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Constructing Inclusive Classroom Climates: An Interpretive Study of Social-Emotional Learning Integration in Pakistani Elementary Education

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Abstract: This interpretive study examines how elementary school teachers in Pakistan construct inclusive classroom climates through the integration of social-emotional learning. Using the assertion development methodology proposed by Erickson, the study was conducted with a sample of 12 teachers working in an elementary school. The researchers identified five main claims: that climate is built by micro-interactions between teachers rather than the official curriculum; that resource regulation implies improvisational climate-building practices; that shared cultural values construct climates differently than individualistic models; that peer relations are the core climate formation process; and that teachers affective states are the most basic way of creating an emotional climates in a classroom. The findings highlight the gap between the expectations of an inclusive education policy and the real-life situations faced by teachers in Pakistani elementary settings. The study also has methodological contributions because it shows the utility of assertion development in explaining the complex phenomenon of pedagogical and has practical contributions in identifying the leverage points of helping the climate development work of teachers.

Key Words: Classroom Climate, Inclusive Education, Social-Emotional Learning, Elementary Education, Teacher Practices, Assertion Development, Pakistan

Introduction

Classroom climate is one of the least apparent aspects of school practice, with an enormous impact on students' learning experience, social interaction, and sense of belonging (Margas, 2023). In classes that are inclusive of students with varying abilities, backgrounds, and needs, climate development is especially consequential, as it determines whether the inclusion will be a form of simple awareness or indeed a form of real participation and learning by all students. Classroom climate is an intermediary between the practice s of inclusive teaching and outcomes of inclusive teaching, and it is an enacted reality of mediating the policy intentions in the lived reality (Margas, 2023).

In the Pakistani elementary education system, the necessity to include classrooms overlaps with key structural issues such as oversized classes, lack of resources, underprepared teacher training, and institutional cultures that primarily focus on the performance of examinations instead of comprehensive development (Saleem et al., 2025; Saleem et al., 2025; Saleem et al., 2020). Teachers operate within settings where the principles of inclusive education tend to impose an imperative to integrate students with special needs, whereas material support, developmental opportunities, and systemic changes are at an even more significant disadvantage. Within such limits, teachers create classroom climates through myriads of votes and daily decisions, interactions, and practices, which together form pleasant or intolerable climates (Noor et al., 2025; Saleem, 2017–2021; Saleem et al., 2019).

Social-emotional learning has emerged as a potentially powerful framework for constructing positive classroom climates, offering teachers conceptual tools and practical strategies for addressing students' emotional needs, building positive relationships, and creating supportive learning environments (Demartino & Fetman, 2025; Durlak et al., 2024;

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Rosário & Cefai, 2024). Nevertheless, the actual way in which teachers establish inclusive climates in Pakistani elementary settings characterised by resource scarcity remain largely unexplored. This interpretive study addresses this gap by examining the following question: How do elementary school teachers in Pakistan construct inclusive classroom climates through social-emotional learning integration?

Theoretical Foundation: Classroom Climate as Constructed Reality

The quality and nature of life in the classroom is the topic of classroom climate and involves emotional performances, patterns of relations, teaching methods, and unspoken rules regulating behaviour and engagement (Margas, 2023). Contrary to environmental factors, climate is dynamically created through the constant interaction of teachers, students, and institutional contexts. This constructionist interpretation places classroom climate not on the levels of creation or control by teachers but on the level of the emergent complexity of social systems (Khalfaoui et al., 2020; Molinari & Grazia, 2022; Rudasill et al., 2018).

Classroom climate includes three dimensions: the relational dimension which includes teacher-student and peer relationships; the instructional dimension, which implies pedagogical practices and learning activities; and the organisational dimension which includes rules, routines, and classroom management arrangements (Jiang et al., 2024; Konrad et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2020). These aspects interrelate in inclusive classrooms to create climates that either enable diversity or enforce exclusion, nurture struggling learners or marginalise them, and legitimise diverse ways of being.

Studies show that favourable classroom climate that emphasise positive relationships, active teaching, and expectations are also related to better academic performance, increased social behaviours, and connectedness in all students, including those with special educational needs (Bucholz & Sheffler, 2009). Negative climates, including severe discipline, teacher-driven education, and competitive relationships with peers, augment existing inequalities and distract affirmative intentions (Duarte et al., 2022; Endedijk et al., 2021; La Salle, 2018). Thus, understanding how teachers create climate has become a vital aspect of inclusive education research.

Methodology

Interpretive Research Approach

This study used an interpretive research methodology that focuses on meaning, context, and lived experience understanding (Erickson, 1986). Interpretive research emphasises the views of actors and understands that educational realities are socially constructed under the interpretations and actions of the participants (Erickson, 2012). The methodology assumes that to comprehend the ways in which teachers create classroom climates, one should focus on the way in which they build implicit theories, practical reasoning, and situated decisions as opposed to quantifying the predetermined variables or testing hypotheses (Erickson, 1986).

The data collection was done over two months in one elementary school in Punjab. There were 12 teachers involved, who were teaching grades one through five, and their teaching experience was between 3 and 16 years.

Non participant observation was the major data collection technique, and during the observations, the research team was required to work two to three days per week in every classroom, where the monitored instruction, interactions, classroom management, and teacher practice (Erickson, 1986). Field notes were conversations of procedures that were carried out in the classroom, the interaction between the teacher and students, peer interactions, and physical elements (Emerson et al., 2011; Sanjek, 2019). The semi-structured interviews were used to examine the intentions and explanations of the events in classrooms, challenges faced by teachers, and the strategies used to build inclusive climates (Bucholz & Sheffler, 2009). This paper mainly reports the data analysis findings from the fieldnotes.

Assertion Development Following Erickson

Analysis was undertaken using the Erickson approach assertion development method, which consisted of inductive working with data to identify trends of meaning and action, develop empirically grounded generalisations, and evaluate such generalisations using the entire body of data (Erickson, 1986). In contrast to hypothesis testing, assertion

development permits theoretical revelations to arise as a result of intense involvement with specific cases, combined with strict requirements of evidence and interpretation (Saldaña, 2024).

This began with reading and rereading field notes and interview transcripts to find recurring themes, contradictions, and important moments. Primary patterns were developed as provisional statements, which were methodically confirmed or refuted by seeking confirmatory and disconfirmatory evidence from all information sources. Assertions were improved by repeatedly doing so and by considering alternative interpretations and border line cases. The legitimacy of ultimate claims is based on the fact that they are supported by empirical evidence, are consistent with the overall evidence, and reflect some agreement with the participants themselves (Erickson, 2012).

Context: Elementary Education in Pakistan

Pakistani elementary education is in a complex situation that essentially conditions teachers' work and their opportunities to create non-discriminatory climates. Teacher demotivation appears to be one of the most significant problems, as numerous teachers demonstrate their abilities, but they are not constantly committed to active teaching and interaction with students. It is a policy of the government to build infrastructure rather than focus on direct educational change, and the imbalance in staffing causes the individual teacher to have to teach multiple classes at the same time, thereby lacking the chance to give individual attention (Waqar et al., 2025).

Notable differences exist between urban and rural schools. Urban schools tend to have better facilities and administrative support, while rural schools have problems with cultural restrictions, especially when it comes to the best female students accessing education. Public schools have a poor societal image, and parents perceive them as upholding poor practices and insufficient commitment to their jobs despite their low cost, which makes parents prefer their options to private ones.

These contexts have policies of inclusive education which compel students with disabilities and special needs to be integrated, but little support is given towards their implementation (Anis et al., 2025; Bokhari et al., 2025). Teachers are given minimal training in inclusive pedagogy, special education services, or differentiated instruction (Noor et al., 2025; Saleem et al., 2025). The high level of enrolment in classes of more than 40 students makes it hard to meet the needs of the varied learning programmes. These structural realities profoundly influence how teachers construct classroom climates and integrate social-emotional learning.

Findings: Assertions About Climate Development

Assertion One: Climate Development Through Micro-Interactions

It is in the micro-interactions among teachers and teachers and teachers, little exchanges, nonverbal messages, and moment-to-moment responses that teachers build inclusive classroom climates and not in the formal curriculum or planned activities. All these micro-interactions combined generate emotional climate that students perceive as friendly or hostile, safe or unsafe, and respectful or dismissive (Margas, 2023).

It was observed that teachers who recognised the presence of each student through greetings, eye contact during communications, and sensitivity when responding to the emotional states of students were able to create warmer classroom climates compared to those without these characteristics. On the other hand, teachers who overlooked some students, used certain body language and tone to show their frustration, or reacted differently to such behaviours helped in creating climates of uncertainty and anxiety.

Notably, these micro-interactions occurred mostly beyond the consciousness of teachers since they were habituated tendencies and not planned. When asked about it, teachers acknowledged that it was important but explained that it was challenging to maintain positive interactions reliably when dealing with large classes, teaching a prescribed curriculum, and dealing with behavioural issues. This statement emphasises the fact that the development of climate is more than planning and is actually located on the practice level.

Assertion Two: Improvisational Climate-Building in Resource Constraints

The scarcity of resources required very improvisational climates, where teachers had to ingeniously modify materials, spaces, and time to give equal access to more inclusive climates despite the constraints imposed by the institution. Rather than implementing standardised SEL programs or utilising specialised resources, teachers improvised by repurposing existing materials, leveraging peer relationships, and embedding social-emotional learning into academic instruction.

For example, one teacher developed a feelings corner using donated cushions and faces of emotions drawn by students when the teacher could not get commercial SEL facilities. Another study introduced social skills development in the teaching of Urdu language by asking students to write and practice dialogues in which there was conflict to be resolved. Teachers used inter-lesson breaks for relationship building (and emotional check-ins) when they did not have formal SEL time.

This improvisation reflected the creativity of teachers as well as the insufficiency of the resources provided for inclusive education. Teachers also complained that climate-building fell on them and not on institutionalised support, which is a form of professional development. This statement sheds light on the schools and possibilities in pedagogy, as well as the agency of the teacher in the efforts to work with and around limited resources.

Assertion Three: Collective Cultural Values Shape Climate Development

The cultural values of Pakistani people, such as collectivism, respect for authority, and interdependence, had a core influence on the classroom climate constructed by teachers, introducing trends different from individualistic Western SEL models. Teachers promoted harmony in groups and not in individuals, obedience rather than liberty, and collective rather than individual responsibilities.

These values were encapsulated in classroom norms, such as collective greetings and sharing of duties to keep the classroom orderly, but conflict resolution methods focused on reconciling instead of personal revenge. Using cultural, religious teachings, and family examples, teachers dealt with social-emotional problems, presenting the classroom as a large family where relatives take care of one another.

Nevertheless, these group orientations were contradictory to the focus of inclusive education on the support of difference and legitimising various needs. Teachers were in conflict with the cultural norms of conformity and acknowledgement of students with disabilities as individuals who needed special treatment. This tension was resolved in some ways by making accommodation seem to be a collective responsibility intended to help vulnerable members of the community, and in other ways, accommodation was perceived to be opposed to cultural values. Such a statement discloses the essential influence of cultural settings on the potentially possible structures of climates.

Assertion Four: Peer Dynamics as Primary Climate Mechanism

Interaction and association with peers were the main channels by which the inclusive or exclusive climate was made, and the influence of teachers was realised through structuring, modelling, and interfering between peers and not necessarily through climate creation. The inclusion or exclusion of students in their daily lives was more based on the treatment of the students by their classmates than on the actions of the teacher.

It was observed that classrooms in which students acted kindly, helped struggling peers, and involved classmates with diverse backgrounds in classroom activities had warm inclusive climates, regardless of the level of formal SEL implementation. In contrast, those classes that were marked by teasing, exclusion, and excessive social ranks were hostile, even when teachers had good intentions of inclusivity. This trend was identified by the teachers, one of whom said, *I can educate them on respect, but unless they extend this to each other, what kind of climate have we actually created?*

Teachers utilised several types of strategies to modify peer relations, such as using deliberate group arrangement, explicitly teaching students about social skills and prosocial behaviours, and using immediate intervention in exclusionary

events. However, they did not reject the fact of minimal ability to regulate peer interactions which take place beyond the direct supervision or influence and strongly held social stratifications such as those manifesting larger societal biases.

Assertion Five: Teacher Emotional States Shape Classroom Emotional Landscapes

Classroom emotional climates were primarily determined by the emotional conditions of teachers themselves, and teacher stress, frustration, enthusiasm, or calm were passed on to students and contributed to the overall creation of the emotional climates. This emotion worked mostly in nonverbal circumstances and influenced the emotional states, behaviours, and safety of students.

The high stress levels of teachers led to tense classroom atmospheres, with students being anxious and behaviourally dysregulated, whereas emotionally stable teachers helped to build less stressful atmospheres. One of the teachers responded, "When I am feeling overwhelmed, they become chaotic. When I am peaceful, they settle. It is as if they are absorbing my feelings." This was especially strong in lower grades of education, when the influence of emotional regulation on students was still under development.

Nevertheless, the provision of emotional support to teachers was not a major form of support in schools, even when teachers were anticipated to influence positive emotional conditions in students. The primary sources of coping with stress, frustration at systemic breakdowns, and emotional labour of meeting the demands of the students were also subject to individual resources as opposed to institutional provisions.

Discussion

Climate Development as Core Inclusive Education Practice

Such results make classroom climate development the main role in inclusive education practice and not the background of teaching (Margas, 2023). The idea that climate acts mainly through micro-interactions disputes some common beliefs according to which inclusive education needs specialised and differentiated curricula or technical adaptations. Although all these aspects are significant, the ability to live an inclusive life hinge on the emotional-relational climate that teachers build upon the daily interactions, which happen significantly.

This implies that the advocacy of inclusive education must deal with aspects of practice that are frequently made invisible through teacher education and professional development: the nature of teacher-learner dynamics, the ways of attention and recognition, the constant emotional responsiveness, and the ability to engage warmly, despite constraints and pressure. These dimensions mostly work on the level of implicit practice, which implies that professional development is based on practice, including observation, introspection, and coaching, rather than an attempt at the transmission of knowledge through mainly cognitive means (Bucholz & Sheffler, 2009).

Resource Constraints and Pedagogical Improvisation

This pedagogical approach requires resources and instruments (not techniques) that enable the development of resources with a specific degree of flexibility and adaptability to the context.

Both teacher agency and system failure can be seen in the finding that the strategies employed by teachers in climate development are improvised under critical resource dependency. The ingenuity of teachers as they managed to utilise the resources given to them was striking, but that should not be used to hide the lack of proper support for inclusive education. The inconsistency associated with the provision of resources in a non-systematic way based on teacher creativity leads to uneven implementation on the students, as the experiences can vary depending on the teacher that they are favoured by chance.

Furthermore, the main factors of teacher stress and burnout are continual improvisation, which is compounded by large classes, grade management, and lack of preparation time. Inclusive education, particularly in Pakistani elementary settings, is unsustainable when managers largely depend on teachers to make extraordinary efforts as opposed to regular institutional accommodation. This finding necessitates examining structural reforms and building teachers' capacity.

Cultural Adaptation and Inclusion Tensions

The assertion concerning shared cultural values demonstrates resources and conflicts regarding inclusive climate building. Interdependence and mutual responsibility collectives also offer cultural support for the inclusion of communities in diverse conditions, where diversity is viewed as a strength. Teachers were able to mobilise cultural values by presenting the idea of inclusion as a religious and ethical duty towards vulnerable community members.

Nonetheless, the situation becomes strained when it involves validating individual differences that disrupt conformity expectations or when accommodation tends to favour individuals over group unity. To negotiate such tensions, the negotiation process demands cultural sophistication which most teachers are not ready to practice. This observation implies the necessity of culturally based inclusive education platforms developed through conversations between teachers, cultural bodies, and disability advocacy movements, instead of the comprehensive adoption of Western concepts in this matter.

Peer Dynamics and Social Justice Concerns

The peer dynamics at the centre of climate development make the question of social justice and the role of a teacher highly questionable (Bucholz & Sheffler, 2009). When the experiences of inclusion are mainly pegged on how the students are treated by peers and learners, and peer relationships are representative of the rest of society in terms of prejudice against disability, classes, ethnicity, and gender, classrooms can tend to contain societal disparities against other students, even though they might have good intentions towards them.

It is not possible to leave the development of peer cultures to self-organise, and teachers are required to enact direct efforts to facilitate a fairer peer process. This necessitates the direct instruction of inclusion principles, the use of interventions against exclusionary actions, and the organisational support of beneficial cross-group connections. However, this requires time, expertise, and institutional bonding which many teachers do not currently have. This observation underscores the need to develop truly teamwork based inclusive climates, not merely with regard to teacher practices, but also student attitudes and peer cultures conditioned by the outside society (Margas, 2023).

Implications for Practice and Policy

Teacher Education and Professional Development

These results imply that inclusive elementary education teacher training needs to focus on climate-building practices such as awareness of micro-interaction, emotional self-regulation, building relationships, and positive peer relationship creation strategies. Pre-service initiatives must involve a great deal of field experience accompanied by reflective practice about climate development aspects of practice that do not depend on the acquisition of knowledge based largely on cognition of disabilities or differentiation strategies.

Professional development, in-service, is supposed to apply practice-based methods such as classroom observation with feedback about the patterns in interaction, the analysis of video recordings of the practice of teachers themselves, and the enquiry about the problems in the climate development created by collaboration. Teachers should be made aware of implicit patterns and support the emotional workload of climate development work.

Resource Provision and Systemic Support

Schools and education systems must provide adequate resources to support inclusive climate development, including reasonable class sizes that enable individualised attention, sufficient planning time for relationship building, access to materials that support social-emotional learning, and spaces for students who require sensory breaks or emotional regulation support. Inclusive education cannot rest sustainably on teacher improvisation alone.

Additionally, systems should support teachers' emotional well-being, including access to counselling services, peer support structures, and workload management. Teachers cannot construct positive emotional climates while experiencing chronic stress and emotional depletion without institutional support.

Culturally Grounded Inclusive Education

To formulate culturally based practices of inclusive education, there must be mutually oriented efforts to integrate teachers, cultural and religious leaders, disability activists, and community members in a concerted effort to define inclusive ideals in the Pakistani context. Instead of directly competing with Western-based SEL, teachers in Pakistan need to formulate locally relevant strategies by adopting Islamic teachings supportive of compassion and justice, Pakistani cultural beliefs about collective responsibility, and a Pakistani perspective on disability rights.

Peer Culture Intervention

Schools are recommended to have systematic methods of developing inclusive peer culture with explicit curricula on prejudice and empathy, consistent punishment on exclusionary behaviours, structured opportunities to learn together in cooperative learning which help students to engage in positive cross-group relationships, and student leadership programmes that can produce peer advocates of inclusion. Peer cultures must be considered in efforts to develop inclusive climates as much as teacher practices are.

Limitations and Future Research

The selection of 12 teachers working in a school in this study makes the study transferable to other educational settings in Pakistan quite limited. Future research needs to focus on climate development in rural schools, those that cater to low-income students, and those with varying religious or linguistic backgrounds to learn how various environments can influence climate development opportunities.

In addition, this study focused on teachers' views, giving little attention to student's experiences of classroom climate. A study that looks at the perceptions and experiences of elementary students with and without disabilities on classroom climate, where teacher practices are found to generate a welcoming or hostile atmosphere in the classroom, would be vital in providing supplementary knowledge (Margas, 2023).

Tracing longitudinal development in classroom climates across school years and teachers' acquisition of climate development skills would help elucidate the trajectories of development and pinpoint the experiences that help facilitate development. Finally, a study of the correlation between particular climate dimensions and individual inclusive outcomes may clarify what climate characteristics are the strongest indicators of inclusion for various groups of students.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Pakistani elementary teachers develop inclusive classroom atmosphere using micro-interactive practices, improvisational tactics suited to resourcefulness, culturally mediated practices that represent the values of the majority, deliberate influence of their own emotional conditions, and manipulation of the emotional environment of the classroom through peer interactions. These assertions are formed as a result of the active interaction with the lived experience of teachers and help to understand the embedded nature of climate development with the context, as well as identify any disparities between the policies of inclusion education and the realities of its practice.

The notion of classroom climate was not presented in the background but as the key process that makes or breaks the intentions of inclusion to turn into inclusion as lived or disintegrate into further exclusion. Teachers have agency in building climates, but this agency is through structural constraints that significantly restrict what is possible. The promotion of inclusive elementary education in Pakistan requires simultaneous consideration of the capacity of teachers, institutional capacity, cultural frameworks, and peer relationships, instead of focusing on a particular aspect.

The assertion development procedure proved useful in comprehending the sophisticated pedagogical phenomenon because it enabled patterns to emerge through the thick participation in a certain case coupled with high-quality criteria of empirical information. The resultant claims are not generalisations but established local pieces of information that may serve to define knowledge and actions in similar situations.

Finally, this study implies that the kind of inclusive elementary classroom that can exist in Pakistan involves a new way of conceiving inclusion as neither a placement policy nor technical accommodation but as an ongoing process of building emotional-relational-instructional climates which are friendly to all students. Such reconceptualisation requires other kinds of teacher preparation, institutional support, and educational policy that most importantly prevail. Since Pakistan is still developing its elementary education system, the climate development aspect of the work of teachers must be carefully considered so that the transformative power of inclusion can be achieved.

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