

## **Embracing Disability through the Lens of Teachers in the Dynamics of General Classrooms**

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### **Abstract**

The study attempts to explore disability through the lens of teachers in the dynamics of general classrooms. Using mixed method design and sample of 506 teachers for questionnaire and 37 for interviews, the study presents multi-faceted challenges in unlocking the potential of main stream sector in terms of support, cooperation, & collaboration that researchers coined into the term “supporting pebbles”. Other backdrop factors i.e.; pedagogy, curriculum and assessment have also sufficient impact on teachers’ lens in embracing disability. It is concluded that to embrace disability, building teachers’ capacity in pedagogy and assessment is mandatory irrespective of schools’ location and category, and teachers’ professional and academic qualification that leads further to inclusion and equity in schools.

**Keywords:** General classrooms, capacity building, embracing disability

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## Introduction

Historically, schools have long been involved in nourishing children abilities irrespective of the extent to bring better citizenship in the society. It has been the impression that schools have been only involved in filtering better talent and leaving the residue in its sorry state of affairs. Teachers and their practices have been used as a filter in conical flask to perform this desired function. As a result, a continuum of discussion is left for educators to mark the lines among the more able to less able and from abilities to disabilities. Praxis and practices exist to isolate disabilities from a separate-to-same classrooms and institutions. Plaisance (2008) elaborates that inclusion characterizes a policy to welcome and educate children with disabilities in general schools instead of placing them in segregated institutions. Schools typically mirror society and its practices. For example, segregated institutions give birth to marginalized society. In a globalized world each country, with its own experiences of segregation and inclusion, has been developing more inclusive environments in general schools. According to United Nations Treaty Collection (2015), United Nations in 2011 formally confirmed Pakistan's membership for the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (2006). Since the country is taking initiatives to minimize marginalization in general classrooms and schools and inclusive education pilot projects have been launched in Pakistan that would probably lead to furthering inclusive education in general schools. In this milieu it becomes significant to explore how teachers perceive disability in their praxis within the dynamics and context of general classrooms. Do significant differences exist among teachers' responses to their capacity building with respect to place and institutions? Pondering the debacle from segregation-to-inclusion the study attempts to see disability through the lens of teachers in classrooms of general schools.

## Disability within the Context of General Classroom

Multi-layered contradictory arguments subsist on disability in the context of teaching-learning process where teachers are at the center of a glut of analyses. It becomes imperative to understand the dynamics of general classroom where teachers practice. Corbett (2005) emphasized that it is important to explore how teachers are coping in schools where they are working hard to be inclusive. While discussing the importance of teachers' pedagogy in general classrooms Armstrong (2008) emphasized training to develop their knowledge of inclusive education. Engen (2004) described that the superior challenge for the teacher was to arrange instruction so that pupils could participate in curricular activities at their own level of functioning. Teachers' actions in the classroom are a result of their training, experiences, beliefs,

and attitudes as well as on situation in the classroom, schools and organizational external factors, for example, political and financial structures, local and regional resources as Meijer(2005) elaborated. Purdue, Gordon-Burns, Gunn, Madden, & Surtees (2009) pointed out that in New Zealand it does seem teachers' inability to teach successfully all who would wish to exercise their rights to participate in their local education setting may in some ways be connected to their initial teacher education programme. Purdue et al. (2009) noted that inclusive education courses in initial teacher education programmes in New Zealand are often centered on ideas about how teachers might include and teach children with disabilities in regular educational settings. Similarly, Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson (2001) stressed the need to develop the capacity of practitioners to carry out research that can directly inform improvements in their practice. Nutbrown & Clough (2004) referred to a survey conducted with Italian teachers which reveals that teachers expressed clear support for the concept of inclusion and willingness to teach children with learning difficulties, but less than 25% thought they had sufficient skills and training. UNESCO (2013) elaborates that in implementing an inclusive approach, consideration must be given to crucial issues such as standards, academic failure, careers advice, assessment, general education-system economics and the training of education professionals. Berg & Schneider (2012) concluded that a discourse of solidarity around inclusive education needs to return to the discussion of diversity and difference, and open up the 'black box' of inclusive education: how do children themselves experience their inclusion in the mainstream classroom or in the special classroom? This discussion has been silenced too long under the guise of the moral imperative of inclusive education. Plaisance & Schneider (2013) proposed that among the possible approaches to the current problem of school inclusion in France, the first step is the analysis of the regulatory and institutional legislative, established for "disabled" children and the second step is favored by the approach of ethnographic field which has the advantage of showing the representations and practices of actors in everyday life to meet school challenges of hosting the difference while maintaining the goal of academic excellence. Goransson & Nilholm (2009) opine that the development of schools is a complex process embedded in a local contest. They further explained the complexities of the development of inclusive education, and referred to results showing that characteristics of an inclusive school are very similar to what is usually recognized as characteristics of good schools in general. General and special educators, according to (Ferguson, 2008), could blend their professional knowledge and skills, work together to adjust their roles, and reorganize their practice to provide groups of quite diverse students with the ongoing supports for learning they needed.

## Methodology

It is assumed that teachers of general schools in Pakistan have not enough knowledge and skills to manage disability in the dynamics of general classroom. Therefore, the study intended to explore how teachers perceive disability in their praxis within the dynamics and context of general classrooms. The study not only takes into account the significant differences exist among teachers' responses to their capacity building with respect to teachers' posting in schools and the type of institutions but also provides suffice insight to understand the patterns rooted in teachers' belief and practices. To reach suffice conclusion, the study used mixed method design. Therefore, quantitative data on questionnaire and qualitative data on interviews have been collected and appropriate statistical and thematic analyses models respectively were utilized for inferences. Mackenzie and Knipe (2006) explicate that gathering both numeric information (e.g., on instruments) as well as text information (e.g., on interviews) so the final database represents both quantitative and qualitative information. Gorard (2004) elaborates that combined or mixed-methods research has been identified as a key element in the improvement of social science, including education research with research strengthened by the use of a variety of methods. Lavrakas (2008) concludes that using this design, the researcher simultaneously conceptualizes quantitative and qualitative research studies. The blend of quantitative and qualitative research used together for the research problem facilitates in two ways. The questionnaire facilitates in identifying in/significant differences exist among the demographics on the variables used in the study. The interviews of general education teachers explicate disability within the context of general classrooms through their voices and facilitate in getting insight. The questionnaires take into account the social determinants of trajectories, while interviews accounts for individual construction of these trajectories, particularly apprehension of some key moments (De Singly, 2008).

Teachers in general schools are not trained to teach all students in the same class due to segregated system of education in Pakistan. Teachers are trained and recruited separately for special and general schools. For the study, teachers of public and private schools located in urban, sub urban and rural areas were selected from three districts of Punjab province, Pakistan. However, teachers selected were not proportionate in number. As compared to cities, in rural schools of each district, fewer teachers were available and the schools were located from long distances from each other. The researcher collected data from the teachers who had been teaching in general schools. Multistage sampling was used. First the schools were selected randomly after obtaining official schools' list from each district. A total of 66 schools

were selected randomly from three districts. From each district, 22 schools were randomly selected from which 10 schools were selected from urban area and 10 were from rural area, and 2 schools were selected from sub urban area of each district. A total of 30 schools were selected from urban areas of all three districts, and 30 schools from all rural areas of each district from which 6 schools were selected. A total of 66 schools were selected randomly and from the total, 33 schools were public and 33 were private. A total 11 public and 11 private schools from each district were selected. From a total of 723 teachers to whom questionnaire were delivered, 506 teachers had given back the questionnaire. The returned rate was 69.98%. For interviews, 37 teachers were purposively selected from district Lahore, Sargodha and Chiniot. Teachers, who were willing to be interviewed, were only interviewed and therefore teachers selected were disproportionate in numbers. From teachers who were interviewed, 19 were selected from Lahore, 11 teachers were selected from Sargodha, and 7 teachers were selected from Chiniot. From 37 teachers who were interviewed, 11 were female teachers and 26 were male teachers.

### **Quantitative Section**

The questionnaire developed for this study contained the questions related to teachers' demographic information (e.g., qualification, age, teaching experience), and statements related to disability in general classroom and general school teachers requirements to practice? For details see annex A. All questions were rated on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree). The researcher himself developed the instrument. The literature available on disability and inclusive education was thoroughly explored and the items were formulated and included reflecting the various dimensions of the objectives of the study. To validate the questionnaire, expert opinion was sought from four professors of Education. In pilot testing, questionnaire was initially distributed to 35 teachers who have been practicing in general classrooms. The data were analyzed in SPSS (version 19) and three items from the questionnaire were deleted to enhance the reliability of the questionnaire. Finally the Cronbach alpha was calculated as 0.867 which shows that the instrument was reliable on which the final collection of the data were made. A few questions asked in final data collection were given in the Table 1.

**Table 1***Items' statements in questionnaire*

Sr. No	Items' statements in questionnaire
1	Teachers need to build their capacity to teach and practice in classrooms where a student with disability is present.
2	Teachers do not know pedagogy so they need to learn how to teach students with disabilities in classrooms.
3	Teachers need to learn how to assess students with disabilities.
4	We think that special education teacher should also be available where a student with disability is present in classrooms.
5	Teachers are ready to cooperate and collaborate with their colleagues and staff to improve all students in classrooms.
6	Teachers are ready to cooperate and collaborate with the parents of both students with and without disabilities to improve all students in classrooms.

### Results Based On Quantitative Analysis

The analyses of quantitative data show that a total of 71.9% teachers agree and strongly agree that they need to build their capacity to teach in classrooms, 78.9% think (agree and strongly agree) that they do not know pedagogy so they need to learn how to teach students with disabilities classrooms, 77.9% perceive (agree and strongly agree) that they need to learn how to assess students with disabilities, 77.9% think that they would need special education teacher in classrooms (agree and strongly agree), 79.7% agree and strongly agree that they are ready to cooperate with colleagues and staff and 82.6% agree and strongly agree that they are also ready to cooperate with the parents of both students with and without disabilities. The t-test and ANOVA show that there are no significant differences found between teachers' responses and the demographics used for example, teachers' schools' locality ( $F = 1.203$ ,  $Sig. = .301$ ), their schools' type i.e. public and private schools ( $t = 1.260$ ,  $Sig. = .208$ , Mean public= 23.6385, Mean private = 23.1378), their academic qualification ( $F = .270$ ,  $Sig. = .847$ ), and their professional qualification ( $F = 1.426$ ,  $Sig. = .847$ ).

### Qualitative Section

Interviews have also been conducted in this mixed method design of the study. Interviews guided by the questioning route takes into account the flexible movement of topic and sometimes provided insight of dimensions of various objectives. Various questions have been asked in interviews in the backdrop of general classroom keeping in view pedagogy, curriculum, and examination, and to accommodate disability in table 2.

**Table 2***Questions asked during interview from general classrooms' teachers.*

Sr. No	Interview's questions
1	How do you view disability in classrooms of general schools?
2	Do you think you can teach and manage children with disabilities in your classroom?
3	Is curriculum of your school suitable for all students including students with disabilities?
4	Is present mode of examination suitable for all students including students with disabilities?
5	What is required to accommodate all students in your classroom and school?
6	Is there anything else you want to add?

The scheduled was decided in oral/telephonic conversation with them for interviews. Sometimes, researchers contacted the principal of the school. The principal gave some of the contacts of different teachers and then researchers contacted them via telephone. Sometimes to conduct interviews from urban and rural schools teachers, researcher himself visited the cities and villages and conducted interviews on individual basis. For example, once researcher travelled to a village which is east of Lahore city. This village is near Pakistan-India border, Waga border. On arriving there, we contacted different persons in the village to know about the school. When we arrived in school, there was only one teacher. We introduced ourselves and requested for interview. In the beginning he was hesitant and he didn't want to allow us to record the interview. But after explaining clearly the purpose of the interview he had agreed. School was spacious but hadn't much facilities. There were two chairs for teachers and one black board. Students were sitting on ground. Teacher has Secondary School Certificate (S.S.C) as academic qualification and Primary Teaching Certificate (PTC) as professional qualification. He had 15 year teaching experience. As the interview proceeded, he expressed himself as "... *for doing so... accepting and managing disability we need training...*" (GR12).

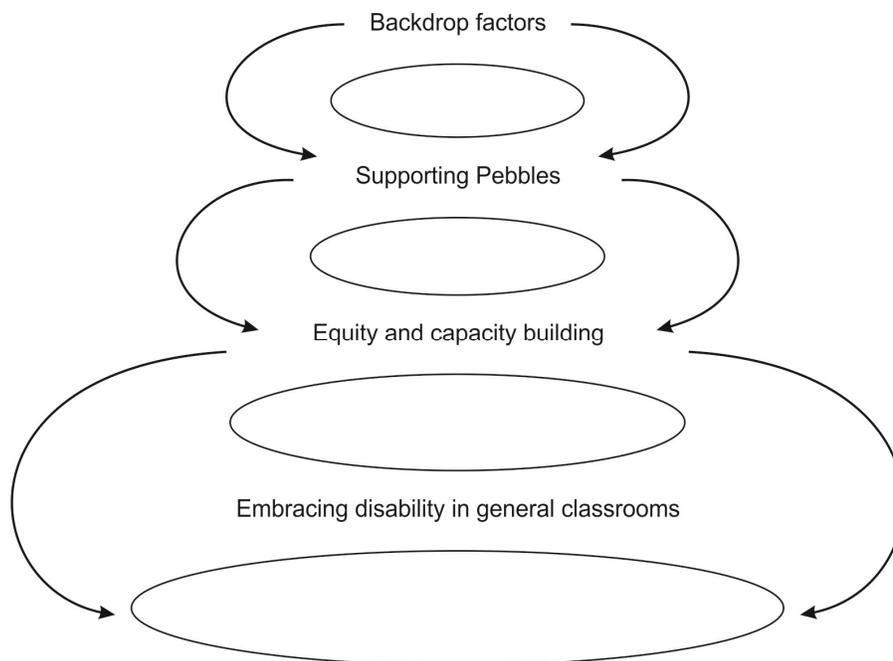
### **Development of themes in Qualitative Data**

According to Saldana (2009), qualitative researchers should never overlook the opportunity to "pre-code" (Layder, 1998) by circling, highlighting, bolding, underlining, or coloring rich or significant participant quotes or passages those "codable moments" worthy of attention (Boyatzis, 1998). Interviews' transcription leads researcher to several readings himself that made some sense of the data and constructed a system that allowed categorizing the data systematically. "Researcher looked at what was in the text and gave it a name" (Patton, 2002). Reading interviews

over several times made researcher to code, retrieve, assemble and viewed the data in different themes and categories. This processes what Patton (2002) called is “coding and retrieving process”. It allows the data to be organized and described before the researcher goes on to the next stage of analysis. This process made researcher to code the words and passages or expressions used by the teachers during the interviews. These codes then lead to various sub categories and categories. From these categories themes had been emerged. Researcher himself reviewed the categories again to remove the chances of overlapping among them and made them final. Each teacher was assigned with a particular identity. For example, the identify “GU7” where the capital letter G stands for Government or public school, U stands for urban school and 7 denotes serial number assigned to teacher in the list. When a teacher opined about particular aspect, researcher traced the expression from the text during analysis and used his/her expressions relevant to the category or theme and ending the sentence with GU7 in parentheses. For example, an expression of a teacher has been used under the theme “Teachers’ lens: Pedagogy, Curriculum & Assessment” as: “[...] *syllabus and exercises should not be lengthy and based on creativity*” (GU7). During analysis of the interviews categories and themes were emerged. As the questions were open-ended and as the interviewees were given the opportunity to respond freely to the questions, the responses were analyzed according to the codes assigned to interviewees. In the subsequent steps, from each category, themes were emerged. To ensure the accuracy of the decision and interpretation of the themes emerged, researcher continuously made efforts keeping in view in analyzing qualitative data. The analyzed interviews evince teachers’ lens for disability, what changes do teachers require and why do teachers feel a need for training?

### **Results Based on Qualitative Data**

The themes developed compose the result of qualitative section. In this part, researchers unveil disability in the dynamics of general classrooms through teachers’ lens. Qualitative analysis shows that a total of 32 teachers out of 37 responded under various themes. Researchers have visualized the themes developed during analysis shown in figure 1.1.



*Fig 1.1: Thematic representation/visualization of themes developed from qualitative data*

The elaboration of themes including teachers' expressions extracted during analysis through codes and categories have been presented to unveil disability in general classrooms.

### **Backdrop Factors**

Teachers use pedagogy, curriculum and assessment as backdrop factors in embracing disability in general classrooms. Under the theme, 20 teachers out of 37 responded. Teachers look for suitable pedagogy, flexible curriculum and variety of assessment techniques to embrace disability in general classrooms. Teachers are direly needed to learn different pedagogies/methods in classes to accommodate students with special education needs. They emphasized in developing curriculum more adaptable and threw light on the mode of assessment for students with disability. Teachers should use a wide range of pedagogies in valuing difference in class. This is what Corbett (2001: p.48) called the third stage of his conceptual definition of differentiation. In Corbett's (2001: p. 48) words "if a teacher recognizes and respects the range of different learning styles within the class group, there is a natural receptivity to adaptations which are meaningful and place value on the

learner”. A teacher from public school discussed his mode of teaching in classroom, “[...] I make groups and ask them to help each other and try to understand the concept, I experienced, by discussion and grouping they learn better” (GU2). Another teacher who had also experience to teach in special schools explicates, “[...] I have used story-telling method by using sign language in deaf class” (PU19). In general schools, teachers usually use traditional approach in their classes. They extensively use lecture method to make concepts clear to students. Some teachers use different approach in their teaching and try to accommodate all students. For example, “[...] I notice why they are not learning? I change my style of teaching. I go deep down in their problems and accordingly I change myself” (PU17). Another teacher from private urban school shares his experience of teaching in ordinary class: “[...] some students stammer and stutter. I design strategy for this. I asked that first you try to speak in-front of mirror and then speak and repeat the same sentences before your mother. I asked that you are normal. I made her understand that you can do this” (PU16). Teachers can also get maximum benefit of assistive and ambient technology if provided to their schools. For example, “[...] if there is a use of digital diary then students with impairment can get benefits from it to learn even in general school” (GU6).

How do teachers adapt curriculum to fulfill the needs of all students and which mode of assessment should be used to assess student with disability and how? Teachers focus on flexible curriculum. For example, “[...] syllabus and exercises should not be lengthy and based on creativity” (GU7). Teachers concluded that curriculum taught in schools is not suitable for students with disabilities because when on assessment they show no improvement. A teacher expressed, “[...] change the mode of examination” (PU20). Teachers paradoxically explicate the situation on embracing disability in the dynamics of general classrooms. For example, “[...] Government policy bound us to show good result that is considered in his/her ACR (Annual Credential Report)”. General school teachers have concerns on embracing disability. Corbett (2005) explained that inclusive education seems to be an apt topic for a series which considers school concerns. Corbett continues to elaborate it is not about special needs alone, it is much more to do with creating and sustaining systems and structures which develop and support flexible and adaptable approaches to learning.

### Supporting Pebbles

Teachers use support, cooperation and collaboration as supporting pebbles in embracing disability in general classrooms. Under the theme, teachers laid stress on the importance of changes particularly in existing system, classrooms and at large on the attitudes of society, parents, students, and teachers themselves. Focusing on teachers' strategies to be used in classroom, importance of support on each step is not ignorable. General education teacher, according to Deng & Harris (2008), can master and apply knowledge and technique of special education in Chinese education classrooms, if only the local education authorities could provide necessary support for them at minimal level. Similarly in Pakistan teachers perceive that many possibilities and potentials for inclusive classes lie within the existing schools system if support can be provided. Teachers of general schools didn't experience disability in general classroom and sans doubt they nothing know about teaching classes with disability.

Parents' role in developing schools to embrace disability is also imperative. For example, "[...] parents should continue to contact teachers because parents understand their children well" (GU4). "[...] parents of non-disabled students don't like to see disabled students with their children in classes" (GU6). On contrary, "[...] parents of disabled students cooperate and make request teachers to facilitate their children in classes" (GU12). Support and cooperation widen teachers' way of embracing disability in classes and increase achievement of students with disability. If a support system was an intricate component of the inclusion mode-there was a slightly greater positive effect for academic outcomes (Artiles, Kozleski, Dorn & Christensen, 2006). A teacher from private school explicates, "[...] we have to encourage the parents, I have seen many disabled children they are quite lovable and are improving" (PR37).

Inclusive classes are productive when students without disabilities cooperate with their counterparts with disabilities. A teacher reflected on his own experience, "[...] they also have potential for learning and they can perform like others with little support from their peers" (GU6). Inclusive classes work best when special education teachers support general schools' teachers. A teacher from public school argues, "[...] if special education teacher is available then it is possible" (GU8).

## Equity and Capacity Building

Teachers consider capacity building to make equitable schools and to embrace disability in general classrooms. It has been learnt from the empirical evidences that if schools would be more inequitable then there are fewer chances of embracing disability in the dynamics of general classrooms. In Pakistan, teachers in general schools have to face large classes where teaching-learning process takes place. This becomes more worse when some teachers involve themselves in business due to economic problems and use unfair means to protect their job. For example, a public rural school teacher expresses, “[...] but in my school we are two teachers, the other (teacher) has business and just come for attendance... and 200 students are enrolled with us” (GR23). Most often teachers indicated towards changes required to embrace disability, for example, a private school teacher explicates: “[...] existing system is a barrier for such classes. It should be changed to make better schools” (PU13). Without equitable schools we cannot change our society. For example, a teacher from public rural school elaborates: “[...] if teachers’ attitudes are not effective, they are inequitable, they stigmatize and call them (students with disability) with nick name like ‘anna’ (GR27). Reflecting upon counseling factor, a teacher explicates “[...] we should also give moral lesson to students and should take help from religion by delivering different historical events based on moral education” (GU1). The factors general schools’ teachers raised in their voice can bring a major change to embrace disability where all students can learn.

Teachers are not trained for the purpose to which they are required to teach in Pakistan. Teachers of general schools require training to embrace disability in the dynamics of general classrooms. That is why teachers of general schools ask for the support of special education teachers. In the country separate training is being imparted to pre-service teachers. This separate training programme does not facilitate general education teachers to learn about students with disabilities. Although, in some institutions a single course on inclusive education is being introduced in training of general schools teachers but it seems that it is insufficient to practice in inclusive classes. Purdue et al. (2009 : p. 807) noted that inclusion or inclusive education courses in initial teacher education programmes in New Zealand are often centered on ideas about how teachers might include and teach children with disabilities in regular educational institution. Gerent & Hotz (2003) have explained that the difficulty is current classroom where teachers were trained to either work in general education classrooms or in special (segregated) education settings. Ferguson (2008) has explained that general and special educators could blend their professional knowledge and skills, work together to adjust their roles, and reorganize their practice to provide

groups of quite diverse students with the ongoing supports for learning they needed". Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson (2001) stressed the need to develop the capacity of practitioners to carry out forms of research that can directly inform improvements in their practice. Purdue et al. (2009: p. 806) have stated that for teachers there should be an understanding of the disability and the effects it would have on the child and other children in the class. Although teachers do not know enough what should be in training but at least the requirements they feel is training concerning methods of teaching students with disability. Also suffice depends on how policy makers develop policies for schools, how administrators make decisions and manage schools' resources, how teachers orchestrate their classes with diversity and profit from it in developing their competencies and use all possible effective strategies like cooperative learning and peer tutoring, developing friendship among children with and without disability and how parents support teachers. All factors are challenge for teachers in general schools and are important to embrace disability. Teachers are inequitable in their attitude. The factors general schools' teachers raised in their voices can bring a major change and make equitable schools where disability is welcomed to make productive citizen for equitable society. For teachers, it is policy matter to embrace disability in general schools. Collaboration among teachers is necessary including special teacher because many issues and problems can be dealt by support-teacher. Although inclusion is highlighted in many courses for teachers about special educational needs, it seems that a deficit model still predominates. This is what we have also explored in ordinary schools in Pakistan in this study. Teachers underestimate students' potentials in ordinary schools particularly the capabilities of students with disabilities. Pedagogy and curriculum are major components of teaching-learning process in schools. If teachers use a wide range of pedagogies in valuing difference in inclusive classes, then disability could be embraced. The studies on general, special and model (inclusive) schools in Pakistan show that general schools' teachers have lot of challenges ahead for embracing disability. For example, the study conducted on inclusive schools reflects some-what flexible compartments of teachers to accept both students with and without special education needs. Hassan, Hussain, Parveen & de Souza (2015) have shown that teachers' inclusive classroom experiences not only widen teachers' level of embracing disability but also demist concerns of those teachers who are lacking in inclusive classroom teaching experiences.

## Discussion and Conclusion

To embrace disability in the dynamics of general classrooms and to build schools' capacity, building teachers' capacity in pedagogy and assessment is mandatory irrespective of schools' location and category, teachers' professional and academic qualification. The European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (2013) elaborates that the effective ways to strengthen the capacity of the mainstream sector to be more inclusive is necessary to unlock the potential of the special sector as a resource. Additionally the systems for collaboration and networking to learners as an integral part of their education have to be introduced. The study conducted on teachers of general classrooms brings multiple challenges in unlocking the potential of mainstream sector in Pakistan. The challenges have been elaborated in terms of support, cooperation, & collaboration that researcher tried to encompass under the term "supporting pebbles". Other backdrop factors i.e.; pedagogy, curriculum and assessment also bring multifaceted challenges that sufficiently impact on teachers' lens in embracing disability in the dynamics of general classrooms. Along with the meager resources, the inequitable practices of teachers in terms of treatment with students in inequitable schools further narrows the spaces available for inclusive practices in general schools. Meijer's (2005) investigation supports our study in terms of backdrop factors, supporting pebbles, and teachers' capacity building. According to Meijer, it has been emphasized that teachers depend on their training, their experience, their beliefs and their attitudes as well as on situation in the classroom, schools and organizational external factors for example, political and financial, and local and regional resources. The study suggests that unlocking the potential of mainstream sector is imperative to embrace disability. By integrating Corbett's (2005) finding in our study we can understand disability in general classroom. According to Corbett, it is important to explore what support structures are needed and how teachers learn that works most effectively. Qualitative analysis helped a lot in viewing disability through teachers lens and also conclusively reflects that teachers themselves become a barrier by underestimating disabled students. The study concludes that developing teachers' professional competencies is must to unlock potential of mainstream sector to embracing disability in the dynamics of general classroom that leads further to inclusion and equity in schools.

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