



EMPOWERING ALL LEARNERS: POLICIES, CHALLENGES, AND PRACTICES FOR CREATING AN EQUITABLE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

Inclusive education entails that all children have access to high-quality education in a welcoming and inclusive setting, regardless of their background, abilities, or impairments. It is giving every child, including those with special needs, equal chances for participation and learning in regular schools within the community. The goals of inclusive education are to break down obstacles, enhance outcomes, and prevent discrimination while fostering diversity, acceptance, and support for all students. It discusses the challenges and barriers hindering the effective implementation of inclusive education practices, This includes issues such as peer pressure, lack of teacher training and adaptability, poor infrastructure, limited parental and community involvement, insufficient collaboration among educational agencies, rejection, geographic disparities, financial constraints, large class sizes, and teacher attitudes and accountability issues. The paper highlights the significance of addressing attitudinal and social barriers to ensure education for all students. It also stresses the necessity for continuous training and assistance for teachers and students to promote a culture of diversity and inclusion in educational settings.

Keywords: *Inclusive Education, Diversity, Special Needs, Classroom Inclusion, and Educational Barriers*

Introduction

Inclusive education is the most effective way to give all children a fair chance to go to school, learn, and develop the skills they need to thrive. Inclusive education means all children are in the same classrooms and schools. It means real learning opportunities for groups who have traditionally been excluded not only children with disabilities but speaking of minority languages too. Inclusive systems value the unique contributions students of all backgrounds bring to the classroom and allow diverse groups to grow side by side, to the benefit of all.

All students must attend and be welcomed by their local schools, where they are helped to learn, contribute, and participate in all aspects of school life. This is what is meant by inclusive education. The goal of inclusive education is to create classrooms, programs, and activities in schools. The education of children with moderate disabilities in a regular classroom is known as mainstreaming (Wuthrich & Lozano, 2018).

According to Loreman and Deppeler "inclusion of children with varying capacities in all parts of schooling that other children can access and enjoy fully." It is a mindset or commitment to valuing diversity and acknowledging that all students can reach their full potential in a common institution. At an inclusive school, everyone is included, accepted, and supported by their peers and other community members.

India is home to 20% of the world's unschooled children and 17% of the world's population. There are 26 million persons with disabilities in India, or around 2.1% of the entire population, according to official estimates from the Census of India (Government of India, 2011). However, according to UNICEF's Report on the Status of Disability in India (2000), there are almost 30 million children in India who have a disability of some kind.

Every child can learn and take part in both school and community life. It is promoted as a means of removing barriers, enhancing outcomes, and combating discrimination. Special needs students are given the necessary support services and additional help for both students and teachers. It means meeting the requirements of all students—including those with disabilities—for a free, top-notch public education in an environment that is both the least restrictive and most productive. Educating children with disabilities alongside their non-disabled peers is considered one of the better ways to provide education to the population in India (Shah et al., 2014).

The Government of India's commitment to the Universalization of Elementary Education (UEE) cannot be fully realized without attending to the unique educational requirements of young people who are mentally and physically handicapped.

Need for Inclusive Education

- Students gain an appreciation for one another's skills and qualities and they are encouraged for interaction. Children develop to their full potential and gain the ability to adjust to a range of circumstances.
- Students with special needs can form connections in a natural atmosphere that feels natural to them. For children with disabilities, feeling a part of a community fosters self-esteem and a sense of accomplishment. It's normal for students to pick up positive social skills from their peers.
- Students who are not disabled have the chance to develop positive opinions of people with disabilities. The objective of universalizing education can be feasible. A well-built nation can be built through inclusive education (Guterman & Detochenko, (2021).
- All kids with disabilities are given the chance to take part in vocational services. People are motivated to discover more about themselves by it. Its objective is to promote children's happiness.
- Students are taught the value of showing compassion to one another. By providing everyone a chance, it preserves social harmony. All children can assimilate themselves into their community and develop a sense of belongingness.
- It introduces new approaches, parameters, and ways of learning. It promotes youth independence, aids in the development of coping mechanisms, and fosters critical thinking. Additionally, decision-making and problem-solving skills are improved (Chakravarty & Shinde, 2022).
- It also assists teachers in recognizing their students' strengths and weaknesses so that they can prepare instructional programs accordingly.
- It encourages self-discovery and aims to provide kids with the tools they need to live happy lives.
- It eliminates all forms of bias and discrimination.

Importance of Inclusive Education

It aims to maximize the potential of every student by bringing them all together in one classroom and community, regardless of their skills or deficiencies. Understanding each person's peculiarities and a particular set of abilities and limitations is a key component of inclusive education (Giffard-Lindsay, 2007).

It is not merely a philosophy of education but Learning how to communicate and collaborate with others who are different from oneself is a crucial life skill for children. It is as important as intellectual proficiency.

To accomplish inclusive education, it is necessary to consider and include students with special needs in conventional classrooms. More and more diverse pupils are being enrolled in general education classes, particularly because these children encounter some form of impediments to learning and involvement in the classroom.

Teachers should understand the importance of respecting each student's individuality and they must adjust activities to incorporate all students in successful inclusive programs, even though each student's goals may differ. Youngsters experience some form of hurdles to engagement and learning in the classroom.

Children do better academically in inclusive environments, according to Studies and inclusion offers chances to build relationships. Low-achieving kids can receive additional support in an inclusive educational environment even though they do not meet the requirements for special education (Singh, 2016).

Making individuals feel cared for, cherished, and safe is the most crucial role that friendships play. The inclusive educational environment aids peers in knowing each other's strengths and faults.

In inclusive classrooms, peers of students with disabilities typically develop their social cognition and become more sensitive to the needs of others. Students with disabilities can form lifelong connections that they would not be able to otherwise.

By learning alongside children with special needs, children who are developing normally develop increased sensitivity. They develop patience, learn empathy, and are aware of the harm that words can do.

Policies Perspective in India

In India, there has been a long separate system for special schools. In Bombay, the first school for the deaf was founded in 1883. In Amritsar, the first school for the blind opened its doors in 1887. In 1949, the Indian Constitution made plain the position of the right to equality and opportunity.

The Indian Constitution serves as a guarantee of equality of opportunity like Articles 14,15,41,45, 46, and 21 A, and Article 51 A (K)2), and social justice for all of its residents. Numerous laws and policies have been implemented for education rehabilitation and equalizing chances for people with disabilities.

The Sargent Report in 1944 and the Kothari Commission in 1964 both offered recommendations to send children with disabilities to mainstream schools (Julka, 2005). Despite this, change has been slow, and until recently, segregation predominated in special schools.

Everyone, including children with impairments, must get universally mandatory education but, not much has been done in this area. Education of children with disabilities should be "an inseparable part of the general education system. The Commission specifically emphasized the importance of integrated education in achieving this goal as it is cost-effective and helpful in fostering mutual understanding between children with and without disabilities (Indian Education Commission 1964-66).

In 1974, the practice of integrating special needs students into mainstream classrooms began to gain popularity. The Indian government has undertaken several efforts throughout the years to give children with disabilities access to educational opportunities. The IEDC was founded in 1974 with this objective in mind. With the aim of "integrating the handicapped with the general population at all levels as equal partners to prepare them for normal growth and to enable them to tackle life with courage and confidence, It is being carried out by NGOs in addition to the education departments of State Governments and Union Territories.

NPE 1986 promoted integrated education. Children and adults with special needs are now given more priority in India's educational systems. The National Policy on Education (NPE) of 1986 and the Program of Action (PA) of 1992, reaffirm the acceptance of integrating physically or mentally impaired children as equal partners with the general category to prepare them for normal growth.

(The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act) Rehabilitation Council of India Act, 1992, revised in 2005) RCI Act of 1992, Rehabilitation Council of India. The Act Rehabilitation Council of India (1992), The Rehabilitation Council of India (Amendment) Act, updated in 2000 added monitoring the training of rehabilitation experts and staff, encouraging rehabilitation research, and establishing special education. The RCI has been working on curriculum standardization, monitoring and evaluation, assessment of teacher preparation, and research and development in the area of disability and rehabilitation through its connections with training facilities and universities.

The groundbreaking Equal Opportunities and Rights of Persons with Impairments Act of 1995 provides for the economic and educational rehabilitation of people with impairments. It states that children with impairments have a right to free education in a proper environment up until the age of 18.

Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, protection of rights & full participation) Act, 1995 addresses seven disabilities, including mental illness, leprosy remission, low vision, hearing impairment, loco-motor impairment, blindness, and low vision.

Article 21-A of the 86th Constitutional Amendment (2002), "The State shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age of 6 to 14 years in such a manner as the State may, by Law, determine."

Sarva Shiksha Abhijan 2002 "free and required education for children. According to UNCRDP, Penalties are offered for crimes committed against people with disabilities. It not only strengthens the rights of Divyang people but also offers efficient mechanisms to guarantee their empowerment and genuine social integration. (SSA) aims to implement "universalization of elementary education" (UEE) in a mission mode, to provide all children between the ages of 6 and 14 with high-quality elementary education and inclusive education, to achieve "education for all" by 2010.

NCERT created Project Integrated Education for Disabled Children (PIED) in conjunction with UNICEF in 1987. According to the National Curriculum Framework (NCF 2005), it is important to enroll and keep all children in school through a curriculum that recognizes their value and gives them the confidence and dignity to learn. A policy of inclusion needs to be implemented in all schools and throughout the Indian education system (NCF, 2005). The National Action Plan for Inclusion of children and youth with disabilities, 2005, August 20.

National Policy for Persons with Disabilities, 2006 - The policy's main goals are to improve teacher education programs and provide CWSN with an atmosphere that is free from barriers to learning.

According to the Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act of 2009, every child has the legal right to a formal school-based, full-time elementary education that is of adequate and equitable quality.

According to the rights of person with disabilities (RPWD) "every disabled child has a right to be educated with a normal child in the same classroom with some changes in infrastructure such as braille technology in Bihar for the visually disabled child" which is a great initiative taken by Government of Bihar and RPWD in past and present years. Every school and college has to adopt inclusive classrooms to enhance the quality of education which will result in cooperative learning between normal and special children (Ubhiriyani, 2022).

Ubhiriyani (2022) stated that Education is a powerful tool to bring change in society and the nation. Inclusive education means providing an opportunity for an individual to get education with ability and disability. Inclusive education plays a vital role in bridging the gap between normal and disabled children with respect and acceptance. According to the NEP 2020, every child has the right to be educated in the 21st century so there is a high demand and need to implement inclusive education with proper infrastructure and quality education such as training of teachers to deal with different disabilities in society, technology advancement, good communication skills and mastery of the particular subject.

Across the World

According to the World Bank (2004), there are an estimated 25 million children in India who are not attending school. Many of these children are excluded owing to factors including poverty, gender, disability, caste, religion, and so forth.

Considering the current reality, there are new requirements for the organization of the educational process in higher education institutions in Ukraine. The art HUB for students and university teachers with special educational needs in H. S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University has been opened. It has been determined that there are elective subjects "Fundamentals of inclusive education" (for the 3rd year students) and "Features of working with an inclusive child" (for the 4th year students) in the educational program "Primary Education" at the Faculty of Primary Education (Dovzenkho, 2022).

The Ministry of Human Resources Development and UNICEF began a new experiment in 1987: Project Integrated Disability Education (PIED). Not only did the number of children with moderate disabilities rise under PIED, but also that of children with severe disabilities, with the proportion of children with orthopedic disabilities in the school system significantly outpacing that of other children with disabilities. The PIED program had a favorable effect on the attitudes of parents, teachers, school administrators, and the community at large.

Chado,(2022) stated that the solution to Education for All (EFA) is the involvement of professional counselors and social workers in the sensitization exercise. If professional psychotherapists are addressed, the

implementation and practicability of inclusive education will eventually become functional to address the challenges confronting the practicability of inclusive education in Nigeria.

Mukh and Salhab (2022) said that the activation of inclusive education in Palestine remains limited due to the lack of skills of teachers to contain all students at all levels, and the lack of material resources, equipment, and means.

Awareness related to Inclusive Education

Chary, Baghda, and Perumal (2022) found that B.Ed. student teachers' awareness of inclusive education is just below the average. Ranganathan,(2020) 55.6 percent of the teachers opined inclusive education helps develop more self-confidence in special children, some teachers felt inclusive education develops an inferiority complex among normal children. 44.4 percent of teachers do not accept that inclusive education lays extra pressure on special children to show similar performance as that of normal children in the classrooms. teachers know the concept of inclusive education, but that is not enough. Still, they do not know how to conduct an inclusive class. Kaul (2015) found that 56.67% of the principals and 61.11% of teachers were completely aware of the concept of inclusive education however 26.67% of principals and 30% of the teachers did not agree that inclusive education should be implemented in elementary schools. Teachers emphasized that they needed the training to develop the ability to modify assignments for learners and design classroom activities. Most of the principals acknowledged the fact that the teachers were not trained to facilitate the process of inclusion. Lack of support from management for providing infrastructure for children with sensory and locomotor impairment, recruiting resource/special teachers, providing training, etc General teachers do not follow a child-centered approach, as they feel that this would involve more work.

Pathy (2013) stated that inclusive education was implemented by the Government of Orissa in 2002-03, The findings were that there was a non-availability of trained teachers and the majority of children with special needs were assessed by Doctors and Psychologists except children with learning disability, Majority of schools have removed infrastructural barriers, made proper seating arrangement of children with special needs in the classroom and the study have revealed that identification of special needs children in rural schools was largely based on reports of parents. However, more teachers in rural schools identified special needs children based on day-to-day observation of children's progress and difficulties at the primary level during 2000-2009.

Attitude of teachers and students

The lack of empathy and discriminatory social behavior displayed by instructors, students, staff, and other stakeholders serve as a barrier to the inclusion of CWSN(Gourneau, 2005).

Education is an activity that helps students attain needed information, ability, and attitude, and develop their identities while they are preparing for public life (Karsh, 2008).

Teachers who teach in mainstream education usually have less favorable attitudes compared with their special education counterparts who are specialized trained and teach students with special educational needs in mainstream or special education, (Desombre et al.,2019). Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert (2011) showed that the majority of teachers adopt neutral or negative attitudes regarding inclusive education.

Pamela (2016) found that physical facilities are available in inclusive schools. The study also found that some Children with Special Needs participate only when they are given an opportunity. The study also found that some teaching methods were not used by teachers all the time. The study revealed that the majority of the respondents more than 50% were aware of the existing policies that support education. Teachers and Children's perception of Inclusive Education was positive. The study found that in inclusive schools there is a high teacher-pupil ratio. Teachers in inclusive schools teach very many Children in class. Parents hope and expect that physical integration/'being there' will lead to their child participating socially with the peer group. Parental support and involvement, moreover, are regarded as being greatly important in facilitating inclusive education (Palmer, et . al. 2001). parents report that inclusive education helps their offspring to learn about and accept individual differences (Gallagher et al. 2000; Miller & Phillips 1992). Children in mainstream schools with special needs are comparatively less accepted by their peers, have fewer friendships, and are less part of work in class compared to their typically developing peers (Frostad & Flem 2008).

Role of Teachers

Krishnaswamy and Reddy (2022) stated that Teachers are willing to accept children with disabilities in their schools, they have a limited capacity to address special educational needs. Teachers are not provided with training through regular professional development to address the needs of all learners. Kang and Lim (2021) say although inclusive education is a practical alternative for teaching heterogeneous students together, some teachers still consider it possible in the existing integrated education system, so objective research and evaluation of the existing integrated education should be given priority. Nanda, (2018) It is seen that teacher educators themselves are being groomed through courses that contribute little to their development of knowledge and attitude toward inclusive education. courses fail to prepare competent teacher educators who can groom competent teachers to practice in inclusive settings and there is a considerable unfavourable attitude towards the inclusion of individuals with special needs in a regular class.

Gara (2017) found that IER teachers were not actively engaging in continuous professional development activities. However, their efficacy level was good. Garg,(2010) it is possible to bring change in the attitude of students and teachers and continuous training for inclusive education is possible.

Practices

In India, 75% of those with disabilities reside in rural regions. Since the nation's independence, the government has established several special education-related policies. Although the Indian government has made an effort to develop policies that include individuals with disabilities, its implementation efforts have not led to an inclusive educational system.

Das, Kuyini, and Desai (2013) found that teachers had neither received training in special education nor had any experience teaching students with disabilities. A little over 94% of children with disabilities in India did not receive any educational assistance, despite numerous initiatives for inclusive education. Most teacher training programs in India do not have a unit on disability studies (Myreddi & Narayan, 2000).

Krishnaswamy and Reddy (2022) stated that Inclusive education is considered to be a desirable practice. Though policies support an inclusive education system, the school infrastructures and facilities are not accessible for children with disabilities. Makwana (2022) incorporating children with disabilities in education is a difficult endeavor that necessitates widespread community mobilization and participation as well as the provision of suitable answers to a wide range of learning needs of special children in both formal and non-formal contexts.

Socially marginalised

The term 'marginalized' in this study refers to those who not only belong to economic backwardness but also suffer from severe social marginality (Srinivas, 2017). The majority of the teachers stated that identification of the problems faced by marginalized students is very important. it was evident that the teachers tried to identify their problems and support them. Despite their poor socio-economic background, they show interest in the language classroom. Some teachers expressed that teaching marginalized students is increasing their workload, and they feel overburdened. Teachers expressed a need for at least short-term training programs at regular intervals to effectively deal with marginalized students in an inclusive setup. Beco,(2021) inclusive education is universal and the right to inclusive education applies to all children alike even if it has disability-specific aspects. Para and Malik (2021) say Its primary goal should be to change people's minds.

Challenges

From Special Education to Integrated Education, and from Integrated Education to Inclusive Education, the education of children with special needs has come a long way. All children with any disability, Special Needs, or from any socio-economic background, or gender require ordinary schooling, education in their community, and instruction from regular teach

Many students are affected by various disabilities. It's difficult to pick them out of a crowded classroom. Each pupil has individual characteristics. A typical class has 60 to 70 students, making individualized attention challenging, and teachers find it even more difficult when dealing with children with special needs.

Approximately 4% to 5% of the 30 million children with special needs have access to education. Many schools are unwilling to accommodate the demands of these children so they also lack access to mainstream education. Multiple agendas, conflicting ideals, and practical obstacles all interplay in institutions and classrooms (Para & Malik,2021).

Children experience a variety of concerns and challenges in inclusive education, including:-

1. Children face prejudice Due to a lack of awareness, positive attitude, and sensitivity on the part of teachers, classmates, parents, and the community.
2. Peers frequently attempt to intimidate and reject other students who are different from them. They do not consider these youngsters to be a part of their family. One of the most common reasons for kids dropping out of school is because of this. Children don't like being labeled since they feel rejected.
3. Teachers lack the ability and willingness to adapt their teaching methods to meet the needs of children with special needs and other children and teachers are not sufficiently trained towards it too.
4. Inadequate infrastructure: Special needs children require a variety of teaching and learning tools. In India, the majority of schools lack adequate teaching and learning tools. Infrastructure and transportation issues are major barriers to the effective implementation of inclusive education.
5. Parental and community involvement: children with learning difficulties are less encouraged.
6. Inclusionary education is hampered by a lack of teacher responsibility and accountability. Most of the time, teachers label their kids, yet doing so is detrimental to both personality development and inclusiveness.
7. Various educational agencies such as the government, non-governmental organizations, and the community. They don't work together very well.
8. Geographic disparities so pervasive in the Indian context are demonstrated by inclusive education's predominance in metropolitan regions. Meeting the unique needs of all children, disabled and not is the challenge of inclusive education. Education for all students is not a soft process. It requires a lot of struggle and commitment to overcome all the types of barriers mainly attitudinal and social (Das 1999).
9. The main risk to the implementation of inclusion is inadequate money. financial resources are among the biggest barriers to implementing inclusive education.
10. Another obstacle to the implementation of inclusive education in the Indian context is large class sizes. In India, few schools are equipped to cater to the special needs of students with disabilities, and the majority of schools are not well-designed (Sari, Çeliköz & Seçer, 2009).

Conclusion

A positive school climate enables inclusive education to be implemented to achieve its goals (Wulan & Sanjaya, 2022). Some of the characteristics of a positive school climate for inclusive education must have an atmosphere of a sense of physical and social-emotional security for all the students, a learning process that supports student self-development as a whole, supportive relationship and respect for individual differences, a school environment that creates a sense of belonging and encourages the active participation of all stakeholders, leadership and professional relationship that cultivate a positive attitude toward inclusive education. However, many school administrators face difficulties in building a positive school climate for inclusive education. It is founded on the idea of equal opportunity, which is put into practice through personal planning to encourage appropriate learning, planning to provide acceptable learning outcomes, and social normalization. Now the teachers are also becoming more and more aware of the importance of valuing each kid as an individual and general education classrooms contain a number of diverse individuals.

Suggestion

At the school level, teachers must be trained, buildings must be refurbished and students must receive accessible learning materials. At the community level, stigma and discrimination must be tackled and individuals need to be educated on the benefits of inclusive education. At the national level, the Government must align laws and policies with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and regularly collect and analyze data to ensure children are reached with effective services.

- It requires customizing and changing typical classrooms and schools in a real way to fulfill the requirements of all children as well as celebrating and appreciating differences.
- It calls for strengthening conventional institutions' ability to adapt creatively to growing diversity. Additionally, it requires instructors to acquire pedagogical skills that support the learning of all students in the classroom as well as the ability to deal with a diverse student body.
- Teachers need to attend orientation programs and lectures. It is also necessary to inform the parents. Special educators need to be hired.

- The staff and school must be strongly integrated for inclusion to be effective.
- The teacher education curriculum must include a practicum-based inclusive education component to the B.Ed. student teachers.

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