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Teacher-Educators as Agents for Social Justice and Inclusion: Insights from a Case Study of Teacher Preparation in Sindh, Pakistan

Noor Ahmed

Department of Education, Faculty of Education, Sukkur Institute of Business Administration
 University, Sukkur, Sindh, Pakistan

noorahmed.mphils21@iba-suk.edu.pk

Al-Karim Datoo

Department of Education, Faculty of Education, Sukkur Institute of Business Administration
 University, Sukkur, Sindh, Pakistan

a.datoo@iba-suk.edu.pk

ABSTRACT

This study explores teacher-educators' perspectives and pedagogical strategies for promoting social justice and inclusion in the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) Honors Program. The exploratory single case study is guided through Cochran-Smith's Theory of Teacher Education for Social Justice (2009). The data was collected through semi-structured interviews of eight teacher-educators purposively selected from the Institute of Business Administration University, Sukkur, Sindh. This primary data is further supported by the secondary sourced data collected through document analysis of B. Ed. honors curriculum. Thematic analysis was conducted with member checking and peer debriefing to ensure trustworthiness, rigor, and credibility. The findings highlight teaching methods that embed inclusive education principles in teacher education curricula and integrate social justice practices to shape prospective teachers for inclusive societies. The study recommends integrating social-justice-oriented revisions into accreditation standards, curricula, and professional development to align contextual practices with global initiatives. It provides evidence-based recommendations for policymakers, academicians, administrators, and curriculum developers to revamp teacher education policies aligned with inclusive education goals.

Keywords: Teacher educators; Social justice; Inclusive education; Teacher preparation; B.Ed. (Honors) program; Pedagogical strategies; Case study; Cochran-Smith's theory; Teacher education for Social Justice.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Social justice and educational inclusion may addresses the systemic injustices and inequities. The future for inclusive education has the potential to cross opportunities over many issues and be aligned with the global reforms, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Specifically, SDG 4 (Quality Education) emphasizes inclusive and equitable education, SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) tackles systemic and cultural barriers, and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) advocates for teacher-educators as agents of social justice and inclusion through transformative pedagogy and institutional reforms (United Nations, 2015). Social experience of either societal exclusion or inclusion shapes socio-emotional development of learners and the process is guided and significantly influenced by teachers (Bourke, 2024). Although Pakistan's National Education Policy (2009) had aimed at improving the quality of education through integrating inclusiveness with teacher education. Like other developing

countries, Pakistan often fails to achieve the expected benefits of well-crafted policies (Malik, 2018). The USAID Teacher Education Project, formerly Pre-STEP, assists universities in implementing a four-year pre-service teacher training program titled Bachelor of Education (B. Ed honors) degree through HEC and the Provincial Education Departments (HEC, 2012). Despite some efforts, Pakistan still has a long way to go in achieving social equity in education. It has been emphasized that social justice may be approached through inclusive education regarding local contexts (Ainscow, 2020). Very few have attempted to understand the region's socio-cultural context or the role of teacher education in such contexts. There is sufficient literature that convincingly argues for the need to stretch the boundaries of knowledge, formulate achievable plans to meet local needs, and design appropriate regional contexts.

1.2 Problem Statement

The qualitative single case study explored some key strategies teacher educators employed to foster social justice and inclusion within the B.Ed honors program. Through in-depth semi-structured interviews with teacher-educators and analysis of the curriculum, this study explores some of the key strategies used by teacher-educators for the promotion of social justice and inclusion. The insights are significant for informing teacher-education policies, curriculum development and professional development initiatives that are relevant to their contexts and effective for preparing the agents for social justice and inclusion through teacher education the upcoming human centric society.

1.3 Research Objectives and Key Questions

In alignment with the aims of the study, the following are the research objectives:

1. To identify key pedagogic strategies that teacher-educators employ to foster social justice and inclusion in the B.Ed. honors program.
2. To explore teacher-educators' insights regarding promoting social justice and inclusion in teacher education.

The following are the three research questions to achieve the stated objectives of the study:

1. What strategies do teacher-educators employ to foster social justice and inclusion through their teachings?
2. How do teacher-educators shape the prospective teachers into inclusive and socially just teachers?
3. What strategies do teacher-educators suggest to promote social justice and inclusion through teacher education within the B.Ed honors program?

The study contributes to global development goals by exploring how teacher-educators incorporate socially inclusive behaviors that align with the principles of advocating for social development. The findings inform educational policies promoting sustainable development and societal advancement. Ainscow (2020) suggested that when students learn in an environment that is respectful, collaborative, and empathetic, they became more able to adapt, accept and appreciate diversity. Education as a social institution with social justice and inclusiveness at the center ensures that every child is supported and nurtured systematically.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Social Justice and Inclusive Education in Teacher Education

Social justice seeks to establish equity through equal rights, resources and opportunities for all people regardless of socio-economic or demographic circumstances (UNESCO, 2020). Whereas inclusion refers to all learners, regardless of differences that they have, their age, gender, social status, language or origin, and physical traits are educated in the equal and equitable environment (Watkins & Donnelly, 2022). It aims to reduce barriers to participation and learning by creating a positive environment that appreciates difference (Ainscow, 2020;

Slee, 2021). It goes beyond assimilating excluded students into regular classroom settings by integrating and modifying systems and curricula to fit all learners, especially those in socioeconomic, cultural, or linguistic marginalization (Florian & Spratt, 2022). On the other hand, social exclusion refers to the discrimination based on gender, caste, ethnicity, race, or religion, which leaves an individual without status, power, recognition, and ignoring the worth of individuals (Ainscow & Viola, 2023). Inclusion in education has two goals: increasing student engagement and decreasing absences from the curricula, the social world, and the cultural practices of the local learning centers. The three main principles guiding an inclusive education system are participation, outcome, and access. Access means that all students may interact with the curriculum (Florian & Spratt, 2022; Ibourk & Raoui, 2024). Participation may focused on meaningful learning engagement, social engagement and collaboration in classroom settings.

2.2 Strategies to Promote Social Justice and Inclusion in Teacher Education

Inclusive educational practices are effective when a whole-school approach is adopted. This approach calls for the engagement of school leaders, teachers, parents, and the wider community and addresses social justice and educational inclusion. Critical pedagogy also advocates for social change, and it began with the work of Paulo Freire (1970). Freire's work promoted education as a medium of practicing freedom and encouraged students to participate in dialogue and self-reflection to challenge societal inequalities (Freire, 1998). This approach re-focuses the space of the classroom from indeed a purely educational space to a space of social activism, allowing learners to analyse the socio-political and economic factors that impact on the individuals and the society.

Culturally responsive pedagogy considers the cultural backgrounds of the learners as it embraces the cultural diversity of the classroom, which is a crucial aspect of social justice in education (Gay, 2022). The mundane realities in which the students live may be integrated into the curriculum so that they feel a sense of belonging and engagement in the learning process, as marginalized groups may not feel alienated (Paris & Alim, 2023). Culturally responsive teaching positively impacts academic progress in underrepresented groups because it accepts students' identities and uses multiculturalism as a resource in the classroom.

Differentiated Instruction (DI) and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) are important concepts that support inclusive education. Independent learning encompasses a variety of approaches to educational instruction that ensure that all learners have equal opportunities to learn, including learners from disadvantaged groups (Jacobse et al., 2019). However, with UDL, learners have an inclusive framework that identifies and solves potential barriers to learning engagement, representation, and expression. DI and UDL systems comply with social justice issues where all students can achieve equity in learning regardless of their ability or background. Cooperative, collaborative, and peer-assisted learning strategies are often suggested for classroom academic and sociocultural development. Despite a growing focus in Western and non-Western countries on social justice and inclusive education, there are still considerable knowledge gaps regarding the functions of teacher educators as social justice advocates. While broad frameworks on inclusive education have been proposed, very few studies have investigated teacher educators' abilities and competencies to apply those frameworks (Florian & Spratt, 2022).

2.3 Theoretical Framework: Teacher Education for Social Justice

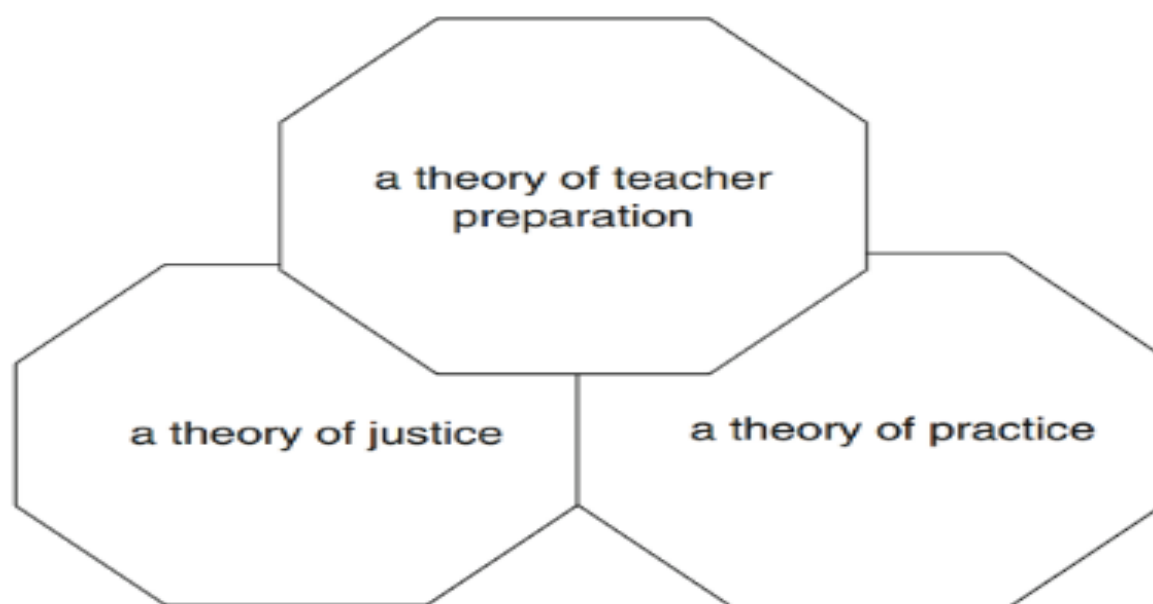


Figure 1 Theory of Teacher Education for Social Justice by Cochran-Smith (2009)

The theory of Teacher Education for Social Justice proposed by Cochran-Smith (2009) combines three components, teacher preparation, justice, and practices, to create a cohesive paradigm that reshapes how educators may be equipped. Theory of Teacher Preparation offers the structural foundation for training teachers to be social change agents. The theory of teacher preparation is concerned with socially, culturally, politically articulating and shaping inclusive teachers. The Theory of Justice grounding the ethical and moral basis, which contends that individual differences and diversity may be celebrated through education demonstrating fairness for all students, especially the marginalised. Together, these components create a unified framework that prepares teachers to act as agents of social justice, promoting equitable and inclusive education through theory and practice.

3. Methodology and Research Approach

Using an exploratory single case study design with an exploratory research design, the study explored strategies to foster inclusion and social justice in teacher education through teacher educators' insights (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). Purposive sampling was employed, and participants were selected based on active teaching roles in the program from lecturers, assistant professors, and associate professors. Eight teacher-educator interviews were conducted, and data saturation was reached in seven, as confirmed by the eighth interview. With this sampling criteria, three lecturers, three assistant professors, and two associate professors with different levels of expertise in teacher education were included to comprehensively understand their practices and deepen the study's relevance and validity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

3.1 Data Collection Procedure

The primary data collection method comprises on semi structured interviews with teacher educations. The semi-structured interview protocol was developed in light of the theoretical framework "Theory of Teacher Education for Social Justice (Cochran, 2009) and conducted a PILOT study on the population other than the case. Subsequently, the interview guide was employed according to the pilot study findings. Each session with an interviewee was 25-35

minutes in length to complete. The other data collection tool comprises document analysis of B. Ed honors curriculum to the research questions answered.

3.2 Data Analysis

A thematic analysis approach was applied for both the document analysis and interview data. First, the interviews were transcribed in full word-for-word details. At the same time, the field notes and reflections were also analysed for data orientation so that the researcher marked their preliminary impressions and possible patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After familiarizing the data, the codes were assigned for major concepts through thematic analysis, where the data patterns and hierarchies were developed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Every theme was named, reflecting the core of the theme and its context to the research questions guiding the study. The final outputs were delivered in the narrative report explaining the key findings and describing themes about salient extracts from interviews and curriculum documents (Creswell & Creswell, 2022).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Strategies Employed by Teacher-Educators for Social Justice and Inclusion

i- Developing Critical Thinking and Inclusivity

Participants highlighted the importance of enhancing critical thinking by introducing interactive activities within the classroom that require critical questions and answers. P1 emphasized the role of dialogic teaching by stating, *"The critical dialogue pedagogic encourages students to think beyond the prescribed curriculum and develop their perspectives, fostering a sense of agency and inclusion in the classroom"* (P1). Similarly, P5 focused on the need to help students engage in conversations about inequalities in society using questions such as *"Why do injustices happens?"* to help students think in meaningful ways. These were primed to be critical thinking practices. In the view of P3 and P4, developing constructive minds and reflective thinkers are the need for upcoming society. The curriculum also aligned with this as it recommends that *"teachers need to employ group work, inquiry-based learning, and problem-solving activities to ensure the active participation from all learners"* (HEC, 2012, p. 27).

ii- Integrating Diverse Perspectives and Cultural Sensitivity

P3 highlighted this approach: *"Integrating examples from different religions and schools of thoughts highlights shared values and promotes mutual respect among students of various faiths"* (P3). By bridging cultural and linguistic divides, such as speaking students' native languages (P3) and acknowledging students' socio-economic and cultural realities, teacher-educators create an environment where all prospective-teachers feel valued and included (P3, P4), in this way it is supposed that they will adopt the same in their future teachings.

iii- Enhancing Student Participation and Addressing Marginalization

Teacher-educators fostered certain strategies to engage actively with those students that feel marginalized or excluded, to enhance their confidence, and meaningful participation in classroom discussions. As P3 claimed, *"Group activities are prepared in such a way that all students having diversified backgrounds both academic and social are involved in the same learning phenomena"* (P3). Correspondingly, P2 and P7 underscored the role of personalised counselling outside the classroom, which helps marginalised students overcome challenges and relate their issues to the subject matter. Positive reinforcement (P3), academic advocacy (P8) and empowering student agencies (P4) were other strategies emphasized to boost the confidence of excluded students, motivating them to contribute more even when their responses were not perfect. P5 emphasized that *"parents' biases against marginalized communities often translate into exclusionary practices in schools"*. Subsequently, P3

suggested engagement with families through workshop and dialogues may bridge such gaps. P5 emphasized *"integrating localized case studies into training programs to address community-specific issues effectively"*. P2 and P7 recommended integrating *"works by critical theorists to help students understand systemic oppression and foster empathy"*.

iv Tackling Textbook Biases and Reimagining the Curriculum

Teacher-educators criticized the rigidity of the curriculum and its failure to meet various student needs. P4 referred to the curriculum as a *"site of ideological struggle,"* noting how dominant social groups shape its content to marginalise indigenous and oppressed communities. P5 and P8 suggested that it is important that educational policymakers prioritize equity and inclusivity while allocating resources. P1 stated, *"The curriculum is often a pre-packaged structure that limits teacher agency, but teachers can guide students to reflect on textbook agendas" (P1) critically*. In the same way, P4 referred to textbooks as *"condensed knowledge"*, and the participant used to integrate students' lived experiences into it, described as *"fluid knowledge,"* to bridge gaps between theory and practice.

v- Promoting Ethical and Social Values through Modeling and Reflective Practices

P5 stated, *"Teachers are supposed to practice social justice in their actions, words, and behaviors. I should be the model starting from myself in the classroom"*. Teacher-educators emphasized the importance of instilling values such as teamwork, welfare, and equality through classroom activities that promote accountability and discourage discrimination (P3, P5). The B. Ed honors curriculum pushes prospective teacher to always consider their attitudes and behaviors towards diverse groups of students through assignments that require them to *"reflect on their biases, assumptions, and experiences"* (HEC, 2012, p. 30). P6 explained that *"reflective practices force educators to confront biases, which many find uncomfortable"*. Training programs should emphasize reflexivity through reflective journals and peer feedback, as recommended by P1 and P8.

vi- Building Awareness of Social Justice through Practical Applications

Practical strategies such as assignments, case studies, and group projects were identified as valuable tools for promoting awareness about social justice. P5 described *"assignments as powerful mechanisms for helping students explore systemic injustices and develop solutions in a structured manner"*. Similarly, inquiry based learning, project based learning and case studies were mentioned as effective in terms of their capacity to contextualize social justice issues and to link together theoretical concepts with real life situations. P5 stated, *"Case studies and real-life examples contextualize social justice issues, helping students understand their relevance and applicability" (P5)*. P7 stated, *"Educators' egos often hinder collaboration and create power imbalances."*

vii- Collaboration and Professional Development for Inclusive Education

Participants identified collaboration as an important element in fostering inclusive practices. P1 involved *"engagement with peers and colleagues with whom they share a significant knowledge and experience as a reflective tool for self-assessment and improving their teaching practices"*. P2 echoed the *impact that early training experiences had on understanding inclusion, especially the role of a trainer and their calm demeanor, and also student-oriented teaching methods as a model*. However, P3 identified challenges in professional development especially for teacher-educators with PhD and mentioned that when engaging in academic work at a higher level, this often means that there is less opportunity to learn practically about justice. The curriculum promotes collaborative learning as a model for inclusivity, implemented in group-based projects and peer teaching exercises,

stating that *"collaborative learning experiences expose students to differing perspectives, fostering empathy and mutual respect"* (HEC, 2012, p. 33).

viii- Teacher as Socially Just and Inclusive Assessor

Participants shared experiences regarding assessment strategies for promoting social justice. P1 criticized on the traditional forms of assessment as product oriented and argued that *"inclusive education requires process oriented forms of assessment such as project based and experiential learning and suggested systemic support as key to implementing fair and reflective assessments practices"*. P2 shared that *"varied forms of assessment which includes projects, practical tasks and paper and pencil tests to cater for different needs of the students and also adapt to meet the challenges associated with the unequal distribution of resource"*. P3 stressed that *"it was necessary to focus on content knowledge rather than language proficiency of students so that it would be fair, especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds"*. The curriculum recommends *"ongoing assessments for feedback and adaptation, enabling teachers to meet each student's unique needs"* (HEC, 2012, p. 38). The curriculum supports differentiated assessment methods, which provide multiple means for students to exhibit their understanding. *"Differentiated assessments are essential to inclusivity, offering students varied opportunities to succeed"* (HEC, 2012, p. 41).

4.2 Discussions

This section explores the participants' insights and corroborates them with recent literature related to them. It discusses the practices and strategies employed by teacher educators to promote social justice and inclusivity in the case.

i- Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Teacher-educators emphasised embedding learners' cultural backgrounds in the curriculum, which needs to be aligned with the teaching methods. Gay (2022) claims that culturally responsive pedagogy helps educators consider individuals' identities to engage and enhance their academic performance as participants highlighted the practices, including adopting culturally relevant content, which fostered discussions about various aspects of diversity and promoted collaborative projects. Hammond (2021) proposes that learning needs to be connected with real life experiences of students as a means of attaining social justice and inclusion. Participants believe in collaborations with non-governmental organizations to address systemic barriers, echoed by Shah and Siddiqui (2023), who argue that multi-stakeholder approaches may lead to sustainable outcomes. Walker et al. (2023) indicate that community involvement promotes inclusive education and helps promote change, acceptance and understanding of the education system.

ii- Professional Development Programs

Teacher-educators recommended continuous professional development (CPD) which has proved to be an influential strategy. These findings are echoed in the existing research that CPD increases educators' confidence in implementing inclusion strategies. On the other hand, Jennings et al. (2023) accentuate that professional development programs focusing on intersectionality helps teacher-educators to tackle multidimensionality of exclusions. Participants witnessed that they had participated in training on conserving themes to utilize the various teaching methods. After such sessions, they created a conducive environment in classrooms for addressing issues related to social exclusions. Lee et al. (2022) claim that workshops or training sessions on culturally responsive teaching and inclusive pedagogy may improve educators' efficacy toward inclusion.

iii- Critical Dialogues and Collaborative Learning Models

Teacher-educators employed critical dialogue and collaborative learning models and found them supporting strategies while promoting social justice principles by critiquing those societal injustices and exclusions. According to Kim and Lee (2023), critical dialogues teach empathy, critical thinking and equip learners in order to cope with discriminatory practices. Hopkins and Rayner (2022) also agreed that dialogic teaching fosters increased agency of the students in promoting justice. Johnson and Johnson (2023) advocate for collaborative learning that foster interdependence and mutual respect as important elements of inclusion. Furthermore, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory is focused on social interaction during cognitive development (Smith & Taylor, 2021).

iv- Engagements in Mentoring Activities for Marginalized Students

Teacher-educators also described redesigning teaching methodologies to include case studies, critical discussions, role models, and contextual examples that promote social justice and inclusion. Meadows and Rahman (2023) support these strategies, claiming that inclusive curricula deconstruct stereotypes and empower marginalized groups. Teacher-educators shared their experiences in mentoring weak academic background, poor families, and marginalized groups of learners and found this was effective in dealing with the different exclusion in the program.

v- Addressing Systemic Barriers through Advocacy

The study found that increasing advocacy for the learners is an effective strategy supported by the contemporary literature (Nasir & Iqbal, 2022) and also highlighted that systemic inequalities may be addressed by enhancing classroom advocacy. On the other side, the participants did not show positive alignment between inclusive educational practices and technological advances. Creating an environment within their teacher-educator institutions through building a culture of collaborative leadership helps create inclusive environment in the educational organization. Green and Thomas (2023) identified the involvement of educators in decision-making and policy may reduce resistance and promote institutional support while promoting social justice and inclusion. Literature also emphasized that through cooperation with policymakers and advocacy for their cause, teacher-educators may play critical role in the promotion of social justice and inclusion in the society.

5. Conclusion

The case study indicated that teacher-educators have a deep understanding of their role as change agents and embrace the ideas of inclusion and justice as practical and not merely a concept to be taught. Participants expressed a firm desire to develop the core ideas of critical thinking, empathy, and cultural sensitivity among pre-service teachers. Participants in this study share different strategies to shape diversified pre-service teachers into inclusive teachers through promoting social justice and inclusion, such as connecting the pre-packaged curriculum with their practical life, including more diverse content, and developing a conducive and cooperative work environment in the classroom. These approaches and critical reflections on equity and justice were encouraged through critical discussions, inquiry-based learning, culturally relevant pedagogy, and reflective teaching practices. Moreover, collaboration with other schools and community organizations helped to broaden students' understanding of particular problems. The research also contributed to the university's goals of increasing diversity. Teacher-educators worked to instill a value system that was rooted in respect, cooperation, and accountability to nurture a culture that they expected their trainees to learn.

6. Implications

The research proposes practical implications that focus on improving teacher education programs regarding the integration of equity and inclusion by using a multi-pronged approach to curriculum design, community-based instruction, collaborative learning approaches, critical pedagogy, culturally responsive pedagogy, and guidance and counseling-based strategies for marginalized students. Teacher-educators require training and continuous professional development opportunities to tackle the problems of inclusion, and collaborative training initiatives provide an avenue for learning practical inclusive approaches. In addition, institutional policies should treat teacher educators as social justice advocates to adequately resource them with funding, professional development opportunities, and other relevant resources. Optimizing social accreditation processes for teacher education institutions is also part of the goals of justice and inclusiveness.

7. Recommendations of the Study

Universities should provide structured professional development opportunities to enhance teacher educators' competencies for inclusive education. Teacher education institutions need to strengthen their links with NGOs, other teacher training schools of different universities, and likewise organizations such as student-teachers and teacher-educators, who may exchange their learnings across institutions physically and virtually. It is suggested that education teachers' curricula must be revised by accommodating the modules of equity, social justice, and inclusion-based real-life case studies, role-playing, and hands-on experiences. Quality assurance and monitoring bodies for teacher training institutes such as NACTE, STEDA, HEC, and others are recommended for considering the principles of fairness and equity in their inspection rubric. Global institutions like UNESCO and UNICEF may also consider the recommendations and incorporate the insights into their frameworks of SDGs, mainly aiming to cultivate equitable and inclusive education across the globe.

8. Limitations of the Study

Among the limitations is the size of the sample which, due to practical considerations, may not be as inclusive as desired. Hence it also impact on the results across institutions. Time constraints, participants' subjectivity, organizational culture and resources may affect the extent to which data is collected and analyzed. Teacher educators' cognitive biases induced by personal dispositions and the study's context, particular to Sukkur IBA University, also lessen what can be inferred as general. The delimitations include the geography of the study, whose focus is Sukkur IBA University in Sindh, Pakistan, where teacher educators are the only respondents. At the same time, other constituents are ignored: the case study design, which focuses on specific programs, and the use of qualitative approaches, primarily semi-structured interviews without any quantitative data. Considering these limitations and delimitations, the study attempts to shed light on social justice and inclusion in education through teacher education programs that encourage the practice of inclusion.

9. Directions for Future Research

As a growing number of students have access to technology, future research on the equity aspects of virtual classrooms and adaptive learning systems may be explored in light of these findings. Looking at educational policy through the lens of sociology, psychology, and leadership may provide new insights related to the study. Mixed-methods research, where narrative information from qualitative interviews is accompanied by survey and observational data, may allow for a better understanding of the experiences of teacher-educators with social justice activism in various social contexts. Furthermore, multidisciplinary studies across different undergraduate programs and other teacher education may be carried out to comply

with the global peace-keeping initiatives like SDGs. The findings also reveal a dire need to explore the challenges and issues that teacher-educators face while promoting social justice and inclusion.

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