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Teacher Competency, Parental Engagement, and Policy Perspectives on Entrepreneurial Education for Children with Down syndrome in Special Education Schools of Punjab

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ABSTRACT

Early exposure to entrepreneurial activities in school settings improves adaptive and vocational outcomes for children with Down syndrome (DS). However, career-transition support in low- and middle-income settings remains fragmented. This sequential explanatory mixed-methods study assessed key stakeholders' readiness to promote school-based entrepreneurial skill development among children with DS. Quantitative data were gathered through stratified random sampling of special education teachers (n = 156) and parents (n = 84). Qualitative data included semi-structured interviews with parents and a focus group discussion involving policymakers, parent leaders, and a former chairperson of the Technical Education and Vocational Training Authority (TEVTA) (n = 5). Teachers showed positive attitudes toward instruction (62.3%), but exhibited moderate level entrepreneurial competency (M = 28.02, SD = 5.46) and practical readiness at low level (49.4%). Multiple regression analysis (R^2 = .504) revealed that specialized entrepreneurship training (β = .42, p < .001), institutional support (β = .28, p < .001), access to teaching resources (β = .24, p < .001), and academic qualification (β = .17, p = .010) significantly predicted teacher competency, while teaching experience did not. Parents demonstrated limited-to-moderate awareness and engagement (M = 59.95, SD = 5.75). Qualitative themes suggested that although parents hoped their children would achieve economic independence and encouraged informal learning at home, limited home-school collaboration constrained their structured participation. Policymakers and experts supported a change in the curriculum from dependency toward progressive, and ability-based entrepreneurial preparation. It should be integrated with mandatory teacher training and formal coordination among special education schools, the Punjab Vocational Training Council (PVTC), and TEVTA. To close the gap between stakeholders' willingness and practical implementation, contextual enterprise projects should be incorporated into special education curricula, alongside focused capacity-building programs for teachers and parents.

Introduction

Children with Down's can learn functional skills if the learning is structured and meaningful (Loveall et al., 2022). The later outcomes of the child are very much a function of the quality of school preparation. Entrepreneurial skills are about spotting opportunities, making your own decisions and being creative in the way you go about completing a task. Early exposure to entrepreneurial activities in school has been linked to better adaptive and vocational outcomes (Katuruni et al., 2022; Musyafa'ah et al., 2025). Global reviews do however find that there is very little career transition support for learners with DS in low and

middle income countries (Ndou-Chikwena & Sefotho, 2026). Transition planning for learners with intellectual disability is often fragmented (Dzhugudzha et al., 2025). Punjab is a good example of this. The programs run by the Punjab Vocational Training Council (PVTC) and the Technical Education and Vocational Training Authority (TEVTA) are largely focused on teaching manual, repetitive tasks (Ahmad & Nawaz, 2025). There is very little coordination between the PVTC and TEVTA and the school based programs.

There are three groups of stakeholders that will determine whether or not school based preparation is successful. The teachers are the ones who actually deliver the learning. Special education schools in Punjab often don't have staff in place who are trained to design entrepreneurial learning. Mazeed (2023) also reported that lack of teacher training was a major barrier to work transition for adolescents with DS. The parents extend the learning beyond the school. Structured training can actually change the parents' attitudes and confidence (Gaad & Thabet, 2017). Families also report a very wide gap between what they expect and what the institution is actually providing (Masdah et al., 2025). Parents in Punjab have expressed their dissatisfaction with the government's special education services (Yasmeen & Saadi, 2021). The policy makers set the overall framework. Punjab's 2020 Special Education Policy does recognise life skills and vocational education but it does not mandate entrepreneurial competency as a distinct outcome (Ahmad & Nawaz, 2025; Khalid et al., 2023). Individual schools therefore have a great deal of freedom in this area and provision varies.

Research Questions

This study addressed three research questions:

1. To what extent do special education teachers have the knowledge, attitudes and competencies to deliver school based entrepreneurial skills development programmes to children with Down syndrome?
2. What are the levels and forms of parental awareness and engagement in supporting this development at home and in school?
3. How do policy makers and subject experts conceive of the role of curriculum reform in the development of entrepreneurial preparedness in children with Down syndrome?

Theoretical Framework

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory is the framework underpinning the study. It views development as the product of a number of interlocking systems. The teacher is part of the child's microsystem through the day to day interaction. The parent-school relationship is the mesosystem. Parent training is one of the mesosystem links (Gaad & Thabet, 2017). The Department of Special Education Punjab, PVTC, TEVTA etc. are part of the exosystem. The implementation gaps in the 2020 policy are an exosystem issue (Ahmad & Nawaz, 2025). Cultural attitudes towards disability are the macrosystem. The theory is used to explain why all three groups (the teacher, the parent and the policy maker) were looked at together as each of them in some way has an impact on whether the entrepreneurial preparation reaches the child.

Method

Design and Participants

The study used a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design. A quantitative survey phase came first. Semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion (FGD) followed, to explain and deepen the survey findings. The strands were integrated at the interpretation stage. Data were collected across ten divisions of Punjab in government, NGO-based, and private special education schools. The wider study involved 329 participants in total. This article draws on the samples in Table 1.

Table 1

Sample Distribution

Participants	Method	Sampling	Instrument	*n*
Special education teachers	Survey	Stratified random	SEPQ (Teacher Competency)	156
Parents/primary caregivers	Survey	Stratified random	PAES	84
Parents	Interview	Purposive	SSIP	4
Policymakers, parent leaders, former TEVTA chairperson	FGD	Purposive	FGDG	5

Note. SEPQ = School Entrepreneurial Preparedness Questionnaire; PAES = Parental Awareness and Engagement Scale; SSIP = Semi-Structured Interview Protocol; FGD = focus group discussion; FGDG = FGD Guide.

Teachers and parents of children with DS aged 10-16 years were selected by stratified random sampling. Strata were geographical division and school category. Four parents were purposively selected for interview from participating schools, varying in education, location, and engagement. The FGD panel had five experts: two policymakers linked to the provincial assembly, two parents leading DS welfare foundations, and one former TEVTA chairperson.

Instruments

Teacher competency was measured with the 10-item Teacher Competency subscale of the SEPQ. The SEPQ is researcher-developed and uses a five-point Likert scale. It drew on Souto et al. (2024) and Dzhugudzha et al. (2025). The subscale covers four dimensions: entrepreneurial knowledge, instructional attitudes, pedagogical competency, and practical instructional readiness. The maximum score is 50. Parental awareness and engagement were measured with the 25-item PAES, also on a five-point scale. It has an awareness dimension (13 items, maximum 65) and an engagement dimension (12 items, maximum 60). The PAES was translated into Urdu using back-translation. Reliability was good (SEPQ Teacher Competency $\alpha = .85$, $N = 216$; PAES total $\alpha = .87$, $n = 84$), exceeding the .70 threshold (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Five experts reviewed content validity, and items needed a content validity index of 0.80 or above. Interviews followed the SSIP and lasted 40-60 minutes. The 90-minute FGD covered policy, institutional coordination, family perspectives, and curriculum reform.

Procedure and Analysis

Institutional approval and informed consent were obtained before data collection. Surveys were administered in person during school visits. Interviews were held in Urdu or English by preference. Interviews and the FGD were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed, and anonymised. Quantitative data were analysed in R 4.4.0 and STATA 18.0. Analyses comprised descriptive statistics, independent-samples *t*-tests, one-way ANOVA with Tukey HSD post hoc tests, and ordinary least squares regression, with $\alpha = .05$. Qualitative data were analysed in NVivo 14 using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis. A trained research assistant independently coded a subset of transcripts. Agreement was calculated with Cohen's κ.

Results

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics for Teacher Entrepreneurial Competency (n = 156)

Dimension	*M*	*SD*	Min	Max	% of max
Entrepreneurial knowledge	5.28	1.97	3	8	52.8
Instructional attitudes	9.34	2.20	5	14	62.3

Dimension	*M*	*SD*	Min	Max	% of max
Pedagogical competency	8.46	2.52	5	14	56.4
Practical instructional readiness	4.94	1.78	2	8	49.4
Grand total (max = 50)	28.02	5.46	17	40	56.0

Teachers Competency

The mean competency score was 28.02 of 50 (*SD* = 5.46), or 56.0% of the maximum (Table 2). Instructional attitudes scored highest at 62.3%. Pedagogical competency reached 56.4%, and entrepreneurial knowledge reached 52.8%. Practical instructional readiness scored lowest at 49.4%. Most teachers (*n* = 87, 55.8%) had moderate competency (scores 25-32). A quarter (*n* = 39, 25.0%) had low competency (17-24). Only 30 teachers (19.2%) reached the high range (33-40).

Table 3

Teacher Competency by Training, Gender, Qualification, and Experience

Variable	Groups (*M*, *SD*)	Test	*P*	Effect size
Training	Trained (*n* = 58): 30.06, 4.65; untrained (*n* = 98): 26.18, 5.24	$t(154) = 4.80$	< .001	$d = 0.77$
Gender	Male (*n* = 61): 28.26, 5.24; female (*n* = 95): 27.30, 5.56	$t(154) = 1.09$	.277	$d = 0.18$
Qualification	Bachelor's, Master's, M.Phil., doctoral	$F(3, 152) = 9.47$	< .001	$\eta^2 = .16$
Experience	1-5, 6-10, 11-15, and over 15 years	$F(3, 152) = 2.11$	.101	$\eta^2 = .04$

Table 3 examines whether teacher competency differs according to training, gender, qualification, and teaching experience.

Training: A statistically significant difference was found between trained and untrained teachers, $t(154)=4.80$,$p<.001$. Trained teachers reported higher competency scores ($M=30.06$, $SD=4.65$) than untrained teachers ($M=26.18$, $SD=5.24$). The effect size was large, $d=0.77$, suggesting that training is meaningfully associated with higher teacher competency.

Gender: The difference between male ($M=28.26$, $SD=5.24$) and female teachers ($M=27.30$, $SD=5.56$) was not statistically significant, $t(154)=1.09$, $p=.277$. The effect size was small, $d=0.18$. Thus, teacher competency did not differ substantially by gender in this sample.

Qualification: Teacher competency differed significantly across qualification groups, $F(3,152)=9.47$, $p<.001$. The effect size, $\eta^2=.16$, indicates that qualification explained approximately 16% of the variance in teacher competency, representing a moderate-to-large effect. However, because the table does not provide the mean scores for the Bachelor's, Master's, M.Phil., and doctoral groups, it is not possible to determine which qualification groups differed from one another. A post-hoc test would be needed for that purpose.

Experience: The differences in competency across the four experience groups were not statistically significant, $F(3,152)=2.11$, $p=.101$. Although the effect size was $\eta^2=.04$, indicating a small effect, the evidence is insufficient to conclude that competency differs according to years of teaching experience.

Table 4

Multiple Regression Predicting Teacher Entrepreneurial Competency (n = 156)

Predictor	*B*	*SE*	*β*	*t*	*p*
Constant	11.85	1.71	–	6.92	< .001
Entrepreneurship training	2.43	0.39	.42	6.19	< .001
Institutional support	1.45	0.37	.28	3.94	< .001
Access to teaching resources	1.23	0.32	.24	3.84	< .001
Teaching experience	0.17	0.13	.08	1.32	.189
Academic qualification	0.78	0.30	.17	2.61	.010

Note. R^2 = .504.

The regression model (Table 4) explained about half of the variance in competency (R^2 = .504). Training was the strongest predictor (β = .42, p < .001). Institutional support (β = .28) and access to teaching resources (β = .24) were also significant. Academic qualification made a smaller significant contribution (β = .17, p = .010). Teaching experience was not a significant independent predictor (β = .08, p = .189).

Table 5

Descriptive Statistics for the PAES (n = 84)

Dimension	*n*	*M*	*SD*	% of max
Parental awareness (max = 65)	84	31.24	4.37	48.1
Parental engagement (max = 60)	84	28.71	3.70	47.9
PAES grand total (max = 125)	84	59.95	5.75	48.0

Parental Awareness and Engagement

Parents reported limited-to-moderate awareness and engagement (Table 5). The PAES mean was 59.95 of 125 (*SD* = 5.75), or 48.0% of the maximum. Awareness (48.1%) and engagement (47.9%) were nearly identical.

Table 6

PAES Grand Total by Location, Parent Gender, Education, and Household Income

Variable	Groups (*M*, *SD*)	Test	*p*	Effect size
Location	Urban (*n* = 39): 62.20, 4.90; rural (*n* = 45): 57.47, 5.10	$t(82) = 4.24$	< .001	d = 0.94
Parent gender	Mothers (*n* = 57): 60.87, 5.00; fathers (*n* = 27): 58.01, 5.25	$t(82) = 2.41$	.018	d = 0.56

Variable	Groups (*M*, *SD*)	Test	*p*	Effect size
Education	Five levels, from no education to postgraduate	$F(4, 79) = 9.84$	< .001	$\eta^2 = .27$
Income	Low, middle, and high income	$F(2, 81) = 5.11$	.008	$\eta^2 = .11$

Table 6 shows group differences. Urban parents scored higher than rural parents, with a large effect. Mothers scored higher than fathers, with a medium effect. Education was strongly associated with scores, and parents with higher qualifications showed greater awareness and involvement. Household income showed a medium association. These are associations, and they do not show that location or income caused the differences.

Four themes emerged from the four parent interviews. The first was the desire for independence and economic participation. One parent put it quite simply: *"We don't expect our child to be dependent on other people for the rest of his life. If he can learn some work and earn some money for himself that will give him confidence and self-respect."* The aspiration was not necessarily for the child to be earning a significant income but for him to be able to be independent and to be doing some work. The second theme was a lack of awareness of the opportunities available. Parents felt that schools didn't talk at all about entrepreneurship, small business skills or transition planning and rural parents in particular were very much in the dark. The third theme was the lack of parent school partnership. The school tended to focus on academic and behavioural issues and parents were not generally invited to any of the enterprise or vocational planning activities. The fourth theme was that families did support the learning of practical skills at home through craft activities, the organisation of the home, small selling activities and family businesses. Mothers in particular described the learning that took place in the day to day running of the family.

Policy Perspectives on Curriculum Reform

The FGD produced five themes, with substantial inter-coder agreement (κ = .79 to .86). Teacher preparation had the lowest agreement (κ = .79), and entrepreneurial independence the highest (κ = .86). Curriculum reform and teacher preparation were both raised across all participant groups. The themes are summarised below:

Reorienting the curriculum. The participants felt the curriculum was all about academic learning and self-care rather than economic participation and independent living. One policy maker put it as "the curriculum still prepares the student for dependency rather than for economic participation". The proposed reform was to have a much wider range of aims including functional numeracy, communication, decision making, problem solving, product development and financial awareness. The reform was seen as a change in the purpose of education rather than a series of discrete topics being added.

Progressive development across stages. The entrepreneurial learning should start in the early and middle years and build up progressively. The early stages involve problem solving, choice making, co-operation and product preparation. The later stages move on to money, dealing with customers, market exposure and transition planning. Participants saw it as a continuum of development rather than a programme for the final years.

Coordination among schools, PVTC, and TEVTA. The schools' curricula and vocational programmes were described as operating in isolation with very little coordination or shared planning. One participant noted that students would go through school "without any real vocational pathway or entrepreneurial direction". There was a call for shared outcomes, referral processes, transition planning and links with families and the wider community. Contextual, ability based approaches. The preparation should be flexible, practical and individualised. Suggested activities would be supported micro-enterprises, community based selling, creative arts, digital crafts and family supported businesses. It should not be restricted to formal business ownership or abstract business concepts.

Contextual, ability-based approaches. Preparation should be flexible, practical, and individualised. Suggested activities included supported micro-enterprises, community-based selling, creative arts, digital crafts, and family-supported businesses. It should not be limited to formal business ownership or abstract business concepts.

Linking reform with teacher preparation. People said reform would be very difficult without teacher preparation going hand in hand with it. The supports they identified as being essential were specialist certification, entrepreneurship workshops, practical

advice and some form of collaborative curriculum planning. Teacher preparation was seen as absolutely fundamental to the reform process rather than something separate.

Discussion

Teachers were the most positive in their attitude towards entrepreneurial education of the four dimensions. A belief in the potential of children with DS is obviously a prerequisite. Knowledge and pedagogical competence were moderate and practical readiness was the lowest. Less than 1 in 5 teachers were in the high competence range. Training was the strongest predictor and length of service was not. This clearly indicates that years of teaching in itself do not equate to competence in this area and that specialist training in entrepreneurial education, transition planning, business awareness and disability responsive instruction is required. This is consistent with Dzhugudzha et al. (2025) and the training deficiencies noted by Mazeed (2023).

Institutional support and resources were also predictors of competence. Competence is therefore a reflection of both working conditions and individual preparation. Parents clearly valued economic independence for their children and were keen to see them achieve it. Their scores were well below the maximum (under half) despite the strength of their desire. This is consistent with the findings of Masdah et al. (2025) who found that there was a strong demand for economic empowerment programmes. Parents felt that schools did not talk at all about entrepreneurship and that they were not ever invited to participate.

The mesosystem link between home and school was therefore very weak. Gaad & Thabet (2017) have shown that structured parent training can have an impact on attitudes, though there is as yet no entrepreneurial programme of a similar nature in Punjab. The differences by location, education and income all point to unequal access to information and services. Mothers were more involved than fathers and described a great deal of practical, everyday learning at home. Things like budgeting a small amount of money, packaging and packaging products and practising customer service were all things they did at home which could in turn reinforce what they were learning at school.

Curriculum reform was described by policy makers and experts as a complete change in purpose. The reform would be one that develops practical, entrepreneurial, vocational and independent living skills in a progressive manner. This is precisely the policy gap that Ahmad and Nawaz (2025) have identified in that entrepreneurial competency is not an outcome in the curriculum. Without a clear policy direction on what is to be taught, what the outcomes are, how it is to be assessed, how it is to be staffed and what the partnerships are, schools have no direction. There was a strong sense of shared responsibility in the group with regard to the reform: the DSEP, PVTC, TEVTA, the schools themselves, the families and civil society. The view that teacher preparation is an essential part of the reform is exactly what the regression results show. Training was the single strongest quantitative predictor of teacher competency. The strands all point to the issue of alignment rather than the issue of provision. There is a willingness from the teachers, interest from the parents and technical training available from the vocational bodies. The problem is that all of these elements still operate in isolation.

The limitations are numerous. The group comparisons and the regression analyses only show associations, not causal effects. The findings are based on self-reported perceptions and researcher developed instruments. The interview sample was four parents and the FGD was five participants so the qualitative themes are illustrative rather than generalisable. All the data is from one province. Future work would need to test training and parent partnership interventions directly.

Conclusion

Entrepreneurial preparation for children with DS in Punjab is just beginning to emerge and is still far from complete. Teachers do value entrepreneurial education but their own level of preparedness is very low. The level of training, institutional support and resources are the best predictors of competence rather than length of service. Parents want their children to be as independent as possible. Their level of awareness and involvement is still well short of the maximum and varies significantly by location, gender, education and income. There is a clear view among the policy makers and experts that the curriculum needs to be reformed in a developmental, ability based way and that this must be accompanied by teacher preparation. The curriculum, the training, the family and the policy all need to be in step.

Recommendations

The following are the recommended actions:

1. The Department of Special Education, Punjab should put in place a clear framework for the delivery of entrepreneurial skills at the school level. This should be integrated into the existing life skills, functional academics and vocational curriculum rather than be a stand-alone subject.
2. Schools should be getting on with systematic preparation between the ages of 10 and 16. It should move from classroom based tasks through to school enterprises, through to supervised selling and through to transition experiences, all of it being tailored to the individual child's strengths and support needs.
3. A specialist professional development programme should be introduced for teachers, head-teachers and vocational trainers. It should be ongoing and practice based, drawing on demonstrations, mentoring, coaching and peer learning rather than just short workshops.
4. Each school should have at least one small, supervised enterprise project running. The students should go right through the whole process from product selection to recording sales and be given real choices and responsibilities throughout.
5. Schools should run regular parent awareness sessions on entrepreneurial potential, independence at home, budgeting, customer communication, supported decision making and transition. Parents should be provided with simple Urdu and English guidance material.
6. Individual education or transition plans should include specific home and school responsibilities so that skills are reinforced in both settings.
7. A Provincial Co-ordination Committee should bring together the Department, PVTC, TEVTA, teacher training institutions, schools, parent organisations and civil society. It should be responsible for coordinating curriculum, training, funding, partnerships and monitoring.
8. All activities must be voluntary, appropriate for the age of the child, safe and in line with the child's rights. Children should not be used as unpaid labour and any income generated should be accounted for transparently.
9. Pilot programs should be introduced in selected urban and rural schools before province-wide roll-out. They should be evaluated with mixed methods, including teacher competency and parental engagement.

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