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## Teachers' Attitudes toward the Inclusion of Autistic Children in Primary Mainstream Schools in Lahore

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### ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores teachers' attitudes toward the inclusion of autistic children in primary mainstream schools in Lahore. Using a descriptive exploratory design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 43 primary school teachers and head teachers. The findings indicate that teachers generally support inclusive education at a conceptual level and recognize the social and moral value of educating autistic children alongside their peers. However, this positive disposition is often constrained by practical challenges, including limited professional training, large class sizes, inadequate resources, and weak institutional support. Teachers' confidence and willingness to implement inclusive practices were found to be closely linked to their knowledge of autism and the availability of administrative and professional support. The study highlights a clear gap between inclusive education policies and classroom realities, emphasizing the need for targeted training and systemic support to ensure effective inclusion.

**Keywords:** Inclusive Education, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Teachers' Attitudes, Primary Mainstream Schools, Lahore

### Introduction

Inclusive education has increasingly become a central focus of global and national education agendas, emphasizing the right of all children, including those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), to access quality education within mainstream school settings. Autism spectrum disorder is a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by differences in social communication, behavior, and sensory processing, which can influence a child's learning experiences in traditional classrooms (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). In primary education, early inclusion of autistic children is particularly significant, as it lays the foundation for their academic development, social



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integration, and long-term participation in society.

Teachers' attitudes play a pivotal role in the successful implementation of inclusive education. Positive attitudes are often associated with higher levels of acceptance, adaptive teaching practices, and a willingness to accommodate diverse learning needs, whereas negative or uncertain attitudes may act as barriers to effective inclusion (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). In mainstream primary schools, teachers are not only responsible for delivering curriculum content but also for creating supportive classroom environments that foster participation, peer interaction, and emotional well-being for autistic children. Their beliefs, perceptions, and confidence levels directly influence instructional strategies, classroom management, and collaboration with parents and support professionals.

In the context of Pakistan, and particularly in a large metropolitan city like Lahore, inclusive education is still evolving. Although national policies and international commitments advocate for the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools, practical implementation remains inconsistent due to limited resources, insufficient teacher training, large class sizes, and sociocultural misconceptions surrounding disability (Government of Pakistan, 2017; UNESCO, 2020). Teachers in primary mainstream schools often face challenges in addressing the specific needs of autistic children without adequate professional development or institutional support. These challenges can significantly shape their attitudes toward inclusion, either reinforcing apprehension or encouraging positive engagement depending on the level of support available.

Understanding teachers' attitudes toward the inclusion of autistic children in primary mainstream schools in Lahore is therefore essential. Such understanding can help identify existing strengths, gaps in knowledge and training, and contextual factors that influence teachers' perceptions. Examining these attitudes contributes to evidence-based policy formulation, targeted teacher training programs, and the development of supportive school environments that promote meaningful inclusion. Ultimately, fostering positive teacher attitudes is a key step toward ensuring equitable educational opportunities for autistic children and advancing inclusive education practices within Pakistan's primary school system.

### **Significance of the study**

Teachers' attitudes are crucial for the successful inclusion of autistic children in primary mainstream schools, as they directly influence classroom practices, acceptance, and learning outcomes. While inclusive education is emphasized in national policies, there is limited empirical evidence in Pakistan, particularly in Lahore, that specifically examines teachers' attitudes toward autism inclusion at the primary level. Most existing studies focus on inclusive education in general or on other disabilities, leaving a gap in understanding autism-specific challenges, training needs, and contextual factors affecting teachers' perceptions. Addressing this gap is essential to inform targeted teacher training, policy implementation, and effective inclusive practices in mainstream primary schools.

### **Objectives of the Study**

- To assess teachers' attitudes toward including autistic children in primary mainstream schools in Lahore.
- To identify challenges faced by teachers in inclusive primary classrooms.
- To examine teachers' knowledge and preparedness for autism inclusion.
- To analyze the influence of training and institutional support on teachers' attitudes.



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### Literature Review

Inclusive education advocates the education of children with disabilities, including autism spectrum disorder (ASD), within mainstream school settings alongside their peers. Autism spectrum disorder is a neurodevelopmental condition marked by persistent challenges in social communication, interaction, and restricted or repetitive patterns of behavior, which can affect learning and classroom participation (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The inclusion of autistic children in primary mainstream schools is particularly important because early schooling plays a critical role in shaping academic foundations, social development, and long-term educational outcomes.

Teachers' attitudes are widely recognized as a decisive factor in the success or failure of inclusive education. Attitudes influence teachers' willingness to accept autistic children, adapt teaching strategies, and create supportive classroom environments. Research consistently demonstrates that positive teacher attitudes are associated with effective inclusive practices, while negative attitudes can lead to exclusion, low expectations, and limited participation of children with disabilities (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). In primary school contexts, where teachers manage diverse learning needs within structured curricula, attitudes become even more influential.

Several international studies have examined teachers' attitudes toward the inclusion of autistic children. De Boer, Pijl, and Minnaert (2011) found that while many teachers support inclusion in principle, their attitudes become less positive when faced with practical classroom demands, particularly behavioral challenges and curriculum adaptation. Teachers often express concerns about managing disruptive behaviors, addressing communication difficulties, and balancing the needs of autistic children with those of typically developing students. These concerns are especially pronounced in primary classrooms with large class sizes and limited support services.

Perceived challenges play a significant role in shaping teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. Emam and Farrell (2009) reported that teachers frequently experience stress and uncertainty when teaching autistic children in mainstream settings, largely due to insufficient training and lack of specialist support. Challenges such as limited time, inadequate teaching materials, and absence of multidisciplinary collaboration contribute to feelings of unpreparedness. When such challenges remain unaddressed, teachers may develop resistant or negative attitudes toward inclusive education.

Teachers' knowledge and preparedness are strongly linked to their attitudes toward autism inclusion. Studies show that teachers with a better understanding of autism characteristics and inclusive teaching strategies exhibit higher confidence and more positive perceptions toward inclusion (Syriopoulou-Delli, Cassimos, Tripsianis, & Polychronopoulou, 2012). Conversely, limited knowledge about autism often leads to fear of failure, misconceptions, and reliance on exclusionary practices. Teacher education and professional development programs that focus on autism awareness and inclusive pedagogy have been shown to significantly improve attitudes and self-efficacy (Sharma & Sokal, 2016).

Institutional and administrative support further influences teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. Supportive school leadership, access to special educators, availability of teaching resources, and ongoing professional development encourage teachers to adopt inclusive practices (Loreman, Deppeler, & Harvey, 2010). Ainscow (2015) emphasizes that inclusion is not solely a teacher responsibility but a systemic process requiring coordinated support at policy, school, and classroom levels. When teachers perceive strong institutional backing, they are more likely to hold positive attitudes toward including autistic children.



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Gender differences in teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education have been explored, though findings remain inconsistent. Some studies suggest that female teachers demonstrate more favorable attitudes toward inclusion and greater empathy toward students with special needs (Avramidis & Kalyva, 2007). Other studies, however, report minimal or no significant gender differences, indicating that training and experience may outweigh gender as determinants of attitude (De Boer et al., 2011). These mixed findings highlight the need for context-specific research to better understand gender-based variations in teachers' perceptions.

In Pakistan, inclusive education has gained policy-level attention, particularly through commitments to international frameworks such as the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. However, implementation remains uneven. Teachers in mainstream schools often face overcrowded classrooms, limited training opportunities, and scarce resources, which negatively affect their readiness to include autistic children (Government of Pakistan, 2017). Existing research in Pakistan largely addresses inclusive education broadly, with limited focus on autism-specific inclusion and teachers' attitudes at the primary level, especially in urban contexts like Lahore (UNESCO, 2020).

The literature reveals a clear gap in empirical, autism-focused research examining teachers' attitudes in Pakistani primary mainstream schools. There is limited evidence on how teachers' attitudes are shaped by challenges, preparedness, institutional support, and gender differences within this context. Addressing this gap is essential to inform teacher training programs, strengthen inclusive policies, and promote effective inclusion of autistic children in primary mainstream schools in Lahore.

### **Material and Methods**

This study adopted a qualitative research approach using a descriptive exploratory study design to examine teachers' attitudes toward the inclusion of autistic children in primary mainstream schools in Lahore. The study population comprised primary school teachers and head teachers working in mainstream schools. Schools were selected purposively, and a convenience sampling technique was employed based on accessibility and participants' willingness to take part in the study. A total of 43 participants were included in the study.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted with teachers and head teachers from different areas of Lahore to capture diverse perspectives. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, allowing for the identification and interpretation of key themes related to teachers' attitudes, challenges, preparedness, and institutional support for the inclusion of autistic children in primary mainstream school settings.

### **Results and Discussion**

Concerning teachers' attitudes toward the inclusion of autistic children in primary mainstream schools in Lahore, the findings of the study revealed a generally positive disposition toward inclusion at the conceptual level; however, this positivity was often accompanied by practical concerns. Most participants expressed agreement with the idea that autistic children have the right to be educated in mainstream classrooms and acknowledged the social and moral value of inclusive education. Teachers reported that inclusion promotes social interaction, peer learning, and acceptance among students. At the same time, many participants emphasized that their positive attitudes were conditional and highly dependent on the availability of support and resources. As one



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teacher stated,

“I support inclusion, but without proper training and support, it becomes very difficult to manage autistic children along with other students in a regular classroom.”

Another participant also echoed similar concerns, stating,

“I believe inclusion is important and beneficial for autistic children, but in reality, it becomes challenging when teachers are not properly trained and there are limited resources available in the classroom. Without support, it is difficult to give equal attention to all students.”

This indicates that while inclusion is accepted in principle, its practical implementation remains challenging, a finding consistent with earlier research highlighting the gap between ideological support and classroom realities (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002).

Supporting this view, another teacher remarked,

“In theory, inclusion sounds very positive, but in actual classroom practice, it becomes difficult due to large class sizes, limited time, and the absence of trained support staff.”

Regarding challenges faced in inclusive classrooms, the results showed that teachers encountered multiple difficulties when teaching autistic children in mainstream primary settings. Commonly reported challenges included classroom management issues, behavioral concerns, communication barriers, large class sizes, and lack of individualized attention. Participants also highlighted time constraints and pressure to complete the prescribed curriculum as major obstacles.

One participant noted, “Managing an autistic child in a class of more than forty students is extremely challenging, especially when there is no assistant teacher or special educator.”

These findings suggest that structural and systemic barriers significantly influence teachers’ classroom experiences and, in turn, shape their attitudes toward inclusion. Similar challenges have been documented in previous studies, which emphasize that insufficient resources and overcrowded classrooms negatively affect inclusive practices (De Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2011). Reinforcing this concern, another participant explained,

“Even motivated teachers struggle to implement inclusive practices when there are limited resources and no specialized support available in the school.”

In terms of teachers’ knowledge and preparedness, the study revealed that most participants had limited formal training related to autism and inclusive education. While some teachers reported gaining basic awareness through workshops or personal experience, many felt inadequately prepared to address the specific learning and behavioral needs of autistic children. A head teacher remarked,

“We try our best, but most of our teachers have never received proper training about autism, so they learn through trial and error.”

This lack of preparedness often resulted in feelings of anxiety, stress, and reduced confidence among teachers. The findings align with existing literature, which indicates that teachers’ knowledge of autism and exposure to inclusive training significantly influence their confidence and attitudes toward inclusion (Syriopoulou-Delli et al., 2012). Supporting this view, one teacher noted, “When we are not properly trained, we feel unsure about our teaching methods and worry about whether we are meeting the needs of autistic students.”

Institutional and administrative support emerged as a critical theme influencing teachers’ attitudes. Participants reported limited support in terms of professional development opportunities, availability of specialized staff, and access to teaching resources. Although some schools provided informal assistance through peer collaboration or administrative



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guidance, there was no structured system to support inclusive education. One participant stated, “Our school supports inclusion morally, but there is no proper policy, no special staff, and no regular training for teachers.”

This finding suggests a lack of systematic planning and policy implementation at the school level, despite broader national commitments to inclusive education. Similar concerns have been highlighted in the Pakistani context, where inclusive education policies exist but are weakly implemented due to administrative and resource constraints (Government of Pakistan, 2017). Reflecting this gap, one head teacher commented, “Policies exist on paper, but at the school level we do not have clear guidelines or resources to implement inclusive education effectively.”

The results demonstrate that teachers in Lahore’s primary mainstream schools show a willingness to include autistic children but face substantial challenges related to training, resources, and institutional support. The discussion highlights a clear gap between inclusive education ideals and classroom realities. Addressing this gap requires targeted teacher training, structured support systems, and school-level policies to strengthen inclusive practices. These findings reinforce international evidence that successful inclusion depends not only on teachers’ attitudes but also on systemic support and effective implementation strategies (Ainscow, 2015).

### **Conclusion**

This study concludes that primary school teachers in Lahore generally hold positive attitudes toward the inclusion of autistic children in mainstream classrooms; however, these attitudes are strongly influenced by practical realities within schools. While teachers recognize the social, moral, and educational value of inclusion, their willingness to implement inclusive practices is constrained by limited training, insufficient resources, large class sizes, and weak institutional support. The findings highlight a clear gap between inclusive education policies and their implementation at the school level, indicating the need for targeted professional development, structured support systems, and effective school-level planning. Strengthening teacher training and institutional frameworks is therefore essential to translate positive attitudes into meaningful and sustainable inclusive practices for autistic children in primary mainstream schools.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that targeted in-service and pre-service training programs on autism and inclusive education be introduced for primary school teachers to enhance their knowledge, confidence, and instructional skills. Schools should establish structured institutional support systems, including the appointment of special educators, provision of assistant teachers, and access to appropriate teaching and learning resources to support inclusive classrooms. Clear school-level policies and guidelines aligned with national inclusive education frameworks should be developed to ensure consistent implementation of inclusive practices. Additionally, school administrations should promote continuous professional development, peer collaboration, and coordination with parents and relevant support services. Finally, policymakers should allocate adequate financial and infrastructural resources to mainstream schools to reduce class sizes and strengthen inclusive education practices for autistic children.

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