

Inclusive Education Implementation and Leaders Role: Evidence from University

Context

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Abstract



This research paper examines the leaders' role in implementing the inclusive education in university context. To perform this qualitative study, the researcher used descriptive research. The study's participants include ten heads of departments from public and private universities of Lahore. The researchers selected the participants using a convenient sampling approach. The researchers employed a semi-structured interview approach for this qualitative investigation. Thematic analysis was done to analyze the interview data. Data gathered through semi-structured interviews yielded four primary themes and several sub-themes, including the current state of inclusive education implementation, how leaders can improve inclusive education, factors that help university leaders in implementing the inclusive education, and the hurdles that leaders confront with to implement Inclusive education at university level. Data shows that university heads of departments actively promote inclusive education by enrolling students with special needs. They focus on leadership tactics and particular actions to promote inclusion. Additionally, they spoke about the resources as well as the sensitivity about inclusion that helps a lot in the successful integration of IE in their departments. However, problems such as insufficient resources, poor infrastructure, cultural hurdles, low knowledge, and insensitivity impede the successful implementation of inclusive education. Addressing these problems is critical to improve inclusive education in higher education settings.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Head of Department as Leaders, University Level

Introduction

Education is vital to country growth and transformation. It must suit the demands of every person. Education is considered a key indication of social and economic progress, as well as national advancement (Kazimi, 2021). All the students, irrespective of financial status, gender, caste, class, or disability, should be able to access inclusive education (Sharma, 2019).

Education is impacted by a variety of social, economic, and environmental variables, not merely access to institutes. Equity in education refers to the dedication of the regular or public educational system to social justice. Inclusive education for kids with impairments is becoming more significant in today's society. To attain this aim, we must investigate disability using a social model based on ability and access. By doing so, we can change the narrative and support special education approaches that prioritize alternative pedagogy and programming. Rather than perceiving impairment as a weakness, we should consider it as a distinction that necessitates a different approach to the way students are educated. This strategy will allow educators to focus on providing access to curriculum and fostering the achievement of all students, regardless of disability (Tonegawa, 2023).

Education accounts for a small percentage of society. Education is being utilized as a coercive tool to maintain the powerful in command of the people. Being barred from an institution or attending a poor and separate school, whether due to ethnic origin, race, or language, can increase socioeconomic barriers. Societal barriers can impede access to public spaces, employment, healthcare, civic engagement, and education. Exclusion perpetuates stereotypes and exacerbates inequality. The same forces have affected the march towards educational fairness for individuals with impairments (Kirby, 2017).

Inclusive education is viewed as a continuous activity and a style of thinking that presents challenges in every situation when someone is excluded (Mohammad Amin Dar et al, 2022). Inclusion is well-defined as the process of identifying and reacting to each student's unique needs by increasing participation in educational institutions, communities, and cultures while reducing exclusion from and within education. It entails additions and adjustments to content, methodology, construction supplies, and strategies, all with a shared purpose including all kids of the appropriate age group and the premise that the conventional system must give a great education to all students (Stadler-Heer, Inclusion, 2019). Many people believe that disability should be considered as simply one component of the practically endless diversity of human life, alongside features such as sexual orientation, gender identity, and religious affiliation. This position represents the majority opinion on inclusive education (Felder, 2019).

Teachers play an important role in promoting a fair educational setting and atmosphere by considering ways to remove barriers to academic achievement so that every learner feels valued and at home (Mugambi, 2017).

The goal of equitable education in these contexts, which falls within the scope of the UN's campaign for "Education for All," is to promote the engagement and learning among learners who are at danger of discrimination within the present educational structures (Kugelmass, 2003).

In Pakistan, the educational system's strategy for accommodating pupils with moderate to severe impairments prefers separate schooling over inclusive or integrated education. This indicates that education ought to be accessible to all, including those with disabilities, and that efforts should be made to create an environment in which every person may learn and succeed. By stressing inclusive education, we may contribute to a more just and fair society (Munir, 2020). Pakistan seeks to provide excellent educational opportunities for all, eliminating possible learning barriers for varied learners (Kazimi, 2021).

As mentioned in the SDGs, education of students who have disabilities has grown into a critical concern in academic circles all around the world (Sajjad Hussain et al, 2020). The Sustainable Development Goals, also referred to as the SDGs feature equitable educational opportunity, which has emerged as a critical component in global education policy. Since SDG 4—"Make certain high-quality education that is attainable to all and promote continuous opportunities for learning for all"—emphasizes inequitable education as its most basic nature, Pakistan, as an adherent to SDGs 2030, is committing to IE. Corresponding provincial education acts and legislation comply with the constitutional criteria that all state entities must satisfy. A "disadvantaged" child is described as a youngster from a socially or economically impoverished class or group, or whose parents' annual income falls below a specified level (Munir, 2020). Pakistan's administration is committed to meeting the needs of all learners without unfair treatment and will keep amending its policies and programs in order to accomplish its goal of incorporating all children with moderate disabilities of any kind into the country's commonplace institutions of learning at all stages of education (Fazal, 2012). In the 1980s and 1990s, the UN inspected Pakistan and other sponsor countries to ensure that issues affecting individuals with disabilities were given special attention (Itfaq Khaliq Khan, 2017). A National Plan of Action (NPA) was developed at the state level in 2006 to guarantee that this course of action is properly implemented and translated (Bano, 2023).

The education system contributes significantly to a country's growth. boosting the quality and effectiveness of the educational system is vital to meeting national development goals, boosting human resource quality, and developing a quality society. Educational supervision and direction are gaining more focus to improve education quality (Ali Mustopa Yakub Simbolon, 2022). Strong leadership may also promote a favorable learning atmosphere, enhance student participation, and inspire innovation and positive developments in educational institutions (Sumarni, 2023). An inclusive education system emphasizes and promotes flexibility in the system, curricula, and processes so that all children's learning needs may be satisfied, rather than focusing solely on the individual student (Basit, 2022). Previous studies suggest that to successfully implement inclusive education, leaders must have a positive attitude towards inclusion and disability, among other conditions. However, in many cases, they continue to retain negative attitudes (Lewin, 2019).

Research Objectives

The paper is focused to:

1. Examine the status of inclusive education implementation in universities.

2. Identify inclusive education implementation strategies.
3. Explore the factors that support university leaders to implement the inclusive education.
4. Investigate the challenges that university leaders face to implement the inclusive education.

Methodology

To perform this qualitative study, the researcher used descriptive technique. The major focus of this interpretive study was to acquire and understand the participants' essential experiences. The study's participants include ten heads of departments from public and private universities of Lahore. The researchers selected the individuals using a convenient sampling approach. The researchers employed a semi-structured interview approach to generate data. The study data was gathered through in-person interviews. Thematic analysis was done to analyze the interview data to identify similarities that leads to discover themes. Before conducting an interview, the researchers contacted the respondents to handover an informed consent request form and interview methodology. Research ethics were properly observed to execute this study.

Data Presentation and Findings

The data presentation and themes are organized under the four main categories that were the study aims. To avoid repetition and unnecessary content only themes derived from the qualitative data and the supportive qualitative data are presented in the following section.

Status of Inclusive Education Implementation in Universities

In Pakistan, the notion of equitable education is not new; it is featured in a number of policy documents over the previous few decades. Pakistan strives to provide good educational opportunities for everybody while addressing potential learning hurdles for diverse learners (Kazimi, 2021).

Conduct Orientations

"Initially, we do have orientations soon following their admittance to make students aware with inclusive education practices" (R1).

Inclusive Education Society

"We have formed an organization in our department called the Inclusive Education Society" (R1).

Disability Coordinators

"There are male and female disability coordinators here" (R1).

Online Courses

"Universities are offering courses via online learning" (R2).

Smart Classrooms and Labs

"We offer online learning which serve all type of student and address the needs of diverse students. Virtual education helps in fulfilling inclusive education needs" (R6).

Free of Cost Education and Residence

"Our institution offers all the accommodations needed for impaired students, including free education and housing if needed" (R7).

New Scheme of Studies

We developed a new curriculum this year, in autumn 2023, for the B.Ed. Hons., B.Ed. 1.5, and B.Ed. 2.5 programs. As part of this curriculum, we made it mandatory for students enrolled in the B.Ed. 1.5, 2.5, or 4-year programs to complete at least two certificates, either for mentally retarded or physically handicapped students. For example, Braille and sign lanuse has become a requirement for them (R2).

Follows HEC Policy

"University in true letter and spirit ensures the compliance of higher education policy for students with special needs" (R6).

Inclusive Education Implementation Strategies

To successfully implement inclusive education, leaders must have a positive attitude towards inclusion and disability, among other conditions. However, in many cases, they continue to retain negative attitudes.

Creating Empathetic Environment

"To foster a sense of belonging and reverence throughout every component of the higher education, as an academics in higher education we are aiming to develop a welcoming and develop culture that respect everyone" (R6).

Teacher’s Training

“Leaders and their academics in higher education need to develop themselves through professional development trainings” (R4).

Student-Teacher Liaisons

“We are focusing a lot on learners-educator’s connection” (R4).

Universal Design for Learning

“Our objective is to provide teachers and staff workers with comprehensive instruction and assistance so that they may adopt inclusive education techniques with the expertise and skills they require” (R4).

Material Provision

“We ensure that everything needed is readily accessible before class time” (R8).

Resource Allocation

“Supporting inclusive education programs needs a proper allocation of assets, including funds, personnel, technological aids, and accessible structures” (R7).

Workshops and Seminars

“We occasionally offer workshops, seminars, and public awareness events on inclusive education” (R9).

Celebrating Days

“We commemorate our days with enthusiasm” (R2).

Factors that support University Leaders to Implement the Inclusive Education

Integration of technology, accessibility in buildings, labs and offices, human capital and financial capital, teacher training, an inclusive environment, a sympathetic atmosphere, awareness campaigns, conferences, and seminars all contribute to the institutes' successful incorporation of IE.

Technology Integration

“It's hard to include such students without utilizing technology” (R1).

Financial Resources

“The financial assistance is clearly from the Higher Education Commission sector. They do not need to shell out anything” (R4).

Workshops and Seminars

“Workshops and seminars on inclusive education help professionals create more all-encompassing and empathy learning environments” (R8).

Teacher’s Training

“Training workshops allow professors to deliver their courses more effectively” (R10).

Creating Inclusive Environment

“Furthermore, if you build an inclusive atmosphere, eventually things become more pleasant and better” (R7).

Awareness campaigns

“We conduct awareness proposals” (R3).

Accessible Infrastructure

“Ramps, lifts, large doors and allocated parking spots are some of the features that make university facilities readily accessible for students with mobility limitations” (R6).

Challenges that University Leaders Face to Implement the Inclusive Education

The most major benefit associated with inclusive classrooms is that they encourage polite discussion about differences and acceptance among children with different needs, abilities, and cultural backgrounds. Despite the benefits, there are still several barriers to establishing inclusive education (Sankar, 2017).

Inappropriate Infrastructure

“Infrastructure is an issue” (R1); “The lift is not operating” (R4).

Cultural and Attitudinal Barriers

“It is challenging to overcome attitude barriers and build an open and tolerant atmosphere in institutions” (R7).

Student’s Non-Serious Behavior

“Teachers have issues due to their behaviors” (R2).

Fear of Authority rather than Rules

“We dread authority more than we do rules and laws” (R3).

Teacher’s Unserious Behavior Towards Training

“Some instructors will not decide to attend for training like inclusion” (R3).

Limited Resources

“If manpower, finances and professional development opportunities are limited and not uniformly distributed create additional challenge” (R9).

Unwillingness of Stakeholders

“A big problem that is reluctance of leaders, academic unions, social leaders and faculty members who have been practicing through traditional techniques, which actually hinders” (R 9).

Improper Planning

“Insufficient preparation hinders to properly implement education that caters the diverse community of students through creating hurdles for effective assessment, cooperation, clarity, professional development of, fair distribution of resources, and access to shares resources” (R7).

Untrained Staff

“We can observe when untrained employees have to deal with pupils from varied backgrounds without the necessary tools and assistance, they easily become upset or stressed out” (R5).

Discussion

Educational leadership is risky in determining the trajectory and vision of educational institutions (Yunita, 2023). An excellent schooling and success leader may motivate, mobilize, encourage and inspire teachers, educational personnel, and pupils to meet educational goals (Arif Fiandi, 2023). To successfully implement inclusive education, leaders must have a favorable attitude towards inclusion and disability, among other factors. However, in many circumstances, they maintain unfavorable opinions. According to the results obtained from this study, the majority of department heads faced similar challenges when implementing inclusive education, such as poor infrastructure, inadequate human and financial capital, planning is poor, untrained employees, attitudes issues, stakeholder are not willing, no education about inclusion, and teacher irresponsible attitude. Strong leadership may also promote a favorable learning atmosphere, enhance students’ role, and inspire creativity and positive developments in institutions of higher education (Sumarni, 2023). In line with earlier research on this subject, a number of public universities are creating new programs in response to perceived market demands. In some cases, these programs are available to diverse students over weekends, in evening, or through virtual mode in an effort to reduce the administrative costs associated with offering in-depth, in-person training while also increasing student accessibility (Lewin, 2019).

Similar to previous research findings, it concludes that inclusion and inclusivity are becoming catchy ideas instead these should be practiced to offer justice in society and provide education as a fundamental right of a human. It is an appellation to take action on the day to celebrate inclusion in all its manifestations while not exploiting children with special needs.

Institutions urgently need to change their current policies, which emphasize individualizations, in order to better serve students. Such choices ought to be made "case-by-case" and examined by a group of interested parties from the university community. While making placement decisions, efforts should be made to periodically involve parents, psychologists, and mainstream instructors. Second, in institutes that houses with disabilities, special support services like special needs assistants and coordinators ought to be a regular feature of special service units. Thirdly, all employees—administrators and professors included—should take part in ongoing programs for professional development that address inclusive education, special education requirements, and pedagogy (Hameed, 2021). Pakistan is working to improve the standard of inclusive education in the country, but a lot of work and efforts are required in policies and laws regarding development, social awareness, community involvement, school ethos, assistance with the educational and professional development of both prospective and in-service educators, adequate assessment procedures, and an integrated curriculum. These domains are very critical for the achievement of inclusive education (Saima Hanif, 2022).

Conclusion

Successful integration of inclusive education at the university level is critical for creating a learning environment which caters students with different needs, develops equality, and make sure that all

individuals should have similar chance to excel. We have talked about a variety of issues in this chat, including the guiding principles and definition, challenges faced, and workable methods to education for inclusivity. The notion education for inclusivity is for more than just offering spaces as needed by constitution. It shows a commitment to creating classrooms that are friendly, encouraging, and responsive to the diverse needs of youths. Primarily, education for inclusivity seeks to rectify barriers to involve all and learn through accepting individuals unique potentials.

Acceptance of variety in all of its forms is a fundamental concept of inclusive education. This includes variety in learning methods, abilities, and backgrounds, as well as diversity in terms of race, ethnicity, and gender orientation.

Each student is unique and may require different types of assistance to flourish academically and psychologically. However, it is difficult to put inclusive learning into practice. Universities must cope with issues such as limited funds, resistance from instructors, ignorance, and institutional barriers. Furthermore, making the mental and cultural shifts required to establish truly inclusive educational settings can take time and effort. However, there are various strategies that academic institutions may employ to promote inclusive education. These include fostering a pleasant atmosphere, producing adaptive curricula, providing aid and training to professors, promoting cooperation and working together, and advocating for increased funding and legislative reforms.

Universities may create learning environments in which all students feel valued, appreciated, and prepared to prosper by adopting inclusivity fully and proactively. Department heads play critical roles in advancing inclusive education in their respective divisions and across the institution. They have the capacity and influence to help academics and staff implement inclusive education programs, champion inclusion, and advocate for legislation and processes that enhance equality and accessibility.

To summarize, the pursuit of inclusive education is an ongoing process that requires the collaborative efforts of academic administrators, teachers, staff, students, and community partners. Universities may create learning environments that reflect the world's rich variety and allow every student to reach their full potential by partnering and adhering to the ideals of inclusion. Rather than a destination, inclusive education is a continuous process of development and change that benefits individuals and strengthens society as a whole.

Recommendations

It is proposed that the department head need to set a positive example by promoting diversity within their department. Leaders should aggressively encourage teachers to participate in training and professional development activities so that they may have a better understanding of inclusive teaching approaches and how to accommodate learners with diverse needs. Universities need to ensure that all students have exposure to departmental resources, including facilities, technology, and course materials. University management should facilities in removing any barriers that students face to access resources.

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