LETTER TO EDITOR

Dear Editor,

Inclusive Education in Pakistan: Role of Teachers' Sense of Self-Efficacy

The worldwide inclination toward inclusive education has made it possible for children with disability to be included in mainstream schools (Ozokcu, 2018). Inclusive education is regarded as a transformation that intends to remove all obstacles to the inclusion of every learner into the mainstream school system, irrespective of their disability (Hamenoo & Dayan, 2021). The idea of inclusion reflects a thoughtful approach that accepts, respects, and values diversity and differences among all individuals. It also targets the development of school systems for every individual (Ghosh, 2022). The drive toward inclusive education lays stress on teaching children with disabilities in regular classrooms. The current reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1997) also includes wide-ranging provisions that boost the enrolment of students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms.

According to Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory (1977), "[it is] an individual's belief in his or her capacity to execute behaviors necessary to produce specific performance attainments. Self-efficacy reflects confidence in the ability to exert control over one's motivation, behavior, and social environment". The teacher's belief signifies a vital variable in discovering the effective execution of an inclusive course of action. Also, the teacher's opinion plays a pivotal role in catering to disabilities and it has a direct influence on students' learning and development (Raath & Hay, 2016). The role of teachers in inclusive educational settings differs from their conventional role. Regular school teachers must be aware of the variety of contemporary classroom setups and must be able to modify their instructional plans following the diversity of learning styles within the classroom (Abbas, Zafar, & Naz, 2016).

Hameed and Manzoor (2019) stated that it is generally observed that teachers face increased stress as their roles diversify and they become reluctant to cater to disabilities. Many teachers working in inclusive as well as non-inclusive schools lack preparation to teach children with disabilities (Shaukat & Rasheed, 2015). Previous research studies showed that while teachers support inclusive educational settings, they are often not confident about teaching children with

disabilities, using appropriate resources and managing classrooms (Khan & Behlol, 2014). Therefore, it is very important to know the relationship between teachers' sense of self-efficacy and their opinions, as it helps to determine the role of teachers' self-awareness in promoting inclusive education (Ghosh, 2022).

We conducted a research study that examined the correlation between the teachers' sense of self-efficacy for an inclusive classroom setup and their opinions regarding the inclusion of children with special educational needs in a regular school setting. It is important to understand that in Pakistan the terms 'children with special educational needs' and 'children with disabilities' are often used interchangeably. The findings of the research study showed a significant positive relationship between the teachers' opinions about inclusion and the promotion of inclusive settings in schools. Positive opinions of teachers create the foundation for inclusive educational practices. In this regard, a positive school ethos and positive attitudes among the workforce are factors that make a significant contribution to successful inclusion.

The data analysis in the current study also revealed that the teachers' sense of self-efficacy offers complementary mediation between their opinions about inclusion and inclusive settings in schools. Therefore, the teachers' confidence proved to be a significant construct in expressing teachers' positive attitudes to promote inclusion. This finding is consistent with that of other research studies carried out, including Ozokcu (2018) and Dalanon and Matsuka (2017). The findings from previous research studies proposed that teachers' acceptance of the presence of children with special educational needs is among the key predictors of positive attitudes concerning their inclusion of them.

Bandura (1977) found that teachers who have an act of courage and assertiveness demonstrate greater levels of organizational planning, maintain self-confidence and enthusiasm, and are more capable of coping with their stress and negative opinions. Sharma, Simi, and Forlin (2015) stated that teacher's belief in themselves is a significant factor that is found to affect the instructional practices of teachers in inclusive classroom setups. This self-confidence is of major importance for the success of inclusive practice within mainstream classrooms. The present research study suggests that teachers with a greater belief in their ability are usually keen to try out new techniques that cater to the requirements of their students with disability. Keeping in view the growing demand for implementing inclusive educational practices and, above all, Pakistan being a signatory to Sustainable Development Goals, this letter to the Editor provides a recommendation to meet

the demands of Sustainable Development Goals. The Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 4) highlights the provision of inclusive and equitable quality education for all. It also emphasizes eliminating all differences in education and ensuring the inclusion of persons with disabilities (United Nations, 2015).

The study findings point towards some indicators that can make inclusive education more effective.

Increasing the level of self-efficacy of teachers

- Professional development: The study found that a teacher's self-motivation is regarded as an imperative element in terms of supporting the idea of inclusive instructional practices. Hence, teacher education programs can be effective in increasing teachers' efficiency. This can be achieved through pre-service and in-service training programs for engaging with children with special educational needs. Self-confidence in instructional approaches, learner engagement, and classroom management are needed for successful teaching and learning. Investing in teacher education programs is recommended as this can have a positive impact on the development of a country's human resources. Professional development courses enable teachers to develop the necessary competencies to teach children with special educational needs. Developing their confidence can be a means of enhancing teachers' self-efficacy. Therefore continuous professional development is needed.

- Training workshops: In addition, the research study indicated that collaboration among different stakeholders through training workshops can play a pivotal role in boosting confidence, thus enhancing self-efficacy.

- Curriculum development: There is a need to put more effort into the provision of pertinent human and material resources. The material resources includes relevant teaching material and teaching strategies in the curriculum. The curriculum must be designed to support teachers in imparting pedagogical practices to facilitate children with special educational needs.

Increasing the collaboration among stakeholders

- Collaboration among teachers: The concept of collaborative teaching is a need of the day. For this, teachers must share their experiences with one another. The teachers who are catering to children with special educational needs must train those who are not teaching such children. This can be a means

of increasing self-confidence as the teacher's poise enables the students to perform effectively. This can be organized in the form of an in-service development course in which competencies can be fostered that are necessary to educate students with disabilities. The teacher-to-teacher interaction can play a vital role in the effective execution of inclusive educational practices

- Collaboration among teachers and school leadership: If the leadership of schools, are willing to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal of having inclusive schools, then they should work towards providing opportunities for professional development of teachers; this can pave the way towards inclusive settings in schools. The school must include classroom teachers in all phases of inclusive policy development. There is a need to improve the quality of instructional techniques and the provision of material resources. The curriculum must be designed in such a way that it enables teachers to feel equipped with knowledge, skills, and right attitudes to support children with disabilities.

- Collaboration with policymakers: The government should establish more professional development organizations for preparing teachers to enable the effective implementation of inclusive practices. A support mechanism must be provided that encourages transformation in attitudes, opinions, morals, and behavior. The major issues identified in this research study – with regard to teachers' professional development, student requirements, and resources - are vital for successful inclusive practices. The current pre-service and in-service teacher programs must be re-assessed and reinforced to improve specific programs that pave the way towards inclusion. There is a need for instant policy change; without this change there could be many hurdles in the path of taking the inclusion agenda forward. The government must include classroom teachers in all phases of inclusive policy development.

Modification is the key to successful inclusion

For students with disabilities, the key to success in the classroom lies in having appropriate adaptations, accommodations, and modifications made to the mode of instruction and other classroom activities. Different instructional strategies need to be adopted and modified to cater to the needs of the learners with disabilities.

- Development of individualized instruction plans: There is a need to put into practice a variety of individualized instructional methods in order to cater to children with special educational needs. An individualized instructional plan is a modified plan where a child with a disability is provided with a modified version of the content and classroom activities to develop a better understanding of a particular topic. This involves the contribution of different stakeholders, including teachers and leaders, to develop a plan that can present topics to students with disability in a simplified form.

- Provision of the least restrictive environment: When children with special educational needs study in the same classroom setup with children without disabilities, the school can create a conducive learning environment by modifying the content and strategies according to the type and intensity of disability; this is an example of providing the least restrictive environment. The schools should give an assurance to parents and children that the least restrictive environment will be provided.

The conclusion drawn from our research study is that regular schools can turn into inclusive schools if all individuals in the educational sector work together. It is a complicated process which demands deliberate targeted effort, encouragement, and specific behaviors of leading stakeholders. Pertinent attention should be given to the professional development of teachers in order to enhance their self-efficacy. Suggestions from our study, as well as from earlier related studies, specify the prerequisite to measure teacher attitudes, apprehensions and obligations in their opinions towards professional development in inclusion. The challenge for policymakers will be to address these issues effectively if inclusion for all learners is to become a reality. Inclusive educational practices require continuous support and encouragement for all stakeholders, as inclusion is an endless journey towards a common vision.

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Mahwish Kamran[1*], Martin Thomas[2]
1. Iqra University, Pakistan
2. Forman Christian College (a Chartered University), Pakistan

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*   Corresponding Author: Mahwish Kamran, Researcher in Inclusive Education, Iqra University, Pakistan. Email:Mahwishkamrankhan@gmail.com