning but as a full stop. This study explores the challenges parents face in the schooling process of their children with disabilities and investigates the grip of social stigma on educational exclusion. Total participants were 40, including teachers, parents, and community members from diverse backgrounds across Gilgit-Baltistan. Data collected through self-structured, semi-structured interview guides and FGD protocols. Checklists to assess teaching and learning in classrooms and school settings for accessibility through structured observations were also developed and applied. Thematic analysis was conducted. Results show that for many children with disabilities, simply being present in school is an achievement. Their presence in classrooms is passive, with less peer interactions. Certain parents praised educators who exceeded expectations, while others perceived that their children were completely overlooked by the schools. Negative perceptions of disability within their communities were among the biggest barriers to education. Cultural traditions and beliefs significantly impact the development of perceptions. Awareness programs run by NGOs and schools transformed community attitudes. The study also revealed how gender norms intersect with disability, creating double discrimination for girls. The study concluded that understanding how participants perceive inclusive education helps explain why implementation is so uneven across Gilgit-Baltistan. The systemic, social, and infrastructural challenges prevent children with disabilities from fully participating in schools. Educating stigma is essential in promoting inclusion. Community elders, NGOs and faith leaders be asked to work together with schools to normalize disability, reduce stigma, and promote girls' inclusion.

Key Words: Children with Disabilities (CWD), Inclusive Education (IE), Parents, Mountainous region of Pakistan



Introduction

United Nations Convention on the Right of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (2006) describes Inclusive Education (IE) as very important human right. This strong statement declares that all children, regardless of their ability or disability, should be celebrated for their uniqueness and given opportunities to do well. Inclusion is a concept that views children with disabilities (CWD) as true full-time participants and members of their neighbourhood schools and communities (Eide et.al., 2022; Waqar, 2008).

In Gilgit-Baltistan, a mountainous region in the North of Pakistan, the landscape of exclusion is physical, societal, institutional, and encoded in the very architecture of belief. In rural and mountain regions, the frequency of disability is much greater, and many of these disabled children are denied academic chances (Haideri et al., 2025). The same source cited, revealed that in Gilgit Baltistan, areas with sizable disabled populations exist, yet these are also places where educational systems are least ready to accommodate the requirements of disabled children. The findings also stress that CWD are much underrepresented in conventional schools and continue to face structural barriers preventing them from receiving quality education.

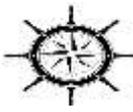
This exclusion cannot be explained solely by the absence of infrastructure. It is woven into deeper layers in cultural scripts that mark disability as misfortune, in social discourse that discourages visibility, and is unfamiliar with the value of IE. Therefore, the barriers are concrete as well as cognitive. Due to society's choice of judgment and misunderstanding, stigma replaces support for those who need help. Thus, CWDs continue to exist outside the learning space, not because they cannot learn, but because the system has never been built to hold them. Nonetheless, the exclusion of these children is not limited to the schools, as the roots of discrimination are beyond these educational and physical barriers.

Parents in antiquity viewed CWD as a burden for their home and a drain on family resources. As a result of such ideas, disabled children were mistreated and sometimes lost their lives through such actions by parents or society (Perry, 2012) and sometimes, people brought the disabled individuals as slaves or servants into their homes (Legano et al., 2021).

Parents, faced with possibility of social exile choose to hide their children rather than bringing them out in society and advocating for their rights. Therefore, these children and their struggles remain invisible, and their entitlements never realised. As the culture keeps them hidden behind closed doors, the schools do not feel the need to include them as their presence is not felt (Shields et al., 2020).

The lens through which parents view disability also matters, as in many homes in these mountainous regions, disability is not seen as a different way of learning but as a defect. Entrenched cultural beliefs, combined with a lack of awareness about educational rights, trap CWD outside the system, invisible and overlooked (Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Shields et al. 2020).

The stigma is rooted with the misconceptions about the non/low productive approach of these children, which leads to social stigma, considered as an outcome of parents' evil deeds (Zhukova et al., 2022). In the same way, parents often ignore and criticize their child's Learning Disability (LD) as it makes them feel ashamed or embarrassed by the child's poor academic



performance and behavior, which drives them to refrain from social interactions (Nasir, et.al., 2024).

This sort of societal behaviour is based on limited knowledge and awareness about disability, its various connotations that impact the learning abilities of specific children (Waqar & Vazir, 2010). As a result, many of these children are kept at home, isolated from their peers, and excluded from the social and educational opportunities available to others. Therefore, this systemic exclusion highlights the urgent need for policy reforms, movements, and actions to break down barriers and ensure that every child, regardless of disability, has access to quality education.

However, in places like rural Nepal, Thapaliya (2023) highlighted how by transforming the mindset of communities, schools are slowly adapting and changing classrooms. It's not only about physical access to education, but about breaking down cultural stigmas that often exclude children with disabilities. Thapaliya emphasized that real change happens when local communities, including teachers, parents, and leaders, come together.

The aim of the current study is to explore challenges parents, face in the schooling process of their children with disabilities in the mountain regions of Pakistan. The study explores the nuances of experiences of families of children with disabilities in the milieu of larger social landscape.

Research Objectives

1. To explore the challenges parents, face in the schooling process of their children with disabilities.
2. To investigate the grip of social stigma on educational exclusion.

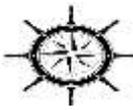
RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What challenges do parents face in the schooling process of their children with disabilities?
2. How can local communities and other stakeholders contribute to making education more inclusive?

Literature Review

Parental and Community Engagement for Inclusive Education

Families of disabled children often have to take up the role of case managers in a variety of situations, navigating complex bureaucracies to get accommodations and assistance. In resource-scarce settings, these challenges are particularly acute, as Ahmed et al. (2022) pointed out. In these environments, there is little institutional support, and stigma makes it harder for people to disclose and advocate for their needs. These families often invest a great deal of money and emotional energy in trying to get access to a basic education, which should be considered an intrinsic right. On the other hand, parents of non-disabled children frequently reject inclusive education because they fear that it might have a detrimental impact on their children's classroom atmosphere or academic achievement. Kilinc (2022) noted that these problems tend to worsen in environments where inclusive practices are poorly implemented or



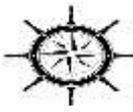
underfunded, which leads to the impression that inclusion is bad for the majority (Kilinc, 2022). The vicious cycle of inadequate resource allocation and community resistance can only be broken by frequent and compassionate communication.

Further research highlights the benefits of IE when parents and communities are seen as partners particularly in diverse or under-served populations such as low-income families, rural communities, or minority groups. The value of educational institutions promoting trust and cooperative relationships with families, particularly in diverse or underserved populations, is emphasized by Ainscow and Sandill (2010). Relationships of this nature foster transparency, collaborative problem-solving, and increased attention to the requirements of pupils. Furthermore, parents of children with disabilities become powerful advocates of equity when they feel that their viewpoints are valued in educational planning, and push for policy and grassroots changes. Additionally, community-based programs that incorporate disability education into conversation might be beneficial. These may include media literacy programs aimed at reducing unfavourable stereotypes, inclusive sports events, peer tutoring programs, and awareness campaigns. In low- and middle-income nations (LMIC), alliances between nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), organizations for disabled people (DPOs), and educational institutions have been crucial in gaining community support and promoting inclusive attitudes. Compared to top-down policy directives, this kind of collaboration is often more sustainable and context-sensitive (Kilinc, 2022).

When it comes to the social, cultural, and linguistic context in which educational institutions operate, parents and communities have crucial insights. Including them in curriculum creation, teacher evaluation, and policy evaluation promotes cultural relevance while also advancing the democratization of education. For example, participatory action research with caregivers in several Sub-Saharan African contexts has led to earlier identification of learning difficulties and improved school preparedness initiatives (Done & Andrews, 2020).

In addition, educational establishments can act as community hubs that connect families to health, social, and legal resources, which is especially helpful for parents who are new to disability-related challenges or who are unsure of their rights. Giving counselling services, holding seminars, and establishing resource centres may give parents more power and lessen social isolation. Unless these services are created to recognize diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, they could unintentionally reinforce the very exclusions they are meant to combat.

Policy frameworks must go beyond simple rhetoric to institutionalize parental and community involvement. School development plans, instructional budgets, and evaluations of teacher performance should all include engagement. Accountability frameworks should demand proof of collaboration, while capacity-building programs should give teachers and parents the tools they need to sustain these connections. The complete success of inclusive education requires the active participation of parents and communities. While policy and instruction are essential, they must be understood in the context of larger social structures in which families and other local stakeholders actively participate in the creation of educational environments. Parents have two roles: they can advocate for inclusive practices or, conversely, defend discriminatory norms.



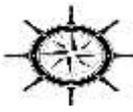
Community-based approaches have shown promise in enhancing inclusive outcomes. Programs that embed disability education into community life through local health services, cultural initiatives, or peer mentoring help normalize diversity and reduce stigma. These interventions are particularly effective when they prioritize local knowledge, engage disabled persons' organizations (DPOs), and include feedback loops for continuous adaptation. To scale up inclusive education, engagement must be systematic rather than episodic. School development plans should allocate resources for parental training and collaboration. Local governments should support community awareness campaigns that demystify disability and promote inclusive values.

Muhammad (2024) reported that parents as well as relevant community members play a key role in developing inclusive educational practices; parental involvement is regarded as a key driving force. It is further asserted that while efforts are being made to promote IE, parental involvement is imperative to have any success. However, it is seen that parents are not usually involved in intervention plans (Raof et al., 2023). There is great significance in collaboratively developing and implementing educational plans through working with schools, parents, and communities. This synergistic collaboration among stakeholders results in the development of a rich learning environment for all students, including those with disabilities.

An exploratory study by Paseka and Schwab (2019) reported on parental attitudes about IE. They found that their views about IE were favourable, and they wanted their children to receive IE. Mann et al (2024) explained how parents can have an impact on the education of children with disabilities. This can take multiple forms. It can be in their choice of the school, or in how they influence the decisions that are made for their education. By far the most important impact of parental involvement is the advocacy that they can do on behalf of their children. However, parents reported experiencing barriers during their interaction with school and felt tension in their relationship with teachers and thought that this hurt their participation in the education of their children, especially if they were not well informed by the schools (Gilmore et al., 2022; Bennett et al., 2020). In other instances, parents felt judged for the challenges experienced by their children and blamed for them. They felt left out of decision-making. Instead of being part of the process, they felt as if they were being asked to sign off on decisions already made by educators (CoA, 2023).

Sukys et al., (2015) reported that a strong correlation exists between how parents involve themselves in IE of their children and their subsequent academic performance. Communication with teachers influenced at least one third of parents' perceptions, and they felt more equal in partnership with teachers. Highly educated parents were in communication with the teacher more than their less educated counterparts. Although several strategies and models can be considered for parental and community involvement, common factors include building trust, open communication, and mutual respect. It is also imperative that cultural and contextual factors are given due importance if greater parental involvement is desired (Muhammad 2024).

In summary, inclusive education goes beyond the boundaries of a school. It stands for a social effort that needs a cultural shift in how we view learning, ability, and inclusion. Educational institutions may change from centres of exclusion to models of inclusion and shared accountability by fostering real partnerships with parents and communities. Only when parents



and communities view inclusion not as an obligation but as a shared vision will inclusive education be truly sustainable. There is a strong need for positive parental and community involvement in IE for children with disabilities, as it is essential to develop a sound understanding of the various dimensions of IE.

Materials And Methods

Research Design

Qualitative research, according to Lim (2025) is appropriate for investigating challenging topics that depend on personal experiences and social dynamics that cannot be covered by only numerical means. This method helps the researcher to grasp the views of the research participants in a detailed manner. The study uses the 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).

By using this lens, the study acknowledges that multi-layered interpretations of inclusive education exist. Such interpretations allow a deeper analysis as these are influenced by local norms, institutional practices, and historical contexts. Subsequently, this paradigm enables the researcher to analyse these outlooks in depth and unearth insights that highlight the broader social contexts and inequalities shaping inclusive education in Pakistan's mountainous communities.

Targeted Population

The mountainous region of Pakistan, namely Gilgit-Baltistan is the research site. It was selected for the study due to its geographic isolation, poverty, and scarcity of inclusive educational resources.

According to the census 2023, Pakistan has over 97.5 million children aged 0–14 years. Among them, around 712,000 have disabilities, and 1.39 million face functional limitations. Punjab has the highest number due to its large population, while Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan also show higher proportions, indicating possible service gaps.

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.

Sampling and Sample Size

A total of 40 participants took part, including teachers, parents, and community members from diverse backgrounds across Gilgit-Baltistan. The purposive sampling method was chosen to explore the experiences and practices of relevant participants. This formed a triad with parents, teachers, and community, covering all perspectives for the benefit of the child. Snowball sampling was used for community members, which is especially effective for identifying individuals who might not have been readily accessible through other sampling techniques. Using snowball sampling ensured the inclusion of community members with appropriate experiences in the study.

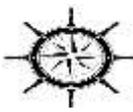


Table 1
Respondents Table

Region	Group	Respondents	Total
Gilgit	Teachers	1–10	10
	Parents	11–15	5
	Community Members	16–20	5
Baltistan	Teachers	21–30	10
	Parents	31–35	5
	Community Members	36–40	5
Total			40

The above Table 1 describes the respondent's numbers assigned to the research study participants. These numbers were used during analysis and are used when their quotes are shared in upcoming theme descriptions.

Data Collection Tools

In this study, the main goal was to obtain insights directly from the people most involved in IE, which are teachers, parents, and community members living in some of Pakistan's most remote, mountainous regions. To do this, the researcher developed self-structured, semi-structured interview guides for FGD protocols that could capture personal stories, insights, and lived realities. These semi-structured interviews were carefully created to fit the unique cultural, geographic, and educational contexts of Gilgit-Baltistan. These protocols were designed to capture personal stories, insights, and lived realities.

In addition, checklists to assess teaching and learning in classrooms and school settings for accessibility through structured observations were also developed and applied.

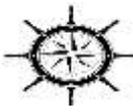
Data Analysis and Procedure

Thematic analysis was applied, following the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method allowed the researcher to organize participants' stories into clear, meaningful themes while staying grounded in their voices. This approach treated participants not as "subjects" but as narrators of their own experiences, allowing their insights to shape the direction of analysis. After developing the themes, the researcher reassessed the original themes to confirm their accurate representation of the data.

At this juncture, certain themes were integrated, whereas others were further developed. For instance, "social exclusion" and "community stigma" were integrated under the overarching theme of "Cultural and Social Attitudes,"

Results

The results are described through the developed themes. These themes came about when researcher coalesced the codes developed earlier and developed the themes. The results describe the perceptions and experiences of parents and community regarding education of children with disabilities in mainstream schools called inclusive education.



Parents' Experiences of Schooling

For parents, the act of enrolling their children in school elicited a range of mixed emotions. Numerous individuals conveyed both pride in their child's participation in classes and discontent regarding the insufficient resources, qualified instructors, and provision of emotional support. A father concerned,

"I am pleased that my son attends school; however, I am concerned daily about his educational progress. When I inquire of his teacher, she indicates that she... tries, but she is burdened by an excessive number of students. I experience a conflict between hope and disappointment." (Baltistan, Res 35, FDG).

A parent observed, *"The class teacher gives my son some extra homework so that he can practice more with me. I think this way my son will benefit"* (Gilgit, Res 11, FGD).

Another parent explained, *"I wish the teacher puts in more efforts. Some days she does not even know that my child is in class or not"* (Baltistan, Res 31, FGD).

Certain parents praised educators who exceeded expectations, while others perceived that their children were completely overlooked by the schools. This inconsistency produced uncertainty among families regarding their child's academic prospects.

Making It into the Classroom

For many children with disabilities, simply being present in school is an achievement in itself. Parents spoke about navigating steep mountain paths, carrying their children to the school and sometimes up the stairs, or arranging private transport just so they could attend class. A mother expressed her views,

"Every morning I wake up at 5 am to prepare my son. The school is far, the roads are rocky, and I carry him part of the way. It takes everything out of me, but I cannot give up on his education." (Gilgit, Res15, FGD).

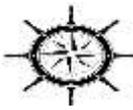
"Some days it is simply not possible to take my daughter to school. She wants to go, but I have other chores to do also. I cannot send her with someone else. My animals need tending, and during corn harvesting there is too much work" (Baltistan, Res 34, FGD)

Despite these sacrifices, in some schools, children missed weeks at a time, resulting in learning gaps that were difficult to close.

Stigma and Misconceptions

For many families, negative perceptions of disability within their communities were among the biggest barriers to education. Participants repeatedly described experiences of shame, gossip, and exclusion. A mother with trembling voice, *"Some neighbors tell me I must have done something wrong in life, and that is why my child is the way she is. They whisper about me, and sometimes, I feel maybe it is so; I feel all alone"* (Baltistan, Res 34, FGD).

In a focus group, three parents shared that they avoid community gatherings to escape judgment. Some even kept their children hidden indoors, fearing ridicule. A father revealed that he would like to take his son out for a stroll in the wheelchair but hesitates,



“I want my son to feel the changing weather, the beauty of our surrounding, but when people see the wheelchair, they react. They cast glances. It is as if we have done something wrong. My son also feels this and does not want to go out” (Baltistan, Res 31, FGD).

These stories reveal that stigma is not only external it becomes internalized, causing parents to question their worth and children to feel invisible.

The Weight of Cultural Beliefs

Cultural traditions and beliefs significantly impact the development of perceptions. In more isolated communities, disability is often misunderstood due to a lack of awareness and educational resources. A high-ranking official from Gilgit shared, *“In modern society, children with disabilities were largely restricted to their residential environments. It was widely believed that they did not possess the ability to learn, thereby making their admission to educational institutions superfluous.”*(Baltistan, Res 38, FGD). Nevertheless, this viewpoint is experiencing substantial transformation. Over time, a significant proportion of individuals has maintained this viewpoint.

For specific families, faith in superstitions influenced decisions related to educational endeavors. Ten parents narrated receiving information indicating that enrolling children with disabilities in educational institutions invites negative consequences. These beliefs discourage participation, particularly among girls, where societal expectations related to the maintenance of family honor persist as a significant influence. One mother explained, *“I think my daughter will be better off not going to school, she will not have to face these comments”* (Baltistan, Res 32, FDG).

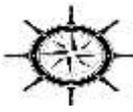
However, the interviews also exemplified notable positive cultural transformations. One community member explained his efforts,

“I want all children in my community to prosper, to have good education and to have good earning. If all people in community contribute, then there will be progress. This is why I think all children, including those in wheelchairs or any other problem, should learn. This way they will also not feel bad for themselves, and we will also not feel guilty that we did nothing for them” (Baltistan, Res 40, FDG).

Religious Perspectives

Religion plays a complex role in shaping attitudes towards inclusion. It is source of both hope and resistance. Although some participants expressed that faith acts as a catalyst for advancing equality, others emphasized how misinterpretations of religious doctrines can perpetuate exclusion. An Imam in Skurdu expressed, *“God has imbued each person with a distinct objective, by depriving a child of educational opportunities, we undermine the intrinsic endowment that Allah has conferred upon them.”* (Baltistan, Res 39, FGD).

Conversely, specific families voiced discouragement as elders utilized traditional interpretations to suggest that education was unnecessary for children with disabilities. one community member commented,



“After all there would be a reason our elders and Imams told us that these children were kept at home in our family before. Why should we change now, what has changed, can we not feed them? They are not made for learning or earnings” (Baltistan, Res 36, FGD).

This dualism exemplifies that religious leaders have the ability to promote or hinder progress, depending on their interpretation and dissemination of teachings concerning disability.

Emotional Impact on Children

One of the strongest findings from interviews and observations was the emotional burden carried by children with disabilities. Feelings of isolation, frustration, and low self-esteem were common, especially when they struggled to keep up with lessons, face teasing or pity from peers and sense teachers' hesitation or discomfort.

A 12-year-old student in Skardu, Baltistan described, *“I like learning, but sometimes I feel invisible. I sit in the classroom, but it's like I am not really there.” (Girl, Obs / Informal discussion).*

Participation in Classroom Activities.

From the 20 classroom observations, the researcher observed that while many schools enrolled children with disabilities, their active participation in lessons was often limited. The following patterns emerged:

Passive Presence

In 12 classrooms, it was observed that children with disabilities were present but silent, seated at the back, rarely called upon by teachers, and excluded from group discussions. A parent described her child's experience, *“I ask her what you did in class today. She cannot show me any good work” (Gilgit, Res 15, FGD).*

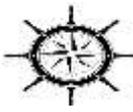
This passive inclusion, where children are physically in the classroom but not engaged was common.

Peer Interactions

Peer relationships played a major role in shaping children's sense of belonging. In few classrooms, it was observed that children with disabilities were welcomed and supported. In others, they faced teasing, exclusion, or pity. A 10-year-old boy with a mobility disability shared during an informal conversation, *“I like school, but sometimes other children laugh when I fall behind. I want to play with them, but they run too fast.” (Student, Obs / Informal discussion)*

Classroom observations revealed that peer attitudes reflect community norms. In schools where parents and teachers discussed inclusion openly, children with disabilities were more accepted by their classmates.

In one school in Gilgit, students were observed helping a classmate with mobility challenges navigate the school entrance which was at the end of a sharp incline and carry his bag. When asked why, a 9-year-old said simply, *“He's our friend. We play together. That's all.” (boy, informal discussion/Observation)*



But in other schools, the researcher observed teasing and avoidance. This highlights how inclusive awareness programs especially targeting parents can influence peer attitudes and create a culture of acceptance.

Changing Perceptions Through Awareness.

There were pockets of hope where awareness programs run by NGOs and schools visibly transformed community attitudes. In Skurdu, one school partnered with a local organization to organize community dialogues on disability rights. According to the facilitator of the program, *“Before, families hid their children. After we held the sessions, more parents came forward to ask about school enrollment. The change was slow, but it started with conversation.”* (Baltistan, Res 30, IDI).

These programs worked best when community elders, teachers, and parents participated together, creating shared understanding and trust. One community elder described her initiatives as,

“I always saw children with disabilities in my area and wanted to help them. I made some efforts on my own, but I realized that ti could not do it alone. Fortunately, the parents of some children joined me, and we approached the area schools. An NGO also had some funds, so we arranged for some wheelchairs, eyeglasses and hearing aids. This convinced the teachers to welcome these children into their classes. So, we learn that it is one step at a time” (Gilgit Res 19, FGD)

Gender and Disability Intersection.

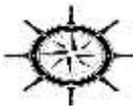
The study also revealed how gender norms intersect with disability, creating double discrimination for girls. In some rural areas, families prioritized boys' education, assuming girls with disabilities “could not contribute” to household or community life. A mother admitted, *“When my son was born with a disability, everyone helped us. When my daughter was born with the same problem, people said, ‘Why bother sending her to school?’ It was like her future didn't matter.”* (Baltistan, Res 32, FGD).

Discussion and Conclusion

Discussion

Parents are crucial stakeholders in their children's educational journeys. The study explored parents' concerns, hopes, and expectations for their children's education. As pointed out by Qvortrup and Qvortrup (2018), parental involvement is critical in the educational success of children with disabilities, especially in rural contexts where social stigma often discourages school attendance. The study captured the lived realities of parents and elicited first-hand narratives from parents, and local influencers bring to light the everyday hurdles that parents face in providing education to their children with disabilities, understanding family perceptions of institutional support and their role in educational advocacy, and gauge local receptiveness to inclusion and the influence of prevailing social norms.

The study revealed the invisible yet powerful role of social stigma in hindering educational access. It was evident how ingrained social perceptions influence family decisions about schooling, the extent to which stigma erodes confidence in the child's potential and rightful



place in education, and the psychological and social fallout for children subjected to subtle marginalization (Rind & Malik, 2023)

Inclusive education does not exist in isolation. Schools are embedded within communities, and the beliefs, traditions, and collective values of those communities strongly influence whether a child with disabilities can attend, participate, and thrive in school.

From across the interviews, observations and FGDs, four major insights emerged. First stigma remains a powerful barrier. Negative community attitudes discourage enrollment and affect children's emotional wellbeing. Second, religious and cultural leaders are critical influencers. When they advocate inclusion, community acceptance grows. Third, awareness programs work. Where NGOs and schools engage with communities, perceptions shift positively. Fourth, peer attitudes mirror community beliefs. Changing minds at the community level shapes behavior among children. Community attitudes are not just background context they actively shape opportunities for children with disabilities. Families rely on community acceptance to send children to school; teachers depend on community trust to integrate them successfully.

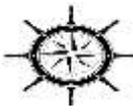
Stakeholders hold mixed, often conflicting notions of inclusion; many equate it with placement. Alignment around a rights-based, participation-focused definition is needed. To succeed a collaborative approach needs to be adopted where the stakeholders work in tandem. An example of this can be pairing physical infrastructure like winter-proof ramps and accessible toilets with community-driven transport and robust contingency plans for harsh weather. All efforts must be made to ensure that geographical isolation does not translate into educational exclusion. For these innovative solutions should be explored and low-cost solutions must be developed.

The results reinforce a shift from counting seats to assessing capability to participate, attention, communication, peer interaction, and demonstrable progress. The shift is from placement to participation. Context as mechanism, not backdrop. Terrain, seasonality, and social norms are not merely "setting variables"; they are active mechanisms shaping feasibility and effect sizes.

Community attitudes operate as a demand-side gate. When disability is stigmatized or framed as a private burden, parents hedge on enrollment and attendance, and children internalize lower expectations (Kumar et al., 2023). The data also show the reverse: where religious or community leaders endorse inclusion, bullying declines and attendance stabilizes. This social layer explains why identical school inputs produce different results across villages; acceptance acts as a multiplier for material and pedagogical supports. In specific communities, elders initiated their advocacy for inclusion, articulating it as an essential Islamic duty to promote equality and compassion. These leaders were instrumental in encouraging hesitant families to register their children for enrollment.

Conclusion

Understanding how participants perceive inclusive education helps explain why implementation is so uneven across Gilgit-Baltistan. The systemic, social, and infrastructural challenges prevent children with disabilities from fully participating in schools.



The findings show that inclusion cannot succeed in classrooms if exclusion persists in society. To transform education, the narrative must be changed at the community level replacing stigma with awareness, pity with respect, and silence with dialogue. Community attitudes in Gilgit and Baltistan fall along a spectrum from strong stigma to growing acceptance shaped by religion, culture, awareness levels, and exposure to inclusive practices. Through interviews, FGDs, and classroom observations, a recurring theme emerged: inclusion begins or fails at the community level. Families cannot send children to school if neighbors whisper behind their backs. Teachers struggle to integrate children when broader society sees them as “different.”

Every effort needs to be directed towards dismantling social stigma by engaging local leaders. Community-driven efforts can play a crucial role in reducing social stigma and mobilizing support for IE. According to Goodwin (2012), community participation is key to creating an inclusive school environment.

It is apparent that while there are diverging perspectives, there are shared aspirations also. Despite differences, a common thread ran through participants’ stories: every stakeholder wants better opportunities for children with disabilities. Parents dream of acceptance, teachers want tools and training and communities desire progress but struggle against long-standing cultural beliefs. This shared aspiration forms the foundation for broader collaborative change but only if policies, schools, and communities move toward a unified vision of inclusion.

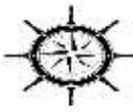
Recommendations

It is evident from the findings that reducing stigma is essential in promoting inclusion. Community elders, NGOs and faith leaders be asked to normalize disability, reduce stigma, and promote girls’ inclusion. They can work together with schools who can co-host elders, and imams. Communities be encouraged to expand buddy systems, inclusive learning circles, and parent peer networks for meaningful integration in mainstream society. Communities should also support parents and schools with small grants and technical guidance.

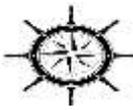
Future research should examine integrated sets of solutions instead of individual interventions, facilitating an understanding of what is effective in actual educational environments with genuine constraints.

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