
Institutional, Pedagogical, and Social Barriers to Inclusive Education: Perspectives of School Principals and Teachers

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Abstract

The education of children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) has been one of the most complicated parts of present-day education systems. Although, inclusive education has been gaining momentum in the world, but there is little empirical knowledge regarding the challenges faced by the school principals and teachers in the field of special education in practice especially in under-resourced countries like Pakistan. The current study aims to explore the professional, instructional, administrative and emotional difficulties faced by teachers serving students with SEND in various educational contexts in Pakistan. The research design used was qualitative exploratory research with a paradigm of interpretivism. The research subjects were purposively selected as four informants, which comprised of three special education teachers and one school principal, from both government and private institutional settings. Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework was used to analyze the data, which resulted in six broad themes: training and professional preparation, classroom and instructional challenges, institutional support and resource availability, policy and system-level barriers, collaboration and stakeholder involvement, and emotional and psychological impact. Results highlight a recurring theme of a theory–practice divide in teacher preparation, the unequal distribution of resources across institutional types, inflexibility in policy frameworks and the emotional burden of all participants. One of the significant results is the resource–equity paradox: centres funded by the government may have material resources but lack adequate human resources, a situation that shows that the provision of material resources is not enough to make education effective. The study provides contextually relevant and empirical knowledge on the education of students with disabilities in Pakistan and suggests reform in the system in teacher training, allocation of resources, policy development and support for educators' wellbeing.

Keywords: Special educational needs, SEND, Inclusive education, Pakistan, Special education teachers, School principals, Thematic analysis, Teacher training, educational policy

1. Introduction

Special children are those who have a disability or a combination of disabilities that makes learning or other activities difficult. Today, there is significant global growth in the number of these students. It is estimated that about 10% of Pakistan's population is disabled, among which many are of school going age (Tahir et al., 2023). Special-needs children are those with mental retardation, speech and language disability, physical disability, cerebral palsy, emotional disabilities and other behavioural problems. Students with learning disabilities experience a number of difficulties including physical, social, emotional and spiritual. Apart from these difficulties, these students might have behavioral problems that are like those of normally developing students (Mohan & Abd Majid, 2020).

Increasingly, education systems around the world are putting greater focus on inclusive and equitable education to make sure that children with special educational needs are afforded suitable learning opportunities. The campaign of education for all began since the early 1990s at the World Conference, where several international organisations, including the World Bank, UNESCO, UNDP, UNFPA and UNICEF, took part (Allam & Martin, 2021). Studies have shown that teachers do not have enough training on how to set measurable learning goals and implement effective instructional methods for students with learning disabilities (Wong & Rashid, 2022). Special education policies are intended to give children with special educational needs an equal education, but there are real challenges for teachers and school principals in putting policies into practice. The importance of identifying and supporting pupils with SEND well is acknowledged in previous research as a negative impact on their academic performance and social engagement (Abeykoon, 2024). Moreover, there is a constant lack of special education teachers which is a critical issue for students with disabilities to receive equitable services (Myrie et al., 2024).

Existing literature focuses on implementation of policies and inclusive education for special education. However, there remains a gap in exploring the practical difficulties encountered by school principals and teachers, especially regarding behavioural management of students with special educational needs. Special education is the whole of educational services provided to students who differ significantly from average student characteristics, individually planned and aiming to maximise the individual's possibility of living independently (Gündüz & Akin, 2019). The primary purpose of this study is to investigate the challenges faced by special education school principals and teachers in educating children with special educational needs. Another significant challenge involves assessing behaviours and monitoring students' learning progress. The parents and educational institutions are more focused on academic achievements rather than extracurricular activities, and most educational institutions are using the conventional curriculum, even though education for learners with developmental disability requires a specific teaching approach and techniques. The provision of appropriate, contextually grounded professional development for educators working with SEND students reflects the same systemic gap identified in other professional and educational domains where inadequate preparation limits the quality of practice (Ali & Nauman, 2026; Ali et al., 2024).

1.1 Research Objectives

To examine the experiences of school principals and teachers and to make sense of the difficulties of working with children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) in their institutional settings.

To explore the challenges that teachers and administrators experience in the implementation of inclusive and special education practices professionally, instructionally and administratively.

To explore the impact that institutional support systems, availability of resources and policy framework have on the effectiveness of educators in working with students with SEND. To discuss the emotional and psychological challenges of special education work and to discuss coping mechanisms of teachers in response to these challenges.

1.2 Research Questions

RQ1. What are the experiences and meanings attributed to challenges faced by teachers and school principals when teaching children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) in their institutional contexts?

RQ2. What are some professional, instructional and administrative issues that teachers and school leaders face in implementing inclusive and special education practices?

RQ3. What impact do institutional support systems, access to resources and policy have on the effectiveness of teachers supporting students with SEND?

RQ4. What are the emotional and psychological impacts of working in special education settings, and what coping strategies do educators employ to manage these demands?

2. Literature Review

Special education is a critical component of developing a welcoming and supportive classroom for students who have special needs. The successful implementation of special education programmes depends more, however, on the efforts of the special education teachers and school principals. In the last few decades, the study of both groups has identified numerous issues from the classroom to the emotional, administrative, institutional and social. Studies across the globe have identified common challenges for teachers, school leaders and education systems in relation to the provision of SEND or Learning Disabilities (LD). These challenges can be less or more severe in different contexts, but can be organized into five general categories.

2.1 Insufficient Teacher Training and Professional Competence

Teachers' pre-service and in-service training is one of the most frequently mentioned problems in the literature. Many teachers report that their first teacher preparation program was inadequate in addressing the needs of learners with disabilities, especially those who have behavioral, cognitive, or emotional disabilities (Billingsley, 2004). While initial teachers training may be offered, ongoing professional development opportunities are limited, which can have a negative effect on teachers' self-efficacy and their use of effective teaching strategies, leading to a negative impact on student learning outcomes.

Research in India shows that primary school teachers' knowledge of learning disabilities is moderately satisfactory, whether they are working in a private or public school. Likewise, studies in Portugal and Türkiye suggest that teachers believe that their initial education is insufficient and does not meet the current requirements, calling for changes to the curriculum that better address issues of inclusive education practices, IEPs, and evidence-based behaviour management strategies (Işık & Seymen, 2023). The issue is not limited to classroom teachers, school principals and administrators also face a lack of preparation in special education. Many leaders say that they did not receive sufficient knowledge or training in school to manage inclusive education well (Crockett, 2002). Teachers of students with multiple disabilities face particular complexity. Special education teachers must be able to manage students with a wide range of disability types, from mild to profound, and must identify and understand the individual strengths, skills, and educational needs of each student (Alias & Salleh, 2017). This requires specific pedagogical competencies that generic teacher training rarely develops.

2.2 Everyday Classroom Challenges: Behaviour, Time Constraints, and Limited Resources

Teachers face several challenges in the classroom each day that can make teaching difficult for students with disabilities. One of the most challenging aspects is student behaviour. Cheng and Toran (2022) state that teachers do not always have the knowledge and skills needed to tackle behavioural challenges of learners with learning disabilities and this needs to be developed and practised. Moreover, teachers find it hard to adjust teaching materials, revise teaching content of the curriculum, and allocate enough time to cater to the needs of individual students, such as curriculum design, behavioral management, time constraints, student motivation, and low self-esteem of learners (Ahammed, 2021).

Another serious issue is the implementation and assessment of Individualized education programs (IEPs). Wong and Rashid (2022) noted that teachers have a specific challenge in measuring student progress in IEP and are less motivated as a result of the complexity and burden of IEP. Furthermore, many schools lack the necessary infrastructure and resources to support inclusive education, overcrowded classrooms, absence of assistive technologies, lack of sensory rooms, and insufficient teaching materials make it extremely challenging for teachers to effectively implement individualised instruction (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002).

2.3 Policy Constraints and System-Level Barriers

Special education services are also challenged in delivery beyond the classroom because of systemic and policy factors. Lack of policy implementation, inadequate finance, and high administrative burden are among the common challenges. Teachers in Sargodha Division of Pakistan also feel burdened with other non-teaching tasks like public health campaigns, student enrolment drives, etc. which limit their time and energy to support students with special needs (Tahir et al., 2023). Although formal policies are in place, problems still remain: parents in England have expressed concerns about the lack of professionals' understanding of SEND and the poor communication between schools, providers and parents/families (Abeykoon, 2024). In addition, principals have problems with policy implementation and accountability, governments have strict rules and they are expected to be followed in the face of limited resources (Lashley, 2007).

2.4 Weak Leadership and Limited Collaboration

The role of the school leader in successful inclusive education is important, but not all school leaders have the expertise or skills to lead special education efforts (DiPaola et al., 2004). Leading inclusive education is a transformative process, which is centered on the improvement of student achievement, empowerment of stakeholders and development of inclusive school cultures. There is evidence to suggest that principals have an impact on inclusive education, not just through their actions, but also through their influence on teachers' beliefs, motivation and teaching practice (Ross & Gray, 2006). Research, however, indicates there is a lack of research regarding principals' specific support for special education inclusion (Edmunds & Macmillan, 2010). Gözler et al. (2023) and Işık and Seymen (2023) point to further issues stemming from ineffective collaboration among stakeholders, such as ambiguous roles within IEP teams and low participation of parents in the educational process. Parental involvement is difficult for teachers and principals in several ways: some parents are not aware of their child's needs, and some parents have unrealistic expectations, which can result in conflicts between teachers and parents (Turnbull et al., 2011).

2.5 Teacher Shortages and Equity Concerns

One of the major and persistent problems in special education is the lack of qualified teachers able to provide sufficient special education services and reduce the access of children to their

due process right to a proper education. Myrie et al. (2024) say this is a crisis of critical proportions and a consequence of which will affect the lives of many, especially in underserved and low-income communities. Without diverse educators, there is less culturally responsive teaching and this has a negative effect on the learning outcomes of already marginalised students with diverse backgrounds and disabilities, deepening the cycle of inequities. In the context of language-in-education, institutional factors, professional preparation, and language-in-education dynamics interact, influencing the effectiveness of educators in meeting the needs of learners with diverse needs, which is acknowledged in various educational settings, as well as in contexts where institutional and sociocultural factors are situated in the middle of teachers' professional practice (Ali, 2018; Ali & Habib, 2025).

3. Methodology

The research for this study used a qualitative exploratory design of research to explore the challenges encountered by school principals and teachers when educating children with SEND. A qualitative approach was used because it was suitable for the study, as it was intended to capture lived experiences, perceptions and context-specific realities that could not be fully measured with quantitative methods. This study aimed to develop an interpretivist paradigm to gain insight into the meaning construction of the professional roles of educators, within institutional and systemic constraints. The research method used for this study was phenomenology which emphasizes on the lived experiences of teachers and school principals in special education settings, aimed to capture the essence of their lived experiences in terms of preparedness for the profession, institutional support, policy constraints, and emotional demands.

The participants were selected using purposive sampling methods which were aimed at identifying those who have direct and relevant experience in the field of special education. The final sample comprised four participants: three special education teachers and one principal of school, chosen for being in special education and having direct engagement with SEND learners and from varied institutional settings, both government and private. Semi-structured interviews, face-to-face or online, approximately 30-45 minutes each, were used to collect data. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Ethical clearance was obtained prior to data collection. Participant consent was sought and confidentiality and anonymity were respected by using participant codes. Data were kept in a secure place for research and the participants were given the assurance that they may withdraw at any stage without repercussions.

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis (familiarisation, coding, theme generation, review, definition and interpretation) were used to analyse the collected data. The analysis was done deductively as well as inductively, thus highlighting the themes which were already available in literature as well as themes emerging from the study which were specific to Pakistan. Data triangulation and comparison between participant accounts, and a clear audit trail of analytical procedures, ensured the trustworthiness of the data. To reduce researcher bias, reflexivity has been used throughout.

4. Results and Discussion

The results of the thematic analysis of four semi-structured interviews conducted with three special education teachers and one special education school principal from different institutional settings in Pakistan are presented here. The analysis resulted in six overall themes: (1) Training and Professional Preparation, (2) Classroom and Instructional Challenges, (3) Institutional Support and Resource Availability, (4) Policy and System-Level Barriers, (5) Collaboration and Stakeholder Involvement, and (6) Emotional and Psychological Impact,

based on the framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Themes are presented in the context of participant stories and in the literature.

4.1 Participant Overview

Table 1 provides a summary of participant profiles. The sample comprised four participants purposively selected for their direct and ongoing involvement with students with SEND. Participants represented both government and private institutional contexts, as well as varying levels of experience from a recently appointed psychologist to a principal with over 25 years of experience.

Table 1

Participant Profiles

Participant	Role	Institution Type	Experience	Context
Teacher 1	Psychologist BS-17	Govt. Special Ed. Dept.	Since Mar 2025	Punjab Government Dept.
Teacher 2	Special Educator	Special Ed. & Rehabilitation	Several years	Private Special Ed. Setting
Teacher 3	Special Ed. Teacher	Special School Karachi	Several years	Private Special School, Karachi
Principal	School Principal	Private Special Ed. Centre	25+ yrs (15 as principal)	Gehwara Special Children Centre

Note. T1 = Teacher 1 (Punjab Govt.); T2 = Teacher 2 (Private Rehab.); T3 = Teacher 3 (Karachi Special School); P = Principal (Gehwara Centre).

Table 2 presents a summary of the six emergent themes and cross-participant consensus. These themes reflect both the breadth and consistency of challenges reported by educators working with SEND students in Pakistan, aligning with categories identified in international literature (Billingsley, 2004; Gözler et al., 2023; Myrie et al., 2024), while also surfacing context-specific challenges unique to the Pakistani educational landscape.

Table 2

Summary of Themes and Cross-Participant Consensus

Theme	Sub-themes / Key Findings	Participant Consensus
Training & Professional Preparation	Theory–practice gap; no IEP training (T1); limited assistive tech & behaviour management training	All 4 participants reported inadequate practical preparation
Classroom & Instructional Challenges	Diverse learning levels; behavioural issues; IEP complexity; time & workload pressure	All 3 teachers cited workload; T1 lacked IEP knowledge entirely
Institutional Support & Resources	Basic materials provided; shortage of assistive tech & specialists; self-created materials	All participants noted resource gaps; T1 exception (state-of-art centre)
Policy & System-Level Barriers	Rigid age-based grouping; non-teaching duties; ill-defined roles; unrealistic policies	Principal & T1 most vocal; T2 & T3 noted inflexibility
Collaboration & Stakeholder Involvement	Parental denial/unawareness; communication gaps; team dynamics vary by setting	All 4 raised parental challenges; collaboration quality varied

Emotional & Psychological Impact	Emotional exhaustion; burnout from workload; rewarding outcomes as motivator	All 4 confirmed stress/burnout; T1 most severe disengagement
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Note. Findings synthesised from semi-structured interview transcripts. All participant names anonymised.

4.2 Theme 1: Training and Professional Preparation

Pre-service and in-service training were among the major concerns that were found in all four participants, which resonates with the literature that teacher preparation is one of the most important factors impacting the effectiveness of special education teachers (Billingsley, 2004; Işık & Seymen, 2023). All participants reported having some level of foundation training, but a common theme was the high level of theory–practice disconnect, whereby academic learning did not always lead to practical skills that could be used in the classroom.

Teacher 2 and Teacher 3 both reported that their professional education had been useful in developing a theoretical foundation, but that a great amount of competence was acquired on the job in the classroom. Teacher 3 stated that training in assistive technology, behaviour management and individual teaching methods were noted as key areas of concern. The same situation was reported in Portugal and Turkey, where teachers also indicated that the initial training was irrelevant and not related to inclusive classrooms (Işık & Seymen, 2023).

"My professional training provided me with basic theoretical knowledge about special education and inclusive teaching strategies. However, much of my practical learning came through classroom experience and interaction with students." — Teacher 3

The most severe example of a lack of training was provided by Teacher 1, a government-employed psychologist, who noted not only a theory–practice gap, but a mismatch between what he was trained to do and what he was being asked to do. This participant had no training in IEP development and explained that there wasn't a clear delineation between the roles of psychologist and special education teacher, which they saw as a systemic structural failure. This is consistent with the results of the Sargodha Division of Pakistan (Tahir et al., 2023) where teachers also indicated that they received assignments that were not aligned with their professional training.

"The training I was provided was not in line with the profession and the role is not well-defined." — Teacher 1

In contrast, the principal articulated a different relationship with training, one built primarily on 25 years of experiential learning rather than formal programmes. This participant expressed high confidence in their knowledge base and reported that other schools now send staff to their centre for guidance, suggesting that sustained practical immersion may compensate for deficits in formal training, particularly at the leadership level.

Table 3

Training Adequacy and Gap Analysis by Participant

Participant	Training Adequacy	Key Gaps Identified	In-Service PD Received?
Teacher 1	Inadequate / Misaligned	Role–job mismatch; no IEP training; irrelevant burden; no clear psychologist vs. SET boundary	No
Teacher 2	Partially Adequate	Behaviour management; assistive tech; sensory integration; severe communication challenges	Yes, workshops on IEP, behaviour, remedial teaching

Teacher 3	Partially Adequate	Practical exposure; assistive technologies; individualized teaching methods	Yes, school & NGO workshops in Karachi
Principal	Adequate (experience-based)	Initial formal training less relevant; knowledge built through 25+ years of practice	N/A, leads PD for others

Note. Training adequacy levels and specific gaps as reported during semi-structured interviews.

The results of this study together highlight the need for revised teacher education programmes to include practicum training, IEP training, AT training, and behaviour management strategies that are consistently mentioned in the SEND literature (Wong & Rashid, 2022; Ahammed, 2021). The lack of structured professional preparation for special educators is similar to other professional education settings where role confusion and lack of professional confidence are a result of lack of pre-service training (Ali & Zaki, 2019; Ali et al., 2024).

4.3 Theme 2: Classroom and Instructional Challenges

The teacher-participants all expressed that they encountered substantial difficulties in terms of instruction due to the variety of learning needs in their classrooms. The main concerns were managing multiple disability profiles, individualised attention and behavioural difficulties. The results are in line with other studies conducted internationally that have documented the most frequent day-to-day problems of special education teachers as behaviour management and differentiated instruction (Cheng & Toran, 2022; Ahammed, 2021).

Teachers 2 and 3 reported using differentiated instruction, visual supports, activity based learning and structured routines as adaptive strategies. Teacher 3 also reported adjusting lessons to accommodate each learner's rate of progress. Such strategies are consistent with literature findings on practices which are supported as evidence-based inclusive strategies (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). Both teachers, however, recognised that workload pressures and lack of resources hindered the implementation of these strategies in practice.

Teacher 3: "The major problems are handling a variety of learning rates in one classroom, behavioral problems, lack of resources, and lack of parental involvement, as well as time management since each child needs individual attention.

Implementation of IEP was a key challenge. Teacher 1 clearly said they did not know how to develop an IEP; Teacher 2 and 3 were experienced in developing and implementing IEPs. This gap is a big professional shortfall in a government-operated centre which is supposed to have the best of everything available — a gap that shows that having the right resources does not make up for a lack of skills. The results are similar to those of Wong and Rashid (2022), who found that factors such as IEP complexity and workload contributed to teacher disengagement. *"I do not know how to make them. No one taught me."* — Teacher 1, on IEPs

Workload and time pressures were reported by all three teachers as significantly impeding teaching quality. Administrative documentation, record-keeping, and non-instructional duties consumed time that would otherwise be devoted to individualised instruction. The Principal similarly identified administrative responsibilities as pulling them away from direct student engagement — a tension well-documented in the school leadership literature (DiPaola et al., 2004).

4.4 Theme 3: Institutional Support and Resource Availability

Resource adequacy varied markedly across institutional contexts, producing one of the starkest divergences in participant responses. This finding itself speaks to a broader inequity within

Pakistan's special education landscape, where the quality of support a child with SEND receives is substantially determined by which institution they attend.

Teacher 1, located at a government designated Centre of Excellence, said that there was no shortage of material resources, and that it was a state of the art rehabilitation facility. In contrast, teachers from two private special education schools in Karachi (Teachers 2 and 3) reported a lack of ATs, modern teaching resources, and trained special educators. Teacher 3 commented that teachers make their own teaching resources regularly, which reflects a general trend reported by Avramidis and Norwich (2002) that teachers are overloaded when resources are inadequate.

"Limited resources make it difficult to provide individualized learning experiences and effective interventions. Teachers often have to create their own teaching materials using personal effort and creativity." — Teacher 3

Table 4

Resource Availability Across Participants

Resource Dimension	Teacher 1	Teacher 2	Teacher 3	Principal
Teaching Materials	✓ Sufficient	Partial	Partial / Limited	Basic provided
Assistive Technologies	✓ Sufficient	Limited	Limited / Shortage	Limited
Specialist Support (Therapists)	✓ Sufficient	Available	Some (speech/OT)	Prioritised
Training / PD Access	✗ Not received	Yes, workshops	Yes, workshops	Provides to others
IEP Framework	✗ Not trained	Fully operational	Operational	Not mentioned

Note. ✓ = Sufficient; Partial = some availability with gaps; ✗ = Not available or received.

The principal described a pragmatic approach to resource constraints, prioritising therapy materials and sensory tools within limited budgets and sourcing alternatives when necessary. This resourcefulness, while admirable, is not a scalable solution and highlights the systemic underfunding of special education in Pakistan, consistent with findings by Lashley (2007) and Tahir et al. (2023).

"We give priority to what the children need directly. If a child needs something for their learning, we find a way to arrange it." — Principal

4.5 Theme 4: Policy and System-Level Barriers

Systemic and policy-related challenges were discussed extensively by all participants, particularly Teacher 1 and the principal. A recurring concern was the rigidity of educational policies that fail to account for the heterogeneous nature of SEND populations. The principal articulated this most clearly, identifying the policy-mandated practice of grouping children by chronological age as a fundamental mismatch with the developmental realities of students with cognitive or intellectual disabilities.

"Policies are made for ideal conditions, but our classrooms are not ideal. A 12-year-old child may have the understanding of a 6-year-old. Without flexibility, the policy remains only on paper." — Principal

This observation resonates strongly with the international literature, which documents a persistent tension between standardised policy frameworks and the individualised needs of SEND students (Gözler et al., 2023; Abeykoon, 2024). The finding from Pakistan suggests that

this policy–practice gap is not a developing-country-exclusive problem, but a structural feature of most national SEND frameworks.

Teacher 1's account was particularly illustrative of systemic dysfunction at the government level. The participant reported that job descriptions were vague, professional roles between psychologists and special education teachers were not well-defined, and there was a lot of non-instructional work. This situation is in line with the study conducted by Tahir et al. (2023) in Sargodha Division, in which the government teachers stated that they were overwhelmed with public health campaigns and enrolment drives, which interfered with their regular teaching duties.

"Hire people that are expert in the field and let them do the job." — Teacher 1

4.6 Theme 5: Collaboration and Stakeholder Involvement

The area of collaboration between teachers, principals and parents was found to be a regularly occurring point of difficulty for all respondents, although this was not necessarily the same difficulty and its level of challenge varied from context to context. Parents' involvement was the most commonly reported challenge, and all four participants reported that parents exhibited a range of denial, lack of awareness and expectations that were not realistic, in line with the literature (Turnbull et al., 2011; Gözler et al., 2023).

The Principal described the most developed and complex description of parent–child relationships, describing some parents who are cooperative from the beginning and others who have to be engaged for a longer time to accept their child's diagnosis. This distinction highlights a key clinical fact: The grief and denial that parents experience in the face of disability are natural responses and educators need to demonstrate significant emotional labour and patience in understanding and working with these responses.

"The first challenge is denial. Parents often struggle to accept their child's condition. My role is to help them see their child's strengths and to understand that progress, however small, is still progress." — Principal

The poor level of collaboration was found by Teacher 1, who said it was ill-defined, had toxic work culture, and was the most critical. This suggests that it is not only the attitude of individuals that can contribute to collaboration failures, but institutional factors too. Collaboration was reported in more moderate terms by both teachers 2 and 3, who also said it was generally positive and focused on student progress, but there were still some communication issues and a lack of follow-through from parents. The solutions suggested by all participants were pretty much the same: frequent parent-teacher conferences, organized awareness sessions, clear communication and shared objectives. They are in line with the recommendations of Gözler et al., (2023) and DiPaola et al., (2004).

4.7 Theme 6: Emotional and Psychological Impact

All four participants admitted to strong emotional aspects of their work, and a common paradox became evident across the accounts: special education is both very rewarding and emotionally taxing. This duality, also known as compassion satisfaction in the occupational wellbeing literature, was most clearly expressed by Teachers 2 and 3 who both identified student achievement as a major factor in their motivation and emotional wellbeing.

"Working with students with special needs is emotionally meaningful and rewarding, especially when observing their academic, social, and behavioural progress." — Teacher 2

Burnout was confirmed by all three teachers. The causes described by all participants were similar to those described in the burnout model of Maslach and Jackson (1981): emotional exhaustion from prolonged high-demand interpersonal work, depersonalisation from being overworked and not knowing what is expected of them, and diminished personal

accomplishment, when teachers are unable to meet their professional standards due to systemic barriers. Teacher 1's was the most extreme, with near complete professional disengagement, sometimes referred to as exit burnout (Ahmad & Subramanian, 2013).

"I would resign from it and run. I cannot change a thing in here." — Teacher 1

Table 5

Emotional Impact and Coping Strategies by Participant

Participant	Emotional Impact	Burnout Causes	Coping Strategies
Teacher 1	Initially exhausted, agitated; improved over time	Departmental burden; ill-defined role; toxic work culture	Family time
Teacher 2	Emotionally meaningful & rewarding	Workload; challenging behaviours; documentation; limited resources	Work-life balance; teamwork; self-reflection
Teacher 3	Challenging but rewarding	Workload; emotional demands; limited resources; behavioural challenges	Breaks; colleague discussion; training; family support; positive mindset
Principal	Deeply rewarding; small progress meaningful	Staff motivation; managing variety of needs; administrative pull	Patience-building; child-centred focus; recognition

Note. Burnout causes and coping strategies as reported during interviews. Participants are anonymised.

The coping strategies were different for each participant. Teacher 1's main coping strategy was family support, showing a lack of institutional emotional support. More diverse strategies were used by teachers 2 and 3, such as through professional peer discussion, self-reflection, training attendance and keeping a positive attitude. The principal's approach to coping was grounded in a value-laden orientation, with meaning being sought in small incremental gains, and purpose as a protective factor against burnout, a finding from organisational resilience research (Lashley, 2007). The emotional labour of these teachers and the lack of institutional support to deal with this emotional labour is indicative of the broader picture that has been documented in high accountability professional settings where institutional pressure, without adequate support, creates long-term psychological stress (Ali, & Ali, 2026b; Ali & Habib, 2025).

4.8 Participant Recommendations and Implications

When asked what they would change about the system, participants converged around four domains: teacher training reform, resource investment, policy flexibility, and mental health support. Table 6 presents a comparative summary of recommendations by participant.

Table 6

Participant Recommendations and Priority Changes

Participant	Key Recommendation(s)	Priority Change Requested
Teacher 1	Hire field-specific experts; define roles clearly; remove irrelevant administrative duties	Would resign from the system — systemic overhaul needed
Teacher 2	Increase teacher training; access to resources; smaller classes; stronger inclusive practices; public awareness	Improve accessibility of quality special education services and support systems

Teacher 3	More training programs; better government funding; improved resources; public awareness in Karachi	Government support and funding for modern facilities
Principal	Group children by mental age (not chronological); equip schools with therapy materials; emotional support for staff	Replace age-based grouping with ability/mental-age grouping

Note. Recommendations drawn from interview responses. Participants are anonymised.

These recommendations are very similar to those suggested in the wider SEND literature. The evidence from Pakistan (Tahir et al., 2023), Turkey (Gözler et al., 2023), England (Abeykoon, 2024) and Malaysia (Wong & Rashid, 2022) supports the call for revised teacher preparation programmes, increased government funding, and more flexible policy frameworks. The Principal's innovative approach to the use of mental age to structure classroom groups is a practical and locally developed solution that should be given further attention in policy and tested on a case-by-case basis. Systemic language and communication education interventions have also shown that locally-informed, contextually-grounded approaches are more effective than imported frameworks that are not adapted. (Ali, 2018; Ali & Zaki, 2019).

5 Discussion

The results of this study shed light on a set of recurring issues that, although influenced by the context of institutions and policies in Pakistan, are similar to those found in the international literature. The theory–practice divide in teacher preparation, the resource–equity paradox (in which government-funded centres might possess physical resources and not human resources), the policy–practice disconnect and the emotional duality of special education roles are all recurrent features, indicating that the structural challenges of special education are widespread in the way educational systems globally understand disability, resource allocation and teacher preparation.

The contribution of this study is one of the most important as it differentiates participants even within the same national context. The contrast between the mindset of Teacher 1 who is disengaged and looking to leave the institution and Principal's mindset of purpose is an example of how institutional context, role clarity, and professional identity are key mediating factors. This implies that changes at a system level need to be customized, increase of physical resources alone at a government centre is not enough without having a clear understanding of professional roles, IEP competencies, and a positive work culture.

The findings also raise important equity questions. If the quality of SEND education in Pakistan is so markedly dependent on institutional type, whether a child attends a government school, a private special school, or a well-established centre like Gehwara, then systemic inequality is being reproduced through the very institutions designed to address educational disadvantage. This echoes Myrie et al.'s (2024) finding that resource shortages in underserved communities create a cycle of inequity, where already-marginalised students face compounded disadvantages. Digital and professional literacy interventions designed for underserved populations have similarly shown that equitable access to resources, not merely their existence, determines outcomes (Ali, & Ali, 2026a).

6. Limitations

Although this study has valuable insights into the direct experience of special educators in Pakistan, it has various limitations that must be acknowledged. Firstly, the study was carried out with a small sample size of only four participants, which limits the generalisability of outcomes across all special education institutes in Pakistan. Secondly, the focus of the study

was mainly on private and government special education institutions, which restricts the representation of teachers from mainstream inclusive schools. Additionally, the research was entirely dependent on semi-structured interviews, which cover participants' personal experiences and perspectives but do not provide live classroom observation. The absence of quantitative analysis limits the ability to measure the broader statistical prevalence of the challenges identified. Future researchers may consider working with larger samples in collaboration with parents and policymakers, across diverse educational institutes, incorporating live classroom observations and a mixed-methods design.

7. Conclusion

This study aimed to understand and describe the problem of school principals and teachers in the education of children with special educational needs in various institutional settings in Pakistan. Eighteen in depth interviews were analyzed thematically, and six themes emerged: training insufficiency, classroom problems, resource differences, policy inflexibility, collaboration issues, and emotional effects. The findings confirm and extend existing literature by situating global patterns of SEND challenge within the specific socio-institutional context of Pakistan.

The most significant finding is what may be termed the resource–equity paradox: government-designated centres of excellence may possess physical and material resources yet suffer from critical human capital deficits, particularly in IEP competency, role clarity, and professional identity, while private institutions with fewer material resources may demonstrate stronger relational and pedagogical practice. This implies that investments in infrastructure are not enough to realize equitable special education, and that investments in teacher preparation, role definition, institutional culture, and emotional support need to be made concurrently.

A systems-level approach is needed to achieve the best possible outcomes in special education: teacher preparation programs with practical and IEP components, IEP resources distributed evenly to address material and human resource shortages, flexible and developmentally appropriate policy frameworks, emotional support for teachers, and structured collaborative processes among teachers, administrators, and families. The principal's suggestion to school-age children to be grouped by their mental age instead of chronological age is an empirically relevant and locally derived idea that needs to be explored through research and policy. As Teacher 3 summarised: *"Special education requires patience, dedication, and teamwork. Despite many challenges, helping children with special needs become independent and confident is one of the most meaningful experiences for a teacher."* Future research should move beyond problem documentation toward evidence-based intervention design and evaluation within these domains.

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