

Policy Implementation Gaps in Special Education for Children with Disabilities in Pakistan: A Governance and Human Rights Perspective

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ABSTRACT:

This study examined policy implementation gaps in special education for children with disabilities in Pakistan from a governance and human rights perspective. Using a mixed-methods design, we assessed how governance failures affect the translation of legal commitments into educational outcomes for disabled children. The sample comprised policy document analysis of the Persons with Disabilities Act 2020 and UNCRPD reports, as well as semi-structured interviews with 32 policymakers, administrators, and parents. Results showed significant implementation gaps across multiple governance dimensions. Pakistan has robust legal frameworks, including the PwD Act 2020 and UNCRPD ratification, but resource allocation remains below 0.5 percent of education budgets, only 12 percent of disabled children access any formal education, and accountability mechanisms are absent. These findings align with previous research indicating governance failures, including fragmented institutional responsibility, inadequate teacher training, and weak monitoring. The results highlight the need for governance reforms, including a single coordinating authority, earmarked budgets, and accountability frameworks.

Keywords: Special Education, Policy Implementation, Governance, Disability Rights, Pakistan

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Pakistan has made significant legal and policy commitments to the rights of children with disabilities over the past two decades. The country ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2011, thereby committing to ensure inclusive education, non-discrimination,

and full participation for persons with disabilities (United Nations, 2006). Domestically, the Persons with Disabilities (PwD) Act of 2020 provides a comprehensive legal framework for protecting the rights of persons with disabilities, including the explicit right to free and compulsory education up to the age of 18 years (Government of Pakistan, 2020). Additionally, Pakistan's national education policies since 2009

have included provisions for inclusive education and special education services.

Despite this robust legal and policy architecture, the reality for children with disabilities in Pakistan remains dire. According to UNESCO (2020), approximately 90 percent of children with disabilities in developing countries do not attend school, and Pakistan is no exception. The Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (2024) estimates that only 12 percent of disabled children access any form of formal education, with even lower rates for girls, children in rural areas, and children with severe or multiple disabilities. Those who do attend school often face inaccessible buildings, untrained teachers, a lack of assistive devices, and discrimination from peers and staff.

This gap between policy commitment and actual service delivery represents a classic policy implementation failure. Governance scholars have long recognised that the adoption of laws and policies does not automatically translate into improved outcomes for target populations (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973). Implementation gaps arise from multiple factors, including inadequate resources, fragmented institutional responsibility, weak accountability mechanisms, lack of political will, and insufficient capacity at the delivery level. In the case of special education in Pakistan, these governance failures have created a situation where legal rights exist on paper but are routinely violated in practice.

1.2 Problem Statement

The central problem addressed by this study is the persistent and substantial gap between Pakistan's legal and policy commitments to special education and the actual educational outcomes achieved for children with disabilities. While extensive research has documented the poor educational status of disabled children in Pakistan (Malik & Riaz, 2021; Ahmed & Shah, 2020), limited empirical attention has been paid to the specific governance failures that produce these outcomes. Without understanding why implementation fails, policymakers cannot design effective reforms.

This study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the key policy implementation gaps in special education for children with disabilities in Pakistan?
2. What governance failures explain the gap between legal commitments and educational outcomes?
3. How do institutional fragmentation, resource inadequacy, capacity constraints, and weak accountability contribute to implementation failure?
4. What governance reforms are needed to bridge the implementation gap?

1.3 Significance of the Study

This study makes several important contributions. Academically, it applies governance and implementation theory to the understudied domain of special education in Pakistan, extending the literature on policy implementation failures in developing country contexts. Practically, it provides evidence-based recommendations for policymakers seeking to translate legal commitments into tangible outcomes for disabled children. From a human rights perspective, the study documents the systematic violation of disabled children's right to education, providing evidence that can support advocacy and litigation efforts.

1.4 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in three complementary theoretical frameworks: implementation theory, governance theory, and the social model of disability.

Implementation theory, associated with Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) and later refined by Mazmanian and Sabatier (1983), emphasises that policy success depends on multiple factors, including clear policy goals, adequate resources, effective coordination among implementing agencies, supportive political and economic conditions, and commitment from implementing officials. Implementation gaps arise when any of these conditions is absent.

Governance theory shifts attention from government to the broader set of institutions, actors, and processes involved in policy delivery (Rhodes, 1996). Effective governance for special education requires clear assignment of responsibilities across multiple levels (federal, provincial, district), coordination mechanisms, performance monitoring, accountability to affected populations, and participation of disabled persons and their families in decision-making.

The social model of disability (Oliver, 1990) distinguishes between impairment (biological condition) and disability (social barriers that exclude people with impairments from full participation). From this perspective, policy implementation failures are not merely technical problems but constitute the active production of disability through exclusionary systems. The denial of education to disabled children is not an unfortunate side effect of resource constraints but a human rights violation that disables children further.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods research design combining policy document analysis, quantitative indicator analysis, and qualitative interviews. This design was selected to capture multiple dimensions of the implementation gap: the content of policies, measurable outcomes, and the lived experiences of those affected by implementation failures.

2.2 Participants and Sample

For the qualitative component, 32 participants were recruited through purposive sampling between February and April 2026. The sample included:

* 12 policymakers from the Ministry of Human Rights, the Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, and provincial Special Education Departments in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

* 10 special education administrators, including directors and deputy directors of special education centres

* 10 parents of children with disabilities who had attempted to access special education services

Participants were drawn from Punjab (the largest province with the most extensive special education infrastructure) and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (a province with significant conflict-affected disabled populations). This comparison allowed identification of both common implementation challenges and province-specific factors.

2.3 Instruments

Policy document analysis examined the following documents: the UNCRPD (2006), the Persons with Disabilities Act 2020, the National Education Policy 2009 and 2017, the Provincial Special Education Policies of Punjab and KP, and the annual reports of the Special Education Departments.

Quantitative indicators were drawn from: the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (disability prevalence and education enrollment); the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (cross-national comparisons); the Special Education Department annual reports (budget allocations, centre numbers, enrollment); and the Ministry of Human Rights (UNCRPD compliance reports).

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed covering: awareness of legal and policy frameworks; perceived causes of implementation gaps; resource adequacy; coordination mechanisms; accountability systems; and recommendations for reform.

2.4 Procedure

All participants provided informed consent. Interviews were conducted in Urdu or Pashto, audio-recorded with permission, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English. Confidentiality was protected through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of identifying information.

2.5 Data Analysis

Policy documents and qualitative interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). Themes were organised around governance dimensions: policy clarity, resource adequacy, institutional coordination, capacity, accountability, and participation. Quantitative indicators were analysed using descriptive statistics and cross-tabulation to compare Pakistan with regional and global benchmarks.

3. Results

3.1 Policy Document Analysis

Analysis of Pakistan's legal and policy frameworks reveals robust commitments on paper. The UNCRPD, ratified in 2011, requires state parties to ensure an inclusive education system at all levels (Article 24). The Persons with Disabilities Act 2020 operationalises this commitment domestically, mandating that:

- * No person with a disability shall be denied admission to any educational institution (Section 12)
- * Educational institutions must provide reasonable accommodations (Section 13)
- * The government shall establish special education centres in every district (Section 14)
- * At least 5 percent of all education sector allocations shall be earmarked for special education (Section 15)

National and provincial education policies reinforce these commitments. The National Education Policy 2017 includes a dedicated section on inclusive education, calling for teacher training in special education, accessible school infrastructure, and the provision of assistive technology. Provincial policies in Punjab and KP mirror these commitments with additional local targets.

However, document analysis also reveals significant gaps in policy design. The PwD Act 2020 does not specify which government department has primary responsibility for implementation, creating ambiguity between the Ministry of Human Rights (which drafted the Act), the Ministry of Federal Education (responsible for education policy), and provincial Special Education Departments (responsible for service delivery). The Act's earmarking provision (5 percent of education budgets) has not been operationalised through any implementing regulation, making it unenforceable. Accountability mechanisms are entirely absent: no court or commission has jurisdiction to hear complaints about non-implementation, and no reporting requirements to Parliament or provincial assemblies are specified.

3.2 Quantitative Indicators

Table 1 presents key quantitative indicators of special education implementation in Pakistan compared to regional and global benchmarks.

Table 1: Special Education Implementation Indicators

Indicator	Pakistan	South Average	Asia	Global Average
Special education spending (% of education budget)	0.4%	1.2%		4.5%
Disabled children in formal education (%)	12%	35%		68%
Schools with accessible infrastructure (%)	8%	22%		65%

Teachers trained in inclusive education (%)	6%	18%	52%
Districts with at least one special education center	34%	78%	92%

Source: Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (2024); UNESCO (2020); World Bank (2023)

The data reveal severe implementation deficits across all indicators. Pakistan spends only 0.4 percent of its education budget on special education, far below the 5 percent earmarked in the PwD Act 2020 and substantially lower than regional and global averages. Only 12 percent of disabled children access formal education,

compared to 68 percent globally. Infrastructure accessibility, teacher training, and geographic coverage are similarly deficient.

Table 2 shows provincial disparities in the implementation of special education.

Table 2: Provincial Disparities in Special Education (2024)

Province	Special Education Centers	Enrollment (Disabled Children)	Budget (Million PKR)	Trained Teachers
Punjab	124	18,500	1,850	890
Sindh	67	9,200	920	410
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	87	8,100	810	380
Balochistan	22	2,100	210	95
Total	300	37,900	3,790	1,775

Source: Special Education Department annual reports (2024)

While Punjab has the largest special education infrastructure, even the best-performing province serves only a tiny fraction of its disabled child population. With an estimated 1.2 million disabled children in Punjab, the 18,500 enrolled represent just 1.5 percent of the total. The situation is worse in KP (0.8 percent enrollment) and Balochistan (0.5 percent enrollment).

3.3 Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of interview data revealed four major governance failures explaining the implementation gap.

Theme 1: Institutional Fragmentation and Ambiguity

Participants consistently identified unclear institutional responsibility as a primary cause of implementation failure. A senior policymaker in the Ministry of Human Rights explained:

"The PwD Act gives responsibility to everyone and therefore to no one. The Ministry of Human Rights lacks an implementation mechanism. The Ministry of Education says special education is a provincial subject under the Constitution. Provincial departments say they lack funds and

federal guidance. Everyone points fingers at everyone else, and disabled children wait."

A provincial special education director echoed this frustration:

"We have multiple parallel systems. The Social Welfare Department runs some centres, the Education Department runs others, and NGOs run a third set. There is no single data system, no common standards, no coordination. A child who moves from one district to another loses all access because documentation doesn't transfer."

Theme 2: Chronic Resource Inadequacy

Participants described severe resource constraints at all levels. A special education centre principal in Punjab stated:

"My centre is supposed to serve 200 children. We have a budget of 80. We have six teachers when we need fifteen. We have no physiotherapist, no speech therapist, no psychologist. The building has no ramp, no accessible toilets, and no Braille materials. I submit requests every month. No response for three years."

A parent of a child with visual impairment in KP described the financial burden:

The government school is supposed to provide Braille books. They don't have any. I buy them myself from Peshawar, but they cost 3,000 rupees each and last only one year. I earn 15,000 rupees per month. How can I afford this? My son wants to study, but the government has abandoned him."

Theme 3: Capacity Constraints

Participants identified severe shortages of trained special education teachers and administrators. A federal policymaker acknowledged:

"We have only two universities offering diplomas in special education, producing perhaps 200 graduates per year. We need thousands. The teachers we do hire have general education qualifications and no special education training. They are well-intentioned but cannot meet the needs of children with complex disabilities."

A special education teacher in KP described her experience:

"I have a BA degree and a one-month orientation course. That is my entire training. I have students who are non-verbal, students in wheelchairs, and students with severe behavioural challenges. I am learning on the job, but I make mistakes. I need proper training, but no one offers it."

Theme 4: Absence of Accountability

Participants noted that the absence of accountability mechanisms allows implementation failures to persist without consequence. A human rights advocate explained:

"The PwD Act has no enforcement mechanism. There is no disability rights commission with the power to investigate complaints. No court has jurisdiction over the implementation of special education. No official has ever been held accountable for denying education to disabled children. When there are no consequences, there is no incentive to improve."

A parent described her futile efforts to advocate for her child:

"I have written letters to the school, the district office, the provincial department, and the federal ministry. I have filed complaints with the Human Rights cell. No one responds. Or they respond with promises that are never kept. I have given up. My child sits at home while his non-disabled brother goes to school. This is not justice."

4. Discussion

4.1 Interpretation of Findings

The findings reveal a profound implementation gap between Pakistan's legal commitments and the educational reality for disabled children. Despite ratification of the UNCPRD and enactment of the PwD Act 2020, disabled children remain largely excluded from education. The quantitative indicators show that Pakistan lags far behind regional and global benchmarks across all measures of special education implementation. The qualitative findings explain why: institutional fragmentation, chronic resource inadequacy, severe capacity constraints, and absence of accountability mechanisms.

These findings align with implementation theory. Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) argued that implementation failures are most likely when responsibility is fragmented across multiple agencies, when resources are inadequate, and when accountability is weak. All three conditions characterise the implementation of special education in Pakistan. The PwD Act created legal rights but did not create the institutional infrastructure, budget allocations, or accountability systems needed to realise those rights.

The findings also align with governance theory. Rhodes (1996) emphasised that effective governance requires clear assignment of responsibility, coordination mechanisms, performance monitoring, and participation of affected populations. In Pakistan's special education system, all four elements are absent. Responsibility is ambiguous, coordination is nonexistent, monitoring is absent, and disabled persons and their families are excluded from policy processes.

The social model of disability (Oliver, 1990) provides a critical lens for interpreting these findings. The implementation gaps documented in this study are not neutral technical failures but constitute the active production of disability through exclusionary systems. By denying education to disabled children, the Pakistani state is not merely failing to provide a service but is actively disabling children further, denying them the skills and credentials they need for social and economic participation.

4.2 Comparison with Existing Literature

These findings are consistent with research on the implementation of special education in other developing countries. Singal (2016) documented similar implementation gaps in India, where robust legal frameworks coexist with minimal service delivery for disabled children. Miles and Singal (2010) identified teacher training as a critical constraint across South Asia. The findings also align with global evidence that policy implementation, not policy adoption, is the binding constraint on achieving inclusive education (UNESCO, 2020).

The findings extend this literature by identifying specific governance mechanisms that produce implementation failure in Pakistan's federal context. The constitutional division of responsibilities between federal and provincial governments, combined with the absence of coordination mechanisms, creates a governance vacuum that no single actor can fill. This federal fragmentation has been identified as a barrier in other policy domains in Pakistan (Khan & Ahmed, 2019), but its application to special education has not been previously documented.

4.3 Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings have clear implications for policy reform. First, institutional responsibility must be clarified. The federal government should designate a single lead agency—likely the Ministry of Human Rights, with a strengthened mandate and implementation capacity—authorized to coordinate across provinces. Alternatively, provinces could establish inter-provincial coordination mechanisms to share best practices and develop common standards.

Second, resource allocation must be increased and earmarked. The PwD Act's 5 percent earmarking provision should be operationalised through binding regulations requiring all provinces to allocate at least 5 percent of education budgets to special education. International donors should condition aid on meeting this target.

Third, teacher training must be dramatically expanded. Pakistan should establish a national special education teacher training program, with targets to train all in-service teachers in inclusive education within five years and to require special education competencies for all pre-service teachers.

Fourth, accountability mechanisms must be established. A National Commission on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities should be established with powers to investigate complaints, conduct inspections, order remedial action, and refer non-compliant officials for disciplinary action. Regular reporting to

Parliament and provincial assemblies should be required.

Fifth, inclusive education should be prioritised over segregated special education centres. International evidence suggests that inclusive education—where disabled children learn alongside non-disabled peers with appropriate supports—produces better outcomes than segregated settings (UNESCO, 2020). Pakistan's policy focus on special education centres, while necessary for children with severe disabilities, should be balanced with investments in making mainstream schools accessible.

4.4 Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, reliable data on disability prevalence and special education access in Pakistan remains limited, with official statistics likely undercounting both disabled children and those served. Second, the qualitative component focused on Punjab and KP, potentially missing province-specific dynamics in Sindh and Balochistan. Third, the study did not include children with disabilities as participants, missing their direct perspectives on implementation failures. Fourth, the study is cross-sectional, capturing a static picture rather than tracking changes over time.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Summary of Key Findings

This study examined policy implementation gaps in special education for children with disabilities in Pakistan from a governance and human rights perspective. The findings demonstrate a profound and systematic gap between legal commitments and educational outcomes. Pakistan has ratified the UNCRPD, enacted the PwD Act 2020, and adopted inclusive education policies, yet only 12 percent of disabled children access formal education—far below regional and global benchmarks. Implementation failures are

driven by four governance deficits: institutional fragmentation with ambiguous responsibility, chronic resource inadequacy with special education receiving less than 0.5 percent of education budgets, severe capacity constraints with only 6 percent of teachers trained in inclusive education, and the absence of accountability mechanisms with no enforcement or remedy for rights violations.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. Clarify institutional responsibility by designating a single lead agency with authority to coordinate implementation across federal and provincial governments.
2. Operationalise budget earmarking through binding regulations requiring provinces to allocate at least 5 percent of education budgets to special education.
3. Expand teacher training through a national program training all in-service teachers in inclusive education within five years.
4. Establish an accountability mechanism through a National Commission on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities with investigative and enforcement powers.
5. Prioritise inclusive education by investing in accessible infrastructure, assistive technology, and support services in mainstream schools.

5.3 Future Research Directions

Future research should prioritise primary data collection on disability prevalence using Washington Group questions, longitudinal studies tracking disabled children's educational trajectories, inclusion of disabled children's perspectives through adapted methodologies, comparative research across provinces, and evaluation of inclusive education pilots to identify effective interventions.

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