

## CULTURAL MEANINGS OF DISABILITY AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON INCLUSIVE TEACHING DECISIONS IN URBAN AND RURAL SCHOOLS OF PAKISTAN

<sup>\*</sup>**Uzma Rafique**

<sup>2</sup>**Anoosha Maryem**

<sup>3</sup>**tanveer Fatiman**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Education, University of management and technology Lahore

<sup>2</sup>Department of Sociology and Criminology, University of Sargodha

<sup>3</sup>Lecturer Department of Pakistan Studies, National University of Modern Languages, Lahore, Pakistan

[\\*Uzzmalik78@yahoo.com](mailto:Uzzmalik78@yahoo.com), [^anooshamaryem4751@gmail.com](mailto:anooshamaryem4751@gmail.com)

### Abstract

Reforms of inclusive education have increased the number of special educators working in regular schools but their place of operation in the inclusive environment is defined vaguely. The proposed work will focus on role conflict as it presents itself to special educators in inclusive schools and colleges in Pakistan, where it deals with the tension of professional identity and overall institutional expectations versus daily practice. The mismatch in policy ideals of collaboration and the disjointed realities of inclusive schooling are the subjects of research problem. The main aim of the research was to investigate the role identities of special educators working in the context of the inclusive setting in terms of what they perceive their work, how they negotiate their conflicting duties, and how they build up professional identity. A qualitative research design was utilized, where the semi-structured interviews with special educators in the public and private inclusive institutions were used to obtain the data. The paper presupposed the assumption that organizational structures, power relations, and ambiguous policy guidance determine role conflict, where the boundaries are determined by workload, staffing patterns, and leadership practices. These conclusions indicate that there exist ongoing strains associated with the cooperation with the general teachers, the anticipations of remediation over inclusion, discriminated status among school hierarchies, and emotional stress related to these professional uncertainties. These results are consistent with the international investigation of the role conflict in inclusive education and can be accompanied by the country-specific information in Pakistan. The paper finds that the presence of unresolved role conflict disrupts the wellbeing of professionals as well as the inclusiveness of education.

### Article Details:

Received on 22 Nov, 2025

Accepted on 26 Dec, 2025

Published on 31 Dec 2025

Corresponding Authors\*  
Uzma Rafique



## Introduction

The recent changes in inclusive education have greatly transformed the professional environment of special educators, who now find themselves in mainstream schools and colleges as the major change agents of inclusion. Special educators in general are supposed to collaborate with general teachers, assist diverse learners, and lead to whole-school inclusive practices at the international level (Friend and Cook, 2013; Florian, 2019). These broadened expectations are, however, hypothesized to be accompanied by indistinct role definitions and conflicting demands (Billingsley et al., 2019). Endorsing inclusive education policies in Pakistan has been in a dissimilar way with little indications regarding the role that special educators should assume in mainstream institutions (Singal, 2008). Because of this, special educators often find themselves on the unsteady sides of professional lines in trying to balance an inclusive philosophy with institutional facts.

One of the assumptions that are common in the policy of inclusive education is that the inclusion of special educators in regular learning environments will automatically result in effective co-operation and better service with severe pupils. Nonetheless, this has become a focal point of studies that have reported incessant role conflict, marginalization, and isolation of special educators (Scruggs et al., 2007; Slee, 2011). Although role conflict has been under international research in an inclusive context, empirical research on the experience of special educator in Pakistan wherein this conflicts have been examined both among schools and even colleges is at a low (Ehsan, 2018). The next question that is raised by this gap is as: How do special educators in Pakistani inclusive schools and colleges experience and negotiate role conflict in their professional practice?

This research will be aimed at investigating the nature of role conflict conducting among special educators teaching in inclusive schools and colleges in Pakistan. The paper analyses special educators to understand how they understand their professional roles, negotiate their collaboration with general educators as well as construct their professional identity in inclusive institutions by applying a qualitative approach. The results show intolerances between remedial centered expectations and an inclusive pedagogical vision, and incidences of marginalization in the school hierarchies. This study empowers the literature of inclusive education by spotting uninvestigated issues of Global South professional challenges, since the central focus is on the voices of special educators. The article has a literature review, which is followed by the methodology, results, discussion, and conclusion.

## Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

Special educators have their functions radically changed with the worldwide move towards inclusive education. Although inclusion policies focus on cooperation and shared accountability, the studies show that special education teachers feel that their roles are not clear and they are frequently involved in conflict situations at general institutions. This literature review focuses on the scholarly work concerning role conflict, professional self, collaboration relations, power relations in institutions, and emotional work of special educators. The guiding question of this study is, How is role conflict experienced and negotiated by special educators in inclusive learning environments? This question is answered in the review. The synthesis of international literature with the investigations of Pakistan and other Global South contexts results in this review, which points out the prevailing themes, contradictions, and gaps in the research, which uphold a qualitative study of the lived professional experiences in special educators.

## 2.2 Development of Special Educator as a Role

In the past, special educators would teach in segregated or resource-room facilities with very clear roles (Friend and Cook, 2013). Their functions were increased by having inclusive education reforms where they would participate in collaboration, consultation, and co-teaching in the regular classrooms (Florian, 2019). Although such changes are consistent with the principles of inclusiveness, studies indicate that role expansion has in most cases been done without any form of structural backup and explanation (Scruggs et al., 2007). Such shift has created conflicts between conventional, remedial based anticipations and inclusive, whole-class supportive functions.

## 2.3 Role Conflict and Role Ambiguity

Role conflict arises when professionals are exposed to conflicting expectations and, in role ambiguity, the professionals are not aware of their duties (Kahn et al., 1964). The research is always consistent in stating that special educators witness both of these phenomena in inclusive environments (Billingsley et al., 2019; Brunsting et al., 2014). Special teachers are usually supposed to offer a personalized support, paperwork, work with general teachers, and resolve behavioral issues at the same time. Such competing roles are some of the factors that lead to professional stress and decreased role satisfaction.

## 2.4 Cooperation with the General Educators

It places collaboration at the center of inclusive education, but studies indicate that there are still consistent challenges in regards to co-teaching and consultation models (Friend et al., 2010). The unequal power relations, lack of time to plan, and sidelining in collaborative arrangements are common reports of special educators (Murawski & Hughes, 2009). Research shows that teamwork tends to be superficial instead of actually shared and serve to strengthen role conflict instead of resolving it.

## 2.5 Professional Identity and Marginalization

Professional identity theory makes an emphasis on the process through which people create meaning and value about the roles they perform at work (Beijaard et al., 2004). It has also been argued in research that special educators working in an inclusive classroom will find it difficult to sustain a professional identity that is coherent based on changing expectations (Conderman and Johnston-Rodriguez, 2009). Inequality in school structures like being left out in decision making and leadership also deteriorate professional identity as well as add to invisibility (Slee, 2011).

## 2.6 Occupation Stress and Emotional Labor

The inclusion education emotional needs have been extensively researched. The special educators record the presence of emotional labor, which is highly linked to advocacy, conflict management, and the necessity to fill the gaps in the system (Brunsting et al., 2014). Burnout, attrition, and lower wellbeing in special educators have been related to role conflict (Billingsley and Bettini, 2019). These affective aspects point to the human aspect of role ambiguity which cannot be resolved within inclusive systems.

## 2.7 Pakistani and global South Situation

Studies of Global South underscore the fact that the reforms of inclusive education tend to be carried out in systems that are limited by the resources (Miles and Singal, 2010; Grech, 2011). Research reports suggest a lack of professional growth, role definition, and hierarchical cultures in schools, which deny special educators equal status in Pakistan (Singal, 2008; Ehsan, 2018). The special educators often lack institutional acknowledgement and power, which exacerbates role conflict even though they are subject to policies.

## 2.8 Synthesis and Research Gap

Through a collection of the reviewed literature, it is possible to identify seven mutually related themes: (a) role expansion with no clarity, (b) role conflict and ambiguity, (c) tensions within collaboration, (d) professional marginalization, (e) emotional labor and stress, (f) power relations in schools, and (g) a dearth of Pakistan-focused qualitative research. Although there is a correlation of these issues in international literature, there is very limited empirical research on how special educators in Pakistan conceptualize and negotiate the role conflict in schools and colleges. This gap is filled in the current study as it focuses on the voices and lived professional experience of special educators.

## Research Methodology

### 3.1 Methodological Approach

This paper has investigated the role conflict that special educators exposed to when teaching in inclusive schools and colleges in Pakistan. The studies centered on the issue of unclear role expectations that are due to inclusive education changes that increase the number of duties and responsibilities, but fail to offer institutional direction. Due to the concern with the professional identity, lived experience, and meaning-making, the research employed the qualitative interpretive approach to the research. The study was based on primary data and was conducted according to a descriptive and exploratory design, which contributed to the possibility of thoroughly examining how special teachers perceive their work and can settle contradictory requirements in the context of inclusion. The qualitative approach was chosen due to its ability to embrace complexity, contradiction, and situational forces that affect professional practice (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

### 3.2 Data Collection Methods

The schools and colleges that were selected to be included in the data collection covered inclusive public and private schools and colleges in Punjab, Sindh, and Khyber Pakhtunkhawanin representative of diverse institutional structure and students. The participants were [approximately 25-40] special educators who had formal training in special education and experience of working in inclusive settings. The participants were recruited by purposive sampling and needed to work with general educators on a regular basis as well as be under a variety of institutional expectations. The method used in data collection was semi-structured interviews, and it covered the role expectations, work experiences at the workplace in terms of collaboration, work load, professional recognition and emotional issues. Interviews were done in the language of choice of the participants. Research ethics were achieved, informed consent, confidentiality and voluntary participation were established.

### 3.3 Data Analysis Methods

The data of the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed literal, and the thematical analysis was conducted. The steps of analysis were performed in the six-phase model by Braun and Clarke (2006), such as familiarization and initial coding, then theme development and refinement. Coding was carried out around role ambiguity, contradicting expectations, collaborative interactions, professional identity, and emotive labor. Data analysis programs qualitative data (e.g., NVivo) were applied to put data in order. Constant comparison among participants and reflexive memo writing were used to strengthen analytic rigor and record analytical decisions and positionality of the researcher.

### 3.4 Methodology Evaluation and Justification

The research of role conflict as a context-dependent and subjective phenomenon was suitable to be considered in terms of the qualitative approach of interpretive inquiry. The nature of semi-structured interviews allowed dedication to tensions and contradictions in the work of

the special educators typically unobserved in official policy statements. The background of both schools and colleges increased the scope of the viewpoints. Weaknesses encompass use of self-reported information, the study did not contain observational or analysis of documents, which could have offered further information on enacted roles. These restrictions were dealt with by probing, comparing cross cases, and reflexive analysis. In spite of these limitations, the methodology has a strong design in comprehending include education professional role conflict.

## Results

This section will show the result of the semi-structured interviews conducted with special educators, based in Pakistani inclusive schools and colleges. The findings are about the types of role conflict encountered by the respondents and they are presented as subject themes that were similar throughout the aspects of institutional settings.

The definition of role is also ambiguous; the supervisor is unfamiliar with the job description provided by the HR director (Tan et al, 2005, p. 473)

### 4.1 Unclear Role Definition

Respondents always had doubts about their formal positions in inclusive institutions. Special teachers reported receiving conflicting or repetitive guidance with school leadership, the general teachers and parents. A few participants said that they were alternatively assigning the roles of a classroom helper, remedial teacher, counselor, or administrative support. Role expectations were seldom put in official job descriptions thus creating ambiguity regarding professional boundaries both in schools and in colleges.

### 4.2 Tension between Remediation and Inclusion

Special educators cited conflict of expectations to offer individualized remediation and goals of inclusive education that focus on collective accountability. Students reported being dragged out of classes to tutor individual students and at the same time be expected to promote inclusive classroom activities. These competing demands were indicated at grade levels and types of institutions helping in the broken practice of the profession.

### 4.3 Cooperation Problems With General Teachers

According to the participants, the problematic areas were the ability to work with general educators, which entailed the lack of time to plan, unequal distribution of decision-making authority, and inadequate communication. Other special educators reported that they were invited as consultants to students who were viewed as problematic but not as having an equal role in the process of instructional planning. The working together was mostly in informal way and based on personal relations instead of the form of institutions.

### 4.4 Professional Marginalization In Institutions

Special teachers indicated feelings of discrimination in the school and college structures. The participants said that they were not included in staff meetings, curriculum planning, and leadership roles. Others said their experience was not well regarded as compared to subject teachers. These were mentioned in the reports in both the public and the private institutions and affected the views of professional status.

### 4.5 Emotional Labor and Stress at Work

The respondents claimed that there was great emotional labor in dealing with role conflict. Special teachers reported being frustrated, exhausted, and less professionally satisfied. Balancing between student advocacy and the compliance of the institutions was associated with emotional strain. Sustained stress also led some of the participants to think of switching roles or quitting inclusive settings.



#### 4.6 Observed Data Limitations

There are some limitations within which the results should be taken into consideration. Information was based on the self-reported data by special educators which could be subjective. Reported practices cannot be verified due to the lack of observational data. Also, the sample used is qualitative and therefore one cannot generalize to other institutional contexts. These restrictions are accepted and not further clarified, and they will be met subsequently in the Discussion section.

#### Discussion

##### 5.1 Summary of Major Findings

This paper has discussed role conflict among special educators in inclusive schools and colleges in Pakistan. The results demonstrate the long-standing uncertainty in role definitions, conflict between remediation and inclusive roles, and collaboration issues with regular educators, professional marginalization in institutional roles and structures, and a lot of emotional work. These conclusions suggest that role conflict is an organizational characteristic of inclusive education and not an individual professional challenge.

##### 5.2 Interpretation of Findings

The results indicate that role conflict develops as a result of conflicting expectations that are inherent in the structures of inclusive education. The role model of special educators is ambivalent to play the role of remediation specialist and facilitator of inclusion at the same time and the creation of incompatible professional requirements. During negotiations, special educators are forced to negotiate legitimacy, authority, and responsibility every time due to open role boundaries. The emotional labor accounted can be seen as the accumulated effect of having to navigate amid uncertainty, advocacy requirement and institutional limitation without any formal recognition or support.

##### 5.3 Relation with Existing Literature

These results are consistent with the previous study of role ambiguity and role conflict among special educators working in inclusive school environments (Billingsley et al., 2019; Scruggs et al., 2007). Research on collaboration also shows that there exist unequal power dynamics and symbolic and not substantive partnership between special and general educators (Friend et al., 2010; Murawski and Hughes, 2009). This dispute of special educators is a reflection of critical views of inclusive schooling which focus on structural inequities and professional invisibility (Slee, 2011). This research builds on Global South scholarship of inclusive education reform with resource and policy limitations by centering on Pakistan (Singal, 2008; Grech, 2011).

##### 5.4 Limitations of the Study

There are a number of limitations that need to be mentioned. The research made use of self-reported information that might not be a comprehensive indication of enacted professional practices. Formal role definitions and institutional discourse are not open to insight when there is no analysis of observable or documents. Moreover, the qualitative sample also limits the generalizability as the participants were representatives of various institutions. These shortcomings indicate the possibility of future studies involving both mixed-method or ethnographic studies.

##### 5.5 Theoretical and Practical implications.

Theoretically, the present study can fit in the literature on the inclusivity in education by conceptualizing role conflict as systematically shaped by policy ambiguity and institutional organization. In practical terms, the results have indicated that there is a need of clear role definition, joint planning mechanisms, and professional school recognition of special educators in inclusive schools. Role conflict is a critical issue that needs to be addressed by

both the educator wellbeing and effective and sustainable inclusive education practices in Pakistan.

## 5.6 Alternative Explanations

Role conflict could also be justified by other organizational issues like, staffing shortage, administrative overload and examination-focused priorities instead of exclusion issues. The difference in leadership practice and the institutional culture could also have a bearing on the level of role conflict among special educators. All these are indicative of the fact that role conflict is influenced by overlapping organizational forces.

## 5.7 Reconnection of the Research Question

Coming back to the research question which is how special educators in Pakistani inclusive schools and colleges experience and negotiate role conflict, the research findings show that special educators are involved in ongoing professional negotiation in a context of conflicting expectations, lack of power, and emotional expectations. The research validates that role conflict which is not addressed cripples professional identity and inclusive objectivity of education.

## Conclusion

This paper aimed to analyze the role of conflict that special educators of inclusive schools and colleges in Pakistan encounter to fill a gap in the extremely vital yet severely understudied aspect of inclusive education reform. Once again, the main issue that was raised in the research is the fact that inclusive policies enable collaboration and collective responsibility, but in most instances they do not specify the specific roles of special educators in clear and operational terms. Once again establishing the central thesis of the study, the results prove the fact that role conflict is not accidental but is structurally generated by the unclear expectations, hierarchical school cultures and diverging professional needs.

The research found that role ambiguity persisted, conflicts arose between the remediation and inclusive practice, difficulty in working with general educators, marginalization of the profession, and heavy emotional workload. The findings are relevant to the scholarly field of inclusive education by qualifying the professional experience of special educators and pointing to human and institutional costs of inadequately resolved role conflict. Using the introduction, again, the study highlights the fact that without clear role structures and professional acknowledgement, inclusive education is not a viable practice.

The full meaning of the current study is its implications to policy, leadership and sustainability of the workforce in Pakistan. The explanation of professional tasks, the development of fair collaboration models, and the acknowledgment of the special education teachers proficiency are the keys to effective inclusion. Future studies need to investigate practices of leadership and policy structures that foster role ambiguity and professional health within inclusive systems of education.

## References

Al-Aoufi, H., Al-Zyoud, N., & Shahminan, N. (2015). Islam and disability. *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health*, 19(4), 327–346.

Avramidis, E., & Norwich, B. (2002). Teachers' attitudes towards integration/inclusion. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 17(2), 129–147.

Barnes, C., & Mercer, G. (2010). *Exploring disability* (2nd ed.). Polity Press.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>

Ehsan, M. (2018). *Inclusive education in primary and secondary schools: Implementation challenges in Islamabad, Pakistan* (Doctoral dissertation). University of London.

Florian, L., & Black-Hawkins, K. (2011). Exploring inclusive pedagogy. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 41(4), 813–828.

Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Prentice Hall.

Grech, S. (2011). Recolonising disability. *Disability & Society*, 26(1), 87–100.

Grech, S. (2011). Recolonising disability: The critical global disability studies perspective. *Disability & Society*, 26(1), 87–100.

Hayat, S. (2016). Inclusive education in Pakistan: Barriers and prospects. *Pakistan Journal of Social Sciences*, 36(2), 1089–1102.

Ingstad, B., & Whyte, S. R. (2007). *Disability in local and global worlds*. University of California Press.

Jordan, A., Glenn, C., & McGhie-Richmond, D. (2009). The supporting effective teaching project. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 25(4), 535–542.

Meekosha, H. (2011). Decolonising disability. *Disability & Society*, 26(6), 667–682.

Miles, M. (2002). Some historical perspectives on disability in Muslim contexts. *Disability & Society*, 17(7), 813–829.

Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (3rd ed.). Sage.

Miles, S., & Singal, N. (2010). The education for all and inclusive education debate. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 14(1), 1–15.

Oliver, M. (1996). *Understanding disability*. Macmillan.

Pajares, M. F. (1992). Teachers' beliefs and educational research. *Review of Educational Research*, 62(3), 307–332.

Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (4th ed.). Sage.

Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough? *Field Methods*, 18(1), 59–82. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X05279903>

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage.

Maxwell, J. A. (2012). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach* (3rd ed.). Sage.

Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight "big-tent" criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16(10), 837–851. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410383121>

Shah, S. (2015). Education and social exclusion in Pakistan. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 36(5), 767–784. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2013.826035>

Shakespeare, T. (2014). *Disability rights and wrongs revisited*. Routledge.

Shifrer, D. (2013). Stigma of a label. *Social Psychology of Education*, 16(1), 67–85.

Singal, N. (2008). Working towards inclusion. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 24(6), 1516–1529.

Singal, N. (2008). Working towards inclusion: Reflections from the classroom. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 24(6), 1516–1529. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2008.01.007>

UNESCO. (2020). *Global education monitoring report: Inclusion and education—All means all*. UNESCO.

Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). Sage.