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ARTICLE

Exploring Teachers' Challenges and Effective Strategies in Teaching English Reading Skills to Autistic Learners in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

In this qualitative study, the authors examine the problems and methods adopted by the English language teachers who are teaching autistic Pakistani students. In recognition of the unique cognitive, communicative, and behavioural patterns of learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), the study investigates teacher navigation in inclusive education in resource-limited settings. The focus of the in-depth interviews was to use a phenomenological method that would interrogate six teachers of both public and private schools in Karachi. Key challenges, such as the shortage of autism-specific training, behavioural issues management, communication barriers, inflexible curriculum, and insufficient institutional support, were revealed through thematic analysis. It was notwithstanding these constraints that the teachers showed ingenuity and adapted methods like visual aids, simplified content instructions, phonics-based learning, and one-on-one classes. These were effective strategies, though mostly informal and self-generated, since formal training or systemic guidance was not provided. The results highlight the urgent necessity to provide specific training to teachers, invest in infrastructure, and supply resources. This paper will add to the body of knowledge concerning special needs education in Pakistan, and teachers will play a pivotal role in ensuring access and inclusion of English reading methods among autistic students.

Keywords: ASD; Language Teaching; Pakistan; Inclusive Education; Challenges; Strategies

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1. Introduction

Although Pakistan has experienced a progressive policy discussion and rhetoric movement to inclusive education, an entrenched and deep implementation gap characterizes children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Still, inclusive education, which is the right of all children to study in regular schools and is called in the international community as the right to learn (Sarwat and Biswal^[1]), is not a practical exercise, but a far-off ideal. This gap is most desperately summarized in the instruction of English reading, the foundation of academic success, which requires a complex conglomeration of cognitive, language, and social skills, where autistic students may have a great deal of difficulty. As a result, educators find themselves at the forefront of an immense educational dilemma, where they must mediate these complexities, and they have the poorest professional training alongside systemic arrangements; overcrowded classrooms, inflexible methodology, and few resources, all of which are inherently ill-suited to this particular task (Alghamdi^[2]; Tariq and Latif^[3]).

At the center of this crisis is a critical policy practice disconnect. National policies, including the National Education Policy 2021, preach the ideals of inclusion, but such requirements collapse at the classroom entrance. Educators often do not receive the background training needed to identify autistic characteristics or make pedagogically viable modifications, and instead, they directly result in false judgments, misinterpretation of behavior patterns, and, eventually, poor support delivery (Shah and Iqbal^[4]). This habitually leads to marginalization, neglect, or mischaracterization of autistic learners in a general environment. Moreover, underlying structural inadequacies, lack of special education resources (such as visual schedules or assistive technology), and absence of formalized mechanisms to build Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) are crippling attacks on any effort to deliver differentiated instruction. Although the use of visual and structured pedagogical tools is highly recommended in international research as the most effective to support autistic students (Sharma and Rahman^[5]), their implementation in Pakistan is rather sporadic due to the extreme resource limitations and the lack of knowledge in the teaching workforce.

Cultural stigmas of autism and developmental disabilities are widespread in such systemic failures. Underdiagnosis, non-disclosure to family members, and a tendency to

avoid institutional admission of autistic children are often caused by limited public awareness, deeply rooted misconceptions, and fear of social stigma (Ahmed and Farooq^[6]; Noreen and Saeed^[7]). This socio-cultural environment makes the classroom teacher even more isolated, where the teacher has to deal with daily instructional challenges with little support from the school leadership, parents or specialist guidance. In contrast to this, there are educators who independently create ad-hoc adaptive strategies as a result of necessity. Nevertheless, they are fragmented, non-standardized, and not tied to any consistent, evidence-based system, or are instances of innovation in a system of massive neglect (Rashid et al.^[8]).

It is against this starkness of the gap between policy aspiration and ground-level practice that the current study lies. The research shall be critical to analyze the experiences of English teachers in Pakistan with a keen eye to the issues that they face and the emerging and unconscious strategies they use when instructing reading to autistic students. It is hoped that through systematically pre-coding and examining these frontline lenses, it is possible to derive action-oriented information that may be used to help create contextually sensitive teacher training programs, practical policy modifications, and effective classroom interventions. The end goal is to add empirical, localized knowledge to help close the current divide, therefore, leading to a shift in the theoretical inclusivity to a more inclusive system of education that is more equitable, effective, and transformative.

1.1. Background of the Study

Systemic restraints that are inherent in the nature of the educational environment of autistic learners in Pakistan essentially define the nature of the gap between policy discourse and the classroom environment. The process of teaching this population to read English is a particularly complex issue because Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) fundamentally affects an understanding of languages, social interactions, and manipulation of information in a manner that is directly opposed to the approach of conventional, dogmatic, and lecture-oriented teaching that is standard in the country (Alghamdi^[2]). This difficulty is acutely exacerbated in an environment where the English language, in turn, is frequently the language of further instruction, further abstracting the language processing of students who might already have

difficulties with mastering basic language processing. Thus, the already untrained teachers are put in an insurmountable situation whereby they have to address at once second language learning, the core literacy acquisition, and the unique behavioral, sensory, and cognitive demands of the autistic learners, all in the massively unsupportive schools' context (Rashid and Qamar^[9]).

The heart of such a crisis is a devastating and extensive pedagogical ill-equippedness. Most educators enter so-called inclusive classrooms without being trained in any autism-specific approaches and are also faced with extreme overcrowding and the total lack of teaching assistants or hierarchical structures, such as Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) (Khan and Ahmed^[10]). The specified national curriculum also makes the issue even worse by providing very little room to implement any kind of meaningful differentiation and adaptation and the incorporation of visual aids and multisensory tasks that are necessary to cover the needs of many autistic learners (Said et al.^[11]). Without systemic support, teachers have to resort to personal intuition and trial and error, which results in creating informal and isolated means of doing things, like creating self-made visual aids or simplifying texts. Nonetheless, grassroots innovations are not validated and not shared throughout the profession systematically, a fact that creates fragmented practice, professional isolation, and failure to construct a cumulative body of contextual knowledge (Ali and Zahra^[12]).

This situation is made even more challenging by the presence of pervasive cultural attitudes regarding autism, in which the stigma and misinformation about autism are so ingrained that it leads to late diagnosis, non-disclosure of the condition by the family, and the resultant failure to provide the necessary coordination of care between home and school. It is common because teachers are often placed in a position where they recognize a need of a child, yet they do not have the formal power, specialized training, or practice resources to do anything about what they observe (Noreen and Saeed^[7]). This puts an unethical and practical strain on personal teachers that is not sustainable.

Teaching literacy to autistic students via evidence-based methods, including structured teaching (TEACCH), the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), and explicit and multisensory instruction taught through phonics, is established throughout the world (Sharma and Rah-

man^[5]). Their effectiveness, however, will always be reliant on the availability of trained staff, relevant facilities, and fluid curricula—conditions that were scarcely available in the Pakistani state public education system. Although non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and individual efforts have been conducting useful training, their scope is small and their influence is not converted into a systemic change that can be scaled (Malik and Qureshi^[13]). This study has firmly placed itself in this vital gap between global pedagogical knowledge and the local realities of implementation. It seeks to create context-relevant knowledge that will allow the bridging of this gap by exploring the realities of what is happening on the ground and the resourceful, intuitive solutions that have been developed by teachers themselves, and ultimately proposing a system that will get beyond theoretical inclusion and toward transformative, enabling practice.

1.2. Objectives

The objectives of this study are as follows:

- To explore the challenges faced by instructors in teaching English reading skills and language to autistic children.
- To propose effective strategies for instructors to teach English reading skills and language to autistic children.

1.3. Research Questions

The research seeks to answer the following key questions:

- What are the challenges that teachers encounter in teaching English reading skills to autistic children?
- What are the effective strategies that teachers can use to overcome these challenges?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder that is defined by the presence of fundamental difficulties in social communication and interaction, as well as the existence of limited, repetitive behaviors, interests, or activities. It has a deep, heterogeneous and multifaceted influence on the process of language acquisition

on all aspects of language, including phonology (sound systems), semantics (meaning), and pragmatics (social use). The key linguistic symptoms may be considerable delays or impairment of receptive and expressive language, use of echolalia (repetition of phrases), and a strong desire to interpret everything literally, which seriously hinders the perception of abstract concepts, figurative language, humor, and inference (Tager-Flusberg and Kasari^[14]). These challenges are language-based and thus of direct consequence to reading development. It is worth noting that phonemic deficits, the overt ability to perceive, detect, and manipulate single sounds (phonemes) in speech, are frequent and especially debilitating because the skill is a predictive and potent predictor of subsequent literacy achievement (Dydia et al.^[15]). In the absence of good phonemic awareness, the process of phonics (sound-letter mapping) is an inaccurate and disorienting process.

The language and literacy learning process is also complicated by the cognitive profiles that have been theorized to be the basis of ASD. Weak Central Coherence (WCC) theory (Frith and Happé^[16]). This is a theory of cognitive style that is prejudiced in favour of processing local features at the expense of global meaning or context. This may serve strengths in decoding by rote and word recognition because of one concentrating on the individual letters and spelling patterns, but it also hinders the process of integrating these into a comprehensible whole, which leads to poor narrative and thematic comprehension. On the other hand, there is also the Enhanced Perceptual Functioning (EPF) theory (Mottron et al.^[17]), which implies excellent low-level perceptual and pattern-detection skills. This can also assist visual analysis and memorization of word forms, which leads to decoding abilities, although it does not necessarily confer power in the integrative, meaning-making mechanisms that are needed to create an understanding.

These cognitive pictures elucidate the high-reported phenomenon of hyperlexia, that is, a great discrepancy in which the decoding skill is significantly bigger than the understanding age (Nation et al.^[18]). An autistic student can read out loud seemingly fluently, but with little or no sense of the meaning of what he or she is reading. This association is of crucial importance in teaching. These physiological neurocognitive difficulties are extremely worsened in the Pakistani context, where English is commonly instructed as

a second language, and the neurocognitive teaching method is often very inflexible and rote-memorization. Neurodiverse cognitive styles are generally not well accommodated by standard teaching conditions, which do not offer the structured visual aids, explicit strategy of comprehension teaching, and pacing flexibility needed to mediate the decoding skill divide with actual reading comprehension and contribute to the expansion of the educational gap in such students (Imran et al.^[19]).

2.2. Reading Development

Reading is a hierarchical, multifaceted skill and it involves a number of interrelated elements: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. The acquisition of this set of skills by autistic learners is usually described as possessing a rather unique and disproportionate profile, with one of the areas of strength being accompanied by excessive difficulties in another, making it necessitate highly specialized methodologies of training.

Phonemic awareness, the skill to recognize and manipulate separate sounds in words, is often disrupted in ASD both because there is an underlying difference in auditory processing and because there are joint attention problems (Dydia et al.^[15]). This gap is especially disastrous for the command of English, with its obscurant and inconsistent spelling. Although visual memory and pattern recognition may enable some autistic learners to gain strong decoding skills or even hyperlexic skills, this skill frequently conceals a weak phonological base. Therefore, successful teaching cannot presuppose that decoding proficiency is phonological knowledge; it should offer systematic, explicit, and visually-mediated phonics instruction in order to construct such an important sound-symbol correspondence strategically.

Going beyond word recognition, there is another obstacle that vocabulary acquisition poses. Vocabulary acquisition is generally rich and incidental in social interaction and can often be deduced through contextual analysis; these are processes that are commonly difficult for autistic individuals because of their limited interests and pragmatic language impairment (Nation et al.^[18]). It leads to a restricted lexicon, which is a large bottleneck to reading, as one cannot comprehend a text without knowing what the words of the text are. Practical and purposeful teaching should consequently be taught directly without much ambiguity or subtlety in the

classroom and be taught in a manner that includes various explicit exposures and clear definitions with a strong linkage to visual aids.

The middle ground between decoding and comprehension is fluency, which is the ability to read slowly, accurately, and with the right prosody. Autistic readers can decode perfectly but read in a monotone, mechanical rhythm, and this indicates problems with extracting rhythmic and emotional information about language. This absence of gesture may even be an indication of poor understanding. Finally, the most important and complicated challenge is understanding. It does not occur passively but is a construction of meaning that needs theory of mind (to determine the motivation and views of characters), executive function (to store information, make predictions, and combine ideas), and integrative reasoning (Davidson et al.^[20]). The above-order level of cognition is a typical area of impairment in ASD. Hence, the successful teaching of autistic students should go way beyond memorization. It requires explicit, step-by-step instruction in inferential reasoning, perspective-taking, and ways of checking to see how well they have learned the material, and it is necessary to scaffold the metacognitive processes that do not occur spontaneously in them. This individualized method acknowledges that each aspect of reading should be instructed with the understanding of the autistic way of thinking, so that a general course in literacy can become a special way to meaning.

2.3. Systemic Barriers in the Pakistani Context

The Pakistani educational system is a nexus of inimitable, intertwined, and reinforcing systemic obstacles, which, together with a stranglehold on effective, inclusive literacy instruction in autistic learners. These barriers work at several levels, that is, the pedagogical, institutional, socio-cultural, and policy levels, developing the climate in which inclusion is a dream, which has little to do with the reality in the classroom.

At the heart of it is a desperate lack of teacher preparedness. Substantive modules on autism spectrum disorder, inclusive pedagogy, or differentiated instruction are mostly absent in pre-service and in-service teacher education programs (Khan and Ahmed^[10]). As a result, teachers are going into the classrooms unprepared to identify the signs of autism, decipher related behaviors, and develop suitable

literacy programs. Chronic resource scarcity contributes to this knowledge gap in a highly detrimental fashion. The educational institutions, especially those in the public sector, usually lack the necessary means of neurodiverse learning visual schedules, assistive technology, sensory equipment, and reading resources that are culturally or linguistically contextualized (Khan et al.^[21]). High student-teacher ratios, which are almost universal, also make individualized attention, not a compromise for many autistic students, logistically unfeasible (Ali and Nasir^[22]).

Such teaching and materials limitations are exacerbated by strong socio-cultural forces. The familial denial, non-disclosure, and late diagnosis of autism are often caused by pervasive stigma, misguided information, and supernatural beliefs about the condition in Pakistani society (Finkelstein et al.^[23]). It leads to an existing deficit of organized home-school cooperation whereby the classroom educator alone and alone becomes the unaccompanied agent of the child in terms of their support and development in academics and otherwise (Noreen and Saeed^[7]).

Moreover, a policy-practice severe divide makes such impediments institutionalized. Although the progressive policy rhetoric endorses the idea of inclusion, there are only conspicuous gaps in the policy's terms of implementation. No one is obliged to allocate funds to special needs resources, no one is obliged to design Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), and there is no accountability mechanism to oversee inclusive practices (Kamran and Bano^[24]). The national curriculum itself is a straitjacket of exams and drilling memorization and standardization above fluid and competitive learning paths that would suit varied learners.

Lastly, language barriers in the educational situation present an intimidating level of challenge. An extra abstraction is imposed on the use of English as a medium of instruction, which is usually not the same language that a child speaks at home (Urdu or a local language). Such a loss of connection makes the basic processes of phonological awareness and vocabulary development of autistic students extremely difficult, on top of the fact that they might already have difficulties in language processing (Shah et al.^[25]). Therefore, the process of learning to read is not only cognitively challenging, but mediated by a foreign linguistic code, which puts autistic learners at a further handicap. Altogether, these interrelated systemic obstacles form a powerful structure

of exclusion that cannot be overcome by individual teacher action.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Design

This research used a qualitative research design with a phenomenological orientation to investigate the experiences of primary school teachers concerning their teaching of autistic learners in Pakistan. The best way to adopt phenomenology as a methodological approach is that phenomenology is interested in knowing how people experience and make meaning of the issues. This framework enabled the collection of data-laden stories from teachers engaged in the everyday work of teaching English reading to children with ASD. Not testing hypotheses or quantifying variables, the study sought to gain insight into the problems teachers encountered and the tools they deployed in their daily classrooms.

3.2. Population and Sampling Technique

The population of the study included English language teachers working in both public and private schools throughout Karachi, who had experience teaching autistic children.

3.3. Selection of Participants

Purposeful sampling was used to select participants who were able to supply relevant and in-depth data. Teachers were included based on the following criteria: (1) teaching experience for at least 1 year, (2) ever taught at least one diagnosed autistic learner in an English reading class, and (3) willingness to be interviewed in-depth. The sample consisted of 6 teachers from the metropolitan area of Karachi, in order to allow for variation of urban school settings and types of institutions. The sample was also selected to reflect diversity in school structure, gender, years of teaching, and access to resources.

3.4. Research Instrument

The researcher collected the data using a prearranged semi-structured interview guide. List of questions asked while using the guide. The questions were open-ended and around three broad themes: 1) “What are”—the difficulties

of teaching English reading to children with autism (autistic) students, 2) “How do you”—deal with these challenges? and 3) “What specific”—type of support does the institution provide—for you to practice Inclusive Education? The questions were designed to be flexible enough to enable participants to elaborate on their personal stories at length and at the same time to fit the needs of the study. Sample questions were: “What specific challenges do you face when teaching reading to autistic learners?” and “Can you reflect on any helpful strategies or tips that you used?” An expert review by two education and special education professionals was used to validate the interview guide, which was slightly refined to enhance clarity and relevance in response to their feedback.

3.5. Data Collection Procedure

Institutional review board approval was obtained before starting data collection. Following approval, the researcher approached school principals and explained the purpose of the study. All participants provided written informed consent before their participation. The interviews were held in a private, quiet room at the participants’ convenience and location. The interviews ranged from 45 to 60 min and were conducted in English and/or Urdu, according to the comfort of the participant. To ensure proper transcription and analysis, interviews were audio-recorded with the participants’ permission. Field notes were also recorded directly after each interview and follow-up interview to document non-verbal evidence, feelings, and observations.

3.6. Data Analysis Technique

The interview data were transcribed literally and, when appropriate, translated into English. The thematic analysis in this study was organized according to Saldaña’s coding model, which involves First Cycle and Second Cycle coding methods. In the First Cycle coding, descriptive codes were assigned to segments of data to summarize the primary topic. In the Second Cycle coding, these codes were categorized and synthesized into broader themes to interpret meaning and patterns. Minimal manual analysis. During coding, the author manually highlighted key words, phrases, and patterns that typified participants’ difficulties and strategies. The initial codes are then clustered together into more general categories, e.g., “no training,” “behaviour management,”

“using visual material,” “institution related.” The NVivo 12 program was also used to organize the data and make established and emerging topics more organized. For reliability purposes, a second reviewer coded 20% of the transcripts and inter-coder agreement exceeded 85%.

3.7. Trustworthiness and Credibility

3.7.1. Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of the study was ensured using various trustworthiness criteria by the researcher. Credibility was strengthened by means of member checking, where part of the transcriptions was reviewed and verified by a few key informants. This contributed to reducing the misinterpretation and ensuring the truth of the responses. The validity of the data was further assured through the use of triangulation, which included field notes, researcher observations, and peer debriefing with other special educators. Reliability was established by employing an audit trail capturing all aspects of the research process from sampling through to data interpretation.

3.7.2. Ethical Considerations

The study followed ethical standards from start to finish. Participants were made aware that they had the right to discontinue their participation in the study at any time without repercussions. All responses were confidential and pseudonymized, and were applied to all the transcripts and research reports to strictly protect privacy. Audio files and transcripts were kept in a password-protected folder only available to the researcher. All the participants were briefed on the aim of the study and the principles of voluntary participation and confidentiality before they were interviewed. All participants signed written consent forms, and verbal consent was reconfirmed prior to the interview for each session. The study did not contain any information on schools and individual students for ethical standards of the research.

3.8. Data Analysis

The thematic analysis of the data gathered from six participants—special education teachers who work with students who have autism—is presented in this section. In order to produce rigorous and grounded themes that reflected the participants’ pedagogical realities, the analysis was carried

out using Saldaña’s^[26] two-cycle coding model, which integrated descriptive, in vivo, and pattern coding.

3.8.1. First Cycle Coding: Descriptive and In Vivo Codes

Descriptive coding was implemented in the first cycle to gather the explicit meaning of the participants’ experiences and summarize the main topics they discussed. Throughout the collection, codes like “difficulty with abstract concepts,” “black or white thinking,” “need for visual support,” “curriculum adaptation,” “material scarcity,” and “assessment practices” were common. Participants’ own words and fundamental stance—such as “breaking texts into smaller chunks,” “we deal with facts and figures,” “visual sequencing,” and “we don’t have any visuals here”—were preserved concurrently through the use of in vivo coding, which captured their experiential meanings.

Participants in all six transcripts frequently characterized their pupils as “visual learners” who had little patience for “abstract or figurative language.” Teachers frequently explained that teaching “facts and reasons” instead of imaginative narratives or idioms was essential. In order to find deeper semantic relationships and pedagogical patterns, the 82 initial codes produced by this first cycle of coding were clustered for the second cycle analysis.

3.8.2. Second Cycle Coding: Pattern Coding and Theme Development

The first cycle codes were combined into broad categories in the second cycle using pattern coding, which represented the participants’ varied and similar experiences. For instance, the theme “Challenges in Teaching Abstract Concepts” included codes like “difficulty understanding idioms,” “difficulty with metaphors,” and “lack of grey area thinking.”

Similarly, codes like “developing remedial books,” “breaking paragraphs into sight words,” “no standard curriculum for autism,” and “lack of visuals” were grouped under “Curriculum Adaptation and Resource Scarcity.” The pattern coding process yielded six core themes, each representing a dimension of special education pedagogy for autistic learners:

Challenges in Teaching Abstract Concepts:

- Curriculum Adaptation and Resource Scarcity
- Individualised Teaching Approaches
- Visual and Multimodal Learning Strategies

- Assessment Challenges and Practices
- Teachers' Emotional Commitment and Advocacy

In order to ensure that all participant voices were fairly represented in the analysis, emphasizing their linguistic preferences and pragmatic concerns, this thematic structure was developed through iterative comparison and memo writing.

3.8.3. Linguistic and Discourse Insights from Participants

A pedagogical pragmatism that stemmed from a desire to guarantee autistic students meaningful language acquisition was evident in the participants' discourse. Their foundational beliefs about autistic cognition and language processing were revealed by their use of phrases like "it is very difficult for them to imagine," "we have to do reasoning with them," and "they remember as a story or sequence." Those assertions are in line with a cognitive-linguistic perspective, which views language comprehension as an experience-based, embodied process that requires tangible input rather than abstract thought.

Participants also employed metaphorical language to describe their teaching process, such as "breaking down the text into chunks," "building side words," and "sequencing like movies," highlighting their efforts to scaffold learning step by step. This aligns with Sociocultural Theory by Vygotsky^[27] emphasising the importance of mediated learning through structured support. Moreover, their narratives revealed an affective dimension, with expressions like "we suffered because people before us didn't know" and "we want to bring change," indicating emotional investment and advocacy for their students' linguistic rights and educational access.

3.8.4. Final Theme Synthesis and Theoretical Integration

The final six themes were interpreted through a Critical Linguistics lens, considering how institutional structures, resource limitations, and pedagogical assumptions shape teaching practices for autistic learners in Pakistan.

1. Theme 1: Challenges in Teaching Abstract Concepts

Challenges in Teaching Abstract Concepts revealed that participants consistently avoided idioms, metaphors, and abstract narratives, preferring factual content that aligns with autistic students' cognitive profiles.

2. Theme 2: Curriculum Adaptation and Resource Scarcity

Curriculum Adaptation and Resource Scarcity highlighted systemic gaps, with teachers developing remedial materials independently due to the absence of standardised autism curricula.

3. Theme 3: Individualised Teaching Approaches

Individualised Teaching Approaches underscored the need for one-on-one instruction, differentiated tasks, and tailored content based on learners' functional needs.

4. Theme 4: Visual and Multimodal Strategies

Visual and Multimodal Strategies affirmed the effectiveness of movies, visual sequencing, and pictorial scaffolds in supporting narrative comprehension and writing skills.

5. Theme 5: Assessment Challenges and Practices

Assessment Challenges and Practices showed that teachers used customised rubrics based on prompting levels to assess progress, with independence marking successful learning.

6. Theme 6: Teachers' Emotional Commitment and Advocacy

Teachers' Emotional Commitment and Advocacy illuminated the strong ethical orientation, moral responsibility, and affective labour embedded in special education teaching.

4. Results

This chapter provides the empirical evidence based on a stringent thematic analysis of the in-depth semi-structured interviews of the six English language teachers who provided their responses in a variety of public and private schools in Karachi. The main aim of this qualitative research was the expression of the lived, subtle experiences of teachers who are directly involved in imparting English reading skills to learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in their mainstream or inclusive classroom in Pakistan. In the spirit of the interpretative phenomenological analysis, the analytical procedure entailed the counting out of the interview transcripts, whereby recurring patterns, meaningful statements, and essences of the core of the professional realities of the participants were identified.

The condensed analysis summarized the abundant amalgamated data into two conclusive, overall thematic subsets

that directly respond to the central research questions posed in the study. The initial prevailing theme is a compilation of different challenges and systemic obstacles that teachers face in their practice every day. The theme explores the restrictive environmental, institutional, and pedagogical barriers to effective teaching. The second major theme is the adaptive techniques and pedagogical ingenuity of teachers in reaction to these restrictions. This theme revolves around the creative, though usually casual, ways that teachers are developing and implementing to support the acquisition and interest in reading among their autistic children.

The next parts of this chapter are designed in such a way that they give a detailed exposition of these two key themes. The themes are unpacked into their corresponding sub-themes that provide a granular and structured depiction of the issues that came up and the solutions that were provided at the classroom level. The presentation is further supported by the direct verbatim quotes of the participants, so that the original voices and views of the teachers are at the center of the findings. This ordered thematic reporting offers a transparent, evidence-based basis to the interpretative discussion to come in the next chapter, connecting these informed encounters to the global theoretical paradigm and

policy discourses in inclusive education.

4.1. Key Challenges

Thematic analysis of interviews showed that the work of the teachers is organized through the interlaced network of systemic obstacles that inherently limit the effectiveness of the pedagogical activity of the teachers. All these problems are well summarized in **Table 1**. The largest issue, which was mentioned by all participants (n = 6, 100%), was that of the complete absence of formal Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and inclusive pedagogy training. Such a deep gap in knowledge reduced the teachers to the never-ending cycle of improvisation and speculation and turned them into an educated lesson into an educated speculator. As was mentioned by one of the teachers, “I went into the classroom with an English literature degree, not with a clue about how to deal with a child who sees the world differently. Every day is a guess, a trial. Is he not responding defiantly, or is it processing lagging? I don’t have the tools to know.” This lack of background knowledge does not allow teachers to capture neurodivergent behaviors and formulate adequate responses in terms of instruction, and frames a stage of frustration and lack of congruence.

Table 1. Challenges Identified by Teachers (n = 6).

Challenge	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Lack of Autism-Specific Training	6	100%
Behavioural Management Difficulties	6	100%
Communication Barriers	5	83.3%
Rigid Curriculum & Assessment	5	83.3%
Absence of Specialist/Institutional Support	6	100%
Inadequate Physical & Sensory Resources	4	66.7%

This is a significant training deficiency that makes behavioral and attentional management issues every educator must cope with. Meltdowns, self-stimulation, or acute sensory overload, which may occur in overcrowded classrooms, were not distractors but precipitants that ruined the whole teaching process of all the students. Devoid of methods of positive environmental change, active sensory control, or non-escalatory de-escalation, a teacher was usually left to use only the strictly reactive and punitive strategies that only served to offend the autistic student and circle the victim in a distress loop. Worsening this was the fact that the communication barrier was profound, especially among non-verbal

or least verbal students—a problem which was reported by five of the six teachers (83.3%).

The lack of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) instruments that serve as Picture Exchange Communication Systems (PECS) or speech-generating devices formed an almost impassable barrier on the way to establishing a basic instructional relationship. One of the teachers moaned, “The curriculum has me teach him to read sentences, though we do not even have a language in common.” How do I scaffold understanding where we cannot create the most fundamental communicative interaction? This disjunction between the pedagogical expectation and com-

municative reality makes most typical literacy interventions meaningless.

Besides, the inflexibility of the official curriculum and assessment regime, as observed by 83.3% of the participants, served as a structural straitjacket. It was institutionally required that teachers cover grade-level English textbooks of rigid text, and that they train all students to take standardized tests, in which no conceptual or logistical space was given to neurodiversity. Such systemic rigidity created no valid space for change to the necessary adaptations (individualized speed adjustment, content modification, multimodal materials, or alternative testing) to substantially include. In turn, this created an ethical and professional dilemma that teachers could not resolve: either follow the syllabus and fail the student or change the instructions and go against school requirements.

Lastly, and most importantly, teachers existed in a state of extreme professional isolation, which is a shared experience among interviewees. None of the participants were provided with special education coordinators, teaching assistants, and an effective and collaborative process of developing and implementing Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). This lack of a favorable collegial or institutional structure implied that the tremendous cognitive, emotional and pedagogical effort of inclusion was carried out individually. The lack of a system that would facilitate collective problem solving, emotional support and strategic direction ensured that every problem was an individual problem. This model is not only inefficient but also economically and emotionally impractical, which generates a lot of emotional labor,

increases stress, and creates a tangible threat of professional burnout. The above outlined interrelated barriers, which include training deficit, the complexity of behavior, a barrier of communication, rigidity of the curriculum, and institutional abandonment, do not work alone. Rather, they work in an interactive synergistic relationship to constitute a consistent whole of structural exclusion, in which the same structure of the educational environment actively impairs the very process of inclusion it claims, which places upon the individual teacher the impossible task of filling in this systematic gap.

4.2. Teacher Strategies

Without systematic support, teachers showed exceptional pedagogical agency, as they managed to create a collection of intuitive strategies, which, most importantly, are consistent with the international evidence-based practices. The most common method, as shown in **Table 2**, was visual mediation, which was applicable in 5 cases out of 6 teachers (83.3%). This entailed the regular use of flashcards, picture books, symbol charts, and color-coded texts to overcome the difference between the concrete and abstract language. The effectiveness of this method was described by one of the participants, who said, abstract words do not mean anything to him. However, when I combine running and a drawing of a person running, and subsequently a gesture, a relationship is established. The linguistic concept is based on the visual. The visual processing strengths typically related to ASD are directly utilized in this practice, as a foundational psychological instrument to literacy.

Table 2. Strategies Employed by Teachers (n = 6).

Effective Strategy	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Use of Visual Aids and Mediation	5	83.3%
Simplification and Chunking of Content	4	66.7%
Structured Repetitive Phonics Instruction	4	66.7%
One-on-One Differentiated Sessions	3	50.0%
Multimodal Storytelling (Visual, Gestural, Vocal)	3	50.0%

The second group of major strategies was cognitive and structural scaffolding. These involved simplifications and chunking of reading materials into manageable units and structured and repetitive phonics teaching, both of which were applied by four teachers (66.7%). The intuitive idea of teachers was the necessity to decrease cognitive load and offer predictable, systematic routines. One of the teachers

referred to her phonics practice as a sound ritual. The rhyme and meter are soothing to him, and the form of the way the English words sound like a pattern he can understand. The purposeful organization establishes low-demand, high-clarity learning environments that are accommodating to the autistic cognitive style. Moreover, in spite of extreme time constraints, differentiated interaction was a given strategy,

as half of the teachers (3/6, 50.0%) provided one-on-one reading sessions, although short but regular. These were termed as transformative moments and they gave personalized pacing and immediate feedback, which resulted in the breakthrough in word recognition that would hardly happen in a group setting, effectively scaffolding the Zone of Proximal Development of the individual learner.

Lastly, teachers used multimodal engagement strategies, especially using storytelling strategies using visuals, dramatic movements and different tones, which 50.0% of participants used. It was a strategy that was supposed to avoid attention deficit and facilitate narrative understanding by turning text into a multisensory experience. It is a universal and logical implementation of the principles of Universal Design of Learning (UDL), and it provides a variety of ways of representation and interaction.

These strategies together can be seen as a sort of folk pedagogy developed empirically, practices as necessitated by need, practices as they are simply a result of classroom experience. They are important because they unconsciously but precisely adhere to the principles of global pedagogy: visual mediation and scaffolding refer to sociocultural theory, routine structures correspond to cognitive-linguistic theories of ASD, and multimodal practices have analogies in differentiated instruction and UDL. The data included in **Table 2**, therefore, gives empirical support to the assumption that teachers, despite being unsupported, are producing a legitimate context-sensitive knowledge base of teaching inclusive English. Nevertheless, this information is tacit and individual. The systemic issue is to appreciate, certify, and incorporate this experience of the grassroots into official professional models to convert solitary ingenuity into collective and enduring action.

5. Discussion

5.1. Systemic Analysis of Challenges

The results of this research provide a grim and sharp-drawn example of structural exclusion, in which even the structure, the policies, and the operational principles of the Pakistani educational system actively produce obstacles that render the process of meaningful inclusion of autistic students impossible. It is not an incidental shortcoming, but a structural design flaw, which systematically excludes neuro-

diversity. The discussion then goes beyond determining the particular problems to actually criticizing the architecture of the system as a whole to show how the parts interrelate to yield exclusionary results. The fact that there is no specialized teacher training universally becomes not a singular failure by itself, but the central source that leads to a chain reaction of failures at the classroom level. This theoretical gap in professional readiness is that the educators come to an inclusive environment without the conceptual framework to learn about Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). They therefore have no diagnostic vision to observe the behavior of students. Symptoms of sensory flood, efforts to communicate, or requirements of predictability are regularly attributed to obstinate disobedience, idleness, or mental tardiness. Such a misdiagnosis, which is highly critical, results in pedagogical reactions, which tend to be punitive or dismissive, which do not align well with the real-life needs of the student, and only further contribute to disengagement and distress. In this way, what is typically captured as behavioral issues is rethought through this analysis as not inherent pathologies of the autistic child, but as the emergent properties of an ill-adapted and inept to comprehend environment. It is a symptom of the failure of the system to offer proper support, and not just a trait of the learner.

To this is added the inelastic, standardized curriculum of the system, which is a pattern of institutional adherence to normative results, as opposed to inclusive processes. The curriculum and its rigid schedule, with its preset syllabus, schedule and textbook-based system is a one-size-fits-all command. It makes official policy promises of inclusion only a performance, a gesture, which is not informed by the mechanisms of teaching and learning. The experiences of the teachers reveal that they are institutionally pressured to cover a predetermined content and train all learners toward standardized assessments, even in a situation where such prescriptive path is based on the cognitive and communicative style of an autistic learner. This poses an unresolvable professional and ethical dilemma for teachers: the former is bound to adhere to the confined curriculum, and the latter to address the need to do what appears necessary; the need of the needless student before them. The system is what makes successful inclusion an act of rebellion against the rules of the system and it punishes adjustment and rewards compliance with a very narrow set of norms. This is aggravated by

the severe lack of support systems in schools. The absence of special education coordinators, teaching assistants, speech therapists or school psychologists translates to the classroom teacher being the first, last and sole provider of support. No multidisciplinary team to consult, no expert to consult on the intervention strategies, and no assistant to help control the classroom dynamics. Formal procedures for developing and implementing an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), which is one of the foundation blocks of individualized support on a global scale, are practically absent in those situations. This professional solitude implies that the enormous cognitive, emotional, and pedagogical work of inclusion is left in the hands of only one generalist teacher whose current class size is large and diverse.

Moreover, the system does not have a collaborative infrastructure. It does not have any systematic communication and collaboration with parents who might be struggling with stigma and resource shortage themselves. No professional learning communities and platforms exist in which teachers can share their challenges and solutions with their colleagues. Such isolation discourages the accumulation of grassroots knowledge and exaggerates the feeling that you are alone and have to accomplish an impossible mission. This model is not only inefficient, but is administratively and emotionally unsustainable. It results in burnout, turnover, and well-being drainage in teachers, and as such, inclusive education will continue to be a door for well-meaning but overwhelmed people.

To sum up, all the issues mentioned are not merely a fragment of troubles but the interrelated symptoms of the system created on the principles of homogeneity. The deficiency of training guarantees misconception, the inflexible curriculum does not allow adapting and the absence of support system is the guarantee of isolation. Collectively, these factors constitute a logical rationale of structural exclusion, in which the standard operating procedures of the system are actively used to exclude and to fail those not matching its tight template. The recognition of this is the initial step to any viable reform- it does not demand heroism on the part of teachers, but the creation of systemic stammering. This is because it takes a total effort to break down these interconnected barriers and re-design the educational ecosystem such that it is responsive, flexible, and supportive through its very structure.

5.2. Theoretical Implications of Teacher Strategies

The resourceful intuitiveness of strategies formulated by teachers to address gaps in the system is analytically relevant, not only due to its practical usefulness but also because of the depth of its perfect fit, albeit unconsciously, of the usual learning theories and cognitive constructs. Such consistency has shown a sort of emergent, contextually based expertise which, when formalized and institutionalized, would have the power to form a strong base for the development of a culturally pertinent inclusive pedagogy in Pakistan.

These pedagogically created practices are, first of all, very close to the sociocultural theory of learning developed by Vygotsky. The thorough and successful application of the visual mediation, the use of flashcards, picture books, and symbol charts, is the direct reflection of the main idea of the theory, which is a psychological tool. To facilitate the process where the autistic learner will interact with the abstract challenging realm of written English, teachers are instinctively coming up with these cultural artifacts (the pictures and symbols). These instruments fill the gap between present knowledge of the child and symbolic world of text, which is an effective way to carry out the cultural development role as the Vygotskian theory assumes. In like manner, the approaches of breaking tasks into small steps and offering one-on-one sessions are both effective real-life applications of scaffolding that fall within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) of the learner. Educators are intuitively offering the provisional, modifiable scaffolding that enables learners to reach literacy milestones that they would otherwise not have attained, and this is exactly the focus of the theory-guided social interaction as the driver of cognitive development.

Moreover, such grassroots measures are quite compatible with recent cognitive-linguistic explanations of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The overwhelming popularity of the visual aids and strict, drilling phonics instruction of the teachers takes advantage of the cognitive profile explained by the theories like Enhanced Perceptual Functioning. This is a model developed by scholars, such as Mottron, which holds that autistic cognition tends to have more to do with extensive detail-oriented processing and a tendency to prefer predictable, rule-based systems. Teachers are intuitively drawing on a relative strength of visual-spatial processing by

using visual aids. They are producing the type of predictable, systematized input that goes with a systemizing cognitive style, which lessens cognitive load and anxiety, by carrying out rhythmic, patterned phonics drills. These theoretical principles are supported by empirical validation of these theoretical assumptions in the real world by the teachers, which revealed that such structured, low-demand, high-clarity environments are more effective in producing better engagement and results.

Such an intersection between the frontline pedagogical innovation and the traditional academic theory makes one critical and most frequently neglected point: even though they have not been trained to be so, teachers already have a substantial amount of pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) of what works with autistic learners in their own context. They are aware of the required interaction between the content (reading in English), the cognition of students (ASD profiles), and effective presentation (visual, structured delivery), which comes with experience. There is, however, a huge systemic failure in that this rich knowledge is tacit, personal, and insulated. It is internalized in the minds of individual instructors and practiced in secluded classrooms and is not explicit, codified, or disseminated in the professional community. This distance between the rich intuitive practice and formalized, disseminated professional knowledge is a large loss to the ability of the system to develop efficiently. It compels every generation of teachers to recycle the wheel, and leaves the continuation of the dependence on unsustainable individual agency rather than accumulating into a repository of evidence-based, collective, and contextual best practice. It is thus crucial to close this divide in order to make incidental teacher resourcefulness a long-term source of systemic change in inclusive education.

5.3. Recommendations for Systemic Support

Multi-level interventions are necessary so as to move away from the unsustainable individual agency to a resilient, inclusive system. The curriculum of teacher education at the pre-service level needs to be fundamentally changed to require credit-bearing courses on neurodiversity, inclusive pedagogy and functional behavior assessment. These modules have to go beyond theoretical sensitization to develop practical ability, so that future teachers can have the means of differentiated instruction, behavior support, and exploitation

of assistive resources within the limitations of a standard Pakistani classroom. This pre-service training is imperative to end the chain of placing unprepared teachers in inclusive schools.

The current paradigm of the intermittent and conceptual workshops cannot be applied adequately in the case of in-service teachers. Continuous professional development must be reconstructed to be pragmatic and sustainable as well as contextual. This will entail a transition towards a continuous professional learning model that will include classroom instruction, peer mentoring, alongside a community of practice where the instructors have a chance to collaboratively solve problems. This support system would help to generalize the isolated and intuitive strategies to the shared and validated practices that would reduce the cases of professional isolation and burnout.

At the same time, school and administrative level interventions cannot be negotiated. Basic support infrastructures should be developed by policy. This involves the designation of special education coordinators, although they may be shared in a group of schools, who may offer direction, create Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and communicate with specialists. Also, budgets for necessary, low-tech resources are crucial. Visual schedules, noise-cancelling headphones, picture communication boards, and adapted reading materials can make the ability of a teacher to use inclusive strategies effective.

One of the main pillars of systemic change is the curricular reform. The current curriculum is completely exam-focused and therefore exclusionary. The education authorities should, therefore, formulate and spread out flexible curriculum structures. These frames are supposed to outline essential learning competencies but clearly permit various career trajectories, multimodal resources, and alternative evaluation to reach the objectives. This competency-based approach, as opposed to the standardized approach, is necessary to institutionalize and legitimize the changes already taking place in an informal manner, by the teachers.

Lastly, sustainable inclusion needs a cultural and structural change to develop ecological collaboration. This is by establishing formal avenues of regular parent-teacher collaboration, acknowledging parents as key partners. In the profession, networks of school-based resources can be created to help the teachers share effective, situation-specific

practices with one another, and to take pedagogical knowledge off the secret side into the public sphere. At the societal level, there is a need to have coordinated public awareness to defy stigma, encourage early diagnosis, and establish a wider culture of neurodiversity acceptance.

To sum up everything mentioned above, an integrated, multi-level solution can be offered, which takes into account one of the main truths, which means that it is impossible to empower teachers only by providing them with skills in isolation. It requires simultaneous change of the structures—pre-service training, in-service support, school resources, curriculum policy and of collaborative networks within which they work. It is only by such systemic re-engineering that it will be possible to transform the teachers into nodes within a robust, indeed inclusive, professional system, no longer isolated or overburdened practitioners.

6. Conclusions

This paper is a ground-level analysis of the actual situation facing English teachers working with autistic students in Pakistan. The research proves that there is a deep systematic and discontinuity between the national policy promise of inclusive education and the classroom reality. At the crossroads of this gap, teachers are forced to operate in an environment marked by incapacitating deficits in autism-specific pedagogical education, inflexible and irritating curriculum, extreme poverty of resources, and uncooperative institutional support. All these failures in the system directly translate into everyday professional issues: how to deal with complex behaviors, lack a proper strategy, how to overcome deep communication barriers, lack of supportive devices, and how to introduce differentiation in a system that should be homogeneous. One of the most striking and interesting insights of this study, though, is the high level of agency and pedagogical creativity of teachers who react to these restrictions. Within the space of no official direction, teachers have intuitively established and implemented a set of interventions, such as visual mediation, simplification of content, structured phonics and one-on-one scaffolding, which demonstrate a remarkable, though unconscious, conformity to internationally documented practices in evidence-based teaching and learning with ASD. This highlights an important latent po-

tential within the teaching force and points to the fact that the principles of successful inclusive instruction are not foreign to the Pakistani scenario, but are being rediscovered independently due to the necessity.

The main value that this research brings is its contextual specificity and its empirical support of systemic voids as well as the emergent and context-driven solutions. It shifts the discussion further than generic promotion of inclusion to an accurate diagnosis of the operational bottlenecks that do not support it. The study proves conclusively that the existing excessive dependence on the personal commitment and informal experimentation of single teachers is not a sustainable and fair model of systemic inclusion. It imposes an unjustifiable moral and professional issue on the teachers, but does not ensure the quality and standardized education of the autistic children. Thus, the answer to the question of the realization of the promise of inclusive education in Pakistan requires systematic re-engineering of the system. This should start with the fact that both pre-service and in-service teacher training programs should include mandatory courses on neurodiversity and inclusive pedagogy. At the same time, schools should be provided with minimum supporting facilities, such as special education coordinators and access to necessary low-tech resources, to make practice out of the training. At the policy level, the curricular structures need to be reformed quickly to incorporate some flexibility, so that the learning goals can be customized, multimedia learning resources can be used, and alternative forms of assessment can be implemented. Lastly, there should be well-organized forums of interaction among teachers, schools and families, to create a network of support around the learner.

In conclusion, this paper suggests that it is not only best to ask teachers to do more using less resources, but simply redesign the system to allow them to do better. It demands a change of paradigm whereby a heroic individualistic approach to work is replaced with that of empowered professionalism in a responsive ecosystem. Pakistan can start bridging the gap between policy and practice by investing in the capacity of teachers, adopting institutional structures and establishing collaborative partnerships to ensure that the right to literacy and quality education of learners with autism becomes not only a theoretical commitment but also a reality in the classroom.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, S.I. and M.Q.; methodology, S.I.; validation, S.I. and M.Q.; formal analysis, S.I.; investigation, S.I.; resources, M.Q.; data curation, S.I. and M.Q.; writing—original draft preparation, S.I. and M.Q.; writing—review and editing, M.Q.; visualization, S.I. and M.Q. Both authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of the Department of English, and approved by the Institutional Review Board of SMI University (June, 2025).

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement

The data will be available upon request.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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