

PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHERS ON THE INCLUSIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT IN PRIMARY SCHOOL IN RURAL AREAS OF BADAKHSHAN AFGHANISTAN

By

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A thesis submitted to the BRAC Institute of Educational Development in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Education in Educational Leadership & School Improvement

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Declaration

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my own original work while completing degree at Brac University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

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Ethics Statement

I, Mohamad Asif Etimadi, hereby affirm that this work, titled ‘Perceptions of Teachers on the Inclusive Learning Environment in Primary Schools in Rural Areas of Badakhshan, Afghanistan,’ as an exploratory study, has been conducted in adherence to the outlined ethical considerations.

1. I solemnly affirm that this work is my own original creation, developed independently. I further confirm that it has not been submitted, published, or presented in any format to any institution, organization, or publication prior to this submission.
2. Proper citation and referencing have been consistently applied throughout this paper to ensure academic integrity, avoid plagiarism, and acknowledge all sources accurately.
3. All participants in the study willingly took part of their own accord, providing informed and voluntary consent.
4. The confidentiality of the participants’ identities has been strictly maintained and will not be disclosed under any circumstances.
5. The findings of this study have been contextualized by drawing on insights from both previous and present research.
6. All codes of conduct have been diligently followed and upheld throughout the study.

Abstract

Inclusive learning environments enable students from diverse backgrounds, genders, socio-economic statuses, and abilities to access education in mainstream schools without facing discrimination or bias. This research aimed to explore teachers' perceptions of inclusivity in primary schools located in rural areas of Badakhshan, Afghanistan. Specifically, it examined factors contributing to educational exclusion, practices employed by educators to foster inclusivity, and the challenges they encounter. A qualitative approach was utilized, involving semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) with primary school teachers and headmasters. Thematic analysis of the data revealed that teachers held positive views on inclusive education and the inclusivity of their school environments. According to participants, inclusive education refers to providing equal opportunities to all individuals, regardless of their background, ethnicity, gender, socio-economic conditions, or abilities. Respondents further confirmed that their schools accommodate diverse groups of students. Key factors contributing to educational exclusion were identified, including socio-economic challenges, limited accessibility, resource scarcity, and security concerns. To promote an inclusive learning environment, educators highlighted practices such as employing varied teaching methods, actively engaging participants, and distributing resources equitably. Nevertheless, the study found several challenges to achieving inclusivity. These included a lack of professional development and organizational support, insufficient resources, long distances to schools, and limited collaboration with communities and parents. Participants suggested that initiatives such as professional development programs, provision of adequate resources and facilities, strengthened community and family engagement, and collaboration among stakeholders could significantly enhance the creation of welcoming and inclusive educational systems. This research provides valuable insights for educational stakeholders and policymakers to make informed and comprehensive decisions aimed at fostering inclusive learning environments, while addressing the challenges identified.

Keywords: Inclusive education; inclusive learning environment; perception of teachers; primary schools; educational exclusion; challenges; strategies and practices; rural areas in Afghanistan

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my family, particularly my father and mother, for their consistent love, guidance, and support.

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List of Acronyms

IDPs Internally Displaced Persons

NESP National Education Strategic Plan

AAOD Accessibility Organization for Afghan Disabled

SEN Special Education Needs

FGD Focus Group Discussion

Chapter 1

Introduction and Background

1.1 Introduction

The inclusivity of the learning environment is a key contributor to quality education, greatly underpinning students' personal, professional, and social skills and growth. This means that learners of diverse backgrounds, abilities, and social classes should be treated with respect and dignity. They should all feel physically and mentally included and supported in the learning environment, free from discrimination, biases, or violence. According to UNICEF (n.d., p.1), "inclusive education allows students of all backgrounds to learn and grow side by side, to the benefit of all." Debasu and Yitayew (2024), in an inclusive learning space, educators have developed a toolkit of instructional, evaluation, and assessment techniques to address students' various learning styles and requirements, while considering the physical design of the environment. They also state that building a welcoming and inclusive learning environment is essential to facilitate educational equity and accessibility. Furthermore, regarding the inclusivity and safety of schools, UNESCO (2010) indicates that children of different genders, abilities, disabilities, health statuses, social statuses, economic statuses, ethnicities, religions, or diverse language backgrounds are supported in an inclusive and child-friendly education system.

The Ministry of Education, in its National Education Strategic Plan (2017-2021) built upon NESP I and NESP II, aims to "increase equitable and inclusive access to relevant, safe, and quality learning opportunities for children, youth, and adults in Afghanistan, especially women and girls." The plan highlights the issue of accessibility for all girls, women, and disadvantaged groups in society. Its strategy for education accessibility is divided into two

categories. The first strategy focuses on increasing education accessibility in both rural and urban areas, raising girls' access, and emphasizing the inclusion of various groups, including those with special needs, IDPs, returnees, and other disadvantaged groups. The second strategy addresses equitable access to educational opportunities in areas with long distances and a lack of female teachers, among other challenges. Additionally, community engagement will be encouraged to promote the sustainability of education programs.

As a result of constant work by the Ministry of Education and development partners, the number of students has grown dramatically between 2001 and 2018, from about 1 million in 2001 to nearly 10 million in 2018. The number of girls attending primary schools has increased to 2.5 million (UNESCO, 2021). Despite this significant progress in student enrollment, a considerable number of children from disadvantaged and marginalized groups, including those with disabilities and special needs, remain out of school. In Afghanistan, there are currently 3.7 million children between the ages of 7 and 17 who do not attend school, with 2.2 million of them being girls. Additionally, many children are at risk of dropping out (Ministry of Education, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, UNICEF, & Samuel Hall, 2018).

Regarding the learning environment, the NESP III strategy emphasizes that the educational setting needs to be inclusive, secure, and supportive of learning and healthy interpersonal relationships (Ministry of Education, 2016). However, in the implementation phase, the NESP III has not been effective. According to UNESCO (2010), the formal education system has mostly neglected the education of minorities, the disabled, and returnees. For instance, regarding disabled students, the Accessibility Organization for Afghan Disabled (AAOD) reports that due to inaccessible learning environments, 95 percent of children with disabilities

are out of school because of a lack of care and necessary facilities (Pouras Consult Aps, 2016).

This study aims to investigate exclusion factors in education in Zebak District, Badakhshan, Afghanistan, and explore teachers' views on the inclusivity of the learning environment in primary schools. It also examines strategies and principles for ensuring an inclusive learning environment and the possible challenges teachers encounter while doing so. To conduct this study, a qualitative design will be employed, with a particular focus on interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). Participants will be selected from two schools in Zebak District, Badakhshan, Afghanistan.

1.2 Research Topic

In this study, “Inclusive Learning Environment in Primary Schools in Rural Areas” is the research topic, and “Perceptions of Teachers on the Inclusive Learning Environment in Primary Schools in Rural Areas of Badakhshan, Afghanistan” is the research title. Several factors contributed to the selection of this specific topic. First, the inclusivity of the learning environment is an area of my interest. As a teacher, I always love letting my students to feel welcomed and included in the classroom, irrespective of their gender, background, socioeconomic status, and more. This approach allows them to take personal responsibility for their learning process, express their thoughts openly, work collaboratively, and thrive. It also fosters the acceptance of diversity in the classroom and underscores the holistic development of students. Second, I would like to understand the exclusionary factors and the current situation of inclusivity in the learning environment from the perspectives of teachers, particularly in two primary schools in Zebak District, Badakhshan, Afghanistan. Furthermore, there is insufficient empirical data available on exclusion factors, teachers' insights into the inclusivity of the learning environment, how they ensure it, what challenges they face, and

how they overcome them. Finally, I decided to work on this topic so that the results of my research could help different educational stakeholders, particularly teachers and headmasters, understand the exclusion factors in their areas, and the value of an inclusive learning environment in student growth and outcomes.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

An inclusive learning environment emphasizes that students of all backgrounds and identities have the opportunity to flourish (Dartmouth Center for the Advancement of Learning [DCAL], n.d.). It is also one in which educators have developed a repertoire of instructional, assessment, and evaluation techniques to accommodate students' varied learning needs and skills while considering the learning climate (Debasu & Yitayew, 2024). However, the right of students to receive an education of the same standard or to be educated alongside their peers is denied by layers of discrimination worldwide based on sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, religion, wealth, ethnicity, language, migration, displacement, incarceration, gender, remoteness, disability, and other beliefs and attitudes (Global Education Monitoring Report Team & International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, 2020). Moreover, the exclusion of disadvantaged populations and varied student groups—such as those with disabilities, people from different ethnic backgrounds, and people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds—has long been an issue in educational institutions worldwide. Lack of professional development programs on inclusive education for teachers, inadequate infrastructure and resources, a lack of peer relationships and social integration, and a lack of parental support and involvement are the main causes of this exclusion (Jardinez & Natividad, 2024). Meanwhile, creating a secure and inclusive learning environment is essential for student's mental health, academic performance, and overall well-being (Mempin, 2024). Nonetheless, globally, it is estimated that 246 million students are

victims of school violence annually. School-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) has a damaging impact on academic achievement and the potential to cause school dropout, particularly when students do not feel safe and included in the learning environment (UNESCO, 2023). It basically appears in the form of physical, psychological, or sexual abuse, such as bullying, verbal and emotional abuse, corporal punishment, sexual harassment, intimidation, and assault, which adversely affect the inclusivity of the learning environment and damage learners' health, well-being, and education (UNESCO, 2017; UNESCO, 2020). Furthermore, in the educational context of Afghanistan, despite significant progress in enrollment over the last two decades with the help of development partners, some children have never entered school or have dropped out due to a lack of an inclusive learning environment in rural areas. According to UNICEF Afghanistan (2019), despite the increase in enrollment, finishing primary school is still a distant dream, particularly for girls in rural areas, with approximately 3.7 million children out of school, 60 percent of whom are girls. Further, there is a critical relationship between an inclusive learning environment and the safety of school, students' well-being, and quality education. Thus as a result of a non-inclusive learning atmosphere, Findings by Human Rights Watch, based on interviews with Afghan students and their parents, indicate that the education system in the country has deteriorated since the Taliban regained power. The quality of education has declined, corporal punishment has become more prevalent, and female teachers have been dismissed from boys' schools. The substituted and newly recruited teachers are reportedly more aggressive, and there is a significant language barrier in classrooms, with the majority of students unable to understand the language (Pashto). Consequently, boys are struggling with mental health issues such as depression and anxiety, particularly in areas lacking adequate mental health services, leading many to leave school (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Despite existing statistics regarding inclusion in education in Afghanistan, there is still insufficient

data available on teachers' understanding of inclusive learning environments and how they practice it in primary schools in rural areas of Afghanistan. Therefore, knowing the factors beyond exclusion in Zebak District and understanding teachers' insights and experiences with inclusive learning environments helps to determine their practices of inclusive education and the challenges they face. Conversely, if this issue remains unaddressed, our understanding of the problem will be limited, making it difficult for leaders and policymakers to take decisive actions for improvement.

1.4 Purpose of the Study

This study aims to explore the factors that greatly contribute to education exclusion, and primary school teachers' understanding of inclusive learning environments in Zebak District, Badakhshan Province, Afghanistan. It also examines the practices and strategies utilized by teachers to guarantee inclusivity and the challenges they face in creating a welcoming and supportive learning environment in primary schools in rural areas of Badakhshan, Afghanistan. Overall, this research intends to analyze teachers' and headmasters' insights and understanding of inclusive learning environments in their schools. Additionally, the results of this research will contribute to bridging the knowledge gap regarding inclusive learning environments and help stakeholders enhance their understanding and knowledge of inclusive education.

1.5 Research Questions

1. What are the factors that excluded students from Zebak primary schools in Badakhshan Afghanistan?
2. How do teachers in Zebak primary schools of Badakhshan, Afghanistan perceive the inclusivity of the learning environment?

3. How do teachers ensure an inclusive learning environment in their schools?
4. What are the key challenges that teachers in Zebak primary schools of Badakhshan, Afghanistan confront in creating an inclusive learning environment?

1.6 Significance of the Study

This study is important for several reasons. First, it greatly contributes to the body of knowledge in the educational context of Afghanistan because there is a large research gap regarding the inclusivity of the learning environment. Second, the findings of this study may help educators, leaders, and policymakers to make thorough and well-thought-out decisions about creating a welcoming learning environment, particularly in Afghanistan's remote areas. Last but not least, the study will shed light on the difficulties and challenges experienced by rural primary school teachers in fostering a welcoming learning environment. As a result, concerned stakeholders and authorities including educational leaders and policymakers could take the necessary steps to improve the situation, ensuring that every child feels valued and included in their educational setting, free from discrimination, biases, stereotypes, and violence. It also contributes to the personal, academic, and social success of children.

1.7 Chapter Summary

An inclusive learning environment is crucial for student overall development, and it ensures that students of diverse backgrounds, abilities, identities, linguistic differences, and gender among many other differences are respected, feel safe, and are supported in the learning environment. Educators use a variety of instructional, assessment, and evaluation techniques to meet the diverse needs of students. However, barriers such as discrimination, lack of resources, and lack of professional development and capacity-building programs hinder inclusivity. Moreover, in the educational context of Afghanistan, despite progress in

enrollment, many children, especially girls and those from disadvantaged backgrounds remain out of school. The lack of an inclusive learning environment contributes to dropout rates and poor educational outcomes. The study aims to explore the factors that contribute to education exclusion, teachers' perceptions and practices of inclusivity in Zebak District, Badakhshan, Afghanistan, identifying the challenges they face and strategies they employ. The findings will help educational stakeholders understand the importance of inclusivity and take necessary actions to improve the learning environment, ensuring all students feel valued and included.

Chapter 2

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

2.1 Overview

I conducted a comprehensive literature review in this chapter using various resources, including books, journal articles, country reports, and governmental documents. This review focused on several key areas: factors beyond educational exclusion, inclusive education, teachers' perceptions of inclusive education, strategies teachers employ to create an inclusive learning environment, challenges and difficulties they face, and educational theories, including Universal Design for Learning UDL and Social Justice Theory regarding inclusive education. By reviewing this literature, I developed my conceptual framework, which allowed me to proceed with the subsequent stages of my research, such as interviews and the FGD protocols. The sections are arranged as follows: Factors beyond Educational Exclusion, Inclusive Education, Teachers' Perceptions of Inclusive Education, Strategies and Practices for Ensuring an Inclusive Learning Environment, Challenges in Creating an Inclusive Learning Environment, Social Justice Theory, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

2.2 Factors beyond Educational Exclusion

Despite several international commitments to making education accessible to all, such as the World Declaration on Education for All (1990), Millennium Development Goals (2000), and Sustainable Development Goals (2015), a large number of boys and girls are still excluded from education. According to UNESCO (2024), around 250 million children and young adults globally do not have access to education. Ainscow (2020) identifies several factors that promote educational exclusion. Discriminatory behaviors based on social class, religion,

gender, race, and capacity create significant barriers to inclusion. Insufficient resources and equipment hinder schools' ability to support all individuals, particularly those in vulnerable groups. Politics and policy can either promote inclusion or lead to exclusion, especially when inclusive education policies conflict with other policies and values. Limited stakeholder engagement and a lack of collaboration among parents, communities, and schools further exacerbate exclusion. The lack of data on groups that are included, excluded, or segregated from education makes it difficult for educational leaders to address all individuals' needs effectively. Cultural and social environments play a significant role in promoting inclusive education; however, in some regions, cultural beliefs and environments are not ready to adapt to changes and support inclusive education. However, in some regions, cultural beliefs and environments are not ready to adapt to changes and support inclusive education. For example, in Afghanistan, some Pashtun communities hold cultural beliefs that girls should only receive traditional education and attend Madrasa (Tareen & Muhammadi, 2021). This is due to social understanding, patriarchal codes, and traditional issues that impede girls from attending school (Bamik, 2018). Despite this understanding of the factors that foster the exclusivity of education, many other factors, considering local and global contexts, prevent numerous children and young adults from schooling. Comprehensive and in-depth studies are required for each country's context to understand these specific barriers to education and to identify who is included and excluded.

Furthermore, Factors beyond exclusion encompass several dimensions that create barriers to education in Afghanistan. First, socio-cultural barriers include language and ethnicity-based exclusion, parental education, gender and educational challenges, bullying, harassment, and violence, as well as social expectations. Economic obstacles are another dimension on the demand side that leads to exclusion and consist of general poverty, low household income, lack of guardianship for vulnerable children, opportunity costs and child labor, ancillary

costs, and lack of employment opportunities following education completion. The supply-side barriers include the lack of educational provision for nomadic lifestyles, ineffective displacement-related solutions, and lack of early childhood education, issues related to pedagogy and the quality and quantity of teachers, outdated or insufficient learning curricula, inadequate infrastructure, stigma against overage children, and additional access constraints for disabled children. Political, governance, capacity, and financial barriers involve the lack of verified data on education, financial constraints in the public sector, mismanagement within the Ministry of Education, and broader issues such as security and conflict-related challenges (Ministry of Education, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, & UNICEF, 2018). Despite this significant study on the bottlenecks to education in Afghanistan in which different dimensions are involved, there is a dearth of in-depth study on the factors that impede children from education in rural areas.

2.3 Inclusive Education

Inclusive education refers to the equitable access of all students to quality education, irrespective of their backgrounds, capabilities, and characteristics (Bindhani & Goinath, 2024). In this regard, the international community, civic society, and many organizations all have agreed on several international commitments to inclusive and equitable education that every child has the right to have access to inclusive education irrespective of his/her background, gender, social status, race, ethnicity, among many other differences. For example, many years back, in 1990, the World Declaration on Education for All, 1990, Article VI strongly emphasized that:

Learning does not take place in isolation. Societies, therefore, must ensure that all learners receive the nutrition, health care, and general physical and emotional support they need in order to participate actively in and benefit from their education.

Knowledge and skills that will enhance the learning environment of children should be integrated into community learning programs for adults. The education of children and their parents or other caretakers is mutually supportive and this interaction should be used to create, for all, a learning environment of vibrancy and warmth.

Furthermore, SDG 4. a. aims to “Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all” (United Nations, 2015). Then, UNESCO (2016), for the implementation of SDG4, indicates:

Ensure equity and inclusion in and through education and address all forms of exclusion and marginalization, disparity, vulnerability, and inequality in education access, participation, retention, and completion and in learning outcomes. Inclusive education for all should be ensured by designing and implementing transformative public policies to respond to learners’ diversity and needs, and to address the multiple forms of discrimination and of situations, including emergencies, which impede the fulfillment of the right to education. As gender equality is another key feature of SDG4-Education 2030, this agenda pays particular attention to gender-based discrimination as well as to vulnerable groups, and to ensuring that no one is left behind. No education target should be considered met unless it is met by all.

Afghanistan, prior to the Taliban's power siege, Article Forty-Three of the National Constitution explicitly emphasized that “Education is the right of all citizens of Afghanistan, which shall be offered up to the undergraduate level in the state educational institutes free of charge by the state.” (Islam Republic of Afghanistan, 2004). Meanwhile, The NESP III on the inclusivity of learning aims to “Ensure the school environment is inclusive, safe, and conducive to learning and positive social

relations” (Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 40). It emphasizes that effective education and learning systems need to be child-friendly, non-discriminatory, physically and psychologically safe, and inclusive.

2.4 Teachers’ Perceptions towards Inclusive Education

A limited number of teachers could explain the definition of inclusive education correctly (Maria, 2013). However, Teachers’ perceptions of inclusive education play a critical role in its successful implementation (Hunter-Johnson et al., 2014). Lindner et al. (2023) highlight that teachers' direct influence in implementing inclusive practices in the classroom makes their viewpoints crucial for promoting inclusive education (Krischler et al., 2019). Further, findings by Lindner et al. (2023) indicated that teachers’ perceptions are shaped by various factors, including personal characteristics (age, gender, personality traits), professional experience (years of teaching, experience with inclusive schooling, professional development), and contextual elements (types of disabilities, school climate and support, classroom composition). Maria (2013) stated that teachers' understanding of the concept of inclusion involves creating strategies and techniques customized to the needs of all children, allowing them to thrive and succeed in learning activities, and utilizing the principle of inclusive teaching.

A study by Iguis-Calinawan et al. (2024) reveals that teachers acknowledge the importance of inclusive education and its potential to enhance educational outcomes for all students. Additionally, Noreen et al. (2019) indicate that teachers' eagerness to align teaching strategies to meet the needs of individual students can be influenced by their positive perceptions and understanding of inclusive education. Teachers who take personal accountability and embrace the idea of inclusion are more likely to adapt their classroom settings to meet diverse student needs through various instructional strategies, effective teaching, regular progress

monitoring, and targeted collaboration with parents and caregivers (Ryan, 2009). As Iguis-Calinawan et al. (2024) demonstrated that there is a significant correlation between positive perceptions of inclusive education, collaborative endeavors, and the acceptance of strategies aimed at enhancing inclusion

For instance, a study titled "An Empirical Study on Teachers' Perceptions towards Inclusive Education in Malaysia" suggested that among 300 participants, 66% depicted positive perceptions of integrating students with special needs in mainstream classrooms (Ali et al., 2006). As described in another study by Chiner and Cardona (2013) in Spain regarding the concept of inclusion: teachers believe that inclusion is about educating all students in a mainstream classroom, including those with special needs, and they state that the advantages of practicing inclusion outweigh the drawbacks and promote mutual respect and tolerance among students. Additionally, According a teacher as quoted in Jury et al. (2023, p. 4) "I believe that an inclusive school is one that permits academic progression of all students regardless of their ability".

In another research, some educators are willing to integrate Special Education Needs (SEN) students into regular classrooms if adequate facilities are provided, while others fear that such inclusion might negatively impact the education of other students (Grieve, 2009). Moreover, Lindner et al. (2023) found that teachers' negative perceptions of inclusive education refer to their doubt about not having sufficient time to address the needs of all students. Hunter-Johnson et al. (2014) outline that teachers' negative perception of implementing inclusive education is influenced by factors such as lack of professional training, insufficient administrative support, large class size, and improper infrastructure. Nevertheless, data regarding teachers' perceptions of inclusive education and inclusivity of the learning environment in the educational setting of Afghanistan is lacking. Thus, more research is

required to understand perceptions depending on the context they are in, the available sources, and the capacity they have.

4.5 Strategies and Practices for Ensuring Inclusive Learning Environment

“Every learner matters and matters equally” (UNESCO, 2017, p. 12). Therefore, various studies have suggested a range of practices and strategies to ensure inclusive education. Hollenweger et al. (2015) highlight the importance of introducing inclusive education and professional development, valuing student diversity, supporting all learners, and collaborating with others, including families and the community. Kilag et al. (2024) further identify strategies to address the challenges of inclusive education beyond professional development. These strategies include resource allocation, policy advocacy, universal design for learning, collaborative planning and teamwork, positive behavior support, accessible instructional materials, culturally responsive teaching, and continuous evaluation and improvement. However, their research design focused exclusively on participants with strong leadership records, deliberately excluding teachers from the study.

Moreover, UNESCO (2014) introduces four dimensions to ensure an inclusive and equitable education system. The first dimension is concepts, which encompass educational policies, plans, and practices for inclusion; a curriculum that responds to all learners; an understanding of national policy goals regarding inclusion and educational equity; and monitoring mechanisms to track all students' achievements. The second dimension is policy statements, which emphasize inclusion and equity through national education documents, provide leadership on educational equity and inclusion at different levels, articulate the consistency of policy goals by leaders, and challenge discriminatory, inequitable, and non-inclusive practices. The third dimension is structures and systems. This dimension provides vulnerable learners with better quality support, involves students and their families in integrating

equitable and inclusive educational policies and practices, ensures the effective and wise distribution of resources to benefit all vulnerable groups, and offers special provisions such as special schools and units to foster an inclusive and equitable education system. The fourth and final dimension is practices, which emphasize techniques and strategies to support the participation, presence, and outcomes of all students within their community. This includes providing supportive schools and learning centers for marginalized, excluded, and underachieving students, preparing educators and support staff to address learner diversity, and offering professional development in equitable and inclusive practices.

Moreover, the establishment of an inclusive learning environment necessitates a thorough and proactive approach, ensuring that these settings are created from the ground up to meet the needs of every student while taking equity, diversity, and accessibility into account in all facets of instruction. Designing and creating an inclusive learning environment requires various initiatives, including ramps that enable individuals with disabilities to easily maneuver to different parts of the school building like other students. Effective and language-appropriate signage plays a critical role in guiding and communicating information to everyone across the school community. In an inclusive education setting, canteens must be accessible to all individuals, considering diverse needs. To secure an inclusive learning environment, it is necessary to implement a system for reaching students and seeking their feedback. Consequently, the teaching and learning processes and techniques should be customized based on students' needs and preferences. Additionally, school equipment and facilities, including toilets, need to be age-appropriate, considering the needs of diverse learners. Collaboration among different stakeholders, such as educators, administrators, community organizations, and students, is essential for creating an inclusive learning environment. Furthermore, the physical environment, such as stairs, walkways, and hallways, should be made child-friendly and supportive, featuring amenities, lighting systems,

ventilation, and modifications to existing structures that enhance accessibility, learning, and engagement for all children, especially those with disabilities (Debasu & Yitayew, 2024). The authors thoroughly explored procedures for creating an inclusive learning environment by relying solely on literature and existing information. In contrast, this study will adopt a qualitative design to examine the strategies employed by teachers in rural areas to foster an inclusive learning environment.

2.6 Challenges of Creating an Inclusive Learning Environment

Regarding the challenges in ensuring the inclusivity of the learning environment, many factors contribute to varying extents based on their involvement in students' academic journeys. Various issues hinder classroom inclusivity, including systemic barriers like inflexible curricular frameworks, standardized testing, and exclusionary regulations; attitudinal barriers such as negative behavior, preconceptions, and misconceptions towards disabled students; and a lack of resources (Bindhani & Gopinath, 2024). Furthermore, Carrington et al. (2022) indicate that societal, systemic, school, and family factors all contribute to challenges to inclusivity of the learning environment. Societal factors include beliefs in the necessity of special schools, parental advocacy for a dual system, cultural attitudes toward disability, discrimination, stigma, and a lack of awareness and understanding. Systemic factors encompass gaps in implementing inclusive policies, inflexible educational structures, a lack of professional development, discriminatory enrollment policies, and resistance to change. School-related barriers to inclusive education include inflexible curriculum delivery, low expectations for learning, a lack of teacher capacity, school leadership and culture, and physical accessibility issues. Family-related barriers consist of fear and mistrust, lack of awareness and understanding, limited

engagement opportunities, negative experiences with schools, and cultural beliefs and attitudes.

2.7 Social Justice Theory

Before discussing the relationship between social justice and education, it's essential first to have a definition of social justice. When all people and socioeconomic groups in a state or society being treated fairly and having the same status is social justice (Duignan, 2024). In other words, social justice refers to the fairness and equitability of society, emphasizing the fair distribution of resources among different groups, particularly disadvantaged ones, and challenging systematic inequalities (Gray Group International, n.d.). In relation to social justice theory and education, it is depicted that to thrive and experience opportunities, resources, and support systems must be accessible to all learners, regardless of their background, characteristics, gender, and ability. This involves understanding and addressing the challenges faced by students and ensuring the equal distribution of quality education among them. Additionally, social justice in schools highlights the importance of creating a secure and welcoming atmosphere where students can express themselves openly, embrace diversity, and promote critical thinking (Gray Group International, n.d.).

There are several dimensions of social justice in relation to inclusive education, including learning and differences, social justice and human rights, empowerment, creativity, humanism, and praxis. The first dimension, learning and differences, suggests that learning is a dynamic process focused on understanding diverse approaches, perspectives, and achievements from various viewpoints. Valuing the diversity of learning is essential to improving learning opportunities. The second dimension, social justice and human rights highlights the importance of ensuring equitable access to education for all (Middleton & Kay, 2019). Article 26 and 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights emphasizes that:

Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing medical care, and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control (United Nations General Assembly, 1949, pp. 5.6).

Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance, and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace (United Nations General Assembly, 1949, p.6).

Additionally, empowerment means that various societal groups need to acquire the necessary skills and power to express their voices and concerns. This can be achieved through students' involvement in decision-making and planning their education based on their needs and interests, leading to their direct empowerment. Another dimension, creativity, plays a significant role in inclusive education. It involves presenting diverse outcomes by valuing learners' different experiences and backgrounds. Moreover, in humanism, humans are the core principle, and decision-making should be based on evidence and consideration of human rights. Lastly, based on praxis, educators and practitioners are encouraged to focus on research evidence, through reading or conducting research, to improve learning practices for all individuals (Middleton & Kay, 2019).

2.8 Universal Design for Learning UDL

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is an educational framework that focuses on creating a flexible and inclusive learning environment that promotes the diversity of learning by valuing

all learners. It removes unnecessary obstructions to learning and helps educators develop curriculum, learning materials, learning objectives, and assessments based on principles that should be accessible to everyone. UDL supports transforming knowledge and information into various formats, utilizing diverse teaching methods to engage students, and providing them with choices in how they demonstrate their learning, while underpinning a supportive learning environment that welcomes students from different backgrounds, abilities, and socio-economic statuses, considering their unique needs (Kurt, 2024).

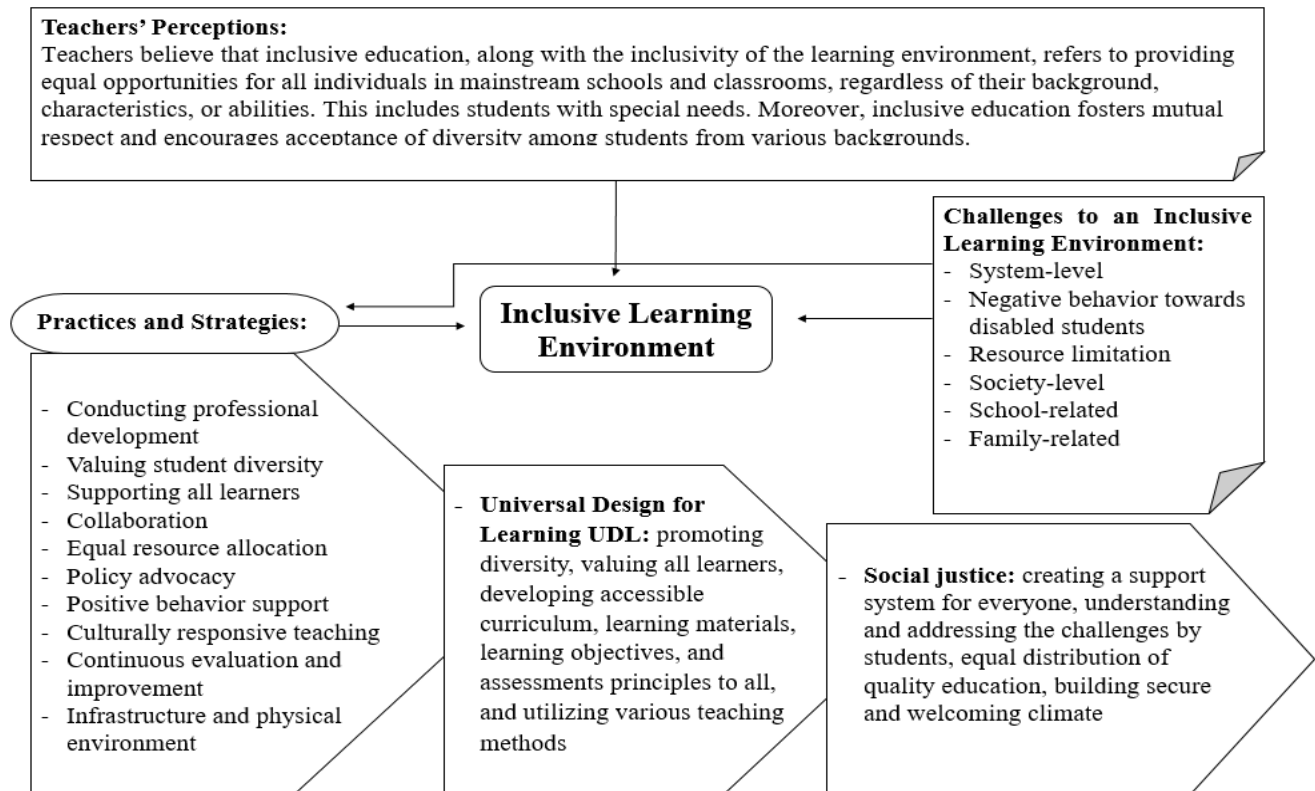
There are three main principles of UDL according to Kurt, (2024), which applied in the educational system, can build a welcoming and inclusive learning environment that makes learning equitable and interesting for all based on their individual unique styles. The first principle is Multiple Means of Engagement, which addresses the “why” of learning. It encourages the use of different strategies and techniques to consider student preferences, maintain constant motivation, and challenge all learners. The second principle is Multiple Means of Representation, which answers the “what” of learning. This principle underscores the importance of diverse teaching methods, recognizing that students present different ways of learning and expanding their knowledge and information. The third principle is Multiple Means of Action and Expression, which answers the “how” of learning. This principle allows students to demonstrate their understanding through various approaches tailored to their preferences and skills. The benefits of UDL are that it promotes increased access, personalized learning, improved engagement, enhanced learning outcomes, equity and inclusion, and reduced stigma and learning (Sharma et al. 2023).

2.9 Conceptual framework

The review of existing studies on inclusive education and inclusive learning environments, considering both global and local contexts, has significantly contributed to determining the

themes for this study. The primary theme of the study is an inclusive learning environment, which is strongly intertwined with and influenced by the following themes. The first theme is teachers' perceptions of the inclusivity of the learning environment, which plays a critical role in developing an inclusive environment where students of diverse backgrounds, abilities, socio-economic situations, and other differences feel valued and included. As Debasu and Yitayew (2024) describe, teachers greatly help build and design an inclusive learning environment by increasing student engagement and participation, fostering student outcomes, creating an atmosphere that welcomes diversity, and ensuring equal accessibility for all learners to opportunities. The second theme concerns strategies and practices that guide the entire system toward an inclusive learning environment. The U.S. Department of Education (2023) states that a positive school climate, which includes policies and practices, can foster and support healthy interactions based on mutual respect, trust, and care, and create a supportive academic, disciplinary, and physical environment for everyone. The final theme of this study addresses the potential challenges encountered by teachers in promoting an inclusive learning environment. A wide range of factors impedes the inclusivity of the learning environment, including societal, systemic, school, and family influences, as previously discussed (Carrington et al. 2022).

Figure 2.1. Conceptual Framework of the Study



2.10 Summary

This chapter has provided an in-depth exploration of the literature on inclusive education, outlining the factors contributing to education exclusion and strategies for creating inclusive learning environments, and challenges that educators encounter in fostering such an environment. It has highlighted the importance of international commitments and context-specific studies to understand and address the barriers to inclusive education. Teachers' perceptions, strategies, and practices have been emphasized as critical components in fostering inclusivity. Additionally, the chapter has identified various challenges and linked social justice theory to the goal of achieving equitable and inclusive education for all. The principles of Universal Design for Learning offer a critical framework for creating flexible and engaging learning environments. The themes identified in this literature review will

guide the subsequent research, aiming to deepen the understanding of inclusive education and inform effective practices and policies.

Chapter 3

Methodology

3.1 Overview

In this chapter, I will outline the study design employed to explore the factors contributing to educational exclusion in primary schools in the Zebak district of Badakhshan, Afghanistan, focusing on teachers' perceptions, practices, and the challenges they face in creating an inclusive learning environment. The segments include the research approach, rationale for choosing the qualitative research approach, research site, sample and sampling procedure, data collection methods, data analysis, researcher role, ethical concerns, study rigor, and limitations.

3.2 Research Approach

The study employed a qualitative approach to develop a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the factors contributing to educational exclusion in the Zebak district of Badakhshan, Afghanistan. It explored teachers' perceptions, insights, and experiences regarding the inclusivity of their school environment, as well as the practices and strategies they utilize and the challenges they encounter in fostering such an environment. This research focused on two schools in the Zebak District of Badakhshan, Afghanistan, with participants drawn from the primary level. Both headmasters and teachers were involved in the inquiry to ensure the triangulation of data.

3.3 Rationale for Choosing the Qualitative Research Approach

According to Creswell (2018), a qualitative design facilitates the exploration and understanding of the meanings people attribute to social and human issues or problems. Similarly, Merriam and Grenier (2019) emphasize that a qualitative approach enables researchers to comprehend people's interactions with and experiences of the social environment, as well as the meanings they derive from it. Thus, selecting this approach aids in understanding the factors that contribute to educational exclusion, teachers' perceptions of the inclusivity of the learning environment, the strategies and practices they employ, and the challenges they face in creating an inclusive learning environment. Meanwhile, as a researcher, I can effectively engage with individual teachers on the spot, delve into their insights and experiences, and develop an understanding of the dynamics in the targeted areas.

3.4 Research Site

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), qualitative inquiry necessitates a natural setting that reflects the genuine engagement of participants. Such environments significantly contribute to gathering comprehensive and in-depth data from research participants through various data collection methods, including interviews, observations, and interactions with the participants. This study was conducted in two high schools, with a particular focus on primary levels in the Zebak District of Badakhshan, Afghanistan. The selected schools are Zebak Boys' High School and Zebak Girls' High School. I chose these two schools in Zebak district as my research site for two main reasons: First, the accessibility to research data, which would have been much more difficult if I had selected another research zone. Family members and friends facilitated the data collection process as many participants did not have access to new technology and internet connections. The other reason is to disclose the

educational challenges and difficulties in remote areas, particularly in the Zebak district, as no study has been conducted before in this context.

Zebak High School was established around 1962, with boys and girls studying together in merged classrooms for several decades. Around 2005, the government decided to separate boys and girls, leading to the creation of Zebak Boys' High School and Zebak Girls' High School. Zebak Boys' High School currently has approximately 608 students and more than 25 teachers and personnel. In contrast, Zebak Girls' High School is currently limited to primary school students, as 1.5 million secondary school girls are prohibited from schooling due to Taliban discriminatory behavior (Human Rights Watch, 2024). The number of teachers active on duty in the girls' school could reach 22 teachers, including other personals.

3.5 Sample and Sampling Procedure

I gathered the data using purposeful sampling, which allowed for an in-depth understanding of the research gap. In a qualitative study, the researcher has the chance to delve deeply into the root of the issue and develop a profound understanding based on individuals' perceptions and experiences of the context. As Creswell and Poth (2018) discuss, purposeful sampling helps researchers gain a purposeful understanding of the research gap and the main phenomenon in the study by selecting participants and research sites deliberately.

Public school headmasters and primary-level teachers were purposefully selected for this study. The headmasters will participate in interviews, while the teachers, both male and female, will contribute through focus group discussions (FGDs). The selection of research participants was based on the following criteria: they represented and primary-level school teachers in rural area, and their accessibility for data collection.

In this study, the participants included eight teachers (four females and four males) from the primary level of the targeted schools and two headmasters (one female and one male). The respondents were purposefully selected to provide necessary information based on their experiences and practices regarding the inclusivity of the learning environment in their schools, the strategies they utilize, the challenges they face, and their understanding of factors beyond educational exclusion.

Table 3.1. Sample and sample size

Participants	Female	Male	Total
Public School Headmasters	1	1	2
Primary School Teachers	4	4	8
Total	5	5	10

3.6 Data Collection Methods

Determine the kinds of data that will answer your research questions as part of the qualitative data-gathering process (Creswell, 2015). This study employed a semi-structured method focusing on two primary data collection methods: headmasters participated in one-on-one interviews, while teachers engaged in Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). The data collection modality was Microsoft Team. These discussions explored several key themes: factors contributing to educational exclusion, teachers' perceptions of inclusivity within the learning environment, their current practices and strategies, and the challenges they encounter. It is also important to highlight that before commencing the actual data collection, pilot testing was conducted with a group of teachers at Pamir High School in Faizabad, Badakhshan, Afghanistan, to ensure that the developed tools effectively collected the required data aligned with the research questions.

3.7 Interview with Headmasters

In this study, one-on-one interviews was employed to delve into headmasters' authentic insights and experiences regarding the inclusivity of the learning environment in Zebak Primary level schools, as well as the factors contributing to exclusion. This approach was selected because, as Hassan (2024) describes, the one-on-one qualitative research method is crucial for gaining a profound understanding of participants' experiences and insights. The flexibility of this approach allows for clarifications and deeper exploration of topics, providing rich data that reveal participants' motivations, insights, and emotions. Moreover, it is a personalized method that focuses on individual responses and allows for follow-up questions, thereby enhancing the depth of understanding. Data was collected utilizing online platforms such as Microsoft Team. The headmasters were asked to describe their understanding of the factors that greatly contribute to educational exclusion in primary-level schools in the Zebak district. They also shared their viewpoints and experiences on the inclusivity of the learning environment in their schools, the practices and strategies used by teachers, and the challenges encountered by them. Thus, an interview guide was developed and divided into two parts. The first part focused on collecting demographic information about the participants, including age, gender, educational qualifications, and years of teaching experience. The second part emphasized open-ended questions, addressing the four research questions outlined below.

- i. Questions regarding the factors contributing to education exclusion: *What do you think are the primary factors that lead to student exclusion in your school? How do economic, social, cultural, and behavioral factors impact student exclusion in your school? Why do you think some students stop going to school? What role do infrastructure (School*

environment, building, boundary walls, and washroom) and learning other resource limitations play in student exclusion?

- ii. Questions about headmasters' perceptions of inclusive education and inclusive learning environments: *What does an inclusive education mean to you? Can you describe the overall education environment at Zebak Primary School level? Can you share any specific examples of inclusive practice observed in your school?* Practices and strategies-related questions: *Do you have students from different backgrounds (e.g., gender, ethnicity, race, social class, students with disabilities)? What methodologies do teachers use to address and support the diverse needs of students in your school? How do teachers teach students who cannot easily understand the lesson? How do you distribute the learning resources among students?*
- iii. Questions regarding the challenges faced by teachers: *What are the key challenges faced by teachers in creating and maintaining an inclusive learning environment? How do they overcome these challenges on a daily basis? What kind of support or training do you provide to teachers to improve the inclusivity of the learning environment?*
- iv. Questions regarding parents and community engagement: *Are families and communities engaged in school activities? What roles do families and communities play in supporting inclusive education in your school?*

3.8 FGDs with Primary School Teachers

According to Van Eeuwijk and Angehrn (2017), Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) are a qualitative research method and data-gathering approach. In this method, an external professional moderator guides a selected group of participants through an in-depth discussion on a specific topic or issue. By fostering interactions among various individuals, FGDs aim to capture participants' attitudes, views, knowledge, experiences, and practices. Thus, this study

will employ this method focusing on the four research questions: *What are the factors that excluded students from Zebak primary schools in Badakhshan Afghanistan? How do teachers in Zebak primary schools of Badakhshan, Afghanistan perceive the inclusivity of the learning environment? How do teachers ensure an inclusive learning environment in their schools? What are the key challenges that teachers in Zebak primary schools of Badakhshan, Afghanistan confront in creating an inclusive learning environment?*

Primary school-level teachers were divided into two FGDs: one for females and one for males. They were gathered at different times and joined the researcher online. The researcher asked questions and facilitated a discussion among the participants, allowing them to discuss the issues in relation to the research questions.

3.9 Data Collection Procedure

In this study, data was collected using two modes: interviews and FGDs. Headmasters participated in one-on-one interviews to identify the research gap from individual perspectives and experiences, fostering an environment where they could express their viewpoints openly. Since I was residing in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and did not have access to in-person interviews, I used the online platform Microsoft Teams to conduct the interviews.

Prior to the interviews, consent letters were sent via email to the research assistant, who then shared them with the participants to confirm their participation in the study. The research assistant scheduled the interviews based on the convenience of the interviewees as I did not have direct contact with the participants due to the unavailability of required devices and internet connections. Before the interviews began, the research assistant emailed me the schedule and timings of the interviews.

When the meeting commenced, I warmly welcomed the interviewees and inquired about their health and the well-being of their families. I then personally asked for their consent to participate in the study. Before proceeding with the interview guide, I also sought their permission to record the session. I started the interview by collecting demographic information from the participants. Following that, I asked questions about factors contributing to educational exclusion, their perceptions of an inclusive learning environment, their practices and strategies to ensure inclusivity, and the challenges they encounter in doing so. All questions were phrased in a manner that was easily understandable to the interviewees. The duration of the interviews averaged 30 to 40 minutes.

For the FGDs, to some extent, a similar process to the one-on-one interviews was followed. The consent letter was sent to the research assistant's email to seek the participants' agreement for participation. He then scheduled the meetings based on the interviewees' availability. Before the meeting, the link was shared with me. When the meeting started, I greeted each individual and asked about their health and family to create a warm and welcoming atmosphere. Next, I asked for their consent once again and their permission to record the meeting. After collecting demographic information, I began asking questions based on the FGD guide. Participants took turns sharing their understanding, insights, and experiences with the group. The questions were posed clearly, utilizing plain and normal communication procedures to avoid any confusion or misunderstanding. The duration of the FGDs was about 50 to 60 minutes.

3.10 Data Analysis Process

In this study, thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data, as its flexibility and accessibility make it advantageous for the data analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The

process followed utilized a combination of multiple phases outlined by Lester et al. (2020), and Braun and Clarke (2006) to perform the analysis.

1. Preparing and organizing data for analysis: In this stage, I collected all the videos, audio recordings, notes, research protocols, and other relevant documents into a single file to ensure they would be easily accessible for analysis.
2. Transcribing the data: After preparing and organizing the data, I began transcribing it. Initially, I transcribed the data into Persian, as the interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in the participants' native language. Following that, I translated the data into English to facilitate the subsequent stages of the research analysis.
3. Familiarizing oneself with the data: Although the transcription phase greatly helped me familiarize myself with the data, at this stage, I went back to the videos and audio recordings, listened to them several times, and reviewed the transcribed data in both Persian and English. This process enabled me to develop an in-depth and comprehensive understanding of the data, which will significantly contribute to the next stages of the research
4. Coding all data: At this stage, as the data was already organized, I systematically reviewed the entire dataset and coded it according to the research questions. I utilized color coding and noted small chunks of words and phrases representing the codes as follows:

Table 3.2. Coding all the data

Interview and FGD extract	Codes
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In my work and experiences in the education sector, I have identified a fundamental problem at the primary level: parents often send their children to school at a very young age, sometimes before they even reach the age of seven. The other reasons are impassable routes and long distances to remote schools. Interview A	Early age Impassable routes Long distance
I believe that factors that contribute to student exclusion from school encompass poverty, lack of awareness, economic challenges, social issues, security concerns, and behavioral problem. Interview B	Poverty Lack of awareness Economic challenge Social issue Security concern Behavioral issues
There is a significant lack of social awareness regarding the importance of education. Many people lack the knowledge necessary to ensure that their children receive the attention they need. Schools face a shortage of teaching materials, including textbooks and properly equipped laboratories. Teachers struggle with these issues, especially when certain lessons require specific materials that are unavailable FGD B	Lack of social awareness Lack of Knowledge Shortage of teaching materials: textbook, laboratory
Poverty, security, and illiteracy among some families are the main factors that greatly contribute to the factors that prevent many children from attending school. Socio-economic conditions play a critical role in education. Families with low socio-economic status often struggle to afford to send their children to school. Families with low socioeconomic are unable to provide essential items such as notebooks, pens, proper uniforms, and other basic necessities. FGD B	Poverty Security Illiteracy Parents inability to provide basic needs such as notebooks, pens, proper uniforms

5. Moving from codes to categories: After completing the coding of the entire dataset, I began categorizing the codes into relevant categories. This step was essential for effectively proceeding to the next stage of the analysis.

Table 3.3. Categorizing

Codes	Categories
Poverty	Poverty
Lack of teaching and learning materials: textbooks	Economic challenges, hardship
Parents' inability to provide the basic needs of students: notebooks, pens, proper uniforms	Lack of basic necessities: shoes, clothes Parents' inability to provide the basic needs of students: notebooks, pens, proper uniforms

No proper building	Lack of teaching and learning materials: textbooks
Teaching and learning materials	Unavailability of equipped laboratories
Lack of basic needs: shoes, clothes	No proper building
Economic challenges, hardship	Teaching and learning materials
Boundary walls, and well-structured classrooms	Boundary walls, and well-structured classrooms
	Various teaching methods

6. Search for sub-themes: Following the categorization phase, I developed sub-themes to streamline the process of identifying the main themes of the study. Here is an example:

Table 3.4. Search for Sub-themes

Categories	Sub-theme
Poverty	Socio-Economic Challenges
Economic challenges, hardship	
Lack of basic necessities: shoes, clothes	
Parent's inability to provide the basic needs of students: notebooks, pens, proper uniforms	
Lack of teaching and learning materials: textbooks	Infrastructure and Resource Availability
Unavailability of equipped laboratories	
No proper building	
Teaching and learning materials	
Boundary walls, and well-structured classrooms	

7. Transferring sub-themes to themes. Then, I identified the themes relevant to the dataset and research questions. To avoid any misconceptions and to ensure the audience's understanding, I defined each theme according to the study's purpose. For example, 'Factors beyond Educational Exclusion' clearly indicates the specific focus, rather than something more ambiguous.

Table 3.5. Transforming sub-themes into themes

Sub-themes	Theme
Socio-economic challenges Infrastructure and Resource Availability	Factors beyond Educational Exclusion

8. Making the Analytic process transparent: At this stage, I made an effort to provide a visual representation of the data analysis process to the readers and audience. I used tables where necessary to illustrate the progression from coding to categorization of the data, to sub-themes, and finally to the development of the main themes. This approach aimed to make the analytic process of this study clear and transparent.

3.11 Ethical Issues and Concerns

When preparing and organizing a qualitative inquiry, researchers must consider potential ethical issues and develop plans to resolve those (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, several key ethical concerns have been addressed: Participants were provided with a consent letter, with the help of a research assistant, to obtain their consent and inform them of the study's purpose and other necessary details. During data collection, I verbally asked for their consent before starting the main issues and assured them that the privacy of their information was my priority, employing pseudonyms if necessary. In FGDs, I took my time to ask for individuals' consent at the beginning of the sessions. Participants were protected from any harm or threats related to their personal, academic, and social lives and were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without providing any rationale.

Additionally, during interviews and FGDs, I avoided posing biased or sensitive questions and instead carefully listened to participants and took note of their ideas. By addressing these ethical concerns, the study aimed to ensure the integrity and respect of all participants involved.

3.12 Trustworthiness and Rigor

Researchers adopt various approaches to ensure the trustworthiness and validity of their findings. These approaches include member checks, peer review, triangulation, the researcher's positionality, maximum variation, adequate engagement in data collection, an audit trail, and providing rich, thick descriptions (Merriam & Grennier, 2019). Based on this study, I will ensure trustworthiness and reliability by employing methods such as triangulation, peer review, member checks, and maintaining an audit trail.

Triangulation: To ensure the triangulation of this study, various stakeholders, including teachers and headmasters, were involved in the data collection process. Additionally, two different data collection methods were used: one-on-one interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). These methods were employed to gather data on factors contributing to educational exclusion, teachers' perceptions of the inclusivity of the learning environment in primary schools in the Zebak district of Badakhshan, Afghanistan, their strategies for promoting inclusivity in the learning environment, and the challenges they face.

Peer review: Throughout the research process, it is crucial to highlight the involvement of my supervisor at various stages of the study. Her insights and constructive feedback significantly contributed to aligning the research method with the research questions, as well as refining the analysis and discussion. These contributions played a vital role in the successful completion of this work.

Member check: The research findings were presented to the participants to ensure that their insights and experiences were accurately and authentically captured and represented.

Audit trail: Before deciding on the thesis, I reviewed both local and global literature, including journal articles, books, country reports, and governmental documents, to identify

the research gap. This comprehensive review greatly informed my decision on the research approach: conducting interviews with headmasters and focus group discussions (FGDs) with teachers to explore their perceptions of an inclusive learning environment. The literature review also assisted in developing the conceptual framework and research tools for the study. Prior to the actual data collection stage, I conducted a pilot study, which significantly helped refine the research tools. Following data collection, I generated sub-themes and themes followed by analysis chapter. Finally, the discussion chapter will be developed to present the alignment and contrast of this study with the existing literature.

3.13 Limitations

This study had several limitations. First, there was a lack of empirical data on inclusive learning environments within Afghanistan's educational context, particularly at the primary school level in rural areas. As a result, I had to rely heavily on literature from a global perspective. Second, challenges such as internet connectivity issues and the participants' limited access to technology (e.g., smartphones or computers) constrained direct communication and data collection. To address this, a third party was involved to facilitate the process. While in-person data collection is generally more effective—allowing for richer and more detailed insights—living in Bangladesh and facing travel difficulties compelled me to rely on online methods. Furthermore, this study focused solely on the inclusivity of the learning environment from teachers' perspectives due to time constraints. Future research could incorporate students' perspectives to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the issue. Finally, the sample size was limited to two primary-level schools in the Zebak District of Badakhshan, Afghanistan. Consequently, the findings may not be generalizable to all levels or schools within the Zebak District and beyond.

Chapter 4

Results

4.1 Overview

This chapter presents the findings of the study based on the data analysis process. It discusses the thematic analysis of interviews with headmasters and FGDs with primary school teachers. Consequently, the results, based on the thematic analysis of the available data, will be discussed around five themes and their relevant sub-themes. The sections for this chapter are organized as follows: Factors beyond educational exclusion, teachers' perception of the inclusive learning environment, strategies and practices used by teachers in ensuring the inclusivity of the learning environment, challenges they face in creating an inclusive learning environment, and initiatives for guaranteeing the inclusivity of the learning environment.

Table 4.1. Themes and sub-themes

Factors beyond Educational Exclusion	Teachers' Perception of Inclusive Learning Environment	Strategies And Practices for Ensuring an Inclusive Learning Environment	Challenges Faced by Teaching in Creating an Inclusive Learning Environment	Initiatives for Guaranteeing the Inclusivity of Learning Environment
• Socio-economic Challenges • School Accessibility • Resource Availability • Family Dynamics and Social and Community Influence • Security and Safety	• Inclusion and equality • Teaching Methods and Assessment Practice • Diversity and Representation • Confirmation of the Inclusivity of the Learning Environment	• Teaching Methods and approaches • Resources Distribution	• Resources and Infrastructure Concerns • The Deficit of Development Programs and Organizational Support • Accessibility and Distance Obstacles • Lack of parents' cooperation	• Professional Development • Facilities and Resources Provision • Community and Family Engagement • Collaborative Support of Stakeholders in Building a Welcoming Educational System

4.2 Factors beyond Educational Exclusion

This theme examines the factors that significantly contribute to educational exclusion in the Zebak district of Badakhshan, Afghanistan, with a particular focus on primary education. Participants identified a wide range of factors that influence and prevent children from attending school. Among the socioeconomic-related elements, poverty and hunger are prominent contributors, alongside the scarcity of teaching and learning materials. The role of families, community awareness, and social influences also play a critical part in determining whether children attend school. Additionally, security concerns, particularly unpredictable mental and psychological challenges, further exacerbate the situation. The geographical challenges of having remote schools make access to education even more difficult. Together, these elements represent the most common factors leading to educational exclusion in Zebak district, as understood from participants' responses and the targeted context. As you go through the analysis of this theme, the sections are organized as follows: Socioeconomic challenges, resource availability, family dynamics, social and community factors, security and safety, and school accessibility.

4.2.1 Socio-Economic Challenges

Based on participants' views and experiences in the education sector in the Zebak district, various factors, including poverty, economic hardship, hunger, deprivation, and parents' inability to provide basic necessities such as stationery, shoes, and proper uniforms, prevent children from attending school. Through the FGDs, participants stated that:

'Poverty is a fundamental dimension that that has a very negative impact on school attendance. For example, a child cannot attend school on an empty stomach. A lack of basic

necessities such as shoes or clothes hinders children from going to school, as parents often cannot afford to provide these essentials. ' (FGD A)

Based on (FGD B):

'Socio-economic conditions play a critical role in education. Families with low socio-economic status often struggle to afford to send their children to school. They are unable to provide essential items such as notebooks, pens, proper uniforms, and other basic necessities.' (FGD B)

4.2.2 School Accessibility

Some participants mentioned that additional factors preventing students from attending school in the Zebak District of Badakhshan include long distances and difficult routes to reach the school. Participants in an FGD reported:

'The long distance to schools often prevents parents from sending their children to school' regularly. (FGD A)

Another participant stated:

'The other reasons are impassable routes and long distances to remote schools.' (Interview A)

4.2.3 Resource Availability

Regarding resource availability, the participants underscore that because of a shortage of teaching and learning materials such as insufficient textbooks at school, they are unable to provide everyone with books. As a result, this issue leads to disappointment among parents and prevents some children from attending school. A participant claimed:

'Lack of teaching and learning materials such as textbooks. Think about it, we have 800 students at the school level, and from 800 students, each class might have 40, 50, or 75 students. For 75 students, I have 15 volumes of books. Therefore, parents will be heartbroken that their children are not provided with books which promotes a lack of interest in schooling.' (Interview A)

Other participants based on FGD stated that:

'Schools face a shortage of teaching materials, including textbooks and properly equipped laboratories. Teachers struggle with these issues, especially when certain lessons require specific materials that are unavailable.' (FGD A)

4.2.4 Family Dynamics and Social and Community Influence

Participants believe that parents' lack of interest in their children's education is a significant factor contributing to educational exclusion in their context. This lack of interest is largely due to the parents' lack of awareness and literacy levels. Moreover, based on the participants' understanding of their living context, they highlighted that community and social awareness, as well as the understanding of the benefits of education, are key factors impeding children's schooling. Considerably, factors of family dynamics and community influence work together to create a barrier to children's education in the Zebak district of Badakhshan, Afghanistan.

'In the Zebak community, there are no cultural beliefs that prevent girls from receiving an education. However, within a limited number of families, illiteracy hinders their children's access to schooling. Some children do not attend school at all, while others may start but eventually discontinue their education.' (FGD B)

Regarding the social and community influence, participants in FGD state,

‘There is a significant lack of social awareness regarding the importance of education. Many people lack the knowledge necessary to ensure that their children receive the attention they need.’ (FGD A).

4.2.5 Security and Safety

All participants highlighted that security and safety are critical factors affecting students' attendance. They acknowledged that there are no concerns regarding students' physical safety, which is improving day by day. However, they expressed uncertainty about the mental and psychological well-being of their learners. One participant explained:

‘In my opinion, the physical security of students is improving. However, I cannot confidently speak about their mental and psychological security, especially given the circumstances of poverty affecting many families. A poor and helpless child may come to school worrying about their empty stomach, lack of shoes, or their father's financial struggles and debt, all of which contribute to discomfort and insecurity in their mental well-being. It has a 100% impact, and a lack of psychological and mental security causes students to leave school.’

(Interview A)

4.3 Teachers’ Perception of Inclusive Learning Environment

This theme will thoroughly explore the perceptions of both teachers and headmasters regarding inclusive education and the inclusivity of the learning environment. They emphasize that inclusive education is about providing equal access to opportunities for all students, regardless of their backgrounds, ethnicities, gender, and abilities. To ensure the inclusivity of the learning environment, they claim to employ various teaching methods based on individual needs. Additionally, regarding the diversity of their school, they noted that students from diverse backgrounds, including those with disabilities, are included. Topics

such as inclusion and equality, diversity and representation, confirmation of the inclusivity of the learning environment, and teaching methods and assessment practices will be covered under this theme.

4.3.1 Inclusion and Equality

When participants were asked about their understanding of inclusive education, they generally emphasized its focus on equal treatment, non-discrimination, and equality in delivering lessons to all individuals irrespective of their backgrounds, social class, and abilities. As participants noted.

‘Inclusive education means that all students, regardless of their background or social class, are given equal opportunities to participate and benefit from the lessons.’ (FGD B)

In other words:

‘Inclusive education, as the term suggests, means that everyone working in the education sector or any educational institution should treat all students equally, providing lessons, learning materials, and other services without discrimination.’ (Interview A)

4.3.2 Teaching Methods and Assessment Practice

Participants mentioned that they employ various teaching methods in the classroom, taking into account the needs and understanding levels of each individual. Concerning assessment procedures and the provision of feedback, they believe that it should be conducted fairly among students from diverse groups. Participants proclaimed:

‘We employ various methods, such as group work and pairing students with mixed abilities, to address the needs of individual students.’ (FGD B)

Participants based on other FGD stated:

'The purpose of inclusive education in the classroom is that the lesson is not considered the same for all students, and what is important is that it is related to the student's understanding of the lesson, which each student has a different level of understanding based on their ability level.' (FGD A)

In terms of the assessment procedure, a participant remarked:

'Group work and feedback should also be handled fairly, without always focusing on the smartest or most intelligent students and ignoring those who may need more support. By following these procedures, we ensure an inclusive educational environment.' (Interview A)

4.3.3 Diversity and Representation

All participants acknowledged that their school hosts students from diverse backgrounds, genders, races, and abilities. A participant said:

'Yes, our students come from different backgrounds. Students from different backgrounds, social classes, races, and even students with disability.' (Interview B)

Other participants in FGD reported:

'In our opinion, the primary educational environment of Zibak is inclusive because it accommodates students from diverse groups, including rich children, poor children, and children with disabilities.' (FGD A).

4.3.4 Confirmation of the Inclusivity of the Learning Environment

When participants were asked to share their thoughts and experiences on whether their school's learning environment is inclusive, they noted a generally positive atmosphere. They mentioned that they are accommodating students from different backgrounds, races, and genders. Additionally, some participants highlighted that they respect students' values and dignity. Participants highlighted that:

'Yes, at our primary level, the learning environment is inclusive because there is no discrimination among students based on their backgrounds, ethnicity, or race. Students of various backgrounds, abilities, races, and social classes can attend and get educated.' (FGD B)

Another participant declared:

'Examples of inclusive practices include ensuring that no differences are created among our students and that their values and dignity are respected.' (Interview B)

Example:

'I have a student named Saboor, son of Qasam from the village of Kalala. He is a very poor and needy child. I encouraged him as much as I could and also motivated the teachers to support him, considering he travels a long distance to attend school. As a result, Saboor developed a great interest in his studies and eventually ranked first among 300 students in grades 1, 2, and 3. If we hadn't fostered an inclusive learning environment and had instead given priority to children from advantaged families, such as those of doctors, commanders, or school headmasters, we might have neglected students like Saboor. His talent could have withered, leading him to become disheartened, possibly even dropping out. In our local context, inclusive education means giving the right to the rightful. For Saboor, it was his right to be encouraged and supported, regardless of his family's financial situation or social standing. We focused on the future of our generation and, as a result, Saboor achieved first place among 300 students in the first, second, and third grades.' (Interview A)

4.4 Strategies and Practice for Ensuring Inclusive Learning Environment

This theme highlights the strategies and practices that teachers employ to create an inclusive learning environment in their schools. They noted the use of diverse teaching methods,

including student-centered approaches, group work, group discussions, and question-and-answer sessions, with a strong emphasis on active student engagement. The distribution of teaching and learning materials is conducted equitably, taking into account the availability of resources. Based on respondents' experiences in ensuring an inclusive learning environment, this theme is divided into two sub-themes: teaching methods and approaches, and resource distribution.

4.4.1 Teaching Methods and Approaches

All the participants greatly emphasized the student-centered approach as a pioneering mechanism for guaranteeing the inclusivity of the learning environment for students of diverse backgrounds. This approach actively engages students in the teaching and learning process. To give an example, they conduct the lesson using group discussions. A participant reported:

'Our teaching method is student-centered and students will actively participate in the teaching and learning process.' (Interview B)

Other participants state:

'We employ student-centered teaching methods, which foster high levels of student participation. This approach includes group discussions, where students are divided into various groups and encouraged to share their ideas on the given topics. Meanwhile, to create a collaborative learning environment, we use group work and question-and-answer sessions.' (FGD B)

Meanwhile, some participants disclosed techniques that have been introduced to them recently. They remarked:

'The Lotis chart involves dividing the board into several equal square sections. The lesson title is written on the board, and the lesson is then presented, reviewed, and discussed in fragmented, summarized parts that are understandable to all students, encouraging their collective contribution.' (FGD A)

'The Cattwell chart consists of three parts. The first part focuses on what the students already know. In the second part, students ask questions among themselves related to both past and new lessons to reach the lesson's objectives. The third part involves providing answers to these questions and checking the students' understanding of the first and second parts.' (FGD A)

4.4.2 Resource Distribution

Participants outlined that the distribution of available resources will be considered equality among students of diverse backgrounds without any biases and discrimination. A participant noted:

'The distribution methods are designed to be equal without considering the diverse backgrounds and abilities of students. If we have ten volumes of books from the Art section and ten volumes of books from the Language section for a group of twenty students, we ensure an even distribution. This means we don't allocate all the books to only a few students, leaving the rest empty-handed. Instead, if one student receives an Art book, another student will be given a Language book, and so on.' (Interview B)

Other participants through FGD said:

'Before distributing books among students, we first assess the total number of available volumes. If there is a shortage, we ensure that each student has access to a book, even if it's for a different subject. For example, a student without a math book might be given a

geography book, and vice versa. The objective is to maintain balance and ensure that all course materials are explained to the students effectively. During class teaching, we strive to have at least one book available on each desk of groups for the students.' (FGD A)

4.5 Challenges Faced by Teachers in Creating Inclusive Learning

Environment

Participants identified several challenges while creating an inclusive learning environment. These challenges include the scarcity of educational resources and a lack of support from various stakeholders, such as parents, administration, and leadership teams, in conducting development programs, accessibility concerns, and lack of parental cooperation. The main themes will address issues such as resources and infrastructure concerns, the deficit of development programs and organizational support, accessibility and distance obstacles, and lack of parental cooperation.

4.5.1 Resources and Infrastructure Concerns

The participants reported struggling with the scarcity of teaching and learning materials in their schools as well as inappropriate learning environments due to a deficit of proper school buildings. Meanwhile, the shortage of teaching and learning materials includes insufficient textbooks, stationery, and even basic needs such as notebooks, which parents cannot afford for their children due to their low economic situation. One participant mentioned

'We face numerous challenges that hinder inclusive education, including shortages of materials, textbooks, blackboards, chalk, and stationery.' (Interview A)

Other participants claimed

‘There is a lack of teaching materials, including textbooks, notebooks, and labs. Additionally, due to poverty and hardship, students often lack access to notebooks for taking notes.’ (FGD A)

Other participants remarked:

‘Challenges include the lack of proper buildings and insufficient teaching and learning materials, such as textbooks.’ (FGD B)

4.5.2 Deficit of Development Programs and Organizational Support

On the role of professional development and capacity-building programs as well as organizational support in creating an inclusive learning environment, the participants highlighted that for a long time, they have not received any training or seminars despite repetitive requests from the Department of Education and Ministry of Education. A participant proclaimed

‘At our school, each teacher has approximately 20 to 30 years of teaching experience. However, not a single seminar or training session on inclusive education has been organized for teachers.’ (Interview A)

Additionally, he mentioned:

‘Despite our countless requests and raised voices, emphasizing the need for seminars and professional training for teachers to enhance their skills and professionalism, no one has listened or paid attention. It is evident that in this country, education, which is crucial for the future, is not taken seriously as the development of the people largely depends on it. Neither the Department nor the Ministry of Education has cooperated with us. They haven't even

provided us with a piece of paper, let alone organizing seminars on inclusive education.'

(Interview A)

4.5.3 Accessibility and Long-Distance Obstacles

Regarding to issue, as it has been discussed earlier in this chapter concerning the factors beyond educational exclusion, in this section, participants in one FGD clearly emphasized that it is a challenge for them in creating an inclusive learning environment.

'The long distance to school also impedes students from arriving on time.' (FGD A)

4.5.4 Parent Lack of Cooperation

Participants clearly mentioned another factor hindering the creation of an inclusive learning environment in their school is a shortage of parents' assistance. When children are inattentive or arrive late, and attempts are made to investigate the root cause, parents often show disinterest in resolving the issue.

'Regarding student-related issues, such as laziness, absenteeism, or appearing in school and running away, parents of the affected students will be contacted and summoned to the school to seek solutions to these challenges. Nevertheless, these issues sometimes remain unresolved due to a lack of cooperation from parents, who often prioritize their work and personal affairs.' (FGD A)

4.6 Initiatives for Guaranteeing the Inclusivity of Learning Environment

To effectively address challenges and promote an inclusive learning environment, participants suggested several key initiatives. These include implementing development and capacity-building programs for teachers through the help of concerned stakeholders including the Department of Education and Ministry of Education, providing necessary facilities and

resources, engaging parents and the community, fostering collaboration among different stakeholders like the administration team, headmaster, principal, and teachers in creating a supportive learning environment.

4.6.1 Professional Development

Participants strongly emphasized the importance of professional development training and capacity-building programs for teachers. These initiatives are essential for providing teachers with access to a wide range of knowledge, skills, and approaches. By acquiring these skills, teachers can customize their lessons to meet the individual needs of students. As participants state:

‘Conducting professional development and capacity-building programs can enhance teachers' knowledge and skills, enabling them to employ a variety of methods tailored to meet students' individual needs.’ (FGD B)

Other participant mentioned:

‘We need support in areas such as capacity-building programs for teachers on inclusive education’ (Interview B)

4.6.2 Facilities and Resource Provision

Earlier in this chapter, participants expressed concerns about the lack of sufficient teaching and learning materials and resources available at school. They mentioned that, in some cases, they have to arrange for at least one textbook per table. To address this situation, participants suggested assistance in the provision of laboratories and facilities for students with disabilities. An FGD noted-

‘Establishing a laboratory and a standard library accessible to students, along with providing textbooks and other educational materials.’ (FGD A)

Another participant outlined,

‘We need support in areas such as providing facilities and resources for individuals with disabilities.’ (Interview B)

Meanwhile, participants in the FGD highlighted the crucial role that parents play in providing essential support for their children. This parental involvement significantly contributes to better academic performance among learners. Participants said-

‘Parents can play a crucial role in their children's education by encouraging them and providing necessary supplies such as books, notebooks, bags, shoes, and clothes. When these supports are in place, students tend to perform better academically. Conversely, in the absence of such support, educational efforts face significant challenges.’ (FGD A)

4.6.3 Community and Family Engagement

In this regard, all participants reported that they have a School Educational Shura (Committee) that involves parents and community members in school activities, considering them an integral part of their educational system. The knowledge, experience, and understanding of inclusive education provided by these individuals can significantly contribute to the development of inclusivity. Additionally, it is recommended to conduct awareness programs for parents and community members to further expand their understanding of inclusion and mutual respect within the community. As one participant noted:

'We have an educational committee called the School Educational Shura (Committee). We maintain contact with the parents and guardians of the students, who play a major role. They, along with the community, represent half of the education system. If they work with us and cooperate with the education system, the education system will develop. However, if they do not cooperate, it cannot grow on its own.' (Interview A)

Moreover, he mentioned,

'We have included various individuals in the School Educational Shura (Committee) through an electoral process. These members can be a mullah of a mosque, an imam of Jamkatkhan (Ismaili Religious Center), tribe representatives, educated individuals, as well as retired and experienced people. Their experience should be utilized to create an inclusive learning environment. They may have insights into issues that we may not fully understand, and perhaps some members have a better grasp of inclusion. It is essential to acknowledge that we cannot achieve this alone.' (Interview A)

Regarding awareness programs, a participant noted,

'Conducting community-level awareness programs to attract parents' attention towards inclusive education, and promoting mutual acceptance within society.' (Interview B)

4.6.4 Collaborative Support of Stakeholders in Building a Welcoming Educational System

Participants emphasized the importance of collaboration among different stakeholders, including teachers, the leadership team, and the administration team, in creating a welcoming educational system. This collaborative approach is critical for promoting and establishing an inclusive learning climate. They strongly refute the use of punishment for students, instead recommending a peaceful and compassionate approach, even when students are involved in conflicts. FGD stated,

‘Students should be encouraged to pursue education, and during lessons, more capable students should be paired with those who may struggle with the content. Every teacher should take responsibility for encouraging students and creating a comfortable learning environment. Other stakeholders, including the school administration, other teachers, the headmaster, and the school principal, should also collaborate on this issue. For example, fostering healthy competition among students can motivate them. Additionally, organizing book reading competitions and encouraging all students to participate can contribute to an inclusive learning environment. By implementing these methods, we can develop a more supportive and effective educational system.’ (FGD A)

Regarding conflict management, participants underscored,

‘We always encourage students to resolve conflicts peacefully and avoid physical confrontations. We inform the school administration, shift students' seats, and consult with their parents to address any issues.’ (FGD B)

4.7 Summary

This chapter discussed a wide range of topics based on data collected from research samples. It addresses the factors that significantly contribute to educational exclusion in the Zebak district of Badakhshan, Afghanistan. These factors include socioeconomic conditions, scarcity of resources and infrastructure availability, security concerns, family dynamics, community factors, and school accessibility. Additionally, the chapter explores teachers’ perceptions of inclusivity. Teachers noted that inclusive education involves treating individuals equally, providing equal opportunities, and delivering lessons without discrimination based on background, ethnicity, gender, or abilities. To ensure inclusivity in the school environment, teachers employ various teaching methods such as student-centered

focusing on group work, discussions, and question-and-answer sessions as well as equal distribution of resources among students of diverse backgrounds, and abilities. Furthermore, the chapter identified the challenges teachers face in promoting an inclusive learning environment. These challenges include insufficient teaching and learning materials, a lack of professional development to enhance teachers' knowledge and skills, a lack of cooperation among different stakeholders, and inadequate school buildings. Moreover, teachers suggest several interventions to foster inclusivity in their schools. These interventions include conducting professional development programs for teachers, implementing awareness programs for parents and the community, providing necessary resources, and establishing a collaborative support system among stakeholders to create a welcoming learning environment.

Chapter 5

Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter seeks to address the findings coherent with the research questions. These questions focus on exploring and understanding the factors contributing to educational exclusion, teachers' perceptions of inclusivity, strategies employed by teachers to create inclusive learning environments, and the challenges teachers encounter in fostering such environments. Additionally, the findings of this study will be compared with existing literature from both local and global contexts to develop an understanding of the similarities and differences that may emerge. Toward the end of the chapter, recommendations for future studies will be outlined.

5.2 Discussion

This section presents the study's findings, organized according to the research questions. The results indicate a positive understanding among participants regarding inclusive education and the inclusivity of their schools' learning environments. Furthermore, the study examines factors contributing to educational exclusion, strategies and practices to promote inclusivity, and the challenges teachers encounter in fostering inclusive learning environments. This section is developed by analyzing the alignment and contrasts with existing literature.

5.2.1 What are the factors that excluded students from Zebak primary schools in Badakhshan, Afghanistan?

The study identified numerous factors contributing to educational exclusion. Socio-economic challenges include poverty, economic hardship, and parents' inability to cover additional

student costs. UNESCO (2020) highlighted that those at the highest risk of exclusion often face multiple disadvantages, with poverty being the primary driver. A study based on the context of Afghanistan found out that, although free education is available, families still struggle with financial burdens caused by indirect costs like school supplies, food, uniforms, and transportation, which frequently result in exclusion (Ministry of Education, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, UNICIF, & Samuel Hall, 2018). Additionally, the UNESCO IIEP Learning Portal (2021) stressed that low family income hinders the ability to provide children with essential learning resources, further restricting access to education. Moreover, poverty remains a significant barrier to education in many developing countries. Families often rely on their children to contribute through household tasks or paid work, limiting their opportunities for schooling. Education costs, including uniforms, books, and transportation, are often unaffordable for low-income households (Asomi College of Science, n.d.).

Accessibility challenges, such as the long distances to schools and the lack of passable routes, also affect attendance, as participants noted. Research by Dryden-Peterson (2009) found that in rural areas, distance significantly impacts school accessibility, preventing many students from attending. Similarly, the Ministry of Education, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (2014) identified long walking distances as a critical barrier. In rural regions of developing nations, irregular school attendance is often caused by schools being far from students' homes and inadequate transportation systems (Asomi College of Science, n.d.).

Insufficient resources, including a lack of teaching and learning materials, further worsen educational exclusion, as described by the study participants. Agarwal (2020) pointed out that governments often lack either the capacity or willingness to allocate sufficient resources for school infrastructure, limiting accessibility for many individuals. Furthermore, inadequate parental and community support exacerbate the issue. CSR Education (2024) argued that

education is a shared responsibility of governments, schools, and communities; however, parental and local community engagement is often lacking, contributing to exclusion.

Finally, regarding students' safety and security, participants emphasized that while their students feel physically safe and secure, there is uncertainty regarding their mental and psychological well-being. This concern is primarily attributed to factors such as poverty, attending school on an empty stomach, the lack of proper uniforms, and worries about family debts. Consequently, the lack of mental and psychological safety further compounds the challenges, leading to higher dropout rates, struggles with mental health, and difficulty maintaining focus. Delju (2024) found that students frequently deal with depression, and teachers observed that while some students are physically present in classrooms, they remain mentally disengaged. Illnesses and issues during the night were also reported as factors negatively affecting student attendance.

5.2.2 How do Teachers in Zebak Primary Schools of Badakhshan, Afghanistan Perceive the Inclusivity of the Learning Environment?

The study revealed that participants understood inclusive education as providing equal opportunities for all individuals, regardless of their backgrounds, genders, ethnicities, or abilities. According to UNICEF (n.d.), inclusive education involves children learning together in the same classrooms and schools. This approach ensures meaningful learning opportunities for traditionally marginalized groups, such as children with disabilities and speakers of minority languages. Furthermore, it highlights that inclusive education allows students from diverse backgrounds to learn and grow collectively, fostering mutual advantages for everyone involved. Bindhani and Gopinath (2024) described inclusive education as a vital principle aimed at ensuring equitable access to education for all, regardless of differences in their backgrounds, characteristics, or abilities. Similarly,

Kurowski et al. (2022) emphasized that the core concept of inclusion is educating students together whenever possible, with mainstream schools adapting to meet the diverse needs of individual learners. In a broader context, UNESCO (2009) defined inclusive education as a process that ensures all learners are reached and works toward achieving the goal of Education for All (EFA) by strengthening the education system. Later, UNESCO (2017, p. 12) noted, “Every learner matters and matters equally.”

Some participants highlighted that the purpose of inclusive education is to adapt teaching and learning to individual students' abilities and understanding rather than applying a one-size-fits-all approach. Similarly, a study by the Global Education Monitoring Report Team & International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030 (2020) reinforces this idea, emphasizing inclusive teaching practices. These practices encourage teachers to recognize each student's unique experiences and abilities, embrace the notion that learning capacity is limitless, and foster diversity. Furthermore, the Aga Khan Foundation (2008) advocates for customized teaching approaches that employ diverse instructional methods to enhance students' learning experiences and skills, irrespective of their starting points. Teachers are encouraged to design lessons and activities that cater to varying learning styles, levels, and expectations.

Study Participants also expressed that their school environments are inclusive as they accommodate diverse student groups with different backgrounds, social classes, and abilities. Teachers implement various teaching strategies and practices while upholding student dignity and respecting their values. Li and Singh (2022) emphasized that inclusive learning environments should welcome every student, making them feel supported and valued. Similarly, Debasu and Yitayew (2024) described an inclusive learning environment as one where teachers employ a range of teaching, assessment, and evaluation techniques to meet

diverse learning needs and strengths while also considering the physical organization of the classroom.

5.2.3 How do Teachers Ensure an Inclusive Learning Environment in Their Schools?

The strategies and practices adopted by teachers to promote inclusivity in the learning environment primarily emphasize the use of varied teaching methods, with particular attention to student-centered approaches and cooperative learning. Additionally, the equitable distribution of resources is crucial, ensuring that students from diverse backgrounds, genders, social classes, and abilities are treated fairly and without discrimination. Tomlinson et al. (2003), to address the specific needs and abilities of individual students, differentiated instruction focuses on customizing the context, teaching methods, and assessment process. Similarly, cooperative learning offers an engaging educational strategy that shifts the focus from individual competition to collaborative efforts, fostering shared responsibility and encouraging students to work toward common goals (Inclusive education strategies, 2025).

Moreover, the literature highlights a wide range of strategies and techniques for promoting inclusivity within learning environments. For instance, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) serves as a vital framework for fostering inclusiveness. It emphasizes employing diverse approaches to representation, action, expression, and engagement to cater to the varying abilities, preferences, and learning styles of students. By acknowledging the unique strengths and requirements of individual learners, UDL advocates for the creation of instructional materials, methods, and assessments that are accessible, understandable, and effective for a diverse range of students (Sharma et al., 2023). Furthermore, Debasu and Yitayew (2024) explore key components of designing inclusive educational environments, including physical infrastructure. These elements encompass ramps, visual signage or displays, canteen facilities, and both indoor and outdoor classroom setups designed to align instructional

methods with student needs through ongoing feedback. Additional considerations include age-appropriate and accessible toilets, flexible curricula and pedagogy centers, collaboration among stakeholders, and the design of accessible stairs, pathways, and corridors to enhance the participation and learning experiences of all students. Furthermore, regarding resource allocation, UNESCO (2020) outlined that it is essential to know how to distribute school resources effectively to support the implementation of inclusive education. In other words, equal distribution of the teaching and learning materials greatly contribute to inclusive practice so that everybody, irrespective of their backgrounds, socio-economic condition, and abilities, feel included and valued in the learning environment.

5.2.4 What Are the Key Challenges that Teachers in Zebak Primary Schools of Badakhshan, Afghanistan Confront in Creating an Inclusive Learning Environment?

Several challenges have been identified based on the findings of this research. These include insufficient resources, such as teaching and learning materials—textbooks, stationery, laboratories, and blackboards. Additionally, some parents are unable to provide basic necessities like notebooks and pens for their children. Another significant issue is the lack of proper infrastructure, as students are being taught in open areas. The deficit of professional development programs, including training sessions and seminars for teachers, further exacerbates the situation. Accessibility challenges, such as the long distances to schools, combined with parental reluctance to cooperate, also hinder the creation of an inclusive learning environment. Similarly, as noted by Oxford University Press ELT (2019), insufficient, physical resources, such as adequate classroom space and facilities for creating learning aids, along with a scarcity of awareness programs targeting teachers, principals, parents, and the broader community, can pose significant obstacles. Additionally, the absence of teaching materials and resources, combined with limited administrative support within the

school system, further complicates the creation of an inclusive learning environment. A further study by Jardinez and Natividad (2024) emphasized that challenges include a shortage of teacher training in inclusive education, inadequate facilities and materials, difficulties in fostering social integration, and peer relationships—where students with special needs may experience peer pressure. Additionally, the study highlighted the lack of parental involvement and support as a significant obstacle.

5.2.5 Initiatives for Creating an Inclusive Learning Environment

The findings revealed that several initiatives must be prioritized to establish an inclusive learning environment. These include implementing professional development and capacity-building and awareness programs, ensuring adequate provision of facilities and resources, fostering stronger community and family engagement, and promoting collaborative support among various stakeholders. The literature suggested that another significant aspect of building an inclusive learning environment and instructional techniques is professional development about inclusive education (Brooks, 2022). Similarly, Advisory Excellence (2024) demonstrated that teacher training and ongoing professional development are essential for fostering inclusive education. Teachers must develop the expertise, abilities, and approaches necessary to meet the varied needs of their students effectively. All organizations and institutions supporting learners and their families collaborate to align inclusive and equitable educational policies and practices. Resources are allocated strategically to support learners who may be at risk. Additionally, educators and support staff are provided with opportunities for ongoing professional development focused on inclusive and equitable practices (UNESCO, 2017). Moreover, UNESO (2020) noted to expand the concept of inclusive education to encompass all learners, regardless of their identity, background, or abilities. Foster collaboration by sharing knowledge and resources, as this is vital for

achieving and maintaining inclusive practices. Actively involve communities and parents in meaningful consultations, as inclusion must be developed collaboratively rather than imposed by higher authorities. Promote coordination across government departments, sectors, and levels, recognizing that educational inclusion is a fundamental aspect of broader social inclusion.

5.3 Conclusion

The study aimed to investigate factors contributing to educational exclusion, teachers' perceptions of inclusive learning environments, strategies and practices for fostering inclusivity, and the challenges teachers face in promoting such environments. A qualitative research approach was employed, utilizing one-on-one interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) to gather in-depth insights. Inclusive education involves meeting the varied needs of all students by minimizing exclusion both within the education system and from it (UNESCO, 2009). An inclusive learning environment is characterized by teachers employing a variety of teaching, assessment, and evaluation methods tailored to address the diverse learning needs and strengths of students while also taking into account the physical design of the space (Debasu and Yitayew, 2024). The findings of this study indicate that all participants demonstrated a positive understanding of inclusive education and the inclusivity of their school environment. They highlighted that their schools welcome students from diverse groups, employ various instructional methods, respect learners' values and dignity, and ensure equitable resource allocation without discrimination based on background, socio-economic status, ethnicity, or ability. However, participants also identified several challenges, including insufficient resources and infrastructure, limited professional development opportunities, distant school locations, and a lack of collaboration among stakeholders. To address these challenges, they offered interventions such as providing

adequate resources and infrastructure, organizing professional development and capacity-building programs, and fostering stronger collaboration among stakeholders, including families, communities, school administrations, and leadership teams. Regarding the implication of this study, it contributes to the existing body of knowledge, particularly regarding the inclusivity of learning environments in rural areas of Afghanistan. It provides valuable insights for various stakeholders, enhancing their understanding of inclusive education, offering strategies for creating inclusive learning environments, and shedding light on the challenges faced by teachers.

5.4 Recommendations

This study offers several recommendations for educators, policymakers, and future researchers to enhance the inclusivity of learning environments.

- Regular professional development, capacity-building, and awareness programs on inclusive education should be implemented, targeting various stakeholders such as parents, community members, and school staff.
- A robust monitoring system should be developed to evaluate and report on the inclusivity of both the education system and the learning environment on a regular basis.
- Strengthening collaboration among diverse stakeholders, including parents and community members, is essential, as it significantly contributes to fostering inclusivity in education.
- Future research should incorporate student perspectives to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the issue from multiple viewpoints.

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Appendixes

A. Consent Letter

Dear Participant,

I hope this letter finds you in good health.

My name is Mohammad Asif Etimadi. I am a student in the Master's degree program in Educational Leadership and School Improvement at Brac University, Dhaka, Bangladesh. I am seeking your consent to participate in a study titled "Perceptions of Teachers on the Inclusive Learning Environment in Primary Schools in Rural Areas of Badakhshan, Afghanistan" This study is being conducted as part of my Master's degree requirements in Educational Leadership and School Improvement at Brac University, Bangladesh.

As a participant, you will be contributing to research intended to explore teachers' perceptions of inclusivity within the learning environment, the strategies and practices used to create an inclusive learning atmosphere, and the challenges faced in promoting inclusivity in primary schools in rural areas of Afghanistan. This study will particularly focus on two schools in the Zebak District of Badakhshan province, where you are employed as a member of the school staff. Please note that this study is solely for educational purposes, and there are no immediate benefits to participating. However, your participation will significantly contribute to the completion of my Master's degree.

Your participation will involve an interview or FGD conducted via online platforms, which will take approximately 60 minutes. You will be asked to share your authentic understanding and experiences regarding the inclusivity of the learning environment in your school. All ethical issues will be taken seriously; there will be no harm or threat to your personal,

professional and social lives. Your dignity and identity will be respected, personal information will be kept confidential, and a pseudonym will be used if necessary. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without providing a reason.

For any questions, concerns, or clarification regarding the study, please feel free to contact me at +93 780016287, +880 17224982902, or via email at asif.eimadi21@gmail.com.

I have read and understood the purpose of the study, and I hereby agree to participate.

Teacher Name_____

Signature:

_____Date_____

Thank you for your participation in this interview. Your time and dedication are greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Mohammad Asif Etimadi

Signature: _____

Master of Education in Educational Leadership and School Improvement

Brac-IED, Brac University, Bangladesh

B. Interview Guide for the Headmasters

Perceptions of Teachers on the Inclusive Learning Environment in Primary Schools in Rural Areas of Badakhshan, Afghanistan

Part one: Demographic Information

1. Name-
2. Gender-
3. Age-
4. Educational qualification-
5. Professional degree-
6. Number of teaching experience_

Part two: Interview Questions

1. What do you think are the primary factors that lead to student exclusion in your school?
2. How do economic, social, cultural, and behavioral factors impact student inclusion in your school?
3. Why do you think some students stop going to school?
4. What role do infrastructure (School environment, building, boundary walls, and washroom) and learning other resource limitations play in student exclusion?
5. What does an inclusive education mean to you?
6. Can you describe the overall education environment at Zebak Primary School level?
7. Can you share any specific examples of inclusive practice observed in your school?
8. Do you have students from different backgrounds (e.g., gender, ethnicity, race, social class, students with disabilities)?
9. What methodologies do teachers use to address and support the diverse needs of students in your school?
10. How do teachers teach students who cannot easily understand the lesson?
11. How do you distribute the learning resources among students?
12. What are the key challenges faced by teachers in creating and maintaining an inclusive learning environment?
13. How do they overcome these challenges on a daily basis?
14. What kind of support or training do you provide to teachers to improve the inclusivity of the learning environment?
15. Are families and communities engaged in school activities?
16. What roles do families and communities play in supporting inclusive education in your school?

C. FGD Guide for the Primary School Teachers

Perceptions of Teachers on the Inclusive Learning Environment in Primary Schools in Rural Areas of Badakhshan, Afghanistan

Part one: Demographic Information

7. Name-
8. Gender-
9. Age-
10. Educational qualification-
11. Professional degree-
12. Number of teaching experience_

Part two: FGD Questions

1. What do you believe are the main factors that lead to students being excluded from Zebak primary schools?
2. How do socioeconomic conditions, affect student attendance and retention in your school?
3. Are there any specific cultural or community beliefs that contribute to student exclusion?
4. How does security issue influence the exclusion of education in your school and what do you think about the psychological and mental status of your students?
5. How do infrastructure (school environment, building, boundary walls, classrooms, and washrooms) and learning materials and resources impact student participation in school?
6. What is your general understanding of inclusive education?
7. How do you perceive the current inclusivity of the learning environment in your school? Is it an inclusive learning environment? How?
8. Can you share any positive examples of inclusive practices that have been implemented in your classrooms?
9. What strategies and methodologies do you use to ensure an inclusive learning environment?
10. How do you differentiate instruction to meet the diverse needs of your students?

11. What criteria do you consider for the distribution of resources among students of different backgrounds?
12. What are the key challenges you face in creating and maintaining an inclusive learning environment?
13. How do you address these challenges on a daily basis?
14. What additional support or resources would help you overcome these challenges?
15. How do you involve parents and the community in supporting inclusive education?
16. What policies or initiatives do you think would improve the inclusivity of your school?
17. How do you deal with the students who disturb the lessons and fight and beat each other?