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Challenges Faced by Parents in Educational Inclusion of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

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Abstract

Parents of the children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are facing various obstacles in acquisition of admission to mainstream education in Pakistan for their child. This is happening due to social stigma based issues, inadequate teacher preparation, institutional gatekeeping issues, and financial constraints, etc. The available research has not captured the lived realities of parents in Pakistan. This study covers this gap through exploration of the real-time challenges which have been experienced by parents in Lahore in their attempts to secure educational inclusion for their children with ASD. For this purpose, a descriptive qualitative methodology is used. A semi-structured and open-ended questionnaires was administered to 15 parents, while doing purposive sampling. Data was collected and analysed thematically. The analysis is supported by direct quotations in order to preserve the authenticity of voices of parents. The findings of this study show that parents are experiencing emotional anguish at the time of diagnosis. They receive minimal professional or school-level support. They face repeated admission refusals or conditional acceptance with shadow teachers. Financial burdens further restrict their access. Additionally, there are cultural misconceptions and social stigmas which intensify their stress. Despite these constraints, parents demonstrate their resilience for the welfare of their child and they propose clear recommendations for policy and institutional reform. The study highlights that there is an urgent need for coordinated and comprehensive action at government level in order to get inclusive education for all in the Punjab, Pakistan.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder, Inclusive Education, Parental Challenges, Special Education

INTRODUCTION

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition which is categorized on the basis of dissimilarities in social communication besides restricted or repetitive behaviour or activities (Al-Dewik et al., 2020). The educational inclusion are those ways and means through which children with different learning needs are educated together with their normal fellows in mainstream school environment; though sometimes they need appropriate supports and accommodations (Ferraioli & Harris, 2011).

Internationally research shows an important shift in the mindset of nations toward the principle of inclusion. It ensures that all children including with ASD, have the right to acquire quality and free education within their society (Pellicano et al., 2018). This international momentum is backed by landmark recommendations of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (Fina, 2017). They upheld the right of every student though with ASD to have an inclusive education system with the essential support (if required) in order to reach their full potential. The concept of inclusion bounds the existing educational environment to make required changings and respond to diverse needs of children with ASD. It is now considered as a right (Byrne, 2022).

Keeping in view the above referred right of the children with ASD, the international policy frameworks have rightly shifted its focus from separated education system toward the inclusive education system. Major policy statements and educational guidelines emphasize that children with disabilities should learn in neighbourhood schools with necessary supports (Hagiwara et al., 2019). Various studies from different contexts showed that there are recurrent barriers in the path of effective inclusion (Waisman et al., 2022). It covers various issues such as inadequate teacher preparation in special-needs pedagogy (Devi et al., 2024; Loiacono & Allen, 2008); sometimes there are limited availability of specially designed classroom with therapeutic resources which need improvements (Crosland & Dunlap, 2012); rigid national curriculum for all (Moores-Abdool, 2010), besides negative attitudes or low expectations among some educators and fellows (Rodríguez et al., 2012). Therefore, families, and especially parents, have to bridge these gaps between school systems and their children special needs through provision of accommodations, arrangement of specialized hired services of special teachers called shadow teacher (Aristya et al., 2024).

Research of various countries show that parents all over the world face different types of difficulties covering a wide range of areas such as lack of information, fear of stigma in the community, and financial strain (Leyser & Kirk *, 2004; U. Sharma & Michael, 2017; Tryfon et al., 2021; Virani & Ali, 2022; Wong et al., 2015). All these resultantly curtail their ability to secure comprehensive education for their children. These circumstances highlight the need for in-depth anaylysis of the challenges which are being faced by parents in the educational inclusion of their children with ASD in the city of Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.

The objective of this study is to explore real-time perceptions of parent with regard to the barriers which they are facing about the educational inclusion for their children with ASD. Further, this study will help to identify the personal, school-level, and community-level challenges of parents. With an aim to document parental strategies and supports which they could use to promote the participation of children with ASD in mainstream education, this study develops certain recommendations in the conclusion for improvements in parental perspectives and for policymakers including the school leadership.

Although as above referred there is international literature available which identify common barriers to school inclusion, yet there is very limited research that focuses on perspectives of parents who lived in Pakistan, except few (Bukhari et al., 2025a; Kamran & Bano, 2025; Sarwar & un Nisa, 2024; Tahreem et al., 2025). Therefore, this study attempts to fill this gap through conducting in-depth interviews of parents with an aim to gain real-time perspectives and a ground based understanding of parental perspectives in order to reach actionable recommendations. Through this way, this study contributes to the existing knowledge on inclusive education for policymakers to improve mechanisms for education of children with ASD.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Global Mandates and the Context of Inclusive Education in Pakistan

Internationally, research shows that many countries have gradually adopted inclusive education policies for children with ASD. According to Slee (2011), inclusive education has its very important role to play in the completion of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through enabling equal access to quality education and lifelong learning for all persons, which include children with ASD. Although substantial international progress has been made toward making inclusive education more effective, yet there are many obstacles which still hinder many students with special needs to access and participate in the mainstream educational work. There are various factors which contribute this aspect, such as insufficient teacher preparation, inadequate availability of supportive services, negative social attitudes toward learners with ASD or special needs, and limited educational resources in under developing countries which make addition to weaken the effectiveness of inclusive education initiatives (DEBASU & CHEKOL, 2024).

Woolfson (2025) has discussed in his research paper that world has recognized that children with ASD or special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) are entitled to have access to inclusive education within available mainstream schools which should be designed to accommodate all types of learning requirements, because this right is supported by principle is reinforced by Article 24 of the UNCRPD, which obliges that everyone who is with disabilities is entitled to receive the necessary support to ensure an effective education and to promote their academic and social development (Fina, 2017). Similarly, Adekunle (2021) in his thesis has discussed about the goal 4.5 of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which do emphasis on the equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for marginalized and vulnerable groups of our society, and it includes children with ASD or disabilities. As a result of these international commitments, there has been seen a noteworthy increase in the inclusion of autistic students within mainstream classroom environment over the past decade (Maenner et al., 2020).

In Pakistan, the government's commitment to special education is shown through its various bodies like the Directorate General of Special Education, which also provides services such as assessment, diagnosis, speech and occupational therapies, and curriculum adjustments, etc. for children with special needs (DGSE, n.d.). However, the focus of government efforts is mostly remained on making separate schools for children with disabilities, instead of inclusion in regular schools. This shows that the system still follows a segregated approach and not the integrated one. In this context, this literature review discusses contemporary research about the challenges faced by parents in this system.

Parental involvement always plays a very important role in improvement of such students. Because interventions for children with ASD are based on cooperation between parents and teachers (Garbacz et al., 2016). It is necessary to support both the academic and behavioural development of the child. Furrukh and Anjum, (2020) has shown that in the social and cultural context of Pakistan, mothers usually work as the main caregivers. They are the ones who deal directly with schools and service providers for their children with ASD. Therefore, most studies on parental experiences focus mainly on mothers, which attempt to shed light on their high levels of stress, ways of coping, and the difficulties they face in routine life about finding suitable care and educational placements for their children.

Policy Discrepancies to Educational Inclusion

In Pakistan, one of the major barriers in inclusion of children with ASD comes from the policy of the government on disability classification. The Government of Punjab officially recognizes only five types of disabilities: visual impairment, hearing impairment, slow learning, physical disability, and mental disability. Because of this narrow classification, most of the available services and facilities are designed only for these groups through separate special schools. As a result, children with ASD and other neurodevelopmental or behavioural conditions are often left out of normal school systems and inclusion programmes. This policy gap precludes many children to become part of conventional education system (Noor, 2023).

However, the recent enactment of the Punjab Autism School and Resource Centre Act, 2025 represents a change in the policy of ASD in Punjab. The Act allows for the establishment of a specialized Centre. It will provide comprehensive education policy, therapy, training programmes, and it will also deal with the inclusive care for children with ASD. Its main goal is to enhance the overall development of children with ASD. The Act also seeks to fill gaps in diagnosis, professional preparation, and access to education. This was over all a delayed development in this area. The governing Board of the Centre has been assigned various responsibilities such as pre-service and in-service training programmes for teachers and associated professionals. Besides, there is also scope for research and training support to autism units throughout the province. These initiatives cover the previously identified deficiencies in teacher preparation and institutional support. This legislative development has been welcomed as a positive breakthrough. This reflects an improved government commitment to ensure that “no child shall be left behind.” (Special Education Department, n.d.).

Institutional and Financial Deficits

In Pakistan, the mainstream education system is generally seen as weak and not properly equipped to include children with ASD in regular classrooms (Hasson et al., 2024). Because schools do not have trained teachers, learning aids systems, and proper support services, that is why parents are left to take on most of the responsibility to arrange all required help for their children. This situation makes educational inclusion dependent on the parent’s financial status. So, those with more resources can turn to private institutions or therapy centers that offer specialized services. On the other hand, families with limited income left for struggle to find suitable educational options (Anwar et al., n.d.). This further widens the gap in access and opportunities for children with ASD.

Studies show that most of the mothers who participate in betterment of their child with ASD in Pakistan come from middle or upper-middle-class families (Furrukh & Anjum, 2020). They are usually the only families who can afford the costly and ongoing therapies. The rural–urban divide also creates a major barrier to inclusion. Families living in rural areas have to face serious financial and approachability problems, as they have to travel long distances to reach diagnostic centers or therapy services that are mostly available in cities (Bukhari et al., 2025b).

The Social Ecology of Diagnosis, Stigma, and Parental Wellbeing

The difficulties that parents face begin well before they start looking for a suitable school for their child. These challenges are dependent on low awareness levels, social and cultural attitudes towards disability, and the emotional stress that parents experience during the process of trying to understand and manage their child's condition (Anchesi et al., 2023; Hill et al., 2015; Ludlow et al., 2012).

Early intervention is the key point for improvement in these children (Fuller & Kaiser, 2020). But in Pakistan, delay in their diagnosis is very common (Yasir et al., 2025). Awareness about the autism is still limited among health professionals. It includes those pediatricians and general practitioners, who are typically the first people are ready to consult when fears rise (Imran et al., 2011). This lack of professional knowledge, along with obsolete religious or mythical beliefs and misconceptions about autism, over and over again results in late identification. Therefore, parents missed opportunities for early support and treatment (Aftab, Haider, et al., 2023).

The burden of tag of ASD in Pakistan is made much worse due to strong social stigma and cultural attitudes (Salman et al., 2024). This stigma causes both emotional and practical harm that children with ASD may face social rejection, in schools and communities. This lead their parents in an academic struggle, where they have to face depression, and lower their self-esteem (Aftab, Haider, et al., 2023). Moreover, there is another aspect which is traditional beliefs and misconceptions. People mix them with ideas about magic or divine punishments. This is another reason for late diagnosis (Aftab et al., 2024). Sometimes this stigma turns the blame toward their mothers. They are considered to be responsible for this condition. Eventually, it raised psychological and emotional stress of parents (Furrukh & Anjum, 2020).

Educational Accessibility and Quality: The Local Reality in Lahore/Punjab

Even if parents overcome the above referred challenges. Even if they get a proper diagnosis and deal with social stigma issue, even then they have to face certain other obstacles in order to get formal education for their child. In cities like Lahore, these difficulties are especially visible in the form of institutional barriers. Schools often lack trained teachers, appropriate classroom environments, and flexible admission policies for children with ASD (Khaliq et al., 2025). As a result, even in urban areas where educational facilities are abundant, there too, parents struggle to find inclusive schools that can support their child (Abbasi et al., 2025).

One of the most constant challenges faced by parents in Lahore is institutional gatekeeping. Many education schools refuse to admit children with ASD without any reason, and this makes it more difficult for parents to find appropriate schools (Marya et al., 2025). This rejection controverts expectations of parents. Yet there is support for inclusive education which is based on the belief that every child has the right to learn and develop social skills together with other children. However, there are various concerns about such academic inclusive programmes. There are concerns of possible negative treatment from other children in a class. Moreover, the lack of trained teachers or personalized support staff in mainstream classrooms are also another highlighted issue (Aftab, Ch, et al., 2023). Consequently, there is a prevalent crisis that shows parents are confused on the choice of education for their children with ASD (Anderson, 2020). Even in Lahore, which is a major urban city with several specialized private institutions, parents are facing limited and often unsatisfactory options: mainstream schools deny entry, government special schools are constrained by outdated policies and social stigma, and private schools, though more open but lack quality. As a result, parents are compelled to compromise on quality just to secure basic acceptance for their children (Saifuddin et al., 2025). However, now the government has started necessary changings in their policy toward special education for ASD (zahid, 2025).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study aims to investigate the challenges which are faced by parents in securing educational inclusion for their children with ASD within Lahore, Punjab. This inquiry is important because prevalent literature offers limited work into this localized context of Pakistan. Since the core objective of this study is to “explore real-time perceptions of parents” and to achieve a “ground based understanding” of the barriers they in routine encounter; therefore, an interpretive research approach, in the context of Descriptive Qualitative Study is utilized in this work. The complexity of the challenges could not be measured through quantitative metrics alone, therefore, a qualitative approach has been used.

This study attempts to identify not only the *presence* of barriers but also *how* parents interpret, experience, and invent plans to overcome these obstacles. This study uses a descriptive qualitative design on the basis of participants’ real-life experiences. It focuses on the level of understanding how parents perceive and experience their challenges in educational inclusion. Since the research axes on the ‘subjective personal experiences of how people personally see things’, therefore, the analysis is aim to pick up the unique voices and emotional meaning regarding the general failures and social hurdles faced by parents.

The research people consists of primary caregivers (parents) of children who have been diagnosed with ASD and who are currently residing within the metropolitan area of Lahore, Punjab. To ensure the selection of relevant data sources, Purposive Sampling has been employed (Rai & Thapa, 2015). Thereafter, a qualitative study while relying on in-depth interviews and subsequent thematic analysis has been made. A target sample size of 15 participants is used. The benchmark is that participants must actively pursued educational placement in Lahore. The sampling process has been structured to include families from different socioeconomic levels and educational paths to counter known affluence bias and to ensure that the conclusions reveal the full spectrum of institutional and financial challenges. Ethical permission has been considered mandatory. Anonymity was guaranteed through the use of pseudonyms to participants.

Data is collected through written format semi-structured interviews, using google forms. This methodology is preferred because it allows to maintain a structured inquiry related to the research objectives. The interview protocol is structured into four main sections. Section A focuses on the Diagnosis and Personal Impact. This covers the emotional and psychological impact, as well as the impact of diagnosis delays. Section B covers Institutional and School-Level Barriers, such as rejection from schools (gatekeeping), the lack of trained staff, and the financial and logistical burden in the arrangement of private supports like shadow teachers. Section C explores Community Ecology and Strategies. It covers the effects of social stigma, cultural and mythical beliefs, financial strain, and parental surviving mechanisms. A final section (D) ask for direct recommendations for improvements from the parents. Thereafter, data analysis is conducted through quoting directly from the answers of parents in order to picture real-time difficulties of parents with an aim to shape practical recommendations.

Description of the Questionnaire

To find out the context of challenges which are being faced by the parents regarding the educational inclusion of their children with ASD, a semi-structured questionnaire was developed during this study and it was administered through Google Forms to parents who are actively pursuing their child education and therapies. The questionnaire is designed with an aim for the data collection to cover the parents' real-life experiences, perceptions, and ongoing challenges in a systematic yet in flexible manner. The instrument is consisted on 10 open-ended questions. They are arranged into four logical sections; each section is aligned with the objectives of the study. Below is the brief description of the instrument:

Section A: Diagnosis and Personal Impact (Q1–Q2)

This section is designed to cover experiences of parents at the time of diagnosis. It includes age of identification, emotional responses, delays, and the immediate impact on their families. These questions helped to understand the starting parental challenges and the early gaps in awareness and support systems in their social life.

Section B: Institutional and School-Level Barriers (Q3–Q6)

In this section, attempt is made to collect detailed information about parents' experiences in finding school admission, types of support they received from schools, and financial or logistical demands for instance the arrangement of shadow teachers. This section covers the barriers which are commonly found within mainstream educational systems, which includes gatekeeping issues, lack of trained staff, and resource limitations, etc.

Section C: Social Stigma, Community Environment, and Coping (Q7–Q8)

This part attempted to cover societal attitudes, cultural beliefs, misunderstanding which are available about the ASD in this society, and family behaviours which affected parents. It also covers how parents cope with these situations, the identification of social and emotional stressors, and their resilience strategies.

Section D: Parental Strategies and Recommendations (Q9–Q10)

This the final section of this study, keeping in view the limitation, wherein parents are invited to share their strategies which they used to support their child. The parents are also directly invited to suggest policy or school-level improvements and recommendations. These questions provided the real-time insights which are practical needs and expectations of parents and it is helpful in shaping actionable recommendations on the basis of lived experiences of parents.

It is also pertinent to mention here that the questionnaire was intentionally structured with an aim to cover personal experiences, institutional challenges, then social barriers, and finally the solutions and recommendations. This logical flow, during interviews, have enabled parents to narrate their real-life experiences. It also allowed the researcher to capture a comprehensive view of the multi-level challenges which they are facing. Moreover, all questions were open-ended. The aim was to get detailed responses.

Themes, Results and Analysis

This study has covered five major themes, which are as follows:

1. Emotional burden at the time of diagnosis
2. Lack of structured support and school-level barriers
3. Financial tension and unequal access
4. Social stigma and cultural misconceptions
5. Parental coping strategies and recommendations

For analysis direct quotations from parent's viewpoints are included in order to illustrate each theme; pseudonyms (Parent 1, Parent 2, etc.) are used in the analysis section in order to maintain the anonymity.

Emotional Burden at the Time of Diagnosis

During the interview most of the parents have described the period of diagnosis as emotionally overwhelming for them. Many parents shown that they had little or no prior awareness about ASD. They initially interpreted their child's behaviour as ordinary "naughtiness" or sometimes it was considered as a simple delay.

One parent shared:

"My child was diagnosed at age of 3.5 when he got admitted in school. He was not following the discipline and rules of classroom. Before this I don't have any idea of autism. It affected a lot to my family." (Parent 1)

For some parents, their finding about early "red flags" and then its confirmation about ASD was deeply shocking:

"He was 1.5 years old when we saw red flags of autism... It was shocking and very depressing situation for us. We thought we had lost him." (Parent 3)

Another parent described this period as complete breakdown for them at the time of diagnosis:

"We feel so much broken as a family and feels burden. At the age of 5 we came to know that's about disorders." (Parent 8)

Even when diagnosis came, the emotional load for parents still remained strong:

"Almost 1 year before... it's difficult for me but God help us." (Parent 10)

Overall, these above quoted answers show that diagnosis has been experienced as a major emotional turning point for the parents. It is accompanied with fear for the child's future, confusion about his or her condition, and there is a lot of stress within the family.

Lack of Structured Professional Support and School-Level Barriers

The second major theme was the limited support which they received from professionals and schools after the diagnosis of ASD in their child. When we asked what help they got, in answer several parents simply reported none:

"None. Also therapies price are too high for us." (Parent 4)

"Most of the people formal support, it's only parents and kid who suffer, others has nothing to do." (Parent 2)

However, some parents did describe partial help which they get from therapists or their families:

"Therapist helps us in understanding autism and its therapies. Family support includes prayers and social support." (Parent 3)

However, when parents tried to place their child in school, they faced school gatekeeping issues and lack of cooperation. One parent summarised the difficulty in clear words:

“I have tried many schools but didn’t find any school who is willing to admit my son.” (Parent 1)

Another parent explained that finding a suitable school in Lahore for them was a slow and uncertain process:

“Finding a school for my child was not easy. Many schools were not fully prepared to support a child with ASD, and some were hesitant to take admission… It took time to find a school that was understanding and willing to give proper support.” (Parent 15)

Even when children were accepted, yet their parents felt that the responses were weak or conditional:

“After diagnosed, school didn’t support me. My son was struck off from school.” (Parent 1)

“Not so much supportive, normal.” (Parent 2)

These above referred experiences of parents suggest they are left on their own, and that mainstream schools resist them or some are partially implementing educational inclusion.

Financial Tension and Inequality in Access to Inclusion

The next section deals with the financial pressure of parents. It appeared in almost all responses. Parents pointed out that therapy, school fees, and additional services such as shadow teachers are placing a heavy burden on their household budgets and routine life expenses.

One parent described the combined impact of therapy and living costs as under:

“Therapies in Pakistan are too much costly. Major portion of salary is used in therapies and living cost due to therapies.” (Parent 3)

Another highlighted how this is affecting the middle-class families:

“It is very difficult for us because the fee range is too much high for middle class fellows.” (Parent 4)

Some parents linked this financial strain directly to unequal access:

“Many of parents couldn’t afford highly paid therapies and private school. So schools should provide facilities to those who couldn’t afford, without any distinction or biasedness.” (Parent 5)

Others simply summarised this pressure:

“It’s so difficult to manage.” (Parent 12)

During this section, more detailed responses emphasised that school policies and extra charges for services such as shadow teachers are limiting their choices of schools:

“Financial issues make it harder because therapy and special support can be expensive. Some schools charge extra for shadow teachers or special services… These factors affect our ability to choose the best mainstream school for our child.” (Parent 15)

These above referred findings show that inclusion of their ASD child is being shaped by families’ financial capacity. Thus, it is making it easier for higher-income parents to access better services and schools and difficult for low and middle income parents.

Social Stigma, Cultural Misconceptions, and Their Impact on Parents

During this study, parents also shared their views regarding stigma and community attitudes which complicate their efforts to educate their children. At a basic level, many people around them simply do not understand ASD:

“They don’t understand my child condition.” (Parent 1)

Some parents reported that relatives and community members interpret ASD through a moral or religious lens, which is another reality in Pakistan:

"Some have sympathetic view and others treat as results of our bad deeds. Some say it's normal in this world. Some say it's just a difficult time which too shall pass." (Parent 3)

In more severe cases, parents were felt by their society that autism was seen as a curse or punishment:

"Like it's a curse for me or my sins." (Parent 4)

Others felt that their child was treated as an "outsider":

"They think she is some alien. People look at her in strange way at her behaviours whenever she shows tantrums at public places." (Parent 14)

Stigma and misunderstanding also led them to emotional strain:

"Yes, I have faced emotional stress and sometimes felt judged, especially regarding my child's behavior and education. It was hurtful at times." (Parent 15)

To cope, parents sometimes turned to religious belief, patience, or withdrawal from social spaces:

"Too much [stress], but cope up with the belief on Allah Almighty." (Parent 4)

"Stress is always there. Cope with patience." (Parent 14)

These real-time, emotionally filled, experiences indicate that stigma about ASD in their child is not only a social issue for parents; it directly shapes their mental health, their willingness to seek inclusion, and opportunities for their child for social participation.

Parental Coping Strategies and Recommendations for Change

During this study, it was also attempted to explore their coping strategies. The answers show that despite facing multiple barriers, parents described various strategies which they used to support their children's education and therapies. Many emphasised on early and continuous therapy:

"I started therapies one to one for my child." (Parent 1)

"ABA therapies besides other and early intervention. Above all family support." (Parent 3)

Others highlighted home-based efforts:

"Home therapy and socialized them." (Parent 4)

"Our life and journey with our children is different from others. Now we had learned to live the way our kids want." (Parent 14)

Several parents pointed out to structure routines. They said that simple and consistent teaching approaches are helpful:

"The most helpful strategies have been creating a routine, using simple instructions, giving positive reinforcement, and breaking tasks into small steps. Working closely with teachers and therapists, and practicing skills at home, has also made a big difference." (Parent 15)

Some parents also expressed their views about what changes are needed at school and policy level. Some suggested minimum inclusion obligations:

"Government should bound every school to admit at least one autistic child in a class of mainstream school." (Parent 1)

Some argued for inclusive programmes and training:

"All schools either government or private must start inclusive programmes for special children along with normal so that they may learn from each other." (Parent 3)

"Schools need trained teachers, smaller class sizes, and more special support services... Government should invest in awareness programs and make special education services easier for families to access." (Parent 15)

Together, all these responses show that parents are not only coping and adapting at a personal level on their own, but at the same time they also have this concrete and informed expectation about systemic reforms at governmental level.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

In summary, the above referred results demonstrate that parents who are living in a big city like Lahore are also facing interconnected emotional, institutional, financial, and social level challenges in order to have educational inclusion for their children with ASD. The diagnosis brings emotional strain for them; post-diagnosis support is limited for them; the schools are resisting inclusion or they are placing heavy conditions on it; the financial burdens are restricting their access to schools; besides the social stigma and misconceptions is also increasing their stress and isolation. At the same time, parents are trying to actively engage in therapy, though home-based support programmes. They also support the ideas of early therapies. They demand the required changes which are needed in schools and government policies. These real-time real-life insights form the basis for the discussion and policy implications which is presented in the next section.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study has revealed various challenges which are being experienced by parents in Lahore in their attempt to secure educational inclusion for their children with ASD. The following discussion connects the empirical results of this study with the above referred existing literature and policy frameworks.

Parents in this study described diagnosis as an emotionally overwhelming situation for them by using words such as *“shattered,” “broken,”* and *“lost”* to express their distress. This mirrors prior research from Pakistan in the similar contexts (Furrukh & Anjum, 2020; Imran et al., 2011). The literature also emphasises that delayed diagnosis could restrict early intervention opportunities (Fuller & Kaiser, 2020). The emotional narratives which are shared by parents in this study again reinforce that lack of diagnostic clarity could contribute in the prolonged uncertainty and anxiety. Their experiences highlight that there is a need for standardised diagnostic training for pediatricians and awareness campaigns in Pakistan.

Furthermore, the second major theme covers school-level barriers. Parents encountered repeated admission refusals, conditional acceptances which are requiring privately paid shadow teachers, and minimal instructional support even after enrolment of children. These findings are consistent with national and international studies which also identify gatekeeping as one of the major obstacle in the pathway of inclusion (Khaliq et al., n.d.; Marya et al., 2025). Moreover, almost every respondent highlighted that the issue of high cost of therapies and specialised schooling. Some expressed clearly that therapy are consuming *“a major portion of salary,”* while others explained that school fees and the extra cost of shadow teachers were unaffordable. The prior research similarly shows that families in Pakistan have to shoulder substantial financial responsibility for ASD-related care (Bukhari et al., 2025b).

In addition, parents also answered the social-stigma related questions clearly. They said that they are being judged, blamed, or misunderstood by relatives and neighbours. Words such as “curse,” “sins,” “burden,” and “alien” revealed the intensity of their feelings. In this regard, the prior studies in Pakistan also confirm that there are cultural misconceptions, supernatural explanations, and parental blame existing in Pakistan (Aftab, Haider, et al., 2023; Salman et al., 2024). However, despite presence of these systemic challenges, parents also demonstrated their resilience about therapy engagement, home-based routines, skill-building activities, and through religious help. They also presented clear and practical recommendations, such as mandatory admission policies, teacher training requirements, fee reductions, increased public-sector ASD services, besides awareness campaigns, etc.

The collective analysis of these insights and literature review show that educational inclusion for children with ASD in Lahore is not smooth and easy. It is hindered not by the characteristics of ASD itself, but also by difficulties which exit at the diagnostic, educational, financial, and social levels.

These insights reinforce that there is an urgent need for improved diagnostic accuracy, then teacher training and classroom accommodations, policy enforcement mechanisms, financial assistance for therapy and schooling and community awareness and stigma reduction. The discussion also shows that although Pakistan is making progress through new government level working, such as the 2025 Autism Resource Centre Act, which is an important step in the right direction. Yet there is a dire need to support inclusive education for children with ASD with constant investment backed by the government, along with coordinated implementation, and recognition of parents as main stakeholders in the policy making process.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study is an attempt to explore the real-life challenges which are being faced by parents at the time of educational inclusion for their ASD child in Lahore, Punjab. The findings of this study reveal that parents are facing interconnected and multi-layered difficulties in the emotional, institutional, financial, and social environments.

It is shown during this study the process begins with an emotionally distressing diagnosis environment. It is intensified because of the limited public awareness and lack of professional guidance available at local level. Parents are commonly left to work on their own with ASD and this could result in confusion, psychological strain, and delays in early interventions for their child. There are also institutional level challenges. This includes mainstream school refusals for admission, imposition of conditions such as hiring shadow teachers, or provide minimal support and inadequate resources. Financial burdens have also emerged as one of the major barrier. The fees of therapies, along with specialised school programmes, and additional support services are one of the obvious reasons. Then social stigmas and cultural misconceptions augment these obstacles. Yet, despite these obstacles, parents are trying to be resilience; they adopted therapies and are struggling.

On the basis of these findings, following are plausible recommendations which are proposed for policymakers, educators, schools, and community stakeholders in order to strengthen the educational inclusion of children with ASD:

1) Teacher Training and Professional Capacity Building

There is a dire need to introduce mandatory pre-service and in-service training on ASD and inclusive pedagogies and also to equip teachers with practical strategies for behaviour management, communication support, and sensory needs. Available international practice shows its importance (Johnson et al., 2024; Kossewska et al., 2021; H. Sharma, n.d.)

2) Enforcement of Inclusive Admission Policies

Then there is a need that mainstream schools should be legally required to admit children with ASD without any discrimination. There is a need of monitoring mechanisms to ensure compliance with inclusive education guidelines (Akhtar, 2025).

3) Establishment of Support Units in Schools

The schools are required to create resource rooms or inclusive support units which should be staffed with trained professionals.

4) Reduction of Financial Burdens on Families

There is dire need to provide government-backed subsidies for therapies, in assessments, and specialised services (Ayub, 2022; ul Haq & Rafiq, 2025). The introduction of tax rebate or financial assistance programmes for families of children with ASD would also be a right step. The regulation of therapy fees and fair cost structures in private schools is also important.

5) Expansion of Public ASD Resource Centres

In the Punjab Pakistan it is high time to strengthen the implementation of the Punjab Autism School and Resource Centre Act (2025) and establishment of additional centres at public sectors level to improve diagnosis, early intervention, and family support under this programme (Bukhari et al., 2025a).

6) Community Awareness to Eradicate the Stigma

The print and electronic media should be directed by the administration to launch media campaigns in order to educate the public about ASD and to dispel harmful myths. There is a need to conduct community-based sensitisation programmes in schools, neighbourhoods, and religious institutions (Alkhuffash, 2024).

7) Early Screening and Diagnostic Pathways

There is also a requirement to train pediatricians at local levels and general practitioners to recognise early signs of ASD (Yasir et al., 2025). The integration of screening tools into routine child health check-ups would be very helpful to reduce delays in diagnosis.

8) Parent Support Networks

The schools and community organisations are also obliged morally to facilitate parents to share their experiences and strategies with each other. Man is a social anima. There is a need to promote cooperation between parents, teachers, and therapists at every level.

9) National and Provincial Inclusion Frameworks

At national and sub-national level, there is a dire need to keep updating the special education policies to explicitly include ASD under disability classifications, in order to provide all legal and administrative benefits to these children (Bukhari et al., 2025b).

10) Collaboration in Different Sectors

There is another requirement to enhance coordination between health, education, and social welfare sectors of government. This is not one department job which could help parents; all public sector departments in coordination with private sectors schools are required to work together to enable these children to be part of mainstream social life.

The above referred recommendations are not exhausted, however, they the minimum, which this study shows are required to be implemented to ease the burden on parents and also to create a more equitable and inclusive educational environment for children with ASD. Inclusive education becomes achievable when systems adapt to the needs of children and not when children are expected to fit into unsupported systems.

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APPENDIX A — Semi-Structured Questionnaire for Parents of Children with ASD ***(Used as the primary data collection instrument in this study)***

This questionnaire was shared with parents of children who have been diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and those who are residing in Lahore, Punjab. The purpose of this instrument was to collect real-life perceptions of these parents regarding obstacles in educational inclusion, social challenges, and to highlight their coping strategies.

1.1 Section A: Diagnosis and Personal Impact

Q1. At what age was your child diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder? Please describe how you first noticed the signs and how the diagnosis affected your family emotionally.

Q2. After diagnosis, what type of help or support (if any) did you receive from doctors, therapists, family members, or others?

1.2 Section B: Institutional and School-Level Barriers

Q3. Please describe your experience in searching for a school for your child. Were there any difficulties or refusals?

Q4. How did schools respond when you sought admission for your child? Please mention whether they supported, refused, or placed any conditions.

Q5. Did the school (if admitted) provide any special support such as trained teachers, shadow teachers, resource rooms, or behavioural plans?

Q6. How do financial factors (therapy costs, school fees, transportation, shadow teachers) affect your ability to secure proper education for your child?

1.3 Section C: Social Stigma, Community Environment, and Coping

Q7. How do relatives, neighbours, and community members generally respond to your child's condition? Have you experienced misunderstanding, blame, or stigma?

Q8. Have you experienced emotional or psychological stress because of societal attitudes toward your child? How do you cope with such situations?

1.4 Section D: Parental Strategies and Recommendations

Q9. What strategies, therapies, or home-based practices have helped you support your child's learning, behaviour, or social development?

Q10. In your opinion, what should schools or the government do to better support children with ASD and make inclusive education possible?

Note for Appendix

This questionnaire was designed and used solely for academic research purposes within the qualitative study "Challenges Faced by Parents in the Educational Inclusion of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)".