

Policy Implementation Gaps in Rural Special Education: A Case Study Approach

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HOW TO CITE:

Humera Amin, Aisha Alam, Syeda Zahra Ali, Usman Hameed, Shaista Naz, Husinov Akobir (2026). Policy Implementation Gaps in Rural Special Education: A Case Study Approach. International Journal of Special Education, 41(6s), 710-726.

ABSTRACT:

Despite extensive global and national commitments to inclusive education, the implementation of special education policy in rural Pakistan remains structurally uneven and institutionally fragmented. This study examines how inclusive education policies are enacted within rural school systems where institutional capacity constraints, governance fragmentation, and sociocultural norms intersect to shape educational access for children with disabilities. Grounded in Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory (Lipsky, 1980) and Policy Enactment Theory (Ball et al., 2012), the study conceptualizes implementation as a socially negotiated and contextually mediated process rather than a linear administrative function. A qualitative multiple-case study design was employed in selected rural districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, document analysis, and non-participant observations, and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Findings reveal that policy enactment is shaped by four interlocking mechanisms: infrastructural deprivation, fragmented governance systems, constrained professional capacity, and sociocultural constructions of disability. Rather than being uniformly implemented, inclusive education policy is continuously reinterpreted through frontline discretion under conditions of scarcity, producing highly variable and unequal forms of inclusion across rural schools. Monitoring systems further reinforce symbolic compliance rather than substantive inclusion outcomes. The study

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argues that implementation gaps are not simply administrative failures but structurally produced outcomes of governance and institutional arrangements. It contributes to inclusive education scholarship by advancing an enactment-oriented and structurally sensitive understanding of policy implementation in low-resource rural contexts.

Keywords: Inclusive education; Special education; Policy enactment; Street-level bureaucracy; Rural education; Disability studies; Pakistan; Educational governance.

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has increasingly emerged as a dominant paradigm within global educational reform, grounded in principles of equity, participation, social justice, and human rights. Contemporary understandings of inclusion extend beyond physical access to schooling and emphasize meaningful participation, equitable learning opportunities, institutional responsiveness, and recognition of learner diversity within mainstream educational systems (Ainscow, 2020; Florian, 2019). International frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education established inclusive schooling as a fundamental strategy for addressing educational exclusion and discrimination against children with disabilities (UNESCO, 1994). This rights-based orientation was subsequently reinforced through the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which obligates states to ensure inclusive education systems that provide equal educational opportunities for persons with disabilities at all levels of education (United Nations, 2006). Similarly, Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG-4) positions inclusive and equitable quality education as central to sustainable development and social transformation (United Nations, 2015).

Despite the global expansion of inclusive education policies, substantial disparities continue to exist between policy commitments and implementation realities. International evidence consistently demonstrates that children with disabilities remain among the most educationally excluded populations worldwide, particularly in low- and middle-income countries where institutional, economic, and

sociocultural barriers continue to restrict participation in formal education systems (UNESCO, 2020; UNICEF, 2021). These disparities are reflected in lower enrollment rates, poor retention, limited learning achievement, and restricted educational progression among learners with disabilities compared to their non-disabled peers (World Bank, 2019). Consequently, the challenge of inclusive education increasingly lies not in policy recognition alone but in the effective institutionalization and implementation of inclusive practices within educational systems.

Within inclusive education scholarship, growing attention has been directed toward the distinction between policy rhetoric and policy enactment. While many countries have formally adopted inclusive education policies aligned with international frameworks, the translation of these commitments into meaningful educational practices remains inconsistent and uneven (Slee, 2018; Florian, 2019). Inclusive education policies are often embedded within broader systems characterized by unequal resource distribution, institutional fragmentation, and structural inequalities, which significantly influence implementation outcomes (Ainscow, 2020). As a result, inclusive education reforms frequently remain symbolic at the policy level while exclusionary practices persist within schools and communities.

Implementation research suggests that educational reforms cannot be understood as linear administrative processes through which policies are automatically translated into practice. Instead, implementation is mediated by institutional capacity, organizational cultures, governance

structures, and the interpretive practices of educational actors operating within specific social and political contexts (Honig, 2006; Spillane et al., 2002). In this regard, inclusive education represents a particularly complex policy domain because it requires systemic transformation across curriculum, pedagogy, infrastructure, teacher preparation, assessment systems, and institutional cultures (Forlin & Chambers, 2011). Effective implementation therefore depends not only on legislative commitments but also on sustained institutional support, professional development, and coordinated governance mechanisms.

Rural education systems represent especially challenging contexts for the implementation of inclusive education policies. Across developing countries, rural schools often experience chronic shortages of trained teachers, inaccessible educational infrastructure, limited transportation networks, inadequate assistive technologies, and weak institutional oversight (UNESCO, 2020; World Bank, 2018). Such structural disadvantages significantly constrain schools' capacities to support learners with disabilities and to operationalize inclusive educational practices. Research indicates that rural schools are substantially less likely to possess the professional resources and institutional support systems necessary for effective inclusion compared to urban schools (Sharma et al., 2021). Consequently, rurality functions not merely as a geographic category but as a structural condition associated with educational marginalization and unequal access to educational opportunities.

In addition to institutional constraints, sociocultural dimensions of disability further complicate inclusive education implementation in rural settings. Disability is socially constructed through cultural beliefs, stigma, and normative assumptions that shape educational participation and community attitudes toward inclusion (Slee, 2018). In many developing societies, children with disabilities continue to experience exclusion due to discriminatory attitudes, misconceptions regarding disability, and low community awareness concerning educational rights (Singal, 2019). These sociocultural dynamics influence parental decision-

making, school participation, and institutional responsiveness, thereby reinforcing barriers to inclusion even where formal educational opportunities exist.

Within South Asia, inclusive education reforms have expanded considerably over the past two decades; however, implementation outcomes remain uneven and highly context-dependent (Singal, 2019). Educational systems within the region frequently struggle to operationalize inclusion due to weak governance structures, insufficient teacher preparation, fragmented institutional coordination, and limited financial investment in disability-inclusive education (Sharma et al., 2021). Consequently, inclusive education reforms often remain concentrated at the level of policy discourse rather than institutional practice. Scholars increasingly argue that understanding implementation challenges requires greater attention to the institutional and sociopolitical conditions through which policies are enacted within local contexts (Ainscow, 2020).

Pakistan reflects many of these broader regional challenges in inclusive education implementation. Over the past decade, the country has introduced several legislative and policy reforms aimed at promoting educational inclusion for children with disabilities. Policy initiatives such as the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016) and the National Education Policy Framework (2017) demonstrate increasing alignment with international disability rights and inclusive education frameworks (Government of Pakistan, 2017). These reforms formally recognize the educational rights of learners with disabilities and emphasize principles of accessibility, equity, and inclusion. However, despite this normative convergence, implementation remains fragmented and uneven across educational institutions and regions.

The rural–urban divide constitutes one of the most significant dimensions of inequality within Pakistan's special and inclusive education system. Existing evidence indicates that educational institutions and specialized services for children with disabilities remain disproportionately concentrated within urban centers, while rural

populations continue to experience severe shortages of institutional support, trained personnel, and accessible educational infrastructure (UNESCO, 2020). Hameed and Manzoor (2016) reported that approximately 91% of special education institutions in Pakistan are located in urban areas, despite the substantial concentration of disability-related vulnerabilities within rural communities. Similarly, Hameed and Manzoor (2014) estimated that only a limited proportion of children with disabilities have access to formal education services, reflecting systemic exclusion within the education system.

The implementation gap within rural Pakistan cannot be explained solely through infrastructural or financial limitations. Rather, it reflects broader governance and institutional challenges associated with policy enactment under conditions of limited state capacity. Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory provides a particularly useful analytical lens for examining these implementation dynamics. According to Lipsky (1980), frontline public service providers—including teachers, school administrators, and local education officials—exercise significant discretion in interpreting and implementing policies within resource-constrained institutional environments. These actors effectively shape policy outcomes because their everyday practices determine how policies are operationalized at the local level.

Within rural inclusive education contexts, frontline actors frequently operate under conditions characterized by inadequate infrastructure, insufficient training opportunities, weak monitoring systems, and heavy workloads. Consequently, implementation becomes a negotiated and contextually adaptive process rather than a straightforward execution of formal policy directives (Honig, 2006). Teachers and administrators may reinterpret policy mandates, prioritize institutional survival strategies, or selectively implement aspects of inclusive education according to local constraints and available resources. While such adaptations may facilitate organizational functioning within constrained systems, they can also generate inconsistencies in

educational access, participation, and service quality (Winter, 2003).

Contemporary implementation scholarship further emphasizes that policy enactment is shaped by institutional cultures, organizational learning processes, and contextual adaptation rather than policy design alone (Spillane et al., 2002). In rural educational settings where accountability mechanisms and institutional oversight remain weak, implementation outcomes are strongly influenced by localized institutional practices and actor discretion. Consequently, implementation gaps emerge not simply as technical failures but as manifestations of broader structural inequalities and governance asymmetries within educational systems.

Despite increasing scholarly attention to inclusive education in Pakistan, existing research remains fragmented and predominantly descriptive. Most studies focus on identifying barriers such as inadequate infrastructure, limited teacher training, resource shortages, and disability stigma without sufficiently examining how these factors interact within institutional environments to shape implementation outcomes (Farooq & Shafique, 2020; Singal, 2019). Furthermore, limited attention has been given to the application of implementation theory particularly Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory in understanding how frontline discretion, governance constraints, and sociocultural realities collectively influence inclusive education delivery in rural contexts.

This study addresses these gaps by critically examining the implementation challenges of special education policies in rural Pakistan through the analytical framework of Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory (Lipsky, 1980). The study conceptualizes implementation not as a mechanical translation of policy into practice but as a socially embedded and institutionally mediated process shaped by governance structures, resource limitations, administrative practices, and sociocultural conditions. By shifting analytical attention from policy formulation to policy enactment, the study contributes to a more critical understanding of why inclusive education implementation gaps persist

despite strong international and national commitments to educational inclusion.

Accordingly, the study aims to assess the extent of implementation of special education policies in rural educational institutions, examine institutional and administrative barriers affecting implementation, explore stakeholder perceptions regarding inclusive educational delivery, analyze the influence of socioeconomic and cultural conditions on educational access, and develop evidence-based recommendations for strengthening inclusive education implementation in rural Pakistan.

Conceptual Framework of the Study

The conceptual framework of this study rejects the conventional, top-down "linear-rational" model of policy implementation, which assumes that mandates are executed seamlessly from the center to the periphery. Instead, this research adopts a Policy Enactment and Street-Level Governance Systems Model. This framework acknowledges that in the resource-constrained landscape of rural Pakistan, policy is not merely "delivered" but is enacted a process of creative interpretation, negotiation, and transformation within specific institutional contexts (Ball et al., 2012).

The Macro-Meso-Micro Nexus: The framework operates across three interconnected layers of governance. At the Macro-Level, the *Independent Determinants* consist of global imperatives (UN CRPD) and national legislative frameworks. However, in this model, these are not seen as rigid instructions but as "policy texts" that must be read and translated. As these texts move to the Meso-Level (Institutional Enactment), they are filtered through the material realities of rurality. Here, "Institutional Capacity" and "Governance Fragmentation" act as mediating mechanisms. In the rural LMIC context, the material constraints such as the absence of assistive technology or inaccessible village infrastructure effectively reshape the policy's potential before it even reaches the classroom.

Frontline Agency and Administrative Discretion: The heart of the framework is the

Micro-Level site of Discretionary Agency. Grounded in Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory (Lipsky, 1980), the model identifies teachers, principals, and district officials as the primary "architects" of policy. Facing chronic resource shortages and ambiguous mandates, these frontline actors exercise significant administrative discretion. This is not a mechanical failure of the system but a fundamental feature of it. These bureaucrats utilize "Coping Mechanisms" to manage the gap between high-level inclusion goals and the reality of their classrooms. Consequently, the actual "policy" experienced by a child with a disability is a product of the teacher's identity construction and their differentiated instruction practices, rather than the national mandate itself.

The Sociocultural and Contextual Envelope:

Unique to this framework is the integration of Critical Disability Studies (Goodley, 2023; Slee, 2018), which positions the school within a broader envelope of *Contextual Rural Constraints*. Factors such as the "Socio-cultural Reproduction of Exclusion," ingrained stigmas, and the "Gatekeeping" behavior of community members are treated as active independent variables. These factors exert constant pressure on the enactment process, often compelling street-level actors to prioritize certain students over others, thereby sustaining cycles of educational marginalization.

Outcome as a Negotiated Reality: Finally, the Dependent Variable, *Effectiveness of Special Education Policy Enactment* is conceptualized as a multi-dimensional outcome. Rather than measuring success solely through quantitative enrollment figures, this framework evaluates "Substantive Rights Realized" and the "Quality of Inclusion." The presence of feedback loops from the outcome back to the institutional and policy levels illustrates that enactment is a dynamic, iterative process. By mapping these non-linear relationships, the framework provides a robust analytical tool for identifying where the "bridge" between policy and practice breaks down in the rural Pakistani context.

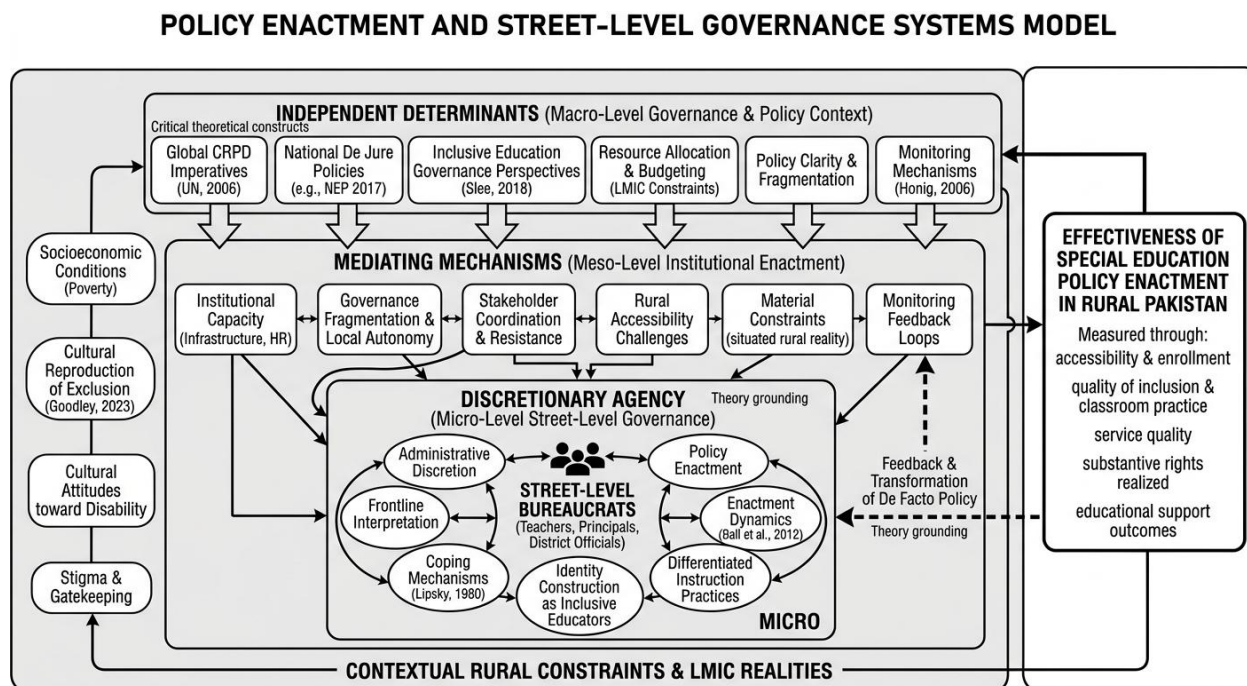


Figure-1: Multi-Level Policy Enactment and Street-Level Governance Model: A Conceptual Framework

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative multiple-case study design to examine the implementation of special education policies in rural Pakistan. Qualitative design is appropriate for investigating how inclusive education policies are interpreted, negotiated, and enacted by educational actors within complex institutional and sociocultural environments. Contemporary inclusive education scholarship emphasizes that policy implementation is not a linear technical process, but a socially situated practice shaped by institutional arrangements, governance structures, and actor interpretations (Ainscow, 2020; Slee, 2018).

A case study approach was employed because policy implementation in rural educational contexts is embedded within real-life institutional settings where boundaries between policy, practice, and context are inseparable (Yin, 2018). In rural Pakistan, special education implementation is shaped by resource scarcity, fragmented governance, uneven institutional capacity, and sociocultural constructions of disability. Therefore, a case-based design enabled in-depth exploration of

these intersecting dynamics. The study is situated within an interpretive-critical policy implementation framework, combining interpretivism with critical disability studies. Interpretivism allows examination of meaning-making processes among educational stakeholders (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), while critical disability studies foreground how disability is socially produced through institutional and structural arrangements that generate exclusion (Goodley, 2023; Slee, 2018). This combined framing enables a shift from descriptive accounts of barriers toward critical analysis of how educational systems reproduce inequality under the discourse of inclusion.

The study is theoretically anchored in Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory (Lipsky, 1980), complemented by policy enactment theory (Ball et al., 2012; Braun et al., 2011). These frameworks conceptualize implementation as an active process of interpretation, negotiation, and adaptation by frontline actors operating under institutional constraints. Recent implementation literature further highlights that educational policy is not implemented but “recontextualized” through

institutional practices and governance logics (Braun et al., 2021; Spillane et al., 2020).

Study Area

The study was conducted in selected rural districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan. KP was selected due to its predominantly rural demographic structure, persistent educational inequalities, and limited availability of inclusive and special education services. Rural districts in KP represent structurally constrained educational environments characterized by infrastructural deficits, teacher shortages, limited accessibility, and weak institutional support systems for learners with disabilities (UNESCO, 2020; World Bank, 2021).

The study sites included government schools, special education centers, and inclusive education settings where children with disabilities are enrolled. These contexts were selected because they represent the intersection of policy intent and implementation reality.

Site selection was guided by:

- rural demographic dominance,
- limited special education infrastructure,
- documented disparities in educational access,
- relevance to provincial education governance,
- and feasibility of field engagement.

Study Population and Sampling

The study population comprised key stakeholders involved in special education policy implementation: special education teachers, mainstream teachers engaged in inclusive education, school administrators, district education officials, parents of children with disabilities, and NGO representatives working in disability inclusion. A purposive sampling strategy was used to identify information-rich participants with direct experience of policy implementation (Patton, 2015). Criterion-based selection ensured that participants had substantive engagement with inclusive education processes.

The sample included: 15 teachers, 8 administrators, 7 district officials, 12 parents, and 5 NGO

representatives. Sample adequacy was determined through theoretical saturation, consistent with qualitative policy research standards (Guest et al., 2020). Sampling prioritized depth, diversity of perspectives, and institutional variation rather than statistical representation.

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through triangulation of multiple qualitative sources to enhance analytical rigor (Flick, 2018).

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers, administrators, district officials, and NGO representatives. Interviews explored: policy awareness and interpretation, institutional implementation practices, governance and accountability structures, resource and infrastructural constraints, teacher capacity and training, and sociocultural barriers to inclusion. Interview guides were developed based on literature and pilot-tested for contextual relevance. Interviews lasted 40–70 minutes and were conducted in Urdu and Pashto. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and supplemented with field notes.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

FGDs were conducted with parents of children with disabilities to explore shared experiences of educational access, stigma, and institutional engagement. FGDs are widely recognized as effective for capturing socially embedded perceptions and collective meanings (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

Key themes included: school access and enrollment experiences, transportation and financial barriers, perceptions of institutional responsiveness, disability-related stigma, and community attitudes toward inclusion. Careful facilitation was used to address power imbalances and ensure inclusive participation in culturally sensitive rural contexts.

Document Analysis

Document analysis was conducted to examine policy and governance texts as active instruments of implementation discourse (Ball et al., 2012).

Documents included: National Education Policy Framework (2017), Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016), provincial education policies, UNESCO and UNICEF reports, and administrative guidelines. These documents were analyzed to understand how inclusive education is framed, operationalized, and institutionalized within governance structures.

Observational Field Notes

Non-participant observations captured institutional realities including:

- accessibility of school infrastructure,
- classroom practices,
- availability of assistive resources,
- and teacher–student interactions.

Observations strengthened contextual validity by linking reported experiences with actual institutional conditions.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2021), enabling systematic identification of patterns across datasets. The analysis followed six stages: data familiarization, initial coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and interpretive synthesis. Analysis was abductive, integrating empirical findings with theoretical frameworks from Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory (Lipsky, 1980), policy enactment theory (Ball et al., 2012), and inclusive education governance literature (Ainscow, 2020). Coding combined deductive categories (institutional capacity, discretion, governance constraints), and inductive categories emerging from field data. This approach ensured theoretical sensitivity while preserving empirical openness.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

Trustworthiness was ensured using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria: Credibility: triangulation across interviews, FGDs, documents, and observations. Transferability: thick contextual

description of rural educational settings. Dependability: transparent documentation of procedures and coding decisions. Confirmability: audit trail and reflexive analysis. Reflexivity was central to the study, acknowledging that interpretations of disability and inclusion are shaped by researcher positionality and institutional context. This aligns with recent inclusive education research emphasizing reflexivity in disability-related policy studies (Slee, 2018; Goodley, 2023).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained prior to fieldwork. Participants were informed about the study purpose, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and withdrawal rights. Given the sensitivity of disability-related experiences, additional ethical measures were implemented: accessible communication strategies for low-literacy participants, culturally appropriate interview settings, anonymization of all participant data, and secure data storage. The study adhered to ethical principles of dignity, respect, and non-exploitation, particularly in rural and marginalized contexts.

RESULTS

The findings of this study demonstrate that implementation of special education policy in rural Pakistan is not a linear administrative process but a multi-layered, negotiated, and structurally constrained practice. Rather than reflecting a straightforward gap between policy and practice, the data reveal that policy is continuously reconstituted through institutional constraints, frontline discretion, and sociocultural governance logics. Five interrelated thematic mechanisms were identified: infrastructural exclusion, fragile human resource regimes, fragmented policy diffusion, governance and fiscal constraint systems, and sociocultural production of exclusion. These mechanisms operate interactively rather than independently, producing systemic implementation divergence across rural educational settings illustrated in Table 1.

Table-1: Thematic Mechanisms Shaping Special Education Policy Enactment in Rural Pakistan

Thematic Mechanism	Analytical Interpretation	Theoretical Anchoring	Illustrative Evidence
Infrastructural Exclusion	Inaccessible infrastructure functioned as a structural gatekeeping mechanism limiting the material feasibility of inclusion.	Policy Enactment Theory (Ball et al., 2012)	<i>"Our buildings themselves do not allow inclusion in practice."</i>
Fragile Human Resource Regimes	Absence of trained personnel shifted implementation responsibility to discretionary teacher improvisation.	Street-Level Bureaucracy (Lipsky, 1980)	<i>"We are not trained for this."</i>
Fragmented Policy Diffusion	Weak translation of policy across governance levels produced inconsistent interpretations of inclusive education.	Interpretive Policy Enactment (Braun et al., 2021)	<i>"We know policy exists, but we are not guided on how to implement it."</i>
Governance and Fiscal Fragmentation	Delayed funding flows and fragmented authority weakened implementation continuity and institutional coordination.	Implementation Infrastructure (Honig, 2006)	<i>"By the time funds reach schools, priorities have changed."</i>
Sociocultural Production of Exclusion	Community stigma and low expectations socially reproduced exclusionary educational practices.	Critical Disability Studies (Slee, 2018; Goodley, 2023)	<i>"It is better to keep them at home."</i>
Symbolic Accountability	Monitoring systems emphasized procedural compliance over substantive evaluation of inclusion quality.	Performative Governance	<i>"Inspection teams mostly check registers."</i>
Contextually Reconstituted Inclusion	Inclusion emerged as an adaptive and negotiated process shaped through interaction between structural constraints, discretionary agency, and sociocultural regulation.	Policy Enactment + Street-Level Bureaucracy	Cross-case thematic synthesis

Infrastructural Exclusion as a Structural Gatekeeping Mechanism

Across all case sites, infrastructural inadequacy emerged not merely as a resource limitation but as a structural mechanism of exclusion that determines the feasibility of policy enactment. Schools lacked disability-accessible architecture, assistive learning tools, and adaptive classroom environments. As a

result, inclusion remained formally mandated but materially constrained.

Field evidence indicates that infrastructural absence functions as a *pre-conditional filter* for inclusion. One school administrator noted:

"We receive instructions for inclusive education, but our buildings themselves do not allow inclusion in practice."

This suggests that policy implementation is effectively pre-empted by material conditions, where access is determined before pedagogical intervention can occur.

From a policy enactment perspective (Ball et al., 2012), infrastructure shapes the “context of practice,” delimiting what forms of inclusion are possible. Thus, exclusion is not incidental but structurally embedded within rural educational provisioning systems.

Fragile Human Resource Regimes and Discretionary Substitution

A second key mechanism relates to the fragility of human resource systems, particularly the absence of trained special education personnel. In all cases, mainstream teachers were required to assume inclusive education responsibilities without formal preparation or institutional support. This absence of structured training did not simply reduce quality; it shifted implementation authority to discretionary teacher practices, consistent with Lipsky’s (1980) theory of street-level bureaucracy. Teachers reported relying on improvised instructional strategies:

“We try our best, but every child needs different attention, and we are not trained for this.”

This illustrates that implementation is not absent but reconstructed through coping mechanisms, where teachers become de facto policymakers. However, these discretionary adaptations produce uneven inclusion outcomes, dependent on individual motivation rather than institutional design. The findings extend Lipsky’s framework by showing that in low-resource rural systems, discretion is not just individual autonomy but a survival response to systemic institutional absence.

Fragmented Policy Diffusion and Interpretive Governance Gaps

A major finding is the weak and uneven diffusion of inclusive education policy across institutional levels. Policy awareness varied significantly between district officials, school administrators, and frontline teachers, indicating a broken chain of policy translation.

At the district level, policy was framed in procedural terms, while at the school level it was often interpreted narrowly as “enrollment inclusion” rather than pedagogical transformation. This reflects what policy enactment theory describes as differentiated interpretation across institutional layers (Braun et al., 2011).

A recurring pattern was that policy documents existed but were not operationally embedded:

“We know the policy exists, but we are not guided on how to implement it in our classrooms.”

This demonstrates that implementation failure is not due to absence of policy but due to weak institutional mediation structures that translate policy into actionable practice.

Governance Fragmentation and Fiscal Incoherence

Governance-related constraints emerged as a systemic mechanism shaping implementation outcomes. Rather than functioning as a unified system, special education governance was characterized by fragmented authority, weak coordination, and delayed resource flows.

Three interrelated dynamics were observed:

1. Fiscal unpredictability (irregular funding for special education needs)
2. Administrative fragmentation (weak coordination between provincial and district levels)
3. Operational dependency (schools relying on ad-hoc or NGO support)

A district official explained:

“Funds are allocated, but by the time they reach schools, priorities have already changed or needs have increased.”

This indicates that governance structures operate through temporal delays and institutional disjuncture, weakening implementation continuity. From a policy implementation perspective, governance fragmentation produces a condition where schools function as autonomous coping units rather than coordinated policy actors.

Sociocultural Production of Educational Exclusion

Beyond institutional constraints, sociocultural norms emerged as a powerful mechanism shaping access to education for children with disabilities. Disability stigma, low parental expectations, and community-level misconceptions significantly influenced school participation decisions. Parents frequently reported external discouragement:

“People say the child will not benefit from school, so it is better to keep them at home.”

This indicates that exclusion is not only institutional but also socially reproduced through normative belief systems. Importantly, sociocultural norms are also influenced by institutional behavior. Teachers and administrators reported that community resistance sometimes shaped enrollment decisions and classroom integration practices, demonstrating a feedback loop between society and institution. From a critical disability studies perspective (Slee, 2018; Goodley, 2023), disability is not a fixed category, but a socially produced condition of exclusion embedded within cultural meaning systems.

Weak Monitoring Systems and Symbolic Accountability

Monitoring and accountability mechanisms were found to be largely procedural rather than substantive. Supervision focused on documentation compliance rather than evaluation of inclusion quality or learning outcomes.

Field evidence indicates that monitoring functions as a symbolic governance practice, where compliance is reported but not critically assessed. A school administrator noted:

“Inspection teams come, but they mostly check registers, not actual inclusion practices.”

This reflects a shift from substantive accountability to performative compliance, where policy implementation is reported rather than evaluated. Consequently, variability in implementation remains largely unchecked, reinforcing uneven educational experiences across rural settings.

Cross-Cutting Mechanism: Implementation as Enacted and Contested Practice

Across all cases, a central analytical pattern emerges: special education policy implementation is best understood as an enacted, contested, and adaptive process rather than a formal administrative sequence.

Three interdependent mechanisms shape this process:

- **Institutional constraint** → **limits feasible action**
- **Frontline discretion** → **reconstructs policy locally**
- **Sociocultural norms** → **legitimize or restrict inclusion**

This triadic interaction produces what can be conceptualized as “contextually reconstituted inclusion”, where policy is continuously reshaped rather than implemented in its original form. The findings strongly support policy enactment theory (Ball et al., 2012) while extending Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory (Lipsky, 1980) by demonstrating that in rural special education systems, discretion is structurally produced rather than individually exercised. The interaction between these thematic mechanisms is illustrated in Figure 2, which presents the Triadic Interaction Model of Contextually Reconstituted Inclusion. This model demonstrates how institutional constraints, discretionary frontline agency, and sociocultural norms converge to reshape the de facto implementation of special education policy.

Results: 'Triadic Interaction Model of Contextually Reconstituted Inclusion'

Derive: qualitative findings on rural special education policy in Pakistan

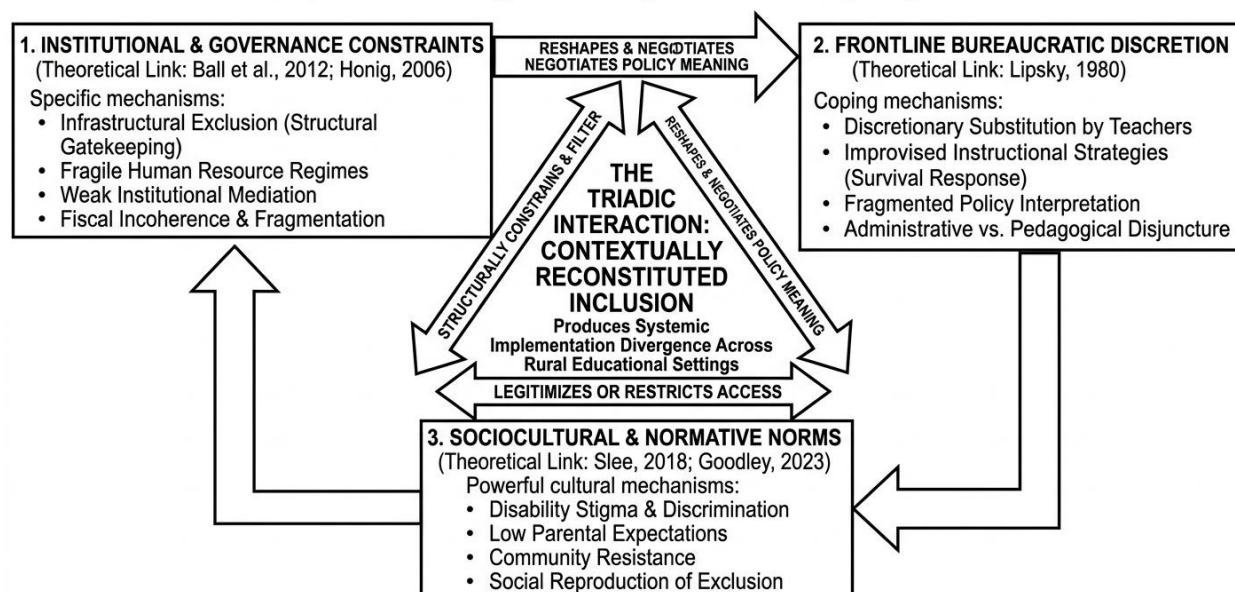


Figure-2: Triadic Interaction Model of Contextually Reconstituted Inclusion in Rural Pakistan

DISCUSSION

This study conceptualizes the implementation of special education policy in rural Pakistan as a structurally mediated process of policy enactment rather than a linear translation of legislative intent into practice. The findings demonstrate that implementation is produced through the interaction of institutional constraints, fragmented governance, frontline discretion, and sociocultural regulation. This reinforces contemporary scholarship that challenges technocratic assumptions of policy delivery and instead positions implementation as a socially situated and institutionally negotiated process (Ball et al., 2012; Spillane et al., 2020; Slee, 2018).

A central contribution of this study is the reconceptualization of the so-called “implementation gap” not as administrative failure, but as a structurally produced condition of enactment. In rural educational contexts of Pakistan, policy is not simply implemented or failed; it is continuously reconstituted through the constraints embedded in institutional environments. While policy enactment theory emphasizes that policies are interpreted within contexts of practice (Ball et al., 2012), the present study extends this argument by demonstrating that

in rural special education systems, interpretation is pre-structured by material deprivation. Infrastructure deficits, shortages of trained personnel, and weak institutional presence do not merely shape implementation they delimit what forms of inclusion are possible in the first place. This finding aligns with international evidence from low-resource contexts indicating that inclusive education often becomes “conditional inclusion,” where access exists nominally but is restricted by material and organizational constraints (UNESCO, 2020; World Bank, 2019). Thus, inclusion in rural Pakistan is not absent but selectively produced within the limits of institutional feasibility.

The study demonstrates that infrastructural and resource constraints are not peripheral barriers but constitutive mechanisms of exclusion. In rural schools, the absence of accessible infrastructure, assistive devices, and specialized personnel fundamentally shapes the boundaries of policy implementation. From a critical disability studies perspective, disability is not located solely in individual impairment but is produced through social and material arrangements that generate exclusion (Goodley, 2023; Slee, 2018). The findings strongly support this position by showing that exclusion is embedded within the spatial and

institutional architecture of rural schooling systems. Importantly, these constraints do not simply weaken implementation capacity; they redefine the scope of what counts as implementable policy. This finding extends Honig's (2006) argument on implementation infrastructure by showing that in contexts of chronic deprivation, infrastructure is not a supporting condition of implementation but its defining limit.

Consistent with Lipsky's (1980) Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory, the study confirms that frontline actors particularly teachers and school administrators play a decisive role in shaping policy outcomes through discretionary practices. However, the findings refine this theory in an important way. In rural special education settings, discretion is not an expression of professional autonomy but a structurally induced necessity arising from institutional absence. Teachers are required to implement inclusive education without adequate training, materials, or systemic guidance. This produces what can be conceptualized as compensatory implementation, where policy is reconstructed in practice to maintain minimal functionality under constraint. This shifts analytical emphasis from individual agency to institutionally produced discretion, where frontline actors become *de facto* policymakers not by design but by necessity. Similar patterns have been observed in other low- and middle-income education systems where teacher agency emerges as a survival mechanism under systemic constraint rather than a planned governance strategy (Ainscow, 2020; UNESCO, 2020).

A key finding of the study is the weak coherence across governance levels, resulting in fragmented policy diffusion from macro-level design to micro-level practice. Inclusive education policy is inconsistently interpreted across district officials, school administrators, and teachers, producing multiple, competing understandings of what inclusion entails. This aligns with implementation research suggesting that policy effectiveness depends on "implementation infrastructure," including coordination systems, communication channels, and institutional coherence (Honig, 2006).

In rural Pakistan, however, such infrastructure is weak or unevenly distributed. The consequence is a progressive dilution of policy intent as it moves through administrative layers. Schools operate within institutional ambiguity, relying on localized interpretations rather than standardized frameworks. This produces significant variation in implementation quality across comparable rural settings, reinforcing educational inequality at the systemic level.

Beyond institutional constraints, the study highlights the significant role of sociocultural norms in shaping educational access for children with disabilities. Disability stigma, low parental expectations, and community beliefs function as informal governance mechanisms that regulate inclusion. Parents' narratives indicate that educational exclusion is frequently socially reinforced rather than institutionally mandated. These findings are consistent with global research showing that disability stigma remains a persistent barrier to inclusive education, particularly in South Asia and other culturally conservative contexts (Singal, 2019; Sharma et al., 2021). Importantly, sociocultural norms do not operate externally to educational systems. Instead, they interact with institutional practices by influencing enrollment decisions, teacher attitudes, and school-level inclusion strategies. From a critical disability studies perspective, this demonstrates that exclusion is socially produced through everyday interactions rather than solely through policy failure (Goodley, 2023; Slee, 2018).

The study further reveals that monitoring and accountability mechanisms are largely procedural, emphasizing documentation and compliance reporting rather than substantive evaluation of inclusion quality or learning outcomes. This produces what can be described as symbolic accountability, where policy implementation is formally recorded but not meaningfully assessed. Inspection systems focus on administrative verification rather than pedagogical transformation, resulting in a disconnect between reported compliance and actual classroom realities. Such patterns are consistent with broader critiques of

education governance in resource-constrained systems, where accountability mechanisms often prioritize bureaucratic reporting over outcome-based evaluation (Spillane et al., 2020). Consequently, variability in implementation persists unaddressed, reinforcing unequal educational experiences across rural schools.

Taken together, the findings suggest that special education policy implementation in rural Pakistan operates as a multi-layered enactment system shaped by interacting structural, institutional, and sociocultural mechanisms. Three interdependent processes are central:

- **Structural constraint**, which defines the boundaries of feasible implementation
- **Frontline discretion**, which reconstructs policy under conditions of scarcity
- **Sociocultural regulation**, which legitimizes or constrains inclusion within communities

These processes do not operate independently; rather, they form a relational system in which each reinforces and conditions the others. Structural constraints intensify reliance on discretion, while sociocultural norms shape the legitimacy of discretionary decisions. Governance fragmentation further amplifies inconsistency across sites. This relational interpretation extends both Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory (Lipsky, 1980) and Policy Enactment Theory (Ball et al., 2012) by demonstrating that in rural LMIC contexts, policy implementation is not only mediated through interpretation but also reconfigured through systemic deprivation.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how special education policies are implemented in rural Pakistan, with a particular focus on the institutional, administrative, and sociocultural factors that shape implementation outcomes. Moving beyond linear notions of policy failure, the findings demonstrate that implementation is better understood as a contextually enacted and structurally mediated process, where policy intent is continuously reshaped through institutional constraints and

frontline practices. A key conclusion is that the so-called “implementation gap” is not merely a technical deficit in execution, but a systemic outcome of interacting governance and contextual conditions. In rural settings, limited infrastructure, weak institutional capacity, fragmented governance structures, and shortages of trained personnel collectively define the boundaries within which inclusive education can be enacted. These constraints do not simply hinder implementation; they actively configure the form that implementation takes. The study further highlights that frontline actors particularly teachers and school administrators play a central role in translating policy into practice. However, their actions are largely shaped by structural limitations, resulting in forms of discretionary adaptation that compensate for institutional deficiencies rather than reflect autonomous pedagogical choice. This reinforces the argument that implementation in resource-constrained contexts is a negotiated process rather than a procedural one.

At the same time, sociocultural norms surrounding disability continue to exert a powerful influence on access and participation, reinforcing exclusion through informal social mechanisms. This finding underscores that inclusive education cannot be achieved through policy reform alone but requires transformation of both institutional systems and societal attitudes. Theoretically, the study extends understandings of policy implementation in inclusive education by demonstrating that Street-Level Bureaucracy and Policy Enactment processes operate under conditions of structural deprivation in ways that systematically reshape policy meaning at the local level. In doing so, it contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how inclusive education policies function in rural and low-resource contexts. Overall, the study argues that improving special education outcomes in rural Pakistan requires moving beyond policy formulation toward strengthening the material, institutional, and sociocultural conditions of implementation. Without addressing these interconnected dimensions, inclusive education risks remaining a normative commitment rather than an operational reality.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

While this study provides in-depth insights into the implementation of special education policy in rural Pakistan, certain limitations must be acknowledged. First, the research is based on a qualitative multiple-case study design conducted in selected rural districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Although this approach enabled rich contextual understanding, it limits the generalizability of findings to other provinces or national contexts with different governance and infrastructural conditions.

Second, the study relies primarily on perceptions and experiences of key stakeholders, including teachers, administrators, parents, and district officials. While triangulation through interviews, focus groups, observation, and document analysis strengthened credibility, the findings remain interpretive in nature and are shaped by participant subjectivities. Third, logistical and contextual constraints in rural field settings may have influenced the depth of access to certain stakeholder groups, particularly policymakers at higher administrative levels. This may have limited the extent to which macro-level governance dynamics could be fully explored in relation to micro-level implementation realities. Finally, the study captures implementation dynamics at a specific point in time. Given that policy environments, resource allocations, and institutional reforms are dynamic, the findings should be understood as contextually and temporally situated rather than fixed representations of the system.

Building on the findings and limitations of this study, several directions for future research emerge. First, there is a need for comparative multi-provincial studies within Pakistan to examine how

variations in governance structures, resource distribution, and institutional capacity influence special education policy implementation across different regions. Such comparative work would enhance understanding of regional disparities and policy scalability.

Second, future research could employ mixed-method or large-scale quantitative designs to assess the prevalence and magnitude of implementation gaps identified in this study. This would allow for broader generalization and statistical validation of qualitative insights. Third, longitudinal studies are needed to explore how special education policy implementation evolves over time, particularly in response to institutional reforms, donor interventions, and changes in governance structures. Such studies would help capture the dynamic nature of policy enactment processes in rural education systems.

Fourth, further research should examine the role of teacher training institutions and professional development systems in shaping inclusive education practices, particularly how pre-service and in-service training influences classroom-level implementation.

Fifth, there is scope for more focused inquiry into the sociocultural dimensions of disability and inclusion, particularly how community beliefs, stigma, and household-level decision-making processes interact with institutional schooling systems.

Finally, future studies could explore policy implementation from a governance and political economy perspective, examining how resource allocation, institutional incentives, and administrative power structures influence the sustainability of inclusive education reforms in low-resource contexts.

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