

Investigating Students' Attitudes towards Peers with Disability in an Inclusive Classroom at the Higher Secondary School Level in Gilgit-Baltistan

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ABSTRACT

This study examines higher secondary students' attitudes toward peers with disabilities in inclusive classrooms in Gilgit-Baltistan. A quantitative research design was employed, and due to the small target population, a census sampling method was used, including all 50 students from grades 11 and 12 across public and private schools. Data were gathered through a validated 25-item Likert-scale questionnaire assessing peer attitudes, social acceptance, awareness, classroom accommodations, and emotional well-being. Results show moderately positive peer attitudes, with students generally reporting respect, friendliness, and a sense of belonging. However, meaningful participation in group activities, deeper social interaction, and awareness of inclusive education remained limited. Structural challenges, including inadequate accessible facilities and assistive tools, further restricted full inclusion. Despite these gaps, students demonstrated strong emotional resilience and academic confidence. The study underscores the need for targeted awareness programs, teacher training, improved infrastructure, and structured peer-interaction strategies to strengthen inclusive education in the region.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Student Attitudes, Peer Acceptance, Disability Awareness, Higher Secondary, Gilgit-Baltistan

Introduction

The concept of inclusive education is to offer all students equal learning opportunities through respect, diversity, and collaboration in general classrooms. In the higher secondary level, where social interaction and emotional development highly influence the learning experiences, the attitude of peers towards classmates with disabilities is important. Positive perceptions facilitate acceptance, involvement and confidence, and negative perceptions result in isolation and impede social or academic interaction (Gökbulut, Gökbulut, and Yeniasir, 2024). Inclusion is not merely the act of putting students with disabilities in mainstream classes; it is the provision of enabling environments, in which all learners can engage fruitfully. Relationships, participation, and educational outcomes are highly impacted by the attitudes of peers as they affect the success of this process (Lindsay, 2007).

The studies indicate that pre-existing experience of disability, the level of awareness, cultural and religious beliefs, as well as age and gender, are the aspects that influence the formation of these attitudes. Positive perceptions can be facilitated by classroom based interventions such as cooperative learning, peer tutoring, and inclusive extracurricular (Johnson, 2009). Policy progress in Pakistan is somehow not fully implemented through inclusive education because of the lack of teacher training programs as well as the existence of social stigma. Some research has examined the beliefs of teachers, but little has been done on the perceptions of students, particularly in the higher secondary level, in remote settings like Gilgit-Baltistan (Haideri & pareveen, 2025). The attitudes of students are critical to understand since they are direct influencing factors of the classroom culture and social inclusion in the long term.

Persons with Disabilities Act (2019) ensures access to inclusive education but the actual improvement of the situation is based on the way teachers and students think and act. Adverse attitudes among the students may inhibit participation, minimize engagement, and interfere with the inclusive initiatives, and on the contrary, positive attitudes may foster empathy, respect, and cooperation (Avramidis, 2010). International studies have demonstrated that acceptance may be promoted through culturally relevant interventions, awareness campaigns, and peer mentoring (Florian, 2015). Hence, the research will fill a serious gap of the research by studying how students view learners with disabilities in Gilgit-Baltistan to facilitate more inclusive classrooms and direct teachers and policymakers to sustainable inclusion. When positive attitudes towards peers and teachers are realized, learning will become an environment where diversity is appreciated and students will drive a sense of belongingness (McDougall et al., 2004).

Statement of the problem

Although inclusive education has expanded globally and nationally, students with disabilities in higher secondary schools of Gilgit-Baltistan continue to experience social exclusion, negative peer attitudes, and limited acceptance. Physical inclusion alone does not guarantee meaningful participation; instead, peers' behaviors such as distancing, stereotyping, or bullying restrict friendship-building and a sense of belonging. Despite the crucial role of non-disabled peers in shaping inclusive environments, there is limited local research on how higher secondary students in

Gilgit-Baltistan perceive and interact with classmates with disabilities. Little is known about how factors such as gender, prior contact, disability status, or school type influence student attitudes and preferences. The region also lacks evidence-based interventions such as awareness programs, structured peer-contact activities, and classroom practices proven to improve attitudes in other contexts. Without clear data on current attitude levels, awareness, and social acceptance, schools struggle to design effective strategies that foster empathy and positive interactions. Therefore, this study seeks to examine students' attitudes, identify predictors of acceptance, and support the development of context-sensitive policies that strengthen inclusive education in Gilgit-Baltistan.

Objectives of the study

- 1-To examine the attitudes of higher secondary students towards peers with disabilities
- 2-To assess the level of awareness among students regarding disabilities and inclusive education in higher secondary schools in Gilgit-Baltistan
- 3-To evaluate the extent of social acceptance of students with disabilities among their peers
- 4-To identify the accommodation that facilitate positive peer's interaction in inclusive classrooms.

Literature Review

Inclusive education is a global movement that seeks to ensure that every student, irrespective of physical, mental or emotional impairment issues has access to quality education. It derives on the premise that diversity enhances classrooms and prompts students to be empathetic, cooperative, and respectful toward each other (UNESCO, 2020). Student attitudes towards their peers who are disabled are very important in ensuring effective inclusion since they greatly influence classroom interaction and engagement and overall emotional well-being (Avramidis and Norwich, 2010).

Although the idea of inclusive education has been recognized in Pakistani education policy, its implementation remains unequal, particularly in the less accessible areas of the country such as Gilgit-Baltistan where resources and cultural stigma remain a reality (Ahmad and Malik, 2018). In this review of international and regional studies, the four primary objectives of the current study, including student's attitudes towards peers with disabilities, disability awareness and inclusive education, peer social acceptance, and classroom accommodations that facilitate positive relationships, are discussed.

Students' Attitudes toward Peers with Disabilities

Attitudes consist of three elements behavioral (actions and reactions), affective (feelings and emotions) and cognitive (perceptions and beliefs). These factors are in action to determine the way individuals understand and deal with others (Ajzen, 2015). The level of attitudes among students is significant in the way peers with disabilities may be excluded or accepted as a valued part of the group in a normal classroom setting. The findings of the research performed in different cultural settings are different. According to the European school-based research, female

students and those with prior experience in working with people with disabilities were more likely to demonstrate empathy and desire to cooperate (Gómez and Navarro, 2017). Li and Zhang (2021) affirm that the positive classroom environment and emotional empathy increased the levels of acceptance among students in China.

Nevertheless, there are still some misunderstandings. The stereotype about disability as being associated with incapacity or dependency is often supported by social labeling and an unconscious bias of teachers (Rahman, 2021). Examples of cooperative classroom strategies that have demonstrated to help reduce prejudice and foster understanding among students are group projects, peer tutoring, and mixed-ability learning (Florian, 2017).

Students in South Asia often behave in a sympathetic way toward students with disabilities but not inclusion, indicating that they believe in equality in theory and do not behave meaningfully in practice (Khan and Akhtar, 2018). The same tendencies have been witnessed in Pakistan. According to Ahmad and Malik (2018), acceptance among students of secondary schools in Punjab had generally positive but superficial levels; they were more willing to engage with peers with physical impairments than with those with intellectual or behavioral impairments. Similarly, Yousaf and Gul (2019) noted that stigma and fear of being different in society inhibited meaningful interaction. Karim (2022) discovered that, despite students in Gilgit-Baltistan providing conceptual support of inclusive education, they tended to become uneasy during close interaction suggesting an urgent necessity of interventions that foster the spirit of empathy, awareness, and continuous interaction with peers.

Awareness Regarding Disabilities and Inclusive Education

Creating positive attitudes begins by increasing awareness on inclusion and disabilities. Educated students are more likely to demonstrate empathy and social acceptance towards various disabilities and people with them and their causes and principles of inclusiveness (Hassan and Ahsan, 2019). The positive results of awareness campaigns around the world. An example of such awareness programs conducted by Al-Nuaimi and Hassan (2024), in the UAE, showed that semester-based awareness programs were significantly more effective at increasing student acceptance of classmates with disabilities. On the same note, McDougall et al. (2004) studied results obtained that disability-related education integrated into the social studies curriculum of the Canadian educational system positively influenced the cooperative behaviours of students as well as the stigma levels they experienced.

Nevertheless, the absence of disability-related material in teacher training and school curricula in Pakistan implies that the level of awareness is low (Rauf and Khan, 2022). As a result of research in Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, some students continue to see disabilities as a curse or a challenge that God has placed upon them instead of a natural aspect of diversity (Shinwari and Rehman, 2021). These misconceptions deny students with disabilities a chance to be seen as part of society. The lack of exposure to diversity is another impediment to creating awareness in geographically isolated regions like Gilgit-Baltistan (Schwab, 2017). To reduce bias and enhance peer interactions, awareness campaigns based on storytelling, disability simulations, and inclusive classroom activities could be helpful.

Social Acceptance of Students with Disabilities among Peers

Social acceptance shows the level of appreciation that students with disabilities have as full members of their peer group (de Boer and Minnaert, 2018). It has the behavioral aspect of inclusion, which is affected by attitudes, as well as awareness. Both academic and emotional well-being depend on positive peer relationships, which are vital in the international research. In the case of Finland, Bossaert and Petry (2013) found out that close friendships enhanced the self-esteem and classroom participation of the disabled students. In a related study, Martínez and López (2019) in Spain established that collaborative work and group work effectively reduced exclusion and facilitated the participation of equal contributions.

Full inclusion has been challenging even with these developments. De Boer et al. (2018) have found that students with behavioral or learning disabilities remained on the outskirts of classroom social networks. Cultural and religious beliefs in South Asia also promote social distance by sometimes relating disability to weakness or trial by God (Khan and Akhtar, 2018). Yousaf and Gul (2019) and Ahmad and Malik (2018) found that Pakistanis students showed greater tolerance towards physical disabilities as compared to mental or emotional conditions. Teacher effects are also essential; the more proactive the inclusion behavior of teachers, the more the peers cooperate, the less the cases of bullying or exclusionary behaviors occur (Rauf and Khan, 2022).

Cultural practices and the absence of exposure to including practices continue to affect social acceptance in Gilgit- Baltistan. Nevertheless, organizing mutual activities among the disabled and with able students has begun to change attitudes due to UNICEF-coordinated community programs and NGO-led initiatives (UNICEF, 2021). These efforts show that community-based strategies could effectively enhance inclusion through community involvement and experience.

Accommodations Promoting Positive Peer Interactions

True inclusion does not only require acceptance, it requires pedagogical and institutional reforms that would allow all the students to participate equally. Ainscow (2016) asserts that to promote interaction and access, it is necessary to include accommodative options such as flexible curriculums, assistive technologies, and barrier-free facilities. As Florian (2017) notes, inclusive education cannot be successful unless schools adopt a common culture of accountability instead of viewing disabilities as a distinct problem.

Specifically, collaborative learning methods and peer tutoring have proved to reduce social distance. Although, students with disabilities were able to become more confident in academics and feel part of the group, Gomez and Navarro (2017) concluded that tutors without disabilities became empathetic and learned to lead. Hassan and Ahsan (2019) also state that shared classroom projects and mixed-ability group activities led by a teacher are also a beneficial tool in terms of breaking the stereotypes and building peer support. The design of classrooms is also relevant since inclusive seating layout and adaptive learning resources are inherently conducive to cooperative learning and communication (World Bank, 2021).

Research Methodology

This study used a quantitative research design with a structured questionnaire to assess higher secondary students' attitudes toward peers with disabilities in inclusive classrooms in Gilgit-Baltistan. The quantitative approach allowed for measurable, comparable data on students' perceptions. The population included all students enrolled in inclusive higher secondary schools, and due to the small size, a census sampling technique was applied, involving all 50 students (27 males and 23 females) from grades 11 and 12 across public and private, urban and rural institutions. A researcher-developed closed-ended questionnaire with 25 Likert-scale items measured five factors: peer attitudes, social acceptance, awareness, classroom accommodations, and emotional well-being. Expert validation and a pilot test yielded a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.82, confirming reliability. Data were collected with permission from school principals, and questionnaires were administered during school hours under the researcher's supervision, resulting in a 100 percent response rate. Participants were informed about the study's purpose, assured of confidentiality, and provided voluntary consent, with the right to withdraw at any stage. The study was limited to 50 students from selected higher secondary schools and focused exclusively on attitudes toward peers with disabilities.

Table 1 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 50)

Variable	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	27	54.0
	Female	23	46.0
Age	15–16 years	9	18.0
	17–18 years	19	38.0
	19–20 years	19	38.0
	21 and above	3	6.0
Grade/Class	11th	23	46.0
	12th	27	54.0
Type of School	Government	22	44.0
	Private	28	56.0
Area	Urban	40	80.0
	Rural	10	20.0
Disability Type	Physical Disability	16	32.0
	Visual Impairment	18	36.0
	Hearing Impairment	9	18.0
	Others	7	14.0
Family Member with Disability	Yes	28	56.0

Variable	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
	No	22	44.0
Subject Group	Science	15	30.0
	Arts	21	42.0
	IT	14	28.0

Table 1 shows the demographic of the 50 respondents who took part in the research. The sample consisted of 27 males (54%) and 23 females (46), which means that there is almost the same gender representation. Majority of the respondents were aged 17-18 years (38%), 19-20 years (38%), with minor proportions of 15-16 years (18%), and very few (6%) aged 21 and above. Regarding the level of education, 46% were studying in 11 th grade, and 54% in 12th grade. Most of them went to private schools (56%), the rest were government schools (44%). Many of the respondents (80%) lived in urban regions, with only 20% living in rural regions. In terms of the type of disability, visual impairment was the most prevalent (36%), followed by physical disability (32%), hearing impairment (18%), and other disabilities (14%). Over fifty-six percent (56%) of them said they had a family member with a disability. In subject specialization, 42% of participants majored in Arts, 30% in Science and 28 in IT, which has diverse academic background of the participants.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Students' Peer Attitudes toward Their Peers with Special Needs (N = 50)

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	Std. Dev.
My classmates treat me with respect and kindness.	3 (6.0%)	9 (18.0%)	8 (16.0%)	25 (50.0%)	5 (10.0%)	3.40	1.09
Most students in my class are friendly and helpful towards me.	8 (16.0%)	9 (18.0%)	12 (24.0%)	19 (38.0%)	2 (4.0%)	2.96	1.18
My peers feel comfortable interacting with me during class activities.	1 (2.0%)	22 (44.0%)	12 (24.0%)	10 (20.0%)	5 (10.0%)	2.92	1.07
I feel accepted as an equal member of my class by my classmates.	4 (8.0%)	20 (40.0%)	6 (12.0%)	14 (28.0%)	6 (12.0%)	2.96	1.23
Other students make fun of my disability.	16 (32.0%)	20 (40.0%)	8 (16.0%)	6 (12.0%)	0 (0.0%)	2.08	0.99

Table 2 demonstrates peer attitudes of students towards disability in inclusive classrooms (N = 50). According to the results, the majority of students with disabilities believed that they were moderately respected and accepted by their mates.

The peer behavior was generally positive with the highest mean ($M = 3.40$) being that of My classmates treat me with respect and kindness. Nevertheless, most students in my class are friendly and helpful toward me ($M = 2.96$) and I feel accepted as an equal member of my class ($M = 2.96$) are moderate with a possible indication of mixed feelings about inclusion. The minimal average ($M = 2.08$) of the other students make fun of my disability implies that teasing or mocking was not very prevalent. In general, students indicated that social acceptance was fair but could be better in terms of peer interaction and inclusion in the classroom.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of Students' Social Acceptance and Peer Inclusion (N = 50)

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	Std. Dev.
I am invited to participate in group discussions and projects.	5 (10.0%)	19 (38.0%)	6 (12.0%)	14 (28.0%)	6 (12.0%)	2.94	1.25
My classmates like to spend free time or breaks with me.	5 (10.0%)	12 (24.0%)	12 (24.0%)	19 (38.0%)	2 (4.0%)	3.02	1.10
I feel included during classroom celebrations or events.	7 (14.0%)	7 (14.0%)	13 (26.0%)	19 (38.0%)	4 (8.0%)	3.12	1.19
I have close friends among my non-disabled peers.	6 (12.0%)	10 (20.0%)	13 (26.0%)	16 (32.0%)	5 (10.0%)	3.08	1.19
I feel isolated or left out in group activities.	7 (14.0%)	18 (36.0%)	11 (22.0%)	13 (26.0%)	1 (2.0%)	2.66	1.08

Table 3 demonstrates the descriptive statistics of the social acceptance and peer inclusion of students in inclusive classrooms ($N = 50$). The general results show average scores of social inclusion among students with disabilities. The highest mean was obtained in the statement of being included in classroom celebrations or events ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 1.19$), which implied that the majority of students felt that they were welcome in the activities of the school together. Likewise, there is a generally positive but diverse experience of friendship and social bonding reflected in I have close friends among my non-disabled peers ($M = 3.08$) and My classmates like to spend free time or breaks with me ($M = 3.02$). On the other hand, the item of being invited to engage in group discussions and projects ($M = 2.94$) indicates that peer collaboration is not a completely opened activity, and many students are still not involved in group learning activities. The value of the statement I feel isolated or left out in group activities has a lower mean ($M = 2.66$) which means that, although the extent of isolation is not high, some students are still socially excluded. In general, these findings would indicate that even though the social acceptance is on the rise,

more unified actions are required to promote the equal participation and meaningful inclusion of students with disabilities.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics of Awareness and Understanding of Disability and Inclusion (N = 50)

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	Std. Dev.
My classmates understand my disability and how it affects my learning.	1 (2.0%)	8 (16.0%)	14 (28.0%)	22 (44.0%)	5 (10.0%)	3.44	0.95
Teachers help other students learn how to support me in class.	0 (0.0%)	8 (16.0%)	19 (38.0%)	21 (42.0%)	2 (4.0%)	3.34	0.80
Students in my school know what inclusive education means.	4 (8.0%)	15 (30.0%)	14 (28.0%)	16 (32.0%)	1 (2.0%)	2.90	1.02
My peers are willing to learn more about disabilities and inclusion.	1 (2.0%)	12 (24.0%)	17 (34.0%)	18 (36.0%)	2 (4.0%)	3.16	0.91
Many students believe that learners with disabilities cannot study well.	10 (20.0%)	14 (28.0%)	11 (22.0%)	14 (28.0%)	1 (2.0%)	2.64	1.16

Table 4 presents the awareness and knowledge of disability and inclusion among students (N = 50). Good peer awareness is reflected in the highest mean (M = 3.44) on the statement My classmates understand my disability and how it affects my learning. Equally, when teachers are actively involved in promoting inclusion, it is demonstrated in the statement that teachers help other students to learn how to support me in class (M = 3.34). Nevertheless, it is low among peers as indicated by the statement of the students in my school know what inclusive education is (M = 2.90). The minimum mean (M = 2.64) of the question: Many students believe that according to learners with disabilities, it is impossible to study well indicates that not all of the negative attitudes are eliminated. Generally, the level of awareness is moderate, yet more education and advocacy should be provided to enhance knowledge and decrease the number of misconceptions.

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics of Classroom Accessibility and Support (N = 50)

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	Std. Dev.
My classroom has facilities or tools that help me participate fully.	11 (22.0%)	16 (32.0%)	7 (14.0%)	15 (30.0%)	1 (2.0%)	2.58	1.20
The seating arrangement in class makes it easy for me to interact with others.	3 (6.0%)	9 (18.0%)	18 (36.0%)	16 (32.0%)	4 (8.0%)	3.18	1.02
My teachers modify class activities so I can join in equally.	4 (8.0%)	4 (8.0%)	19 (38.0%)	20 (40.0%)	3 (6.0%)	3.28	0.99
My peers help me when I face difficulty in completing tasks.	1 (2.0%)	9 (18.0%)	12 (24.0%)	25 (50.0%)	3 (6.0%)	3.40	0.93
The school environment makes me feel safe and supported.	4 (8.0%)	2 (4.0%)	18 (36.0%)	24 (48.0%)	2 (4.0%)	3.36	0.94

Table 5 shows the descriptive statistics of accessibility and support in classrooms (N = 50). The results indicate that students tend to have moderate to good levels of support in inclusive classrooms. The mean (M = 3.40) of the highest rating (My peers help me when I find difficulty in completing tasks) points to high levels of peer cooperation. In the same way, The school environment makes me feel safe and supported (M = 3.36) and My teachers modify class activities so I can join in equally (M = 3.28) are ratings of positive efforts by both teachers and peers, though physical accessibility or assistive tools are not as high. Moderate rating was given to the seating arrangement (M = 3.18), indicating the need to improve it. In general, the emotional and instructional support is good, but infrastructural access remains a concern that should be addressed to provide complete inclusion of students with disabilities.

Table 6: Descriptive Statistics of Emotional Well-being and Self-Confidence (N = 50)

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	Std. Dev.
I feel confident to express my ideas in front of my classmates.	0 (0.0%)	3 (6.0%)	16 (32.0%)	24 (48.0%)	7 (14.0%)	3.70	0.79
I feel motivated to learn when my peers encourage me.	0 (0.0%)	8 (16.0%)	15 (30.0%)	20 (40.0%)	7 (14.0%)	3.52	0.93
I feel anxious or nervous	9	10	14	17	0	2.78	1.11

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	Std. Dev.
when working with non-disabled peers.	(18.0%)	(20.0%)	(28.0%)	(34.0%)	(0.0%)		
My classmates' support makes me feel proud of my abilities.	3 (6.0%)	9 (18.0%)	13 (26.0%)	22 (44.0%)	3 (6.0%)	3.26	1.03
I believe I can achieve my goals despite my disability.	1 (2.0%)	11 (22.0%)	5 (10.0%)	15 (30.0%)	18 (36.0%)	3.76	1.22

Table 6 shows the descriptive statistics of emotional well-being of students and self-confidence (N = 50). The results show that students tend to experience positive emotional adjustment in inclusive classrooms. The mean (M = 3.76) of I believe I can achieve my goals despite my disability is highest and this indicates high self-belief among the students. Similarly, good levels of peer-inspired motivation and confidence in front of peers are implied by such statements as I feel confident to express my ideas in front of my classmates (M = 3.70) and I feel motivated to learn when my peers encourage me (M = 3.52).

Conversely, the mean of, I feel anxious or nervous when working with non-disabled peers (M = 2.78) is lower, which also means that there are some students who have social anxiety. On the whole, the findings show that students with disabilities tend to have a healthy self-esteem and confidence, which is facilitated by positive peer relationships and inclusive classrooms.

Summary

This paper explored the perceptions and responses of the upper secondary students of Gilgit-Baltistan towards their disabled peers in the inclusive learning environment. Even though inclusive education promotes diversity and equality, this success largely relies on how students treat each other. Persons with Disabilities Act (2019) provides the right to inclusive education in Pakistan, although, because of the lack of awareness, insufficient teacher training, and the persistence of prejudice in society, it is not yet widely practiced.

The quantitative research method was used to systematically explore the perceptions of students based on a random selection of 50 participants (27 males and 23 females) in both state and privately-run higher secondary schools. The five main areas included peer attitudes, social acceptance, awareness, classroom support, and emotional well-being that were assessed through a structured Likert-scale questionnaire. The instrument was very reliable with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.82. The researcher personally collected the data after obtaining the informed consent of the participants and the school permission.

Even though full inclusion had not been achieved yet, the findings indicated that students usually enjoyed moderate acceptance and respect among their peers. It was found out that the level of awareness about disabilities and inclusive education was

relatively high, and the teachers played a vital role in assisting their peers in the support of inclusion. Some myths still persisted, such as some students doubting the ability of their fellow learners. There was also a lack of resources and classroom accessibility, particularly on assistive facilities.

These inconsistencies did not negatively affect the findings of emotional well-being. Although, still, some students were nervous or hesitant, most of the students were confident, motivated, and felt part of the inclusive classrooms. All in all, the research concluded that, despite the positive trends in Gilgit-Baltistan regarding its attitude to inclusion, the promotion of more systematic and structured peer cooperation, better infrastructure, and greater awareness efforts are still necessary. To create an inclusive environment, empathy, and equal opportunities to all students, the researcher proposes awareness campaigns, teacher training, and inclusive classroom practices.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight both progress and persistent challenges in fostering inclusive education at the higher secondary level in Gilgit-Baltistan. Overall, students exhibited moderately positive attitudes toward their peers with disabilities, suggesting growing acceptance and empathy. However, the data also revealed gaps in social interaction, awareness, and infrastructural support that continue to hinder full inclusion. Peer relationships emerged as a key factor influencing students' emotional well-being and participation. Many respondents felt respected and supported by classmates, which contributed to higher confidence and motivation levels. These results align with earlier studies emphasizing the importance of peer acceptance in shaping inclusive classroom dynamics (Avramidis & Norwich, 2010). Yet, limited participation in group discussions and occasional feelings of isolation indicate that inclusion is often superficial rather than fully participatory. This partial acceptance may stem from persistent stereotypes and a lack of structured interaction opportunities between students with and without disabilities.

Awareness about disability and inclusive education was found to be moderate. While some students understood their peers' needs and expressed willingness to learn more, misconceptions—such as doubts about the academic potential of students with disabilities—remained. This reflects findings by Ahmad and Malik (2018) and Schwab (2017), who noted that without systematic awareness programs, inclusion efforts remain incomplete. Teacher guidance was reported as an encouraging factor, showing that educator involvement plays a crucial role in shaping peer attitudes. Classroom support and accessibility were also mixed. Although students appreciated emotional and instructional assistance from teachers and peers, the lack of physical resources and adaptive facilities limited full participation. This imbalance between social and structural inclusion mirrors broader challenges in Pakistan's education system, where infrastructural development often lags behind policy intentions.

The emotional well-being outcomes were among the strongest aspects of the study. Students displayed resilience, self-belief, and confidence in their academic abilities despite limited resources. Positive peer interactions significantly enhanced their motivation, suggesting that even small acts of empathy can foster belonging and reduce anxiety.

Findings

According to the study, although there are still large gaps in attaining true inclusion, higher secondary students in Gilgit-Baltistan generally have moderately positive attitudes toward their classmates with disabilities.

Peer Attitudes:

Students with disabilities claimed that their peers treated them in the simplest manner of respect and kindness. Equal roles in class sessions and actual cooperation, however, were inconsistent. Inclusion was in most cases more social than active which appeared quite often.

Social Acceptance:

The participants indicated that they felt sufficiently integrated in the classrooms. There were numerous friends who made friendship with peers with no disability and attended school events. Nevertheless, there was often minimal participation in group work and discussions, which means that the acceptance is there, but there is still no deeper social integration.

Knowledge and Comprehension:

The general awareness of students about disabilities and inclusive education was moderate. There were lots of peers who were willing to offer support as they knew the effect that disabilities can impose on learning. The instructors were cooperative in inculcating this type of interpretation. Nevertheless, certain misunderstandings still persisted, particularly, the assumption that students with disabilities cannot compete with their peers academically.

Support and Accessibility in Classrooms:

Though the support of peers and teachers was sufficient in terms of academic and emotional support, facilities and facilities were not enough. Learners with physical or sensory impairments could not engage fully in most classrooms since they did not have adaptive facilities, accessible spatial planning, or assistive technology.

Emotional Well-Being:

Students with disability had much optimism and self-confidence with respect to learning. Positive peer relationships made them more motivated and reduce their social anxiety. Most participants noted a positive sense of belonging and intentions to achieve success even though a few noted feelings of anxiety working with peers who were not disabled.

Recommendations

Promote Sensitization and Awareness:

Schools need to conduct frequent seminars, workshops, and awareness campaigns to inform the students about different disabilities and values of inclusion. These programs can help build sympathy, break stereotypes and develop a culture of acceptance.

Include Inclusion in the Curriculum:

Themes of inclusive education should be integrated into every academic and extra-curricular activity. Storytelling, class discussions, and service-learning activities are some of the activities that foster social cohesion and normalize diversity.

Enhance Teacher Capacity:

The teachers should receive continuous professional training on classroom management, differentiated instruction, and inclusive pedagogy. The role of teachers is vital in shaping the behaviors of other teachers; therefore must be ready to create classroom settings in which all students feel valued.

Improve Infrastructure and Accessibility:

To ensure a fair level of participation, schools ought to prioritize barrier-free design and accessibility changes, including ramps, adaptive seating, and assistive technologies. Physical accessibility is as significant as social inclusion.

Promote Cross-functional Co-operation and Mentoring:

Learning activities with mixed abilities, group projects, and planned peer tutoring should be encouraged. Such programs provide empathy, reduce the social distance, and foster significant interaction between students with and without disabilities.

Provide Psychological and Emotional Support:

Counseling and mentorship programs should be opened up in order to address the emotional needs of students with disabilities and enhance their self-esteem. Relationships between people can also be enhanced through peer mentorship programs.

Assure Policy Implementation and Evaluation:

Local education authorities in remote and underserved regions should implement regular monitoring and accountability systems to enforce the current inclusive the education policies, such as the Persons with Disabilities Act (2019).

Engage Parents and Communities:

Inclusive practice beyond school walls can be enlarged by organizing joint events and awareness campaigns with parents, local authorities, and local organizations to promote social inclusion in the long term.

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