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PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENTS ENROLLED IN SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS TOWARDS INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN PAKISTAN

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
<p>Inclusive Education, Attitudes, Perceptions, Learners, Disabilities, KP, Pakistan</p>	<p>To include individuals with special needs in settings wherein all students are learning and enjoying equitable opportunities for the acquisition of learning outcomes. To study this phenomenon, the investigator started exploring the challenges and opportunities to develop quality of the program. In line with this connection, current study, entitled "The perception of students enrolled in a special education program towards inclusive education was investigated. Objectives of the study are: To examine the attitudes of students enrolled in special education degree programs towards inclusive education; To assess the willingness and acceptance levels of students in special education degree programs regarding inclusive education. Two null hypotheses were developed to proceed with the study further. The participants were students from B.Ed. (1.5Y) Special Education degree program of Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad, learning through the distance learning. The sample comprised 22 students, 11 males and 11 females as participated in current research study. The sample was collected using convenience sampling. The responses were recorded using a 15-item measuring tool. Responses from all 22 students were recorded and then analyzed by the percentage and chi-square statistics. The results showed that most of participants had a positive response to inclusive education. All the results were significant based on the interpretation of the chi-square analysis.</p>
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INTRODUCTION

The inclusion of students with special needs in an educational environment wherein equitable access to education is available to every learner, regardless of their abilities and disabilities, to achieve desired outcomes over modifications to content methodologies and access to learning (Ullah, Ullah, & Iqbal, 2025). Since the efficacious idea of inclusion, researchers from diverse

backgrounds are taking an interest in inclusive education and are curious about its success rate. The educational institutions offering inclusive education accommodate the diverse needs of large groups of students, including persons with disabilities, and address challenges they face (Wahl, 2024). Researchers in inclusive education and experts in special education have a significant influence on the accommodations provided to students with special needs. But the attitudes of teachers in mainstream need to be transformed toward inclusive education (Zhao, Pugh, Sheldon & Byers, 2022). Sebastian and Buckner (2023) state that the success of inclusive education is fundamentally dependent on the critical role of educators. According to them, a reformed education system must actively engage students with special needs and address their concerns.

One of the most crucial things to think about if inclusion is to work is how teachers feel about it. The research has shown that teachers are in favor of inclusive education. However, there are both agreements and disparities in how professionals at diverse implementations see inclusive education. The push for inclusive education is part of a larger human rights movement, but many teachers are not sure about putting a lot of students with special needs in the same class (Zhao & Frank, 2023). While comments from educators differed about their overall educational systems and specifically special education, a general hierarchy of criteria deemed suitable for inclusion was established (Andleeb, Taj & Rashid, 2024). When inclusive environments are supportive, students tend to develop a stronger academic identity and feel more motivated to participate actively in learning activities. Conversely, the absence of such resources can lead to negative perceptions, where students feel marginalized within mainstream classrooms. In this linking, people were severely mentally challenged were all thought to be least desirable, while people with medical & physical problems were thought to be easiest to deal with (Mastropieri, 2022).

Regarding a quarter of instructors thought that children with sensory impairments could be taught in regular classes as ten percent of teachers felt the same way regarding children with significant intellectual issues and multiple challenges (Savage & Wienke, 2021). The students in special education often perceive inclusive education as the pathway to social integration and normalization. Salvia and Munson (2022) conducted a cross-cultural study examining teacher attitudes towards inclusion and integration. Still, these positive perceptions are not universal. Some students express concerns about the challenges associated with inclusion, particularly when right support systems are lacking. Other attitude tests have shown as general educators have not cultivated an empathic comprehension of disabled circumstances. The role of teachers is central in shaping these perceptions. Teachers who validate empathy, flexibility, and skill in managing diverse classrooms contribute significantly to positive student experiences. A study involving normal students noted that their attitudes toward integration stemmed from a lack of confidence in both their own instructional abilities and teacher's management skills (Rogers, 2023).

Problem Statement

This study was concerned with the assessment of attitudes of graduates of a special education degree program towards inclusive education. The teachers' education program mainly focuses

on in-service training with a theoretical background and avoid to prepare teacher education graduates for teaching in inclusive setups. Thus, it is very critical to understand the attitudes of prospective teachers towards challenges in inclusive education. Therefore, the current study was titled, The perception of students enrolled in special education program towards inclusive education.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the attitudes of students enrolled in the special education degree programs towards inclusive education.
2. To assess willingness and acceptance levels of students in special education programs about inclusive education.

Research Hypothesis

H₀₁: There is no significant difference in attitudes of students enrolled in special education degree programs towards inclusive education.

H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between willingness & acceptance levels of students in special education about inclusive education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Teachers, who will be the main people responsible for implementing the policy, are often not prepared to help the pupils who have serious problems and are less prepared to do so than administrators and policymakers. Those on the front line, including mainstream teachers, have seen a more positive attitude of integration (Padeliadou & Lampropoulou, 2024). A subsequent study conducted by Hussain, Dehraj, Ditto, Soomro and Shah (2021) examined students' views towards integration and various forms of support. The findings indicated the shift in attitudes favoring the integration of children with special educational needs during preceding decade. This study also showed that although the people who answered the questions seemed to be more in favor of integration, they had different ideas about which demand was the hardest to achieve. Cultural and societal attitudes toward disability also shape students' perceptions. In contexts where disabilities are stigmatized, students may internalize negative beliefs, affecting their confidence and participation in the inclusive settings. The teachers specifically recognized that the students with the academic issues and, to a greater extent, those with emotional as well as behavioral difficulties as the most challenging groups (Center, Ward, Parmenter & Nash, 2024).

Buell, Hallam, McCormick and Scheer (2023), in their meta-analysis of the American attitude studies encompassing 28 survey reports from 1958 to 1995, found that two-thirds of surveyed students in the special education degree programs (10,560 in total) concurred with the general concept of integration. The smaller majority was willing to use integration methods in their classrooms, but again, the answers seemed to depend on the type of disability. Also, less than a third of instructors thought they had enough time, skills, training, resources for integration (Rogers, 2023). The research has shown that students enrolled in special education programs frequently lack the preparedness to address the needs of individuals with severe impairments, and their views toward integration are influenced by the severity of disability they encounter.

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The students enrolled in special education hold diverse perceptions of the inclusive education, ranging from highly positive to cautiously critical. This is mainly enlightening given research conducted in many studies that analyzed how students in special education degree programs strategies & implement modifications for individuals with learning challenges (Center & Ward, 2021).

Center and Ward (2022) conducted the study using focus group interviews to investigate the perspectives of inclusion among students in regular and special education degree programs. Most of students in these special education degree programs who didn't know about inclusive programs had strong unfavorable views about inclusion and thought that people in charge were out of touch with what was really going on in the classroom. The students in the special education degree program listed number of things that would affect how well inclusion works. These included class size, not having enough resources, whether or not students would benefit from inclusion, and not having enough teacher training (Buell, et.al., 2023). Nevertheless, in studies where teachers had direct experience with inclusion, conflicting results emerged; a study by Bowman (2024) found that supported inclusion of students with special educational needs in typical schools availability of resources, and overall school climate. The researchers observed that teacher commitment frequently materializes toward the end of implementation cycle, following instructors' acquisition of vital professional knowledge to execute inclusive programs.

This finding was corroborated by the Bochner and Pieterse (2023) case study of a senior high school and middle school in Washington School District, Utah, where children with significant learning issues were merged. Twenty teachers were interviewed at start and end of the school year to assess their views about inclusion. The educators believed that inclusion was effective and, despite the necessity for more help, it was regarded as a challenge. Ali (2021) conducted a study on effects of inclusion over three years in Punjab, Pakistan, yielding comparable results. The findings of the study indicated that as teachers' experience with the children with special education needs enhanced, their confidence level also increased. It was also noted that in the beginning, situation is worse, but with passage of time and experience the change in behavior occurred from negative towards positive that genuinely meet needs of all learners (Ali, 2021). A recent UK survey of teacher attitudes in one LEA corroborated this conclusion, that reveals that teachers graduate who have experience of several years in inclusive education showed favorable attitudes toward inclusive education as compared to those which have no experience (Ali, 2020).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methods and procedure representing research methodology for conducting the study on the particular issues and obtaining the desired information are produced in this section. The population of the present study was drawn from the 3rd semester regular students enrolled in B.Ed (1.5 years) special education degree program at the Allama Iqbal Open University, Swat region. The study population comprised 22 students, 11 male and 11 female, as shown in the table.

Table 1
Biographical Details

Independent Variable	N=22	%=100
Gender		
Male	11	50
Female	11	50
Age		
20-24	10	45
25-29	5	20
30-34	7	35

A detailed questionnaire was developed comprising two parts. The first parts consist of items to diagnose attitudes designed to offer background information. The other part developed to clear attitudes of students enrolled in special education programs toward inclusive education. Participants in sample were informed to be present for recording responses at specific day and time.

RESULTS OF STUDY

The results of current study are produced in this section in order to present the main outcomes of the statistical analysis for extracting the required information for reaching desired decisions about the perception of students enrolled in special education programs and towards inclusive education.

Table 2
Attitudes towards Inclusive Education (N22)

Attitudes	Percentage	χ^2	df	Result
Positive Attitudes	60%	45.50	2	Significant
Negative Attitudes	35%			
Undecided	5%			

All responses from learners in special education program were displayed regarding inclusive education. Regarding inclusion of students with the special needs in education they responded optimistically. The optimistic and pessimistic attitudes to inclusive education were spotted in analyzed studies. Given that inclusive education is often seen as progressive choice, favorable reaction to it could be enthusiastic. It has started to implement inclusive education, which is great. The outcomes cannot be generalized to entire learner population in the special education program, as was restricted study, outcome suggests there may be some hope about inclusive education.

Table 3
Requirements for Competency

Need for skills	Percentage	χ^2	df	Result
Need for special skills	72	73.65	2	Significant

No need for special skills	28
Undecided	2

The high percentage of need for special skills is shown in Table 3. This outcome supported the findings of a study in which students in special education program reported that their attitudes toward inclusive education were characterized by diffidence about educator's management skills and their own teaching efficacy. Tutoring in an inclusive classroom needs different skills, so these outcomes are comprehensible as the need for skills is reported by the [Ullah, Shah, and Nisar \(2025\)](#). Many teachers may not be qualified enough to teach in inclusive environments. And as a result, a feeling of helplessness and despair arises. As a result, the special education program for most of the students becomes distressing. In this drive, despite being in execution of the inclusive education, the sampling training group did not includes inclusive education methodologies.

Table 4
Requirements for Successful Inclusion

Need for special resources	Percentage	χ^2	df	Result
Need for special resources	72	73.65	2	Significant
No need for special resources	28			
Undecided	2			

Table 4 displayed that a large part of sample agreed that in inclusive education classroom, it is essential to have specialized expertise & facilities. It is revealed through literature on teachers' attitudes about inclusive education that when structural, human facilities are provided, only then is inclusive education initiated in schools. Certain schools be transformed into full-service institutions with materials, resources, and support. Schools for children with special needs be transformed into resource centers, so special needs children be housed there, and the resource school practitioners are required to exercise their knowledge and skills to help those in normal institutions.

Table 5
Attitudes towards Learners with Special Needs

Attitudes towards special needs	Percentage	χ^2	df	Result
Positive	77	52.86	2	Significant
Negative	27			
Undecided	16			

In above table, more optimistic points were given by the special education program's learners toward the students with special needs. Since this suggests that students of special education programs may be ready to fulfill the requirements of children with diverse learning needs, the outcome is steady. When facilitated and fortified, students with diverse needs responded more optimistically and accurately. In this regard, results offer significant information for analyzing the perception of students about research phenomena for attaining information in particular context.

DISCUSSION

The optimistic and pessimistic attitudes toward inclusive education were spotted in analyzed studies. Given that the inclusive education is often seen as a progressive choice, the favorable reaction to it could be enthusiastic. The consequence suggests that there might be hope for the inclusive education. In the available literature, both types of views were reported, like [Mngo, and Mngo, \(2018\)](#), who were in favor of the separate special education. The responses noted by [Triviño et al \(2022\)](#) were very positive towards inclusive education. Similarly, [Ullah, Ullah, and Iqbal \(2025\)](#) revealed that the teachers of the mainstream and special education had welcoming attitude towards the inclusive education. While inclusion offers significant social and academic benefits, its success depends largely on the quality of implementation, teacher preparedness, availability of resources, and the overall school climate. When the inclusive environments are supportive, students tend to develop a stronger academic identity and feel more motivated to participate actively in learning activities. Table 3 reports that special skills are very crucial for teaching special students in inclusive education system. In this linking, [Rodriguez \(2021\)](#) also reported that preparation is very necessary before attending a class in the inclusive education system.

The findings of the study revealed that specialized resources and facilities are very necessary for inclusive education. Students in special education often perceive inclusive education as a pathway to social integration and normalization. Being part of mainstream classrooms allows them to interact with the peers without disabilities, which can foster a sense of belonging and reduce feelings of isolation or stigmatization. The same idea was also favored by [Andleeb, Taj, and Rashid, \(2024\)](#) but they say that severe cases should be educated in the separate special education institutes while mild students can be educated in the mainstream when sufficient resources are available. For students who are already part of special education programs, their perceptions of the inclusion are shaped by the complex interaction of the personal experiences, institutional support, peer relationships, and teaching practices. A very optimistic approach was reported by the participants towards students with special needs, and the same concepts were reported in almost all research studies, like [Rosado-Castellano, \(2022\)](#); [Alduais and Deng \(2022\)](#). Consequently, perceptions of students enrolled in special education programs toward inclusive education constitute a critical area of inquiry within the broader field of the inclusive education.

CONCLUSION

The above discussion makes it evident that sampled students had a generally hopeful opinion of inclusive education. If inclusive education has to be implemented successfully, pre-service coaching and ongoing professional practices are necessary. If distress regarding adoptability of the inclusive education is to be managed, facilitating of the schools is mandatory. The reality that a lot of effort is required to be done internally as well as globally, is displayed through the literature, which looks like to show both optimistic and pessimistic perceptions towards the inclusive education. In terms of adopting inclusive education, it may be said that this recent era is the time of inclusion. To be able to embrace and accept this novel idea of inclusive education, Advocacy activities and community based mobilization are highly important. It has been seen

that parents, teachers, and students does not have enough knowledge regarding the inclusive education. It appears that there is an assumption that students may easily embrace the idea of inclusion. But could be possible that some students may not have favorable opinions on this, such assumption could be risky or unsafe. It is planned to study student thoughts on inclusive education.

Recommendations

1. The teacher training should be increased in the institutions so that teachers are trained in differentiated instruction, classroom management and inclusive teaching methods to be able to meet the needs of learners.
2. The institutions ought to offer support services, include assistive technology, individual education plans, and access to special educators, to ensure that students feel sufficiently accommodated in inclusive setting.
3. The institution ought to encourage the positive peer relationships, in terms of awareness programs, learning activities and anti-bullying policies to create acceptance, respect and belonging amongst all the students.
4. The policymakers and administrators must make sure that there is a sufficient allocation of resources like number of students and better infrastructure to establish the inclusive and responsive learning environment.

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