

Voices from the Margins: Christian Students' Experiences of Access and Equity Challenges in Primary Schools

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Abstract

The objective of this qualitative study was to examine the experiences of the Christian students on access and equity issues faced in primary schools of Pakistan. The research was undertaken to investigate the socio-economic, cultural, institutional and interpersonal challenges that impact Christian learners' schooling experiences. Thematic analysis was used to analyze data from semi-structured interviews conducted with Christian students and parents. The results showed that levels of poverty, low family income and unstable family circumstances had a significant impact on access and continuity of education. The study also revealed that there was peer discrimination, social isolation, derogatory labelling, unequal treatment by teachers and less involvement in school activities among Christians. Moreover, the curriculum was not religiously inclusive, with a disproportionate emphasis on the teaching of Islamic contents in educational resources and a lack of Christian perspectives. Christian Families have shown their resilience and commitment towards education with support from their community and church in spite of these challenges. The study suggests inclusive educational policies, culturally sensitive curricula, anti-discrimination practices and teacher training programs to foster educational equity and inclusion for religious minority students.

The keywords: Christian students, educational access, educational equity, marginalisation, inclusion, minority education, primary schools, qualitative study.

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Introduction

Education is an integral part of human life and can be considered as one of the most powerful means of achieving social mobility, social empowerment and national development. There are international conventions that do highlight the importance of inclusive and equitable quality education for all without discrimination on the basis of religion, ethnicity or social status, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG-4) (UNESCO, 2022). In spite of these international pledges, however, marginalised groups within developing countries are still suffering from inequalities in education. Students belonging to religious minority groups are frequently discriminated against, excluded and have unequal access to schooling opportunities (Banks, 2021), especially the Christian students in Pakistan.

Pakistan is a Muslim majority state and religious minorities (Christians, Hindus, Sikhs) form a minority in the country. In spite of the provision of equal rights and religious freedom enshrined in Pakistan's Constitution (Article 22) minority students face various educational challenges in the schools (Ali & Zafar, 2021). Research shows that Christian students often face discrimination, marginalisation and restricted access to school (Malik & Akhtar, 2023). These experiences are frequently a product of structural inequities, cultural biases and institutional practices that favour dominant religious groups over minorities.

Primary education is vital to the intellectual, emotional and social development of children. The primary school marks the inception of children developing their self-concept, peer relationships and learning dispositions. Therefore, if students feel discriminated or excluded at this stage, it could have a lifelong impact on their confidence, academic motivation and psychological health (Rashid & Qureshi, 2020). Students attending Christian primary schools may find their culture and religion underrepresented or overlooked. Studies in Punjab reveal that minority students are often subjected to bullying by fellow students, insensitive attitudes of teachers, and exclusion from classroom and out-of-classroom activities (Hussain, 2020; Rehman et al., 2021). They feel isolated because of such experiences and it adversely impacts their educational involvement.

Educational access is the first major variable in this study. Access to education is the right afforded to students to attend, access and reap the benefits of education, without experiencing geographical, socio-economic, religious and discrimination-based barriers. Access consists of access to school, regular attendance, access to educational resources, and freedom from discriminatory practices (World Bank, 2022). Numerous Christian families reside in low-income groups within Pakistan, and it becomes challenging for them

to pay for school fees, school supplies, school uniforms, and transportation. (Akhtar & Iqbal, 2022). Further, a significant number of Christian students live in rural districts or areas where no school is available with proper infrastructural facilities and quality schools.

Equity in education is the second variable. Educational equity is about the equal opportunity, support and treatment of all students, based on their needs in the learning process. Equity ensures that there is no disadvantage to any child based on their religion, ethnicity, gender and socio-economic status (Ahmed, 2019). The inequity towards minority students can be demonstrated in many ways such as unequal teacher expectations, discriminatory policies in school, and absence of representation in the curriculum (Noor & Khan, 2020). Many schools in Pakistan have curricula that are mostly Islam-centric with limited scope for religious minorities' identities and contribution. The lack of cultural inclusiveness can lead to feelings of alienation and disconnection among Christian students from their learning environment.

There are a few studies that have investigated minority education in Pakistan, but there are some gaps in research. Studies have largely been on the subject of education inequalities for minorities as a whole rather than on the experiences of Christian students in primary schools. In addition, most studies have measured enrollment figures, drop-out rates, or academic achievement using quantitative approaches and few have focused on the personal narratives and voices of minority children (Jamil et al., 2022). There is also a lack of research specifically focused on the combined effect of classroom interactions, teacher attitudes, peer relationships and school environment on the experiences of Christian students with respect to access and equity. In this regard, the present study aims to address the gap by employing qualitative research method, which will enable it to capture the lived experiences of the Christian students.

This study is based on two theories namely Critical Theory and Social Exclusion Theory. Paulo Freire (1970) in Critical Theory describes how social institutions like schools have the capacity of reproducing inequalities through social systems of domination and oppression. This view holds that education systems tend to be biased toward the dominant cultural and religious norms and groups, excluding or marginalizing minorities. This study illustrates how Critical Theory can be used to interpret the role of institutional practices, curricula and social attitudes in contributing to inequitable educational experiences for Christian students.

Likewise, Social Exclusion Theory accounts for how marginalized groups are systematically barred from participation in social, cultural and educational life (Silver, 2015). Exclusion can happen to Christian students because of discriminatory practices in the classroom, the absence of their presence in school activities, and negative attitudes that

teachers and students demonstrate in social interactions. These theoretical concepts offer insights into the effect of structural inequalities and discrimination on access and equity for Christian students in primary schools.

This study was undertaken, because there is an urgent need to understand and solve the educational issues of the Christian students in Pakistan. Despite the policies that promote inclusive education both nationally and internationally, minority students still face challenges that hinder their participation and success in school (UNESCO, 2022). This study seeks to draw out the voices and experiences of the Christian students in order to gain insight into the reality of marginalization in primary schools. The results can be informative for policy makers, education administrators, curriculum designers, and teachers in developing more inclusive educational practices and policies. In addition, the study can add to the academic literature related to minority education and be used to inform educational efforts that promote educational justice, equality, and inclusion for all students regardless of their religious identity.

While religious minorities students are entitled to education, which supports equality, inclusion and social development, there is still discrimination and unequal educational opportunities for religious minorities in Pakistan (UNESCO, 2022). At the primary school level, Christian students are often facing challenges with educational access and equity, such as poverty, discriminatory attitude of teachers, peer discrimination, and absence of representation of Christians in the curriculum (Ali & Zafar, 2021). These challenges have an adverse impact on their learning engagement, confidence and learning experiences. Research also shows that minority students often feel neglected in educational settings that lack recognition of their identities and contributions, as it is a dominant religious narrative in the school (Noor & Khan, 2020). Moreover, there has been little qualitative study that has looked at the experiences of Christian primary school children in relation to these challenges. This study therefore seeks to explore issues of access and equity experienced by Christian students in primary schools and the impact these experiences have on their participation in the school and their sense of belongingness.

Research Objectives:

These were the research objectives:

- To investigate the experiences of Christian primary school children and their parents with education in public and private schools.
- To explore systemic, cultural and interpersonal marginalization experienced by Christian learners in primary schools.

The findings from this study could make a great impact on the education of Christian learners in primary schools, especially concerning access, equity and inclusion. The findings will enable teachers, school administrators and policy makers to identify the systemic, cultural and interpersonal challenges encountered by religious minorities in schools (Ali & Zafar, 2021). The study may also help to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of Christian students and their parents, and how they are impacted by discrimination, exclusion, and unequal opportunities in their academic participation, confidence, and sense of belonging.

Moreover, the research can help the curriculum developers and teacher trainers to create culturally responsive curricula and teaching methodology that will foster respect and equality among pupils (UNESCO, 2022). The research can also be a source of literature for the limited qualitative literature available in Pakistan regarding minorities education and can bring in an inspiration to further study for researchers to explore issue of educational justice and social inclusion in future. Finally, the study could contribute to efforts to make school environments more inclusive, equitable, and supportive for all students, including those in religious minority communities.

Research Methodology

A grounded theory method was used to systematically investigate and develop an in-depth understanding of the difficulty of access and equity issues that primary school Christian students experience in their schools.

Grounded theory

Grounded theory works well in situations where existing theories are inadequate to account for the complexity of phenomena within the context of investigation (Charmaz, 2014; Tie et al., 2019).

The study took an inductive approach of gathering data and analyzing it in cycles, interviewing parents, teachers, school administrators, and policy makers, and developing a theory that is grounded in the lived experiences and perspectives of these stakeholders.

This enables the identification of patterns, processes and social interactions that may occur regularly, and which lead to marginalisation and educational inequity. The grounded theory method not only builds the empirical base of a study but it also helps develop actionable, contextually specific strategies for policy and institutional change (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Charmaz, 2014).

Population

The total population of Punjab, Pakistan as per latest population census report (2023) is 127,333,305. Among them minorities are 2,870,408. Moreover, Christians are 2,458,924. This means that 2.25% of minorities (including 1.93% Christians) live here.

Where there is segregation of population according to gender as follows:

Table. 3. 1

Religion-wise population distribution in Punjab

<i>Sr.</i>	<i>Religion</i>	<i>Estimated Population</i>
1.	Muslims	124,462,897
2.	Christians	2,458,924
3.	Hindu	228,559
4.	Qadiani	140,512
5.	Scheduled Castes	21,157
6.	Sikh	5,649
7.	Parsi	358
8.	Others	15,249

Sampling Technique

In this study the qualitative data analysis was done using the theoretical sampling method for selecting the subjects.

Theoretical sampling is a selective and continued process that involves the selection of participants, locations, or events that will help to build the conceptual understanding of the research topic (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018). For research projects dedicated to the development of rich, contextually based theory or thematic explanations (such as access and equity issues of Christian students in primary schools) this approach is especially relevant.

Theoretical Sampling

Unlike statistical sampling, theoretical sampling occurs when the need for representativeness is not the motivating factor as the data is obtained and analyzed; instead,

the need for the study is continually changing as data is gathered and analyzed (Glaser & Strauss, 2017).

The participants were selected because they provided unique, diverse, or especially insightful comments regarding the processes, experiences, and contexts at the heart of the study's core research questions (Charmaz, 2014).

This approach was particularly appropriate for the study of the marginalised groups because it enables the researcher to actively look for voices that reveal invisible patterns and dynamics of discrimination.

Sample Size

However, there is no formula for sample size to be followed when conducting qualitative research. The sample size initial sample size was 5 participants per group until saturation. The recommended sample size as per calculator (<https://www.entropik.io/qualitative-sample-size-calculator>) for qualitative research using interviews are 5-30 participants. The sample included:

- Parents of minorities & Muslims.
- Teachers of Minority and Muslim Students
- School Administrators
- Policy Makers

Instrument

Semi-structured interview protocols were used to capture perceptions, personal experiences and access to educational resources of parents and teachers of minority students.

Data Collection Process

- **Initial Sampling:** Participants were selected by purposive sampling with direct and relevant experience on the focus of the study (Christian students from primary schools with diverse students).
- **Data Collection and Analysis Process:** Data was analyzed thematically in an iterative fashion as the interviews and focus groups were carried out and transcribed.

- **Emergent Sampling Decisions:** As the findings were surfaced the researcher determined what perspectives and/or cases should be further explored, given the need to clarify inconsistencies or to gain deeper understanding.
- **Theoretical saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 2017):** Sampling continues until there are no more data to generate new theoretical insights or categories.

Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) was used to transcribe and analyze the data to find out the themes, recurring patterns, coping strategies and discriminations. The analysis will take the following six phases of the approach set out by Braun and Clarke:

1. familiarization with the data,
2. generating initial codes,
3. searching for themes,
4. reviewing themes,
5. defining and naming themes,
6. Producing the final product and 6. and producing the final report

NVivo software was used for coding and organizing qualitative data.

Qualitative analysis

Thematic Analysis

<i>Sr.</i>	<i>Major Theme</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Node</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Code</i>	<i>n</i>
1.	Socio-economic and access conditions		Household vulnerability		Economic precarity		Low-paid labor, financial hardship, shape schooling	
					Family instability		Widowhood, unemployment, illness, substance misuse, schooling conditions	

2.	Conditional inclusion at the school level	Access pathways	School type and affordability Distance/proximity	low-cost government schools School distance or closeness Church/community
		Support mechanisms	External support	, informal support
		Parent-facing inclusion	Respectful interaction	Teachers/staff speak politely to parents
			Apparent non-discrimination	Parents do not always feel directly discriminated against during visits
		Parent-facing exclusion	Disrespectful treatment	Christian parents/community spoke to them rudely
		School climate	Mixed inclusion	School is seen as educationally good, but not equally inclusive for children
3.	Peer-level religious othering	Food-based exclusion	Meal segregation	Separation in eating, utensils, or food sharing
			Canteen exclusion	Discrimination in shared eating spaces/canteen
		Verbal stigmatization	Religious slurs	Children called "Choorā/Chowra/Christian" derogatorily
		Social hostility	Majority hostility	Hatred, contempt, or being treated as inferior by Muslim peers

4.	Teacher and institutional inequity	Social separation	Play/social distance	Christian and Muslim children remain socially separate
		Differential discipline	Punitive bias	Christian children are punished more harshly or treated more strictly
		Academic inequity	Biased marking	Christian students given fewer marks / unfair grading
		Deficit stereotyping	Teacher taunts	Teachers describe Christian children as weak, lazy, or unfocused
		Opportunity restriction	Participation exclusion	Christian children blocked from speeches/debates/advancement
		Unequal treatment	Child-level discrimination	Children treated differently even when parents are treated politely
5.	Curriculum and religious non-inclusion	Curriculum dominance	Islamic centrality	Islamiyat/Arabic Qaida/Islamic stories dominate curriculum
		Curriculum omission	Missing Christian content	No Christian religious subject or basic Christian teaching
		Religious mismatch	Compulsory majority-content learning	Christian children study Islamiyat
		Reform demand	Separate Christian classes	Desire for Christian religious subject/classes

6.	Resilience, support, and counter-narratives	Educational persistence	Continuity	Families continue children's schooling despite adversity
		Support mechanisms	Home/community support	Mothers, neighbors, or the church help sustain education
		Academic agency	Student capability	Christian children are seen as capable / position holders / good students
		Counter-case	Inclusive school experience	One case reported genuinely positive treatment and inclusion

Table 1 outlines the thematic analysis of the qualitative data and illustrates that the education of Christian students is influenced by a complex interplay of the socio-economic, interpersonal, institutional and curricular factors. The six major themes listed in the table show that marginalization is not limited to one aspect of schooling, but is present in the access conditions, peer relationships, teacher practices, and curriculum structures. This is illustrated further with the frequency distribution. Educational persistence was a frequent code, with all six participants reporting it, suggesting that children's families are very determined to keep their children in school, even in the face of adversity. Likewise, the government schools are also heavily used, which illustrates how important the affordability is in determining access to education. Meanwhile, frequent language of peer hostility, claims of "non-discrimination" and "respectful interaction with parents" indicate that inclusion is a partial and conditional affair in schools. Overall, the table indicates that Christian students are also subject to explicit and implicit forms of exclusion and that they are also resilient and have agency in education through their ongoing participation.

Theme 1. Socio-economic and access conditions

Table 1 presents a summary of the thematic analysis of the qualitative data, to illustrate that the educational experiences of students from Christian backgrounds are complex processes influenced by a number of factors such as socio-economic, interpersonal, institutional and curricular factors. The six major themes found in the table show that marginalization is not limited to a single aspect of schooling, but is reflected in

access, peer relationships, teacher practice and curriculum. The relative strength of these patterns are further indicated in the frequency distribution. The code that appeared most frequently was educational persistence, mentioned by all six respondents, that shows through the efforts, the families are very committed to the education of their children even if the situation is challenging. Likewise, the significant number of those attending government schools is indicative of the importance of affordability as a determinant of school access. Meanwhile, there are also codes of recurrence pertaining to peer hostility, the absence of discrimination, and respectful interaction with parents, indicating that inclusion in the school is partial and often conditional. Overall, the table highlights that, in both explicit and implicit ways, Christian students are excluded from their educational experiences, and that there is also a tendency for Christian students to be resilient and have agency in maintaining their presence in education.

Table 2

Themes of Socio-economic and access conditions

Major Theme	Category	Node	Code	Frequency
Socio-economic and access conditions	Household vulnerability	Economic precarity	Low-paid labor, financial hardship	4
		Family instability	Widowhood, unemployment, illness, substance misuse	3
	Access pathways	School type and affordability	low-cost schools, government schools	5
		Distance/proximity	Far from home, Nearness to home, easy access	3
	Support mechanisms	External support	Church charity, community support, informal support	2

The first theme documents how household economic status, family instability, school affordability and geographic location impact on the access of Christian students to education in Punjab. The first theme documents how the economic status of the households, family instability, school affordability and geographic proximity influence the access to education of Christian students in Punjab. The interviews revealed that poverty, and/or low paid work, have a significant impact on enrolment and retention in school. Participant 4 mentioned how challenging it was to manage the cost of living in the family:

"We manage it ourselves, it's very difficult to make ends meet".

This shows the importance of keeping costs down, as parents are left with little choice but to attend low-cost government schools. Indeed, 5 of the 6 respondents had children enrolled in government schools, reflecting the fact that type and affordability of school are central to access:

"We pay the government school fees ourselves, my children go to a government school and there are fees, but they are not that high". (P5).

In addition to financial insecurity, family instability (including widowhood, sickness, unemployment, and drug or alcohol abuse) was also a factor in school attendance. Participant 6 explained:

"I have one daughter married, and the other four go to school; I have to pay part of it myself and the church pays the other half, since my husband takes drugs".

This shows how unstable family situations lead to reliance on outside support networks such as churches or communities as a safety net when there is not an adequate supply of family resources. Similarly, Participant 2 shared:

"The church is "helping" with fees because of our situation".

Access to the school was also a factor that came out of the analysis, with the closer the school to the student's residence, the greater the impact on access. Traveling long distances and the lack of transportation further restricted opportunities, especially for the children of low-income families. Participant 6 mentioned:

"It's quite far. The children have to travel to get there".

This not only confirms access as being more than just registration, but also the capacity to remain in attendance in difficult situations like financial constraints, family instability, and location barriers.

In Theme 1, students show how socio-economic vulnerability is a structural barrier to access to education. The multiple disadvantages of poverty, low income level, and poor family situations hinders not only enrollments but also the ability to persist in school. While the government schools offer an affordable access route, geographical isolation and family precarity remain a problem. Depending on outside resources (churches or neighbours) reflects a resilient family, but also a lack of resources in the system, where church or policy interventions can help. This theme resonates with the literature which has highlighted that the socio-economic status directly impacts the educational opportunities for minority students in Pakistan (Akhtar & Iqbal, 2022; Bano, 2021).

Theme 2. School based conditional inclusion

It was notable that some of the participants reported that parents were treated well by teachers or school staff, but not necessarily the children. Inclusion is thus superficially and formally implemented in some schools; parents are addressed respectfully, while children remain marginalised within the classroom, in the playground and co-curricular environments. This creates a dichotomy and an ambivalent atmosphere in the school.

Table 3

Themes of School Based Conditional Inclusion

Major Theme	Category	Node	Code	Frequency
Conditional inclusion at school level	Parent-facing inclusion	Respectful interaction	Teachers/staff speak politely to parents	4
		Apparent non-discrimination	Parents do not always feel directly discriminated against during visits	4
	at Parent-facing exclusion	Disrespectful treatment	Christian parents/community spoken to rudely	1
	School climate	Mixed inclusion	School seen as educationally good, but not equally inclusive for children	3

Theme 2 focuses on the contradictory experiences of inclusion as reported by parents and looks at the complexity of these experiences. Teachers and school personnel may generally engage parents in a polite manner, but this good will does not necessarily translate to equal treatment of children. Parents reported situations where they were treated with respect, but their children were still experiencing marginalisation in the classroom, on the playground and in co-curricular activities.

A large number of participants had a positive attitude towards their parents' treatment. Participant 1 remarked:

"Whenever I go to pay the fee, they talk to me nicely".

Similarly, Participant 2 stated:

"Teachers speak to us in a polite manner".

The interactions indicate that certain aspects of the school environment can create an impression of inclusiveness to adult visitors, a politeness in the procedures of the school or a social norm. But when parents do not appear to discriminate, it is not necessarily a sign of equal experiences for students. Some parents reported that their children were treated differently than other children in their school, and that this was an issue of respect and welcome experienced by their children as well as the mother or father. Participant 3 explained:

"I don't feel any discrimination or hostile treatment when I'm there, but when the children come home, they tell me that they're treated differently".

Differences between inclusion at the institutional level and the child's experiences suggest either conditional or superficial inclusion, where policies or practices might appear to include children formally, but not effectively ensure protection from daily marginalization. Teaching and school organisation was generally considered to be "educationally good" in the school; the environment for Christian pupils was often described as "good" but sometimes as "poor". Participant 4 noted:

"School is okay, they learn but Muslim children behave differently towards our children, they keep away".

This theme reflects that inclusion is multi-dimensional. Courtesy may give the appearance to parents that things are fair, while for students, there is continued inequity. Schools can have respectful interactions with adults to meet norms or community expectations but, children still experience issues of exclusion, marginalisation and subtle bias. This is consistent with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory that posits

children's experiences are influenced by the policies of the institutions in which they are situated, as well as their interactions with peers, classroom culture, and wider social attitudes (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Furthermore, this is aligned with the literature on conditional inclusion in minority education, in which procedural civility towards parents can coexist with inequities, on a student-by-student basis, with structural and interpersonal obstacles to equitable education (Shahid & Hussain, 2023; Hussain, 2022). It highlights the importance of recognizing both formal and substantive inclusion of families in the school and of parents' involvement in the school, and how this can translate into substantive equality for students.

Theme 3. Peer-level religious othering

It is one of the most pronounced patterns in the collection. Food-related separation, derogatory labelling and peer hostility were repeatedly identified by the participants. This discrimination was sometimes manifested in the normal daily activities: eating with different plates, not sharing eating utensils, insults like “Choorā/Chowra” and socially downgrading Christian children. It reveals how marginalization is institutional, as well as part of a regular peer culture.

The findings of the study indicate that Christian students in primary schools face several challenges with respect to educational access, equity and inclusion. Using thematic analysis six main themes emerged from the participants' answers: socio-economic hardships, conditional inclusion, peer discrimination, teacher bias, curriculum exclusion and resilience of Christian families and students.

The first major finding was that the socio-economic conditions have a significant impact on the educational access of Christian students. The majority of participants were families in low-income areas and paid for their education in government schools as it is more affordable for them. Children's ability to maintain their education was hampered by poverty, poor family circumstances, unemployment and ill health. Church or community support was important to some families to keep them in school.

The second finding was that inclusion in school was sometimes superficial and conditional. Parents stated that teachers and school employees treated them well in general, but that their children still faced unequal treatment within classrooms and playgrounds. This implies that schools may be inclusive with parents and not provide equal experiences for minority children.

Furthermore, a substantial amount of peer-level religious othering was reported. Social exclusion and food segregation, verbal abuse and derogatory labelling, for example as “Choorā” or “Chowra,” were common experiences of Christian students. Muslim peers often did not sit down together or share food and utensils with Christian children, which further exacerbated feelings of inferiority and isolation.

Conclusion

The study identified that a lot of Christian students in primary school’s experience education access, equity and inclusion issues. The results showed that socio-economic disadvantage, such as poverty, unstable family circumstances and inadequate financial resources significantly affected students’ participation in school and educational opportunities. Furthermore, Christian students are very often discriminated and marginalized in school settings, by being ostracized by peers, by teachers’ differential treatment, and by being labeled with derogatory terms.

The study also noted that inclusion is often 'conditional' in schools, and that respectful interactions with parents do not always mean that the children are included. There was also a lack of religious inclusivity in curriculum practices with an overwhelming focus on Islamic content, with Christian beliefs and identities being underrepresented. The learning outcomes of these experiences are detrimental to student confidence, sense of belonging and engagement.

In the face of these obstacles, Christian families and students showed resilience and perseverance in their educational pursuits through the support of their churches, communities, and families. The overall findings in the study highlight the need for inclusive educational policies, culturally responsive curricula, teacher education, and anti-discrimination practices to achieve equal educational opportunities for religious minority children in primary schools.

Teacher inequity and institutional inequity were also found in the study. Students shared experiences of unequal treatment by teachers, such as: receiving more severe punishment, unfair grading, negative stereotyping, and exclusion from speeches, debating, and leadership opportunities. Christian pupils were believed to be less able than Muslims.

Besides, the results showed that there was no religious inclusivity in the curriculum. Content and teaching were overwhelmingly Islamic with no Christian religious content. The situation of Christian pupils studying Islamiyat despite their own religious identity meant that separate courses for Christian religion were called for by parents of many Christian pupils.

However, the study was able to identify resilience and persistence in Christian families and students. Financial difficulty and discrimination did not deter parents from being committed to their children's education. Schooling was continued with the help of mothers, neighbors, and churches. There were also a number of positive cases of the children who were studying academically well and enjoying the inclusive treatment in some schools cited.

Discussion

The results of this study have shown that there are various types of marginalization faced by the Christian learners in primary schools in terms of access, equity and inclusion in education. The study found that socio-economic factors including poverty, poor family circumstances and lack of financial resources have a significant impact on participation and continuity in school. The results support Akhtar and Iqbal (2022) who stated that minorities families in Pakistan are also generally affected by economic issues which reduce children's access to education. Likewise, Bano (2021) spoke of the significance of poverty and social vulnerability as hindering minority students' access to quality education.

The study also revealed that food segregation, derogatory labelling and social exclusion at the peers' level is an issue that Christians encounter. Students would frequently be referred to as derogatory names like “Choorā” or “Chowra,” further perpetuating notions of being inferior and marginalised. The findings are in line with Hussain (2020) who found that religious bullying and stigmatization of minority students is common in schools in Pakistan. The results are consistent with Tajfel and Turner's (1979) Social Identity Theory which accounts for how group-based discriminations lead to in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination.

One other key discovery was that of disparities between teachers and institutions. Students with Christian backgrounds were allegedly subjected to unfair discipline, biased marking of their work and denied participation and leadership in the class. The results are consistent with Rehman et al. (2021) who identified that minority children may be treated differently and have less teacher expectations in Pakistani schools. These practices have a negative impact on the students' self-belief, learning motivation and belongingness.

Exclusion due to curriculum was also identified as a key issue. Islamic teachings were reported to be overall predominant in the curriculum, with little or none being reported for Christian religious perspectives and Christian identities. The students of other religions were also made to study Islamiyat. These finding can be supported by Noor and Khan 2020 who concluded that in Pakistan the curriculum is oriented towards majority

religion and neglects the minority religion. This lack of representation exacerbates minority student's feelings of alienation.

The results indicated Christian families and students were resilient and committed to education in the face of these challenges. Parents pursued their children's education even when they were unable to afford it themselves, or were discriminated against, and faced attendance at the local school or church. This finding is consistent with Shahid and Hussain (2023) who highlighted the importance of community networks and family support to maintaining minority students' participation in their studies.

Overall, the study has found that Christian education is influenced by the various socio-economic, cultural, institutional, and interpersonal factors in an intertwined manner. The results indicate the need for inclusive educational policies, culturally responsive curriculum, anti-discrimination strategies, and teacher preparation programs for providing equitable educational opportunities for religious minority students.

Major Theme	Category	Node	Code	Frequency
Peer-level religious othering	Food-based exclusion	Meal segregation	Separation in eating, utensils, or food sharing	3
		Canteen exclusion	Discrimination in shared eating spaces/canteen	1
	Verbal stigmatization	Religious slurs	Children called "Choora/Chowra/Christian" derogatorily	3
	Social hostility	Majority hostility	Hatred, contempt, or being treated as inferior by Muslim peers	4
	Social separation	Play/social distance	Christian and Muslim children remain socially separate	2

Theme 3 reflects how children's daily lives with peers in school are marginalising experiences of Christian children. Theme 3 represents the marginalising experiences of Christian children in the context of everyday peer relationships in school. This theme identifies peer interactions as a source of social exclusion, stigmatisation and internalised inferiority, which transcends institutional policies and curriculum biases. Consistent responses by the participants were that Muslim children experienced discriminatory behaviors from other minority children and that these behaviors were primarily related to activities in everyday life, including eating, playing, and informal social interaction.

Exclusion due to food was a frequent problem. A number of parents reported that Christian children were separated from other children at mealtimes or forced to eat with their own plate/fork, creating a sense of social hierarchy and religious othering. Participant 1 stated:

“When my kids are fighting with Muslim kids, it is always about food, they make the difference between utensils, they make religion an issue”.

Similarly, Participant 4 reported:

“Our children are treated differently by Muslim children, eating and playing are separated, and they make a difference”.

This separation also reveals that exclusion can be an indirect, non-explicit form of aggression, so that the children learn that they are “others” in the school social space.

Verbal stigmatization was also a major theme. Peer-driven religious labelling was common with Christian children being derogatorily named “Choorā” or “Chowra”. Participant 1 noted:

“In minor conflicts between children, Muslim children have said that my children are ‘Choorā’ or ‘Christian’”.

Participant 2 echoed this:

“Yes, I have heard that sometimes Muslim children call Christian children ‘Chowra.’”

The verbal slurs are both markers for social control and identity policing which helps perpetuate a sense of inferiority and social marginality among the minority children.

Hostility and separation spilled over into play and socializing outside of the dinner hour. Participant 6 shared a very upsetting example:

“One day, in between classes, I was at the school and a little Muslim girl said to my daughter, ‘Move behind you, it’s Christian time!’”

Likewise, Participant 5 reported that the Christian children were not socially integrated during games or classroom activities, with a trend of Christians being socially excluded, impacting on both belonging and confidence.

There is othering at the peer level, which shows that the marginalisation of a group is not only institutional, but also at a micro level, through social interactions. From the

division of meals to derogatory labels to social distancing, every day act of discrimination creates an inferiority complex and reveals the subtle, embedded nature of discrimination. This is consistent with Social Identity Theory (SIT) that suggests that in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination are “natural” as a result of the categorization into groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In this case, Christian children are always placed in the “out-group”, excluded and stigmatized by other children.

Moreover, it is also suggested from these experiences that the school climate is co-constructed by institutional norms and peer culture. The hierarchy between students can exacerbate inequities even if teachers are respectful to parents or when they merely state rules, which can affect children's emotional health, sense of belonging, and engagement. This reflects the importance of actions that address peer relationships such as awareness campaigns, diversity education and inclusive extra-curricular activities in the fight against religious othering and promoting intergroup harmony.

Recommendations

- Christian students in primary schools may benefit from inclusive education policies and monitoring systems in their schools, being treated equally and having the same opportunities as other pupils.
- Diversity or sensitivity training may be provided for teachers and school administrators to eliminate discriminatory practices and foster positive and respectful learning environments for religious minority students.
- To ensure inclusiveness and representation, Christian history, culture and religious views may be incorporated into textbooks and learning materials by curriculum developers.
- Economically disadvantaged Christian families could receive financial assistance, scholarships, and educational assistance programs from Government and community-based organizations to increase educational access and continuity.

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