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The Burden of Good Intentions: How Pakistan's Private Schools Enroll Special Needs Students Without Systems of Support

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ABSTRACT
This study critically examines the dichotomy of inclusive education within Pakistan's rapidly expanding private school sector. The core argument rests on a paradox: private schools exhibit the "Good Intention" of enrolling Students with Special Needs (SWSN) as a market response to high parental demand for perceived quality. However, this enrollment is consistently decoupled from the necessary "Systems of Support" structural, financial, and pedagogical. The consequent "Burden" is the creation of a system of tokenistic inclusion, where students are physically present but functionally excluded due to the failure to provide specialized services. This failure is rooted in systemic state underinvestment, a resulting crisis of human capital (untrained teachers), and severe regulatory impotence that permits private institutions to charge exorbitant, often illegal, fees without accountability. This dynamic externalizes the entire cost and responsibility for specialized support onto vulnerable families, who are forced to rely on expensive external tuition to compensate for the school's pedagogical deficits. Policy recommendations mandate systemic regulatory reforms to link fee collection directly to verifiable resource provision, leveraging successful local case studies as the necessary benchmark for quality assurance and equity.

Keywords: *Special Education, Inclusive Education, Pakistan, Private Schools, Teacher Training, Policy Implementation, Financial Burden*.

Introduction

The Paradox of Private Sector Inclusion in Pakistan

The pursuit of inclusive education in Pakistan is mandated by international human rights commitments, yet its implementation is constrained by a fragmented and structurally complex domestic education system. This system is traditionally categorized into four distinct streams public, private, Deeni Madaris, and non-formal a heterogeneity that has historically lacked a unifying national curriculum framework and consistent quality standards (UNICEF, 2021, pp. 5–8). This structural fragmentation presents a major impediment to establishing and enforcing uniform quality standards for Students with Special Needs (SWSN) across the nation.

A foundational challenge that cripples effective systemic planning is the critical absence of reliable empirical evidence regarding the prevalence and status of persons with disabilities (PWDs) and SWSN in Pakistan (Shaukat, 2022). Historical attempts to gather data, notably in the 1998 national census, are severely outdated, and subsequent efforts have faced significant obstacles (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 1998). This regulatory and statistical impotence means that authorities are unable to accurately calculate the budgetary scale required, the necessary volume of specialized teacher training, or effectively monitor the true number of SWSN enrolled. Consequently, the high-level policy framework, despite its "Good Intention" of achieving inclusion (UNESCO, 1999), is functionally crippled at the foundational planning and oversight stage, ensuring that the gap between policy objectives and operational reality widens (Shaukat, 2022).

The private education market has expanded rapidly, fueled by intense parental demand for alternatives to the frequently perceived inadequate government school system (Das et al., 2018, pp. 1–3). Analysis suggests that private institutions offer marginal, yet measurable, advantages in preparedness for inclusion compared to public schools, particularly regarding access to resources and the likelihood of adopting formal inclusive policies (Malik & Aslam, 2018, pp. 145–146). This difference attracts parents seeking better outcomes for their children, including those with special needs. This report argues that the apparent willingness to enroll SWSN the "Good Intention" is often a strategic, transactional act of market differentiation (Khan, 2007). When this enrollment is not matched by investment in specialized support, it leads to "The Burden," transforming inclusion into a system of tokenism, where students are physically present but functionally excluded (Siddique, 2018, pp. 317–319). This paper seeks to analyze the specific regulatory, pedagogical, and financial failures that perpetuate this tokenistic inclusion.

The Architecture of Ambiguity: Policy Intent and Regulatory Gaps

Pakistan's policy documents articulate a clear intent to regulate and improve special education services. Provincial policies, such as the Punjab Special Education Policy (2020), aim to establish quality standards for all Special Education institutes and mandate the registration of all private institutes with the Special Education Department (SpED) (Punjab Government, 2020, pp. 8–15). Similarly, the Government of Sindh has prioritized the subject by giving its Special Education Department independent status (Government of Sindh, 2011), aligning its sector plan (SESP) with national and international commitments like Education for All (EFA) (Shaukat, 2022, pp. 2–3).

Despite this high-level commitment, the core systemic obstacle remains fiscal inadequacy. Although current legislation emphasizes the allocation of a special budget to address the needs of SWSN, Pakistan’s investment in this area is demonstrably insufficient when compared to other developing and developed countries (Shaukat, 2022, pp. 2–3). This lack of a "reasonable budget" reveals that special education is prioritized in rhetoric but remains fiscally marginalized. The lack of state investment means the true financial weight of inclusion is automatically transferred down the chain, first to private providers and ultimately to vulnerable families, which is the primary systemic cause of the resulting "Burden" (Shah & Hussain, 2024, pp. 120–135).

Regulatory Failure: The Policy-to-Practice Chasm

Effective governance of special education provision is undermined by monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems that are currently weak or non-existent. The Punjab policy itself outlines the need for the creation of new posts for specialist M&E inspectors at the district level, an admission that existing oversight mechanisms are insufficient to effectively monitor Special Education institutions (Punjab Government, 2020, p. 10).

This failure of oversight is most pronounced in the area of financial regulation. Regulatory bodies, such as the Private Educational Institutions Regulatory Authority (PEIRA), have attempted to cap annual fee increases, for example, limiting them to 5 to 8 per cent based on a 2017 baseline (PEIRA, 2021). However, reports confirm that private schools routinely increase fees massively and illegally, sometimes by up to 12 per cent, in blatant violation of these notifications (Chaudhry & Nisa, 2022, pp. 45–56). Compounding this issue, past efforts by parliamentary committees to address these exorbitant fees have often failed to provide lasting relief to parents (Chaudhry & Nisa, 2022, pp. 45–56). This pattern of regulatory failure regarding fees suggests a permissive environment where private operators treat regulatory non-compliance as a manageable cost of doing business, which inevitably translates into low enforcement of mandated special education support (Sarwar, 2019, pp. 90–105).

Motivations for Enrollment: Market Dynamics and the Illusion of Quality

The expansion of the private school sector is fundamentally demand-driven, linked to a perception of better educational achievement in private settings compared to government schools (Das et al., 2018, pp. 1–3). Analysis of parental choice indicates a high Willingness to Pay (WTP), where families exhibit low price elasticities for school fees despite being sensitive to logistical factors like distance (Carneiro et al., 2019, pp. 5–7). For families choosing private schools, the value they place on this option is significant, reaching 2 to 8 per cent of their annual per capita expenditure (Carneiro et al., 2019, p. 9).

This intense demand establishes the preconditions for the monetization of inclusive education. Private schools capitalize on this high WTP by leveraging marginally better resources and policies (Malik & Aslam, 2018, pp. 145–146), positioning the enrollment of SWSN as a market transaction that justifies charging a premium.

Furthermore, the government actively supports the involvement of private schools through Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) to improve equity and quality (Malik & Khan, 2023, pp. 2–3). Organizations like the Punjab Education Foundation (PEF) sponsor PPPs that have reported successes in general education outcomes (ADB, 2007). These PPPs are explicitly promoted for their role in creating programs for disadvantaged students (Malik & Khan, 2023, p. 2). However, evaluations of programs like the Educational Management Organizations (EMOs) in Sindh show that while governance and M&E improved, the broader impact on overall quality and ensuring equity remained unpredicted and limited (Rizvi et al., 2023, pp. 1–2). If PPPs prioritize basic access over the highly resource-intensive requirements of specialized support, they inherently risk institutionalizing tokenism as a subsidized model of low-support expansion (Government of Sindh, 2017).

The Marketing of Enrollment and Tokenistic Inclusion

In a competitive market, the decision by a private school to enroll SWSN is often a strategic move toward competitive differentiation. In urban centres, the willingness to include students signals a commitment to "modern" educational values and benevolence (Naz & Aurangzeb, 2002). For students with mild or moderate needs, the existence of formal inclusive policies (reported in 45 per cent of private schools) serves as marketing material (Malik & Aslam, 2018, p. 146).

The issue is that the pedagogical capacity to follow through on this commitment is absent. Because regulatory enforcement is weak (Chaudhry & Nisa, 2022) and budgetary commitment from the state is low (Shaukat, 2022), the school can profit from enrollment without needing to deliver the core, complex specialized service. The efficiency for which the private sector is known becomes antithetical to the resource-intensive reality of true inclusion, leading to an environment where the "Good Intention" is financially rationalized but pedagogically abandoned, resulting in tokenistic inclusion (Siddique, 2018, pp. 317–319).

The Systemic Deficit: Unpacking the Absence of Core Support Systems

The most significant structural impediment to effective inclusion in Pakistan's private sector is the profound crisis of human capital. This challenge is rooted in a pervasive lack of adequate initial teacher education and, critically, insufficient continuous professional development (CPD) for practicing teachers in inclusive methodologies (Virani & Ali, 2022, pp. 1–2). This deficit is common across the Asia-Pacific region, but its impact is acutely felt in Pakistan where educational systems are fragmented (Shaukat, 2022).

This lack of training contributes to a problematic institutional culture where teachers frequently lack the requisite knowledge for effective instructional differentiation, curriculum modification, or the implementation of essential documents like Individualized Educational Plans (IEPs) (Anjum et al., 2015, pp. 60–62). Consequently, educators often view inclusion not as an opportunity for diverse learning but as an unwelcome "problem to solve" (Virani & Ali, 2022, p. 2). While teachers generally hold positive attitudes towards inclusion (Anjum et al., 2015), the necessary academic and pedagogical core of inclusion is completely missed. This creates a state of pedagogical tokenism, where the child is physically present and socially integrated, but functionally excluded from curriculum access (Siddiqui & Shaukat, 2021, pp. 15–28).

Infrastructure and Resource Gaps

Beyond the human capital crisis, functional inclusion is hampered by critical deficits in specialized resources and infrastructure. Mainstream schools, including many private institutions, are poorly equipped to diagnose and adequately address Learning Disabilities (LDs) (Malik & Aslam, 2018, p. 146). Specialized resources necessary for intervention such as diagnostic tools and technological supports are scarce (Malik & Aslam, 2018, p. 146). Even though private schools report better access to specialized resources than public schools, the statistic of 30 per cent access confirms that 70 per cent of private institutions still operate without the necessary tools, defining the vast scale of the systemic deficit (Akhtar, 2021, pp. 210–225).

Furthermore, students with physical needs continue to face structural barriers within general education schools (Ahmad et al., 2020, pp. 170–175). These infrastructural deficits, including lack of accessibility to classrooms and facilities, persist from the primary level through to higher education (Ahmad et al., 2020). The systemic deficit is often addressed only by relying on the individual goodwill of teachers (Hameed et al., 2022, p. 303). Without systemic investment in infrastructure, specialized resources, and organizational leadership, this reliance on individual effort cannot be sustained and inevitably converts the goal of inclusion into a substantial pedagogical and emotional burden on unprepared institutions (Baig & Shah, 2020, pp. 35–50).

The Financial and Emotional Burden on Stakeholders

The regulatory failure to control fee structures has exposed parents seeking private education for their SWSN to financial exploitation. Reports confirm that private schools routinely impose excessive and often illegal annual charges, ranging dramatically from Rs5,000 to over Rs50,000 per child (Jabeen, 2024). Parents report being forced to make profound sacrifices, cutting back on other essential expenses, and even taking out loans to cover the unsustainable educational costs (Jabeen, 2024). Low-income parents are particularly affected, facing severe financial problems due to the combined costs of high school fees and supplemental tuition (Hassan et al., 2015, pp. 235–237).

This financial imposition is compounded by the shadow education system. Evidence indicates that parents exhibit an "absolute dependence" on external, low-fee tuition providers to ensure the child can cope in class, complete homework, and achieve grade progression (Das et al., 2022, p. 1). The need for private tuition, purchased *in addition* to the high, often unregulated school fees, demonstrates unequivocally that the core service paid for at the private school is functionally insufficient (Das et al., 2023, p. 1). The private education system has thus effectively monetized its own lack of competence by outsourcing the complex pedagogical requirement of special needs support to the unregulated low-fee tuition sector. This results in financial exploitation based on structural deficiency, leading to de facto economic exclusion for SWSN (Das et al., 2022, p. 1).

The Emotional and Pedagogical Toll

The financial strain on families translates into significant emotional hardship (Jabeen, 2024). Concurrently, the lack of institutional preparation places a tremendous pedagogical and emotional burden on mainstream teachers. Without proper comprehension of inclusive education concepts or responsible school management, teachers face high levels of stress (Hameed et al., 2022, p. 303). Teacher readiness remains the main challenge, and in the absence of professional training in inclusive teaching methods, educators are prone to maintaining opposition to the required practices (Virani & Ali, 2022, p. 2). A successful inclusive environment demands specific systemic supports, including differentiation learning strategies and robust parent-teacher relationships (Hameed & Anjum, 2022, pp. 80–82). Where these systems are absent, the "Burden" manifests as burnout and resistance among the teaching staff, exacerbating the cycle of low-quality provision (Anjum et al., 2015).

Benchmarking Success: Case Studies in Viable Private Inclusion

To transition the discourse from systemic failure to achievable reform, it is necessary to identify and analyze successful local benchmarks of quality. Research confirms the existence of highly effective, sustainable inclusive private schools, particularly in urban areas like Karachi (Khan, 2007). The findings underscore the urgent need for "local inclusion research" to inform and scale best practices throughout the region (Kamran, Bano, & Siddiqui, 2024a, p. 1). One compelling case study investigated a private primary institution in Karachi that has sustained robust inclusive education for over 25 years (Kamran & Siddiqui, 2024b, p. 1).

Key Enablers of Sustainability (The Necessary Systems of Support)

Thematic analysis of these exemplary models highlights the critical systems of support that are conspicuously absent in the majority of private schools (Kamran & Siddiqui, 2024b, pp. 10–15). These enablers serve as the quantifiable metric that regulatory bodies must use to enforce quality:

1. **Institutional Values and Policy:** Success is rooted in the implementation of welcoming policies, fostering supportive attitudes among all stakeholders, and demonstrating outstanding leadership dedicated to inclusive support (Kamran & Siddiqui, 2024b, p. 18).
2. **Human Capital Investment:** Sustainability requires the continuous professional development (CPD) of staff and targeted advocacy for acceptance and equality (Kamran, Bano, & Siddiqui, 2024a, p. 15). This guarantees that teachers possess the specialized competence to execute differentiation and IEPs.
3. **Resource Allocation:** Successful models provide essential resources and create demonstrably adapted learning environments (Kamran & Siddiqui, 2024b, p. 12).
4. **Collaboration:** The promotion of parental and peer support, alongside enhanced parent-teacher relationships, creates a holistic support ecosystem (Hameed et al., 2022, p. 305).

This comparison demonstrates that high-quality inclusion is not an abstract goal; it requires specific, measurable inputs (leadership, CPD, adapted resources). If a private school charges premium fees, policy must ensure that those funds are demonstrably purchasing these specific inputs. This capability defines the standard against which accountability must be enforced (Shah & Hussain, 2024, pp. 120–135).

Policy Interventions and the Path to Systemic Support

The move from "Good Intentions" to "Guaranteed Support" requires shifting the regulatory focus from nominal enrollment compliance to mandatory capacity building and verifiable resource provision.

Strengthening Regulatory Enforcement and Accountability

Effective reform must begin with radical regulatory transparency and enforcement.

Mandatory Linkage of Fees to Provision: Regulatory authorities must establish an auditable mechanism that links permitted fee levels and annual increases to the documented, verifiable provision of specific SWSN support systems, such as investments in certified trained staff, resource rooms, and physical accessibility (Chaudhry & Nisa, 2022, pp. 50–52). Private schools seeking fee increases must demonstrate such investments beyond the regulated minimum (PEIRA, 2021).

Enforced Transparency and Data Collection: To address the critical data vacuum, policymakers must provide substantial resources to provincial Special Education departments to initiate reliable, ongoing provincial-level data collection on SWSN prevalence, enrollment, and support needs (Shaukat, 2022, p. 4). Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) systems must be fundamentally reformed, utilizing specialized inspectors to ensure data accuracy and compliance reporting (Punjab Government, 2020, p. 10).

Penalty Structures for Tokenism: Clear penalty structures must be established for schools that charge fees based on the promise of specialized support but fail audits on core resource provision (e.g., lack of IEPs, lack of qualified special educators). This directly counters the current permissive environment where non-compliance is factored into the cost of doing business (Sarwar, 2019, p. 102).

Investment and Capacity Building Mandates

The fundamental crisis of human capital necessitates mandatory, large-scale intervention.

Mandatory Professional Development (CPD): All private school teachers in mainstream classrooms enrolling SWSN must be required to undergo standardized, subsidized, and ongoing CPD in inclusive teaching methods and differentiation strategies (Virani & Ali, 2022, p. 2). This directly addresses the core deficit identified in pedagogical preparedness (Anjum et al., 2015).

Resource Room Model Standards: The government should partner with expert bodies (including the successful private sector institutions like the Karachi case study) to develop and disseminate standardized, cost-efficient models for resource room creation and management, providing concrete blueprints for replication (Kamran & Siddiqui, 2024b, p. 12).

Bridging the Policy-to-Practice Gap: Government commitment must extend beyond policy formulation to oversight that translates high-level policy guidelines into actionable, verifiable implementation plans at the school level (Baig & Shah, 2020, pp. 45–48).

Rethinking Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) for Equity

Given the state's reliance on the private sector for educational expansion, PPPs must be redesigned to prioritize specialized support for SWSN (Malik & Khan, 2023).

Inclusion Audits in PPP Contracts: Future PPP initiatives must embed rigorous, measurable quality standards specific to inclusive education within their contracts, ensuring that partnerships are evaluated not just on access but on the delivery of equitable, specialized support (Rizvi et al., 2023, p. 8).

Subsidizing Specialization: Mechanisms must be explored to help private schools internalize the high costs of special education services. This could include targeted vouchers, tax incentives, or government subsidies designed to support the recruitment and retention of qualified special education teachers and the purchase of essential diagnostic technology, preventing the high cost of specialized services from being transferred exclusively to vulnerable families (Shah & Hussain, 2024, p. 130).

Conclusion

The prevailing situation in Pakistan's private education sector is a classic example of The Burden of Good Intentions, where the aspiration for inclusivity is undermined by a systemic failure of support. The core paradox identified in this research is the strategic decoupling of enrollment from resource provision: private schools satisfy intense parental demand for perceived quality by admitting Students with Special Needs, yet they fail to follow through with the specialized pedagogical, structural, and financial commitment required for functional integration. This results in an epidemic of tokenistic inclusion, a superficial inclusion where the student's physical presence masks their functional exclusion from the learning process.

This profound implementation gap is not a matter of isolated malpractice but a manifestation of severe systemic deficiencies traceable to the state level. Firstly, despite clear legal mandates for equitable access, Pakistan suffers from chronic fiscal inadequacy in special education, marginalizing the issue rhetorically while denying it the necessary financial scaffolding. This deliberate state underinvestment effectively transfers the entire financial burden of inclusion onto the private sector and, ultimately, vulnerable families. Secondly, this fiscal neglect is exacerbated by regulatory impotence. Oversight bodies routinely fail to enforce existing fee caps, allowing private institutions to levy excessive, often illegal, charges. This absence of regulatory fidelity creates a permissive environment where non-compliance on resource provision—such as the failure to hire qualified special educators or implement Individualized Educational Plans—is simply factored into the cost of doing business, turning structural deficiency into a monetized market opportunity.

The human cost of this failed system is devastating. Parents seeking a better future for their children face acute financial exploitation, forced to pay exorbitant school fees while simultaneously bearing the *additional* cost of essential private tuition (the shadow education system) to compensate for the school's pedagogical deficits. This financial double jeopardy, particularly for low-income households, converts the fundamental right to education into a debilitating economic hazard, restricting genuinely effective education access based on socioeconomic status. For mainstream teachers, the lack of continuous professional development and training means the institutional commitment to diversity transforms into personal stress and pedagogical burnout, fueling resistance and maintaining the cycle of low-quality support.

However, the path forward is not abstract. The few documented case studies of successful, long-term inclusive private schools in urban centers provide a clear and actionable blueprint for reform. These institutions demonstrate that viability depends on specific, measurable Systems of Support: dedicated institutional leadership, mandatory and continuous professional development for all staff, audited resource rooms, and strong parent-teacher collaboration. This model must become the non-negotiable benchmark for all private institutions that charge fees based on a claim of inclusive service provision.

Policy must, therefore, undergo a radical shift: from rewarding nominal enrollment compliance to enforcing system readiness. This requires bold regulatory action, including auditable mechanisms linking fees directly to resource provision and the introduction of severe penalties for tokenism. Furthermore, government commitment must extend to mandatory, subsidized professional development for all teachers in inclusive practices, bridging the profound human capital deficit. Public-Private Partnerships must be redesigned with specialized inclusion audits built into their contracts, ensuring public funds promote equitable services, not just private access.

In conclusion, the goal of genuine inclusive education requires Pakistan to move decisively past symbolic gestures. It requires an acknowledgment that educational rights cannot be outsourced without robust accountability. The institutional commitment to diversity must be supported by guaranteed infrastructure, mandated expertise, and transparent financial fidelity. Only by demanding and enforcing these institutional systems of support can the state ensure that the Good Intentions of its education providers finally translate into guaranteed, equitable support, lifting the Burden from the most vulnerable students and their families.

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