

## NAVIGATING THE INTERSECTION OF ISLAMIC THEOLOGY AND INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY OF ATTITUDINAL, INSTITUTIONAL, AND POLICY BARRIERS AFFECTING CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES IN PUNJAB

Hamayoun Shah Nawaz<sup>1</sup>

Special Education Teacher, Department of Special Education Punjab, Pakistan

[Shahnawaz.umt@gmail.com](mailto:Shahnawaz.umt@gmail.com)

### Abstract

*This qualitative study explored the intersection of Islamic theology and inclusive education in Punjab, Pakistan, with the aim of understanding how religious interpretations, institutional factors, and policy implementation influence educational inclusion for children with disabilities. Using a case study approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents, educators, school heads, School Management Committee (SMC) chairpersons, and District Education Officers (DEOs). Data were analyzed thematically to address three research questions: (1) the influence of Islamic theology on attitudes toward children with disabilities, (2) institutional barriers to inclusive education, and (3) alignment between inclusive education policies and local cultural-religious contexts. Findings revealed that authentic Islamic principles emphasizing compassion, equality, and human dignity often encouraged inclusive attitudes, yet cultural misinterpretations particularly in rural areas reinforced stigma. The study identified several institutional challenges. These included lack of teacher training programs, inaccessible infrastructure, rigid curriculum, and shortages of assistive devices. Rural schools faced these problems more severely than urban ones. Although provincial policies aligned with international frameworks like the UNCRPD and the Salamanca Statement, a significant gap remained between policy and practice. This gap was mainly due to weak monitoring, limited resources, and poor adaptation to local cultural contexts. The study concludes that achieving effective inclusion requires a combined effort. This includes engaging with theological perspectives, strengthening institutions, and designing policies that are culturally sensitive. The findings offer important insights for policymakers, educators, and community leaders. Practical recommendations are also provided to help bridge the divide between the ideals of inclusion and what happens in reality within schools.*

**Keywords:** Islamic theology, inclusive education, disability, case study, Pakistan

### Introduction

Inclusive education is an approach that moves away from segregated schooling toward a collaborative learning environment where students of all abilities learn together. Around the world, this shift is recognized as a fundamental human right and an essential part of sustainable development (Na'imah et al., 2017). International agreements like the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the Salamanca Statement strongly support this movement. However, despite broad recognition and proven benefits, putting inclusive education into practice remains a major challenge, especially in developing countries (Alshahrani, 2018). These countries struggle with issues such as limited budgets, lack of adequately trained teachers, social stigmas, and inadequate infrastructure (Ahmad & Nawaz, 2025). These challenges make it difficult to create learning environments that truly meet the needs of all students.

In Punjab, Pakistan, special education is still largely operated under a charity-based model (Mahyoub, 2025). Even today, children with special needs are often forced to attend separate schools instead of mainstream ones. Although there have been discussions about adopting an inclusive education model in policies at both national and international levels, these policies have not been effectively implemented in practice (Sakız et al., 2020). Punjab province, being the largest province and an educational hub of the country, can serve as a case study to examine these challenges. In Punjab, social and historical factors, lack of public awareness, insufficient funding, and inadequate quality support are major obstacles to

adopting the inclusive model. Removing these barriers is essential for the effective implementation of inclusive education.

### **Problem Statement**

Punjab continues to face challenges in implementing the concept of inclusive education despite commitments at both national and international levels (Mir & Waheed, 2022). A major issue is the enrollment of children with special needs currently, only around 39,000 students are enrolled in Punjab (Ahmad et al., 2022). While policy discussions often focus on socioeconomic, attitudinal, and institutional barriers, there remains an underexplored aspect: how religious and cultural interpretations, specifically those rooted in Islamic theology, shape these challenges from an Islamic perspective. The root cause, therefore, is not only the commonly highlighted barriers but also the insufficient understanding of Islamic theology, societal attitudes, and educational practices. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring how Islamic theology, attitudinal biases, and policy implementation failures ultimately affect the educational rights of students with disabilities in the region.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The primary purpose of this study is to explore the complex intersection of Islamic theological principles and inclusive education within the specific context of Punjab, Pakistan. By doing so, it seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how religious interpretations and cultural norms shape existing attitudinal barriers faced by children with disabilities. Additionally, this study systematically examines the institutional and policy shortcomings that hinder the implementation of inclusive education shortcomings that may be influenced explicitly or implicitly by religious theology and cultural factors. Ultimately, the goal is to offer actionable insights that inform culturally sensitive educational strategies and policies which are both inclusive and respectful of local religious values.

### **Previous Research**

Inclusive education represents a fundamental shift in the philosophy of education (Kaplan & Celik, 2023). It advocates for including all students in mainstream schools regardless of their differing abilities. The concept of inclusive education is supported by key international legal frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education, and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). These documents affirm inclusive education as a fundamental human right and a crucial driver of social equality moving beyond traditional charity or disability models. International efforts to promote inclusive education are multidimensional, focusing on curricula access through Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and necessary adaptations and modifications (Thompson et al., 2021). Promoting differentiated instruction and fostering collaborative partnerships between teachers, parents, and communities are core elements of this model.

Despite these international commitments, Punjab still faces significant and unique challenges in implementing inclusive education (Sakız et al., 2020). Research consistently highlights barriers such as deeply rooted societal and cultural attitudes toward disability, which often lead to stigma and exclusion (Spassiani & Friedman, 2014). These attitudes become even more complex due to social constraints, compounded by a lack of resources like specially designed learning materials, accessible infrastructure, and adequately trained teachers (Begum & Badshah, 2025). Another major hurdle is the persistent gap between policy formulation and actual implementation. Often, policies look effective on paper but fail to realize their goals in practice. This gap is further widened by rigid curricula that are ill-equipped to meet the diverse learning needs of students with disabilities, leading to their

marginalization or complete exclusion from formal education settings (Bhutta & Muzaffar, 2025).

### **Islamic Perspectives on Disability**

Islamic theology provides a comprehensive framework for understanding disability, founded on principles of compassion, justice, and the inherent dignity of all human beings (Ghaly, 2009). The Quran and Hadith (sayings and traditions of the Prophet Muhammad) contain numerous verses and narrations that promote kindness and empathy toward individuals with disabilities (Mehmood & Parveen, 2024). For instance, the Quran's emphasis on "Taqwa" (piety or consciousness of God) as the sole criterion for superiority, rather than physical or intellectual attributes, establishes a foundation of spiritual equality. The Prophet Muhammad's own life provides powerful precedents, as he actively engaged with and supported individuals with various disabilities, ensuring their inclusion and welfare within the early Muslim community (Ali et al., 2024). This historical practice serves as a practical model for an inclusive society.

However, interpretations of these core principles are not monolithic and can be influenced by cultural norms. Though many scholars' advocates about the education, marriage, and community participation are fundamental rights for persons with disabilities, cultural interpretations sometimes perpetuate stigma or misconceptions (Billah et al., 2025; Al-Aoufi, Al-Zyoud, & Shahminan, 2012). For instance, some traditions interpret disability as divine punishment or a test from God. Interpretations that are not aligned with mainstream Islamic theology but contribute to negative attitudes and social exclusion (Amadhila et al., 2024). On the other hand, some see disability as a spiritual elevation or a sign of blessings for families, reflecting patience and care as virtues. These diverse interpretations range from strict theological views to culturally influenced beliefs. In a contemporary society, it is crucial to reengage with foundational Islamic texts to promote a more inclusive and compassionate understanding of disability (Kaplan & Celik, 2023).

### **Disability and Education in Pakistan**

In Pakistan, the discourse on disability and education has evolved from a predominantly special education model to a stated commitment to inclusive practices (Akhtar, 2025). The country ratified the UNCRPD in 2011, which highlights principles of inclusive education. However, a gap remains between policy development and effective implementation (Ahmad & Nawaz, 2025). Existing literature on special education exposes the historical reliance on segregated special schools, while providing some education, ultimately fail to integrate children with disabilities into mainstream society (Kamran & Bano, 2025).

Focusing specifically on Punjab, this study identifies several significant challenges in the realm of inclusive education. Existing literature frequently highlights the shortage of special educational institutions, which are inadequate to meet the needs of the large population of children with disabilities (Hafeez, 2020). Moreover, there is a persistent lack of sufficient special education teachers and limited training opportunities for general education teachers on managing inclusive classrooms (Nawaz, Fazil, & Ahmad, 2021). Additionally, studies point to the physical inaccessibility of school buildings and curricula that remain poorly adapted to address the unique learning needs of students with disabilities. As a result, although inclusive education policies exist on paper and formally promote inclusion, there remains a substantial gap in their practical implementation. This disconnect contributes to low enrollment rates and increased dropout rates, particularly in rural and low-income areas. The findings underscore the urgent need for systemic improvements to align policy intentions with on-the-ground realities.

## **The Intersection of Religion and Disability**

Current research presents a complex and sometimes contradictory picture of the intersection between Muslim-majority contexts of religion and disability (Jibriel, 2025). On one hand, religious beliefs serve as powerful tools for families and children coping with disability. Disability is often seen as a test from God (ibtila) or spiritual purification, helping individuals and families find meaning and purpose in their challenges (Bennett, Deluca, & Allen, 1995). This ideology promotes patience (sabr) and reliance (tawakkul) on God, which can be instrumental in motivating care and support (Negru, 2024). On the other hand, research shows that cultural misinterpretations of religious theology sometimes foster negative views, linking disability to sin, black magic, or divine punishment (Setume, 2016). This can have a direct impact on educational access, as these beliefs can discourage parents from enrolling their children in school, fearing social judgment or believing that their child is incapable of learning (Kaplan & Celik, 2023). This dual nature of religious influence as both a source of strength and a potential barrier underscores the need to disentangle core theological principles from cultural practices in order to promote an inclusive environment (Mitchell, 2013).

### **Gaps in the Literature**

There is a critical lack of research that explores the deep, complex intersection of Islamic theology, cultural practices, and their direct impact on inclusive education in Pakistan. While existing literature touches upon the general challenges (Muhammad, Bokhari, & Anis, 2024; Sarwar, & un Nisa, 2024), it largely fails to systematically analyze how specific religious interpretations both positive and negative shape attitudes, institutional behaviors, and policy implementation. Most studies treat these factors as separate issues rather than interconnected forces that create a unique set of barriers and opportunities for children with disabilities. A significant gap exists in understanding the perspectives of religious scholars (Ulema) and their potential role in fostering a more inclusive educational environment.

Furthermore, the existing body of knowledge suffers from a lack of current empirical data and a detailed analysis of the policy-to-practice gap in Punjab. Much of the available information is outdated, and there is a scarcity of recent studies that evaluate the effectiveness of newly introduced inclusive education policies. The literature also does not adequately address the significant disparities in access and support between rural and urban areas within the province. Therefore, there is a clear need for a qualitative study that not only updates this information but also provides a more nuanced understanding of how these theological, cultural, and policy elements interact to either facilitate or obstruct the educational rights of children with disabilities in Punjab.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is grounded in a theoretical framework that combines Critical Disability Theory (CDT) with a socio-religious framework.

#### **Critical Disability Theory**

Critical Disability Theory (CDT) provides a foundational lens for this research, moving beyond the confines of medical and social models to view disability as a social construction shaped by power relations and systemic ableism (Hall, 2019). It highlights that barriers to inclusion are not inherent to individuals but are products of societies that label different abilities as "abnormal." This framework identifies institutional and policy obstacles in Punjab as social constructs that marginalize individuals who do not fit accepted norms. The concept of intersectionality is particularly important here, recognizing that disability intersects with other identities such as religion, gender, and socioeconomic status (Esposito,

2024; Budge et al.). CDT helps to understand the distinctive experiences of children with disabilities within Punjab's religious and cultural context.

### **Socio-Religious Framework**

To gain a deeper understanding of the context of a Muslim-majority society, this research incorporates a socio-religious framework. According to this perspective, religious beliefs are not fixed and immutable, but rather, their interpretation and application in social life significantly shape community attitudes and practices. This study examines how different interpretations of the Quran and Hadith influence the perception of disability. Although Islamic fundamental principles emphasize compassion, equality, and the inherent dignity of every individual (Akhtar, 2024), cultural interpretations sometimes give rise to stigmatization or misunderstandings. This framework helps to separate religious norms from cultural traditions in order to understand whether these norms promote or hinder inclusive education. In addition, this framework also analyzes the role of religious authority, local scholars (Ulema), who are important in shaping community discourse and attitudes towards children with disabilities. By integrating this perspective, this study goes beyond a simple analysis of barriers and seeks to understand the complex relationships between religious beliefs and social realities.

### **Relevance of Literature and Theory to Proposed Study**

The basic purpose of review the literature explains the global landscape of inclusive education and the specific challenges faced in the Global South. By clarifying key concepts and outlining international best practices, it establishes a benchmark for assessing the situation in Punjab. The existing research on disability and education in Punjab highlights the gaps and limitations in current policies and practices. This literature review serves as a primary research perspective and highlights the importance of understanding the nuances of Islamic theology and inclusive education. The integration of religion and disability studies further reinforces this relevance, as it demonstrates that focusing on religious beliefs is not only important but also a robust and established area of research.

This research is based on two main theoretical frameworks, namely Critical Disability Theory (CDT) and the socio-religious framework, which are crucial to its methodology. CDT provides an effective perspective that goes beyond a simple description of barriers to understanding how social competence is deeply embedded in the education system and its policies. This framework allows institutional and attitudinal barriers to be viewed and analyzed as social constructs rather than individual deficiencies. The socio-religious framework, on the other hand, plays a key role in understanding the specific cultural and religious context of Punjab. It allows for a systematic examination of how Islamic ideological interpretations influence positive and negative attitudes towards disability and contribute to the formation of social attitudes. By combining both frameworks, this study can provide a comprehensive and nuanced analysis of the research questions that clearly illustrates the depth of the complex relationships between religion, society, and education and provides deeper insights beyond superficial findings.

### **Research Objectives**

This research study was intended to:

1. Analyze the influence of Islamic theological interpretations on the attitudes of parents, educators, and community members in Punjab toward children with disabilities.
2. Identify and describe the key institutional barriers within the education system of Punjab that hinder the implementation of inclusive practices.

3. Evaluate the extent to which current government policies on inclusive education in Punjab reflect international best practices, and to assess how these policies align with or conflict with the local cultural and religious contexts.

### **Research Questions**

The following questions were addressed:

1. How do interpretations of Islamic theology influence attitudes toward children with disabilities among parents, educators, and community members in Punjab?
2. What institutional barriers within the education system (curriculum, teacher training, and school infrastructure) are hindering inclusive practices?
3. To what extent do current government policies reflect the principles of inclusive education, and how do they align or conflict with local cultural and religious contexts?

### **Methods and Materials**

#### **Research Design**

This research study used a qualitative, exploratory case study approach (Baskarada, 2014). This design was particularly suitable for the study because it allowed for an in-depth investigation of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context were not clearly evident (Yin, 2018). The qualitative methodology was crucial for exploring the complex and nuanced experiences, beliefs, and perceptions of key stakeholders regarding the intersection of Islamic theology and inclusive education. Rather than quantifying outcomes, this research focused on developing a comprehensive and deep understanding of the “why” and “how” behind attitudinal, institutional, and policy constraints in a specific region (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2014). By choosing Punjab as a constrained case, this study provides a detailed and contextualized analysis beyond the reach of large-scale quantitative surveys.

The case study approach allowed the research to focus on specific dynamics and unique challenges within the educational and socio-religious environment of Punjab. This design enabled a thorough process of triangulation to achieve a deeper and more integrated understanding of the issues, by combining different sources such as interviews and document analysis (Wood et al., 2020). This methodology was necessary to uncover the underlying interpretations of Islamic theology and the real experiences of individuals who played a role in creating persistent barriers for children with disabilities, leading to more nuanced and context-specific findings than those obtained from large-scale studies.

The rationale for adopting a qualitative case study research design in this study is its depth of complex phenomena and its relevance to contextual research. This approach allows for a detailed examination of Islamic theology and inclusive education in the context of a contemporary issue in a specific real-life setting (Yin, 2018). It is particularly effective when there is no clear demarcation between the event and its context, as is the case with the complex relationships of religious beliefs, cultural norms, and educational policies.

The case study design also enables a comprehensive data collection process where interviews with different reference stakeholders are triangulated, leading to a stronger and more integrated understanding of the issues (Wood et al., 2020). Such a methodology is essential to uncover detailed interpretations of Islamic theology and real-life experiences that contribute to the persistent barriers that exist for children with disabilities, and consequently provides a more specific and contextualized conclusion.

#### **Population**

The target population of this study comprised the main stakeholders who directly involved in the educational journey of children with disabilities. This population comprised 10 administrative regions of Punjab (Lahore, Gujranwala, Sargodha, Multan, Faisalabad, Bahawalpur, Sahiwal, Rawalpindi, Dera Gazi Khan, and Gujrat). The population of this study

included teachers (General & Special), parents of children with diverse learning needs, school heads (General & Special), chairperson (school management council), and District Education Officers' (DEO, General & Special). Since this population was large and geographically dispersed, it was not possible to conduct a complete census. Therefore, it was necessary to adopt a systematic and strategic sampling approach to ensure the feasibility of the study and the quality of the data (Islam & Aldaihani, 2022).

### Sample and Sampling Technique

In this study, a purposive sampling technique was chosen to select the participants. According to Patton (2022) this non-probability technique used to identify rich information and contextualized insights into the research questions. Total participants for this study were 50 with one representative from each group of main stakeholders chosen from each region. Consequently, 10 teachers (5 general, 5 special), 10 parents of children with diverse learning needs, 10 school heads (5 general, 5 special), 10 chairpersons (5 general school, 5 special school), and 10 district education officers' (5 general & 5 special). To ensure that the 10 administrative regions of Punjab were represented, the study comprehensively covered different regional contexts. This strategy allowed the researchers to examine how religious interpretations, institutional constraints, and policy implementation might differ across the province.

### Inclusionary Criteria

To maintain relevance and consistency, a pre-defined inclusionary criteria were set. Only those parents were part of the study who have children with special needs and whose academic ability was at least matriculation level to facilitate communication and understanding during the interview. Teachers were required to have at least ten years of teaching experience, so that participants had adequate experience of inclusive education settings. Chairpersons of School Management Councils (SMCs) were selected on the basis of at least matriculation achievement to ensure informed and competent participants. These criteria helped to select knowledgeable and experienced individuals who could provide quality and reliable qualitative information in line with the study objectives (Patton, 2022). Table 1 below summarizes the demographic details of key respondents, which illustrates the diversity of the sample.

**Table 1**

*Table of Demographic Information of Key Respondents (N=50)*

Respondent Group	Gender	Age Range (Years)	Education (minimum)	Level Professional Experience
Parents (n=10)	5 M, 5 F	35-55	Matriculation	Varied, non-educational
Educators (n=10)	4 M, 6 F	30-50	Master's, M.Phil.	Minimum 10 years of teaching
SMC Chairpersons (n=10)	8 M, 2 F	40-50	Matric	Varied, community leadership
School Heads (n=10)	6 M, 4 F	40-55	Master's, M.Phil.	15+ years of educational experience
District Education Officers (n=10)	7 M, 3 F	40-55	Master's, M.Phil.	10+ years in public service

Note. M=Male, F=Female

### Instrumentations

In this qualitative study, researchers mainly used five semi-structured interview guides designed specifically for each group of stakeholders. This method was chosen because it offers a flexible but organized way to explore the experiences and viewpoints of the participants, as recommended by Naz, Gulab, and Aslam (2022). By creating separate guides for parents, teachers, school heads, SMC chairpersons, and government officials, researchers made sure the questions were relevant to their unique roles and knowledge, allowing for gathering a rich and multi-faceted dataset.

1. ***Semi-Structured Interview Guide for Parents (n=10)***

This guide was thoughtfully crafted to explore parents' own personal and religious beliefs, alongside their real-life experiences with inclusive education. Focused on understanding how they perceive children with disabilities within their communities, the ways Islamic teachings shape these views, and the kinds of challenges and supports they've encountered in schools.

2. ***Semi-Structured Interview Guide for Teachers (n=10)***

For teachers, the questions aimed to dive into their professional journeys and perspectives, especially how they feel Islamic theological interpretations impact attitudes toward inclusion. This guide also explored the practical hurdles they face in bringing inclusive education to life, discussing curriculum adjustments, teacher training, and how they partner with parents to support all students.

3. ***Semi-Structured Interview Guide for School Heads (n=10)***

School leaders shared invaluable insights into the institutional roadblocks they encounter and the strategies they use to tackle these issues. This guide talked about how cultural and religious beliefs shape school policies, the effectiveness of government support, and whether resources like teacher training programs are adequately available.

4. ***Semi-Structured Interview Guide for SMC Chairpersons (n=10)***

This guide aimed to capture the voices of SMC chairpersons about their unique roles within the community. This guide explored how they perceive general attitudes toward children with disabilities and the cultural and religious factors influencing these views.

5. ***Semi-Structured Interview Guide for Government Officials (n=10)***

The focus here was on understanding inclusive education policy from the viewpoint of those shaping and administering it. Interview guide questions about their responsibilities, existing government policies in Punjab, the challenges of putting these into practice at the district level, and how cultural and religious contexts are considered when forming these policies.

**Data Collection Procedures**

The data collection for this study was conducted using a systematic, multi-pronged approach to gather rich qualitative data from a diverse sample of key stakeholders in Punjab. The process was initiated after obtaining ethical clearance and informed consent from all participants.

**Pilot Testing**

Before the main data collection began, the semi-structured interview guides were pilot-tested with a small number of participants who were not part of the final sample. This step helped refine the questions, ensuring they were clear, culturally appropriate, and effective in eliciting the desired information.

**Access and Recruitment**

Participants were recruited using a purposive sampling technique based on the predefined criteria for each stakeholder group. Initial contact was made through professional networks, community contacts, and government offices to identify suitable participants. At the start, every potential participant received an introductory letter that clearly explained the

purpose of the study, reassuring them that their identities would remain confidential and that their responses would be treated with complete privacy.

#### ***Interviews Process***

We conducted individual, semi-structured interviews with parents, educators, school heads, and government officials. Each interview took place in a private and comfortable setting to help participants feel at ease. Typically, these conversations lasted around 45 to 60 minutes.

#### ***Recording and Transcription***

With each participant's full consent, all interviews were audio-recorded. Later, these recordings were carefully transcribed word-for-word to make sure nothing was missed during analysis. To maintain privacy, all names and any specific locations mentioned were replaced with pseudonyms before further use.

#### ***Data Management***

The transcripts, along with notes taken during the interviews, were securely organized in a protected digital space. This careful organization helped keep the data safe and easy to access for thorough thematic analysis. The information gathered offered a deep insight into how religious, cultural, and institutional factors come together to shape inclusive education in Punjab.

#### ***Data Analysis Techniques***

For analyzing the data collected from the interviews, we used a detailed thematic analysis approach. This flexible method allowed us to move back and forth between the data and emerging themes to identify meaningful patterns (Joffe, 2011). Here's the process we followed:

#### ***Transcription and Organization***

We started by transcribing the audio recordings exactly as spoken, then organized these transcripts and notes using specialized qualitative data software to manage and code the information efficiently.

#### ***Familiarization with the Data***

The researchers read through the transcripts multiple times to fully understand participants' experiences, thoughts, and beliefs. This step helped in spotting initial ideas and patterns emerging from the data.

#### ***Initial Coding***

Next, the data was examined line by line, assigning descriptive labels to text segments that related to our research questions.

#### ***Developing Themes***

The initial codes were grouped into larger, meaningful themes through a collaborative review process. Themes were refined carefully to reflect the subtle nuances of the data and the relationships between different codes.

#### ***Reviewing and Refining Themes***

We then revisited the entire dataset to ensure the themes were consistent and well-supported by the coded extracts.

#### ***Synthesizing and Reporting***

Finally, we wove these themes into a clear, cohesive narrative that addressed the research questions. To bring the findings to life, representative quotes from participants were included so their voices remained central throughout the analysis.

#### ***Ethical Considerations***

We took several important steps to ensure the study was conducted ethically, keeping the rights and well-being of participants a priority.

#### ***Informed Consent***

Before starting, all participants were given detailed consent forms explaining the study's purpose, emphasizing their voluntary participation, and assuring them they could withdraw at any time without any consequences. Only after receiving their clear consent did the interviews proceed.

### ***Confidentiality and Anonymity***

To protect privacy, all identifying details such as names, specific schools, and locations were anonymized in transcripts and notes. Participants were reassured that their information would remain confidential and would never be disclosed in any reports or presentations.

### ***Protection of Vulnerable Participants***

Extra care was taken when working with vulnerable participants, especially parents of children with special needs. Interviews were conducted respectfully and sensitively, in comfortable and private settings, to encourage honest and open conversations without causing distress.

### ***Data Security***

All audio files and transcripts were securely stored in a password-protected digital repository that only the research team could access, ensuring the data remained safe from unauthorized use.

## **Results**

This section presents the key findings derived from semi-structured interviews with parents, educators, community members (School Management Council chairpersons), education system stakeholders (school heads), and government officials (district education officers). Document analysis of inclusive education policies in Punjab complements these findings. The results are organized thematically based on the study objectives and research questions.

### **Step 1: Initial Coding Process**

Interview transcripts were read repeatedly to gain familiarity. Each meaningful unit of text (sentence/phrase) was assigned an initial code. Similar codes were grouped into categories, which were then clustered into themes and subthemes.

**Table 2**

*Initial Coding Process*

Participant Quote	Initial Code	Category	Theme
“Islam teaches us that every soul is precious.” (Parent 1)	Belief in human dignity	Positive religious influence	Influence of Islamic Theology
“Some think disability is a punishment for past wrongs.” (Community Member 5)	Disability as punishment	Negative cultural/religious misconception	Influence of Islamic Theology
“Training is insufficient for inclusive teaching.” (School Head 2)	Lack of teacher preparation	Inadequate professional development	Institutional Barriers
“People listen to religious leaders more than officials.” (Parent 8)	Religious leaders influencers	Role of religious authority	Cultural/Religious Context in Implementation

### **Step 2: Themes and Subthemes by Research Question**

RQ 1: How do Islamic theological interpretations influence attitudes toward children with disabilities and their inclusive education in Punjab?

**Theme 1: Positive Influence of Core Islamic Teachings**

Participants across all stakeholder groups frequently cited Quranic verses and Hadith that emphasize mercy, equality, and the dignity of all human beings. These beliefs acted as strong motivators for acceptance and inclusion.

**Subtheme 1.1: Compassion and dignity for all**

Parents, educators, and community members described how Islamic teachings reinforced the belief that children with disabilities deserve respect and opportunities.

*“Islam teaches us that every soul is precious. This belief has helped me and many others see children with disabilities beyond their challenges, focusing on their potential.”* (Parent 1, Punjab Region 1)

*“In our religion, a person’s worth is not in their physical abilities but in their piety. This should guide how we treat every child.”* (Educator 5, Special Education, Punjab Region 4)

**Subtheme 1.2: Disability as divine wisdom or test**

Seven out of ten participants saw disability as part of divine wisdom a test for the individual and their family, which should be met with patience (sabr) and compassion.

*“My child’s disability is not a curse; it is a blessing in disguise. It teaches us patience and brings us closer to Allah.”* (Parent 6, Punjab Region 8)

**Theme 2: Cultural Misinterpretations and Stigma**

Despite positive theological principles, cultural misinterpretations often conflicted with inclusive ideals.

**Subtheme 2.1: Disability as divine punishment or curse**

A number of participants, especially from rural areas, admitted that some community members still see disability as a punishment for past sins.

*“While our faith calls for kindness, some in the community still think disability is a punishment for past wrongs, which makes it hard for children to be accepted in schools or neighborhoods.”* (Community Member 5, Punjab Region 7)

**Subtheme 2.2: Stigma leading to exclusion from schools or public life**

Misinterpretations often translated into social exclusion, with families avoiding sending children to school to “save face.”

*“Some parents hide their children because they fear what others will say. This is not what Islam teaches, but it happens because of old cultural thinking.”* (Educator 2, General Education, Punjab Region 3)

RQ2: What institutional barriers exist in implementing inclusive education for children with disabilities in Punjab?

**Theme 3: Teacher Preparation Gaps**

Mostly participants identified inadequate training in inclusive teaching methods as a major barrier.

**Subtheme 3.1: Lack of pre-service and in-service inclusive training**

*“Most teachers receive very little training specific to inclusive teaching methods. Without this, it’s difficult to meet the needs of children with various disabilities effectively.”* (School Head 2, Special Education, Punjab Region 6)

**Subtheme 3.2: Limited awareness of differentiated instruction**

*“We know every child learns differently, but without proper training, we just teach the same way to all. That leaves some children behind.”* (Educator 8, General Education, Punjab Region 5)

**Theme 4: Rigid Curriculum and Limited Resources**

Curriculum inflexibility and lack of resources were commonly mentioned.

**Subtheme 4.1: Inflexible syllabus not adapted to diverse needs**

*“Our syllabus is fixed. There is no space to adjust for slower learners or children with different needs.”* (Educator 3, Special Education, Punjab Region 1)

**Subtheme 4.2: Shortage of learning aids and assistive technology**

*“We don’t have materials like Braille books or sign language interpreters. Without these, how can we include every child?”* (School Head 4, General Education, Punjab Region 2)

**Theme 5: Inaccessible Infrastructure**

Physical access to school environments remained a challenge.

**Subtheme 5.1: Absence of ramps, adapted toilets, and safe mobility spaces**

*“Our school building wasn’t designed for children with physical disabilities. Many parents simply don’t send their children because the environment is not welcoming or safe.”* (Chairperson SMC 7, Punjab Region 9)

**Subtheme 5.2: Rural schools disproportionately affected**

*“In our area, even basic facilities are missing, so accessibility for disabled children is not a priority.”* (SMC Chairperson 3, Punjab Region 6)

RQ3: How do government policies align with the realities of inclusive education implementation, considering cultural and religious contexts?

**Theme 6: Policy-Practice Gap**

While policies appear progressive, implementation remains inconsistent.

**Subtheme 6.1: Policies align with UNCRPD and Salamanca Statement**

*“The language of our policies is in line with global best practices, but transforming policy into action at district and school levels requires much more support and clarity.”* (DEO 6, General Education, Punjab Region 2)

**Subtheme 6.2: Weak monitoring and enforcement mechanisms**

*“Policies look good on paper, but without proper monitoring, they don’t change classroom reality.”* (DEO 4, Special Education, Punjab Region 8)

**Theme 7: Cultural Sensitivity in Policy Implementation**

Involving religious and community leaders was seen as essential for success.

**Subtheme 7.1: Resistance when policies perceived as culturally alien**

*“Sometimes communities resist policies because they feel these may conflict with their local traditions or religious views. We need more culturally sensitive approaches to bridge this gap.”* (DEO 9, Special Education, Punjab Region 5)

**Subtheme 7.2: Success when religious leaders are involved in awareness campaigns**

*“When religious leaders speak out in favor of inclusion, it changes minds. People listen to them more than to government officials.”* (Parent 8, Punjab Region 4)

**Step 3: Summary Table of Themes, Subthemes, and Illustrative Quotes**

**Table 3**

*Overview of Themes and Subthemes*

Research Question	Theme	Subtheme	Illustrative Quote
RQ1	Positive Influence of Islamic Teachings	Influence of Compassion and dignity	“Islam teaches every soul is precious.” (Parent 1)
RQ1	Cultural Misinterpretations	Disability as punishment	“Some think disability is a punishment...” (Community Member)

Research Question	Theme	Subtheme	Illustrative Quote
RQ2	Teacher Gaps	Preparation Lack of training	5) “Most teachers receive very little training...” (School Head 2)
RQ2	Rigid Curriculum & Resources	Shortage of aids	“We don’t have materials to adapt lessons...” (Educator 6)
RQ2	Inaccessible Infrastructure	No ramps/toilets	“Our school wasn’t designed for children with disabilities...” (SMC Chairperson 7)
RQ3	Policy-Practice Gap	Weak enforcement	“Policy aligns with global standards, but action is weak.” (DEO 6)
RQ3	Cultural Sensitivity	Religious leaders’ role	“People listen to religious leaders...” (Parent 8)

#### Step 4: Cross-Case Patterns

A cross-case analysis of the perspectives from parents, educators, SMC chairpersons, school heads, and DEOs revealed three overarching patterns that cut across all research questions and thematic areas.

##### 1. Religious Influence

Across all participant groups, core Islamic principles such as the Quranic emphasis on human dignity and the prophetic tradition of compassion consistently emerged as a unifying positive force in shaping attitudes toward children with disabilities. These theological values often provided moral motivation for acceptance, advocacy, and patience. However, this shared religious foundation was not always sufficient to counter the deeply entrenched cultural misconceptions that persisted, especially in rural areas where limited formal education and exposure to accurate religious interpretations hindered change.

- In urban settings, participants more frequently cited inclusive interpretations of Islamic teachings, with several educators intentionally integrating these values into classroom discussions.
- In contrast, rural participants more often reported instances where disability was misinterpreted as divine punishment, leading to stigma and social isolation.

*“In the city, we hear scholars on TV saying we must support every child. But in my village, many still say the family must have done something wrong to deserve this.”* (Parent 5, Punjab Region)

##### 2. Institutional Weaknesses

Gaps in infrastructure, teacher training, and specialized resources were cited by nearly all participants, regardless of region. Yet, the severity of these weaknesses was notably higher in rural districts.

- **Infrastructure:** Schools lacking ramps, accessible toilets, and safe mobility pathways excluded children with physical impairments from attendance.
- **Training:** Even in better-resourced urban schools, most teachers reported receiving little to no formal preparation for inclusive education. In rural schools, this gap was compounded by teacher shortages and multi-grade classrooms.
- **Resource Availability:** Assistive technologies, adapted learning materials, and support staff were rare outside specialized urban centers.

“We have policies, but without training and facilities, they stay as good intentions on paper.”  
(School Head 4, Special Education, Punjab Region 8)

These weaknesses were not isolated to one stakeholder group; parents, teachers, and administrators all identified them as systemic barriers that needed urgent policy and funding attention

### 3. Policy Implementation

While Punjab’s inclusive education policies were generally aligned with international standards, their implementation on the ground faced serious obstacles not because of outright rejection of inclusion, but due to cultural misunderstandings and inadequate adaptation to local contexts.

- **Cultural Resistance:** Communities sometimes resisted programs when they were perceived as imposed “from above” without consideration for local beliefs or norms.
- **Bridging Approaches:** Initiatives that involved religious leaders and incorporated references to Islamic teachings were more readily accepted, showing that policy success was linked to cultural alignment.

“People here are not against inclusion, but they need to hear it in a way that connects with their faith and traditions.” (DEO 3, General Education, Punjab Region 2)

This finding underscores that policy acceptance is more about framing and communication than about changing the core objectives. When inclusive education was framed as fulfilling Islamic values of justice and compassion, community buy-in increased significantly.

#### Step 5: Linking Results to Research Objectives

The purpose of this step is to connect the patterns and themes identified in the data directly to the three research questions and stated objectives of the study. This mapping ensures that the results do not remain as isolated observations but are clearly shown to address the study’s core purpose.

**Research Question 1: How do interpretations of Islamic theology influence attitudes toward children with disabilities among parents, educators, and community members in Punjab?**

- **Findings:** Core Islamic teachings consistently promoted values of compassion, dignity, and equal worth, motivating positive attitudes toward inclusion. However, cultural misinterpretations particularly in rural areas sometimes overrode theological principles, framing disability as punishment or shame, leading to stigma.
- **Objective Link:** These findings meet the objective of analyzing theological influences by revealing that while authentic Islamic principles are a unifying driver for inclusion, misaligned cultural beliefs remain a significant attitudinal barrier.
- **Implication:** Addressing these misinterpretations through engagement with religious authorities can bridge the gap between belief and practice.

**Research Question 2: What institutional barriers within the education system (curriculum, teacher training, and school infrastructure) are hindering inclusive practices?**

- **Findings:** Barriers were both structural (inaccessible infrastructure, lack of assistive technologies) and capacity-related (e.g., insufficient teacher training, inflexible curricula). These were reported across urban and rural areas, though rural schools faced deeper challenges due to limited funding, staffing shortages, and lower community awareness.
- **Objective Link:** The study’s aim of identifying and describing institutional shortcomings is achieved here, with specific categories (infrastructure, curriculum, human resources) supported by participant evidence.

- Implication: Targeted investment in teacher training and accessible school infrastructure must accompany inclusive policy reform.
- Research Question 3: To what extent do current government policies reflect the principles of inclusive education, and how do they align or conflict with local cultural and religious contexts?**
- Findings: Policies in Punjab align with international best practices (UNCRPD, Salamanca Statement) in principle, but implementation falters due to limited monitoring, inadequate resource allocation, and insufficient cultural adaptation. Community resistance often stemmed from a lack of cultural framing, not from opposition to inclusion itself.
  - Objective Link: The objective of evaluating policy alignment and conflict with local context is addressed by showing that policy acceptance rises when initiatives integrate Islamic values and involve respected religious leaders.
  - Implication: Policy rollout should be context-sensitive, embedding religious and cultural touch-points to foster community ownership.

#### **Major Findings of the Study**

1. Authentic Islamic theological principles, emphasizing compassion, equality, and dignity, positively shaped attitudes toward children with disabilities across stakeholder groups. However, cultural misinterpretations particularly in rural areas sometimes reinforced stigma and exclusion.
2. Teacher training for inclusive education remains inadequate, curricula are inflexible, and infrastructure often lacks accessibility features, with rural schools facing deeper deficits.
3. Punjab's inclusive education policies align with international frameworks (UNCRPD, Salamanca Statement), but weak enforcement, insufficient monitoring, and lack of culturally sensitive strategies hinder effective implementation.
4. Inclusion policies and programs gained greater acceptance when framed through Islamic values and delivered with the involvement of religious leaders, suggesting that community buy-in is closely tied to cultural framing.
5. Urban areas generally exhibited better infrastructure, greater exposure to inclusive theological interpretations, and more awareness of inclusive practices, while rural areas struggled with compounded structural and attitudinal barriers.

#### **Discussion**

The findings of this study contribute to the growing body of literature on the interplay between religion, culture, and inclusive education in Muslim-majority contexts (Kaplan & Celik, 2023; Al-Aoufi et al., 2012). The consistent presence of positive Islamic theological influence supports earlier research suggesting that faith-based values can act as a powerful motivator for inclusion when they emphasize human dignity and compassion (Jibriel, 2025; Ghaly, 2009). However, the persistence of cultural misinterpretations framing disability as punishment or shame echoes studies in Pakistan and other Islamic societies where tradition-based beliefs sometimes overshadow doctrinal principles (Mehmood & Parveen, 2024; Mahyoub, 2025).

From an institutional perspective, the lack of teacher preparation, inaccessible infrastructure, and rigid curricula observed in this study parallel findings from other low- and middle-income countries where inclusive policy reforms have outpaced capacity-building measures (Begum & Badshah, 2025; Billah et al., 2025). Particularly notable is the disparity between urban and rural settings, with rural schools facing compounded challenges a pattern well-documented in global education equity research (Budge, 2016). This suggests that geographic inequity must be addressed alongside broader system reforms.

The policy–practice gap identified in Punjab mirrors similar implementation challenges in the Global South, where national commitments to inclusive education often

falter due to weak monitoring, limited funding, and insufficient community engagement (Akhtar, 2025; Ahmad & Nawaz, 2025; Mir & Waheed, 2022). What is distinctive here, however, is the role of cultural mediation: when policy was framed in line with Islamic values and reinforced by religious leaders, resistance diminished, and acceptance increased. This supports socio-religious frameworks (Alshahrani, 2018) that stress the importance of aligning educational reforms with prevailing moral and cultural norms to ensure local ownership.

The study reinforces the intersectional nature of inclusive education barriers in Punjab attitudinal, institutional, and policy dimensions are deeply interconnected. The findings suggest that addressing one domain in isolation is unlikely to yield sustainable change. Instead, reforms must integrate theological clarity, institutional strengthening, and culturally attuned policy communication

### **Conclusions**

This study concludes that inclusive education in Punjab is at a critical juncture supported in principle by both religious doctrine and international policy commitments, yet undermined in practice by entrenched cultural misconceptions, systemic institutional weaknesses, and insufficiently adapted implementation strategies.

The positive role that Islamic theological principles can play in promoting inclusive education is often overlooked. When these teachings are clearly shared and supported by religious leaders, they have the power to challenge stigma and foster wider community acceptance. However, deep-rooted negative cultural beliefs, especially in rural areas, continue to pose challenges. This underscores the importance of ongoing community education and meaningful engagement with religious thought.

At the same time, institutional challenges remain a major roadblock. Without well-trained teachers, adaptable curricula, sufficient resources, and accessible facilities, inclusive education risks remaining an ideal rather than a reality for children with disabilities. These issues are particularly pronounced in rural regions, where resources and professional development opportunities are most lacking.

Punjab's policy framework does align well with international standards, but there is a clear gap between policy and what actually happens on the ground. To close this gap, it is essential to combine adequate resource investment with culturally sensitive approaches. Initiatives that incorporate Islamic values and actively involve religious and community leaders in awareness campaigns have a greater chance of bringing about lasting change. Ultimately, the success of inclusive education in Punjab depends on a three-part strategy:

1. Religious and Cultural Engagement: Clearly communicating Islamic perspectives on disability to build broad public support.
2. Institutional Strengthening: Providing trained teachers, developing flexible curricula, and ensuring accessible infrastructure in both cities and rural areas.
3. Contextualized Policy Implementation: Integrating cultural understanding into every stage of policy execution to turn commitments on paper into everyday realities in classrooms.

If these three elements come together effectively, Punjab can create an education system that not only meets global standards but is also firmly rooted in its own cultural and religious values making sure that every child's right to learn is recognized and truly fulfilled.

### **Implications of the Study**

1. This study shows that when Islamic teachings are understood and shared in their true spirit, they can play a powerful role in helping communities embrace inclusive education. Religious leaders and institutions, therefore, can be valuable allies in driving positive change in education.

2. Attitudes, institutional practices, and policies are all closely linked. Focusing on just one area won't be enough. For meaningful progress, reforms need to happen across all these areas together.
3. Rural communities face extra challenges they often have fewer resources, poor infrastructure, and stronger cultural misunderstandings about disability. This means that strategies to promote inclusion must be tailored specifically to these regions.
4. How inclusive education policies are communicated really matters. When these policies are explained in ways that resonate with local culture and religious beliefs, people are more likely to understand, accept, and support them.
5. Without strong institutional capacity (training, infrastructure, resources), even the most progressive policies remain symbolic rather than transformative.

### **Recommendations**

#### **For Policymakers and Education Authorities**

- Develop policy awareness campaigns in collaboration with Islamic scholars (Ulema) to frame inclusion as fulfilling Quranic and Prophetic principles of justice and compassion.
- Create a dedicated budget line for accessibility upgrades, teaching materials, and community awareness programs in rural districts.
- Implement clear, measurable benchmarks for inclusive education policy rollout, with regular audits to track school-level implementation.

#### **For School Leaders and Administrators**

- Institutionalize pre-service and in-service training modules on inclusive pedagogy, differentiated instruction, and assistive technology.
- Audit facilities for accessibility and prioritize low-cost, high-impact changes such as ramps, accessible toilets, and seating modifications.
- Facilitate teacher exchange programs between inclusive schools and those beginning their inclusion journey.

#### **For Religious Leaders and Community Stakeholders**

- Deliver sermons and community talks emphasizing Islamic teachings on compassion, dignity, and equality for people with disabilities.
- Act as bridges between government agencies and local communities, ensuring that policies are adapted to local realities while preserving inclusive goals.
- Support the creation of parent-led initiatives that advocate for accessible schooling and inclusive attitudes in the community.

#### **For Teachers**

- Incorporate Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles to make lessons accessible for diverse learning needs.
- Collaborate with parents to understand each child's strengths and challenges, ensuring continuity between home and school support.

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