

**Silent Exclusion in Inclusive Schools: A Qualitative Study of Everyday Practices That Marginalize Students with Disabilities in Pakistan**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Inclusive education policies are built on the idea of participation and belonging, but students with disabilities are still likely to face the issue of marginalization when the school administration relies on implicit and normalized school practices. This paper analyzes silent exclusion within an inclusive primary and secondary schooling belonging to Pakistan with respect to the day to day activities and encounters that isolate students with disabilities without necessarily segregating them. The research problem aims to fill the gap between the official inclusion policies and the experience of participating of students in real life. The main idea in the study was to look at how teachers, students, and school administrators identify, implement, or sanction practices that bring into existence exclusion in inclusive environments. The data were gathered by relying on qualitative research design, semi-structured interviews with teachers and school leaders, as well as reflective descriptions of classroom and school practice. It was even assumed that exclusion was socially constructed in the form of routines, expectations and institutional norms and that the boundary of it is defined by the structure of the curriculum, assessment and school culture. The results show some trends of silent exclusion due to reduction of expectations, lack of chances of participation, marginalization through space, and selective inclusion in both academic and social processes. These results correspond to global sources on the topic of hidden exclusion besides giving context-based information in Pakistan. The paper comes to the conclusion that to cope with inclusive education the aspects of the subtle, everyday practices that will disable meaningful participation even in the cases of formal inclusion must be addressed.*

**Keywords:** Silent exclusion; Disability marginalization; Inclusive schooling; Hidden practices; Qualitative study; School culture; Pakistan education

**INTRODUCTION**

Inclusive education has emerged as a leading policy objective in order to guarantee access, participation and belonging of all learners. Nevertheless, researchers believe that it is impossible to consider inclusion based only on micro-location in general classrooms (Ainscow, 2020). The research focuses on the influence of the unofficial curriculum of knowledge, rules, and unwritten rules (the hidden curriculum) on the experiences of studies in participating and feeling sidelined (Allan, 2008). Students with disabilities can be part of an inclusive school and they can be excluded in relevant academic and social activities (Florian, 2019). Inclusive education efforts are simultaneously coexisting with the examination-oriented model and

strict classroom routines, which produce a situation where minor exclusion types can occur even regardless of publicly stated inclusion policies (Singal, 2008; Shah, 2015).

There is a popular inclination in the discourse of inclusive education that reputation of being placed in mainstream schools should follow the meaning of inclusion. Nevertheless, this assumption is not supported by critical research, which has shown that exclusion is possible with the help of the practices that are not obvious or commonly accepted in ordinary everyday life (Slee, 2011). Although hidden exclusion is reported in international studies, scant empirical research of such processes in Pakistan is done yet. Available literature on Pakistani concerns has concentrated more on implementation and attitudes of teachers and has not addressed enough on experience of participation and marginalization by the students (Ehsan, 2018; Hayat, 2016). It is in this gap that the question of the research question is the following: How do daily school practices in Pakistani inclusive schools create silent strategies of exclusion of students with disability?

This study aims at investigating silent exclusion and its dynamics in inclusive primary and secondary schools in Pakistan. The research conducts a survey using a qualitative method to investigate the manner in which normal classroom activities, institutional and interactive patterns discriminate against students with disabilities without any visible efforts to segregate. The results demonstrate the trends of exclusion with regard to participation, expectations, and spatial organization. This research has reached an inclusive education scholarship goal through foregrounding the subtle and normalized practices, by moving the focus to compliance with the policy to lived inclusion. The article then continues with a literature review that is related to it, then the methodology, results, discussion and conclusion.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Introduction**

Inclusive education studies have recognized the growing importance of relating physical placement in regular schools as not assuring meaningful participation by the student having the disability. This literature review provides an analysis of research on the topic of silent exclusion, hidden curriculum, and participation versus presence, normalization of marginalization and quotidian practices in school. The guiding question of the current study revolves around which the review answers the following: How do the everyday practices in inclusive schools create new means of exclusion against a student with a disability? Based on the review of international literature and the study of the particular focus on Pakistan and Global South, this review summarizes key theoretical insights, research results, and unresolved contradictions to warrant the qualitative study of silent exclusion in Pakistani primary and secondary schools.

### **Everything Inclusion Not Physical Placement**

The initial inclusion education studies concentrated on access and placement by laying stress on eliminating segregative school education systems (Ainscow, 2005). This focus is later criticized in other areas of scholarship, which argue that inclusion has to be comprehended through the lens of participation, recognition, and belonging (Florian, 2019; Messiou, 2017). Research shows that students with disabilities can be physically there but they are not getting anything substantive in terms of learning and socializing (Slee, 2011). This change of focus draws attention to the necessity to study the inclusion implementation in the daily life in the classroom rather than presuppose it by compliance with policies.

### **The Silent Exclusion and the Hidden Curriculum**

The hidden curriculum has also been adopted and utilized extensively to comprehend how the expectation, norms, and routines affect the experience of students, which are unwritten (Jackson, 1990; Allan, 2008). It has been indicated that the process of silent exclusion frequently works based on normalized practices including selective participation, varied expectations, and traces of space planning (Bourdieu, 1990; Tomlinson, 2017). These are seldom described as exclusionary but they are systematic ways of disadvantaging students with disabilities. Research underlines that silent exclusion is especially hard to job since it is part of everyday school culture and occupational general sense.

Defining the rights to participate, vote, and remain marginalized in the political sphere is crucial.

### **Participation, Voice, and Marginalization**

The importance of inclusive education emphasizes the role of student voice, agency, and interaction in participation structures (Booth and Ainscow, 2011; Messiou, 2012). According to the empirical research, it has been found that students with disabilities are not usually involved in the classroom discussion, group activity, or decision making even though they are physically present (Graham and Slee, 2008). Poor chances of participation lead to social isolation and low levels of academic participation. Such results highlight the importance of presence and participation as one important aspect of inclusive schooling.

### **Teacher Expectations and Deficit Discourses**

The key factor in inclusive practices is teacher expectations. It has been shown that decreased classroom expectations of students with disabilities are factors that lead to the limited access to high-level curriculum material (Norwich, 2013; Florian and Black-Hawkins, 2011). Deficit-based discourses can contribute to teachers justifying the exclusionary practices as protection or support (Allan, 2008). Such rationalizations make marginalization an accepted norm and soften its estrangement impact and support the unspoken marginalization in inclusive classrooms.

### **Geographical and Organizational Aspects of Exclusion**

Inclusion and exclusion has also been shown to be replicated and reflected in spatial arrangements in schools, i.e., seating, classification in the classroom and access to common space (Gulson & Symes, 2007). Research indicates that disabled children are usually sidelined in the classrooms or locked out of other informal areas in schools (Slee, 2011). Membership practices such as schedule arrangements and absence to seek support might also restrict membership and maintain a pretense of inclusion.

### **Pakistani and Global South Situation**

The Global South research highlights that the resource scarcity, exam-driven system, and deep-rooted hierarchy are among the defining factors of inclusive education (Miles and Singal, 2010; Grech, 2011). In inclusive education studies in Pakistan, teacher training, curriculum rigidity, social stigma are the issues that emerge (Singal, 2008; Ehsan, 2018). Nevertheless, not many studies focus on the workings of silent exclusion in day to day school experiences. The lack signifies a serious gap in the knowledge relating to inclusion other than policy enactment in Pakistan.

### **Synthesis and Research Gap**

There are six mutually interrelated themes across the literature reviewed, namely: (a) constraints of placement-based inclusion, (b) hidden curriculum as a place of exclusion, (c) participation vs. presence, (d) normalization of deficit discourses, (e) spatial and organizational marginalization and (f) limitation of qualitative research on Pakistan itself. Although literature in the international scholarship has witnessed silent exclusion, little empirical studies had been carried out to investigate such processes in Pakistani schools. This gap is filled by the current research work that qualitatively investigates the everyday practices that exclude students with disabilities in Pakistani inclusive schools.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### **Methodological Approach**

The research was on silent exclusion in inclusive primary and secondary schools in Pakistan in terms of routine exclusion where students with disabilities are sidelined despite being formally included. The research problem was rooted in the lack of correspondence between policy pledges of inclusion and actual lives of students of inclusion. The experimental method used in the research was a qualitative, interpretive research method because it was used to study low profile practices that are normalized and in most cases, invisible in institutional practices. The study used primary data and adhered to descriptive and exploratory research design which allowed exploring the issue of the creation of exclusion in the social life in an in-depth manner with references to daily interactions, expectations, and organizational practices. The qualitative approach was chosen as it has the ability to reveal meanings, interpretations, and taken-granted norms that form the inclusive schooling (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

#### **Data Collection Methods**

Data was sampled on public and private inclusive primary and secondary schools in Punjab, Sindh, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, which constitute different institutional and socio-cultural environments. The sample was comprised of [about 30-45] teachers and school administrators in contact with inclusive schooling. The sampling method used was purposive in which individuals who have experience in inclusive classrooms and school leadership over a long period were identified. The semi-structured interviews were used in terms of data collection and the aspects targeted classroom routines, practices of participation, expectations, spatial layouts, and the process of making decisions. Participants also gave reflective descriptions of the everyday school practices where possible. Informed consent, confidentiality and voluntary participation were ensured and ethical approval was sought during the study.

#### **Data Analysis Methods**

The audio-recorded interview data was transcribed directly and analyzed with the help of thematic analysis. The analysis was conducted in the six-phase framework described by Braun and Clarke (2006) and started with familiarization and preliminary coding, then on to theme development and refinement. Coding was centered on everyday activities, participation style, spatial arrangement and enslaved anticipations on students with disabilities. Data was analyzed using qualitative data analysis software (e.g., NVivo) to control and systematize data. Constant comparison made across participants and reflexive memo writing was also used to advance analytical rigor to record interpretive decisions.

### **Methodology Assessment and justification**

The qualitative interpretive method was suitable in researching the apparently insidious and normalized types of exclusion that cannot be identified easily using quantitative data. The semi-structured interviews also enabled the participants to look back upon the routine practice that is commonly overlooked in practice. Teachers and administrators were included, which allowed the triangulation of the perspectives and enhanced credibility. The weaknesses are associated with using self-reported descriptions and the lack of systematic classroom observations that could have been done to gain a deeper understanding of practices implemented. Special probing, comparison of cross participants and reflexive analysis was used to solve these limitations. Irrespective of these limitations, the approach provides a solid methodology of delving into the topic of silent exclusion in inclusive Pakistani schools.

### **RESULTS**

It is a section in which the findings are provided through semi structured interviews with both teachers and school administrators in the inclusive primary and secondary schools in Pakistan. The findings are centered around the daily activities that lead to quiet marginalization of students with disabilities and grouped into major themes that were common among participants and school settings.

#### **Limited Participation in Classrooms**

The respondents indicated that students having disability were not always present in the classrooms but often participated less in the academic discourse, group discussions, and classroom questioning. Educators explained that they call on these students less frequently or choose to give them only peripheral responsibilities and work in groups. These were denoted as commonplace classroom management techniques and were not officially considered as exclusionary. The limited participation was also observed on the subjects and grades.

#### **Reduced Academic Expectations**

Educators claimed that they had lower academic expectations of students with disabilities especially those subjects that are examination oriented. Participants indicated the process of simplifying things, lessening curriculum expectations, or absolving students of some learning activities. These modifications were usually explained as supportive ones but led to a low level of access to difficult academic material. Reduced expectations were also reported in both the public and the private schools.

#### **Geographical Disenfranchisement in School**

The respondents cited spatial practices that have placed the students with disabilities at the peripheries of the classrooms and the school premises. Some of them involved sitting students in the back of the classrooms, in a fixed position, or restricting their movements during the activities. Administrators pointed out that they were regularly arranged due to convenience or order but not to be intentionally excluded. These spatial patterns were normalized and could hardly be doubted.

#### **Selective Inclusion in School life**

It was reported by the teachers and administrators that the students with disabilities were selectively involved in academic, extracurricular, and social activities. The participants wrote about how they have left out students in some type of events, competitions, or group activities based on their assumptions on ability,

safety, or performance results. These were usually made with informality and were not reflected as exclusionary practices. Participants diploidly explained that exclusionary practices are part and parcel of school operations. According to teachers, the practice was not often addressed during staff meetings or professional development programs. Administrators observed that quality of compliance to requirements of inclusive policy was often measured in terms of enrollment as opposed to participation. This invisibility contributed towards the invisibility of exclusion in inclusive schools.

### **Limitations Noticed in the Data**

Many limitations should be viewed with respect to the results. It was based on self reporting data, and could be due to the subjective view of the participants instead of actual observation. Observations in the classroom and in schools were not made, so the observed practices could not be possible to verify. Also, the qualitative sample does not allow generalizing outside of similar situations. These restrictions are accepted without interpretation and are discussed in more detail in the Discussion section.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Summary of Major Findings**

This paper analyzed the impact of silent exclusion in including primary and secondary schools within Pakistan by looking at the practice in everyday situations involving marginalization of students with disabilities. The results portray limited classroom engagement, reduced educational anticipations, spatial marginalization, choosy inclusion in the school undertakings, and normalization of exclusionary practices. These occurred practices took place in the formally inclusive environments and could hardly be recognized as exclusionary by school staffing. The results show how exclusion is perpetuated by routine and taken-for-granted practice instead of open segregation.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

The findings indicate that silent exclusion takes place via implicit curriculum of inclusive schools, which influences how students come to feel interested and feel included to participate. Limited involvement and reduced expectations are manifestations of unspoken assumptions regarding ability which play a role in the instructional choices. Spatial marginalization and selective inclusion also enhance a sense of boundaries among included and fully participating students. These practices mean that inclusion is taken to literally mean physical presence and not more meaningful interaction thus the new practice does not eradicate exclusion but instead it is covertly practiced within the inclusive environment.

### **Relation to the Current Literature**

These are consistent with the critical field of inclusive education scholarship that draws the difference between presence and participation (Slee, 2011; Florian, 2019). The literature on hidden curriculum also focuses on the reproduction of exclusion through everyday routines without any deliberate effort being made (Allan, 2008; Jackson, 1990). The decreased expectations and deficit discourses are reported as the strategies which limit the access of learning by students with disabilities (Norwich, 2013; Florian and Black-Hawkins, 2011). This study presents the Global South views on culture important to the enactment of silent exclusion and inclusion policies in a Pakistani school by contextualizing this idea in the context of Pakistani schools (Singal, 2008; Grech, 2011).



### **Limitations of the Study**

There are various drawbacks that need to be considered. The research was based on self-reported data of teachers and administrators, which are not necessarily repetitive of enacted practices. There is no actual classroom observation which reduces the opportunity to learn about real-time interactions. Also, the participants were used to represent different school settings, whereas the qualitative sample is limited in generalization. These weaknesses imply that future studies based on ethnography and participatory-based research approaches are possible.

### **Empirical and Conceptual Implications**

Theoretically, this research paper adds to the inclusivity education research as it predicts the silent exclusion as a structural and cultural phenomenon, but not as an individual failure. In practice, the results emphasize the necessity of professional development with regards to hidden curriculum, participation and setting expectations. Policies on inclusive education in Pakistan cannot remain within the enrollment measures, they should introduce meaningful participation and learning. School leaders are important in confronting normalized exclusionary practices.

### **Alternative Explanations**

Another possible explanation of silent exclusion is that there is a larger systemic pressure with large classes, examination requirements and resource requirements as opposed to intentional marginalization. The disparity in the teacher preparation and the leadership practice can also have an impact on the level of exclusion. Such possibilities indicate that silent exclusion is generated as a result of overlapping institutional processes. To revise the research question- how does everyday school practice within inclusive Pakistani schools reproduce the insidious form of exclusion of students with disabilities?- the results reveal that the patterns of participation (including the usual patterns of expected participation), expectations, and spatial forms of exclusion exist as a cultural norm. The paper has also validated that the inclusion education must be addressed by giving focus to those small and normal processes which weaken meaningful inclusion.

### **CONCLUSION**

This research project was aimed at investigating silent exclusion in inclusive primary and secondary schools in Pakistan, based on the daily activities that disenfranchise students with disabilities even with the formal inclusion. The study dealt with the fact that meaningful inclusion is synonymous with the physical placement in mainstream schools. Restating the main idea of the study, the results prove that exclusion is maintained due to the everyday classroom routine, lowered expectations, and space organization which still remain a taboo topic in institutional frames.

The most important results include the fact that limited involvement, selective inclusion and assumptions of normality of deficit subdued access to learning and belonging among students. The findings can add to the body of scholarship of inclusive education because they start focusing on the experiences of participation rather than the policy guidelines. Returning to the introduction, the study highlights that inclusion should be defined as a process of relations and practice not as the product of a placement.

This study is significant because of what it suggests to the inclusive policy, professional growth, and leadership in schools in Pakistan. Silent exclusion through the prism of hidden curricula, expectation-setting, and participation structures not only should be addressed critically but is a must. Student voice and

observation techniques should be integrated into future studies to shed more light on the day-to-day inclusion and exclusion in more detail.

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