

Classroom, Family and Community-related Experiences of Children with Disabilities in Mainstream Schools in Pakistan

Evidence from the DARE Research Consortium

Policy Brief

Authors

Dr Julia de Kadt
Dr Nasima Shakeel
Dr Kausar Waqar
Mr Itfaq Khaliq Khan

ABOUT

This policy brief was produced by the DARE Research Consortium. It summarises the findings from a full report (forthcoming) detailing research conducted as part of the DARE-RC portfolio, and was authored by the researchers of that report. This brief forms a part of a series to provide actionable evidence to policymakers in Pakistan to improve education.

DISCLAIMER

The views expressed in this document are those of the authors and the DARE Research Consortium and do not necessarily reflect those of the FCDO or the UK Government.

PUBLICATION DATE

October, 2026

DESIGN & EDITING

Sam Wilson, Amina Batool (Wyeside Education)

Scan to find out more



DARE Research Consortium

DARE-RC is Pakistan's largest education research programme, generating rigorous, actionable evidence to improve education policy and practice.

DARE's 44 research studies and scoping papers offer critical insights on inclusion, teaching and learning, governance, data, accountability, and system resilience.

© DARE Research Consortium

Classroom, Family and Community-related Experiences of Children with Disabilities in Mainstream Schools in Pakistan

Dr Julia de Kadt, Dr Nasima Shakeel, Dr Kausar Waqar, Mr Itfaq Khaliq Khan, et al.

Methodology

- **Design:** qualitative, participatory research across two peri-urban settings in KP and one rural and one urban context in Sindh.
- **Sample:** 111 children with disabilities aged 6–17, 60 parents, and 55 teachers, via FGDs and adapted in-depth interviews, analysed thematically.

Key Figures

111

children with disabilities participated across four locations

60

parents participated in the research

55

teachers participated in the research

4

locations across KP and Sindh selected for diverse contexts

Findings

1

Limited teacher capacity for inclusive pedagogy

Most teaching remains didactic; teachers face heavy workloads, large classes, and little training on inclusive education, feeling unable to meet diverse needs.

2

Poor infrastructure hinders participation

Inaccessible buildings, overcrowded classrooms, and unsafe or absent washrooms are major barriers, with severe consequences for adolescent girls.

3

Peer relationships cut both ways

Many children benefit from supportive peer relationships, but others face exclusion or bullying at the classroom and school level.

4

Family support is strong but resource-constrained

Parents value education and make considerable efforts, but their ability to support learning is limited by poverty and low levels of education.

5

Unsafe travel and stigma disproportionately affect girls

Difficult travel to school, combined with community stigma and harassment, further restricts girls with disabilities' participation.

6

Inclusion is shaped by overlapping, intersecting factors

Disability type, poverty, gender, and location combine to shape each child's experience – no single fix will work everywhere.

Policy Implications

- Disability-inclusive pedagogy must be integrated into pre- and in-service teacher training, alongside sustained teacher support mechanisms.
- Disability-disaggregated data must be meaningfully incorporated into EMIS and the Annual School Census to enable targeted policy responses.
- Provincial budget allocations must be based on equity principles, considering different schools' and pupils' needs for infrastructure and materials.
- Poverty, stigma and social exclusion require a multisectoral approach, linking education with health and social protection systems.

Recommendations

TEACHER CAPACITY

Scale Inclusive Pedagogy Training

- Scale CPD on disability inclusion and differentiated instruction.
- Embed inclusive education in all pre-service teacher curricula.
- Embed disability inclusion in teacher licensing requirements.

PLANNING & FINANCE

Institutionalise Inclusive Planning

- Integrate disability inclusion into provincial Education Sector Plans.
- Invest in infrastructure, assistive devices and accessible materials.
- Allocate budgets using disability-inclusive funding formulas.

DATA & COORDINATION

Strengthen Data & Coordination

- Strengthen disability-disaggregated data within EMIS and the ASC.
- Establish inter-departmental committees across education, health and social protection.
- Ensure meaningful engagement of OPDs, parents and learners.

Key Messages

Despite Pakistan's appreciable policy commitments, children with disabilities enrolled in KP and Sindh's mainstream schools continue to lag behind their peers in learning outcomes. To understand why, this brief moves beyond data and explores the lived experiences of children with disabilities in schools.

Children value flexible and interactive teaching practices but most teaching is didactic. Teachers lack training in inclusive pedagogy, and feel unable to meet diverse needs due to heavy workloads, large class sizes, and a shortage of adapted materials and assistive devices. Embedding disability inclusion within in-service CPD and pre-service education curricula, leadership training, and teacher licensing requirements can help change this.

Poor physical infrastructure (inaccessible buildings, overcrowded classrooms, unsafe/absent washrooms) hinders participation, especially for adolescent girls. Peer relationships can be a source of support, but also of exclusion or bullying. Addressing this requires disability-inclusive budgeting, investment in infrastructure standards, and safeguarding measures to support safe school environments.

Family support for education is often strong but constrained by poverty, low parental literacy, and limited access to services – while unsafe travel to school and community stigma create further barriers, disproportionately affecting girls with disabilities. Addressing these challenges requires stronger coordination between education, health, and social protection systems, and meaningful participation of parents and Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) in local decision-making.

Better data can also help: incorporating disability-disaggregated information into Education Management Information Systems (EMIS) and Annual School Census (ASC) can help policymakers target and evaluate inclusion efforts.

Children's experiences of inclusion are shaped by overlapping factors like disability type, poverty, gender, and location. No single fix will work everywhere but progress is possible through sustained investment, systemic accountability, and context-sensitive approaches.



Introduction

This policy brief is based on a qualitative study into how children with disabilities experience participation in mainstream public schools in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Sindh provinces of Pakistan. Children with disabilities are entitled to an equitable and inclusive education in their neighbourhood schools, in line with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) article 24. In Pakistan, learning outcomes of children with disabilities continue to lag behind those of their peers. The reasons for this gap remain poorly understood, particularly from the perspective of children themselves.

The study forms part of DARE-RC's work on improving drivers of learning for marginalised children. It centres the perspectives of children with disabilities, alongside those of parents and teachers, to explore how classroom practices, school environments, and family and community contexts influence participation in education. By focusing on children already enrolled in mainstream schools, the study provides evidence on the factors that enable or constrain meaningful inclusion, and highlights priority areas for action across teaching practice, school environments, family support and education system implementation.

Pakistan has made strong policy commitments to inclusive education, including constitutional guarantees of free compulsory education for all children aged 5–16 and ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. However, commitments to inclusion in education policy are not yet adequately concrete, and not supported by budgetary decisions.

Study Methodology

The study used a qualitative, participatory research design to explore the experience of children with disabilities in mainstream public schools in two peri-urban settings in KP and one rural and one urban context in Sindh. The research included children with disabilities aged 6–17, along with their parents and teachers, providing a multi-perspective understanding of inclusion. In total, 111 children, 60 parents, and 55 teachers participated across four locations selected to capture diverse contexts.

Data collection combined focus group discussions and in-depth interviews, using adapted methods to ensure inclusive participation of children with different types of disabilities. Participants were identified through school data and local engagement, including children without formal diagnoses. Data was analysed thematically across key domains: teaching practices, learning environments, and family and community support. Quality assurance processes included ethical clearance, researcher training, informed consent, child safeguarding, and validation of findings with stakeholders.

Key Findings

The study generated evidence on the experiences of children with disabilities in mainstream schools in KP and Sindh and flagged several barriers to their inclusion in education. Children with disabilities showed strong motivation and commitment for education, expressing a strong desire to learn, participate and be included on an equitable basis with their peers, despite the many challenges they faced.

111

CHILDREN PARTICIPATED

Children with disabilities aged 6–17 across four locations

“

This study addresses an evidence gap by generating in-depth qualitative evidence from children with disabilities, alongside parents and teachers.

1 Limited teacher capacity and support for inclusive pedagogy

Children's learning preferences were sometimes linked to their disabilities, but most pupils valued clear explanation and participatory approaches. A girl with learning and visual difficulties explained how she benefitted: "The teacher explains to us. Then if we don't understand, then she explains by writing on the board, so we understand. Then we write ourselves." However, most of the teaching described by children was didactic in nature. Teachers reported facing heavy workloads, large class sizes and limited training on inclusive education, and often felt unable to meet diverse learning needs.

"If we even tell the teacher, then they say, 'yes, we will explain to them separately', and they say, 'we don't have that much time to give them separate time'."

— PARENT

There was also a general lack of adapted teaching and learning resources and assistive devices. Many teachers felt that mainstream schools were not resourced or equipped to meet the needs of learners with disabilities, and that these children would be better served by special schools.

2 Poor physical infrastructure and unsupportive learning environments

Most schools in the study areas were not physically accessible and faced overcrowded classrooms, extreme heat, lack of electricity, non-functional fans and inadequate seating. A girl with a physical disability described her challenges: "I struggle to climb the stairs. All my friends go upstairs easily, but sometimes I can manage and sometimes I can't." Lack of clean water and dirty, inaccessible and unsafe washrooms were a significant concern, with particularly severe consequences for adolescent girls with disabilities.

"When I sit on the back bench, I cannot hear what the teachers say, and then I feel very bad."

— GIRL WITH HEARING IMPAIRMENT

3 Family and community environment strongly influenced children's experiences

Family support was generally strong, with parents valuing education and making considerable efforts for their children to attend school, but their ability to support learning was often constrained by poverty, low levels of education, and limited access to essential services.

"If she doesn't study then what else will she have in life? ... I will educate her so that one day she can stand on her own feet."

— MOTHER

Children with disabilities also faced barriers related to unsafe or difficult travel to school, disproportionately affecting girls whose participation was further constrained by safety concerns and gender norms. Stigma and harassment in the community was also a concern: a boy with a physical disability in KP, regularly called names by other children, explained: 'I want that they don't use these names and call me by my own name.'

Policy Implications

Integration of inclusive education into teacher training. The study revealed that teachers often have limited training in inclusive pedagogy, reducing their ability to support diverse learners. Disability-inclusive pedagogy must be integrated into teacher training curricula, along with teacher support mechanisms for sustained disability awareness and acceptance.

Budget allocations to inclusive education. System-wide changes and increased investment are needed to ensure mainstream schools can meet diverse learning needs. Recent progress includes Sindh's new 'school specific budget' of Rs 18.63 billion, allocated in 2026 for the first time, and increased Facility Level Budget allocations for Parent Teacher Councils in KP.

Inclusive data and strengthened accountability. Policy makers will only be able to effectively target, resource, monitor or evaluate inclusive education outcomes if disability-disaggregated data is meaningfully incorporated into EMIS and the ASC. The inclusion of Washington Group Short Set (WG-SS) questions is a welcome starting point.

A multisectoral approach to poverty and stigma. Children's participation in education is also shaped by poverty, parental education and access to services. Inclusive education policies must be linked with social protection and welfare initiatives, school health programmes, and community-level interventions.

“
Meaningful participation of parents of children with disabilities and Organisations of Persons with Disabilities in decision-making processes is essential.

Recommendations

Some recommendations are more straightforward and can be implemented in the next five years (short/medium term); others require more systemic changes and should be progressively implemented (long-term).

1. Scale Teacher Training on Inclusive Pedagogy

- **Short/medium term:** Scale CPD on disability inclusion and classroom adaptations with provincial training institutions (PITE Sindh, KP DPD); build capacity of school leaders; establish mentoring mechanisms.
- **Long term:** Embed inclusive education in all pre-service teacher curricula via HEC and NACTE; embed disability inclusion in teacher licensing requirements, linked to the Sindh Teaching License Policy and upcoming KP equivalent.

2. Institutionalise Disability-Inclusive Education Planning and Financing

- **Short/medium term:** Integrate disability inclusion into provincial ESPs with monitoring indicators; invest in infrastructure and assistive devices; ensure textbook boards provide accessible materials.
- **Long term:** Allocate adequate budgets, reduce mainstream class sizes to under 30 students, and ensure disability-inclusive school funding formulas.

3. Improve the Collection and Use of Disability-Disaggregated Data

- **Short/medium term:** Strengthen integration of disability data into the ASC and EMIS reporting.
- **Long term:** Create digital individual learner records at school level, coordinated with health and social protection data.

4. Strengthen Cross-Sectoral Coordination

- **Short/medium term:** Establish inter-departmental committees considering intersectionality and specific needs of girls and children living in poverty.
- **Long term:** Expand programmes like Waseela-e-Taleem Conditional Cash Transfers to explicitly support children with disabilities.

5. Ensure Meaningful Engagement of Community Stakeholders

- **Short/medium term:** Ensure participation of OPDs, parents and learners in planning via LEGs and SMCs/PTCs; build awareness to combat stigma.
- **Long term:** Implement School Safeguarding Frameworks and enforce zero-tolerance policies on corporal punishment.

Conclusion

The research study has shown that despite Pakistan's strong policy commitments to inclusive education, children with disabilities still experience many barriers to learning in mainstream schools. Children's testimonies reveal that inclusion is often superficial, constrained by a lack of teachers trained on inclusive approaches, inaccessible infrastructure, social stigma, and limited systemic support.

The findings and recommendations point to the need for a more intentional focus on policy implementation, supported by sustained investments to make the education system more accessible and inclusive for all learners. By allocating appropriate resources to implement inclusive education policies, strengthening systems and community engagement, Pakistan has an opportunity to make schools inclusive for all learners, ensuring that all children can participate, learn, and thrive.

For More Information

Authors: Dr Julia de Kadt, Dr Nasima Shakeel, Dr Kausar Waqar, Mr Itfaq Khaliq Khan, Dr Sulaman Ijaz, Kadija Gul, Ujala Sarfaraz

Report Date: June 2026

This policy brief is based on findings from the report titled: *Classroom, Family and Community-related Experiences of Children with Disabilities in Mainstream Schools in Pakistan*.

More information about the DARE-RC Programme: <https://darerc.org/>

The DARE-RC project is funded by UK International Development from the UK government. Its implementation is led by Oxford Policy Management in partnership with its consortium partners.

References

Kamran, M., & Bano, N. (2023). A systematic review of literature on inclusive education with special emphasis on children with disability in Pakistan. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 1–19.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2023.2256321>



DARE-RC
DATA AND RESEARCH IN EDUCATION
RESEARCH CONSORTIUM
جرات تحقیق ملے



**UK International
Development**

Partnership | Progress | Prosperity

Scan to find out more



DARE Research Consortium

DARE-RC is Pakistan's largest education research programme, generating rigorous, actionable evidence to improve education policy and practice. DARE's 44 research studies and scoping papers offer critical insights on inclusion, teaching and learning, governance, data, accountability, and system resilience.



DARE-RC is funded with UK International Development from the UK Government and its implementation is led by Oxford Policy Management in partnership with its consortium partners.