

Challenges in Implementing Inclusive Education: A Qualitative Exploration in School Contexts

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Abstract - Inclusive education represents a fundamental shift in pedagogical philosophy, advocating for the seamless integration of all learners into mainstream classrooms regardless of their physical, cognitive, or socio-economic backgrounds. This study utilizes a qualitative, phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of school teachers and administrators navigating the implementation of inclusive practices in the Indian school context. Drawing on a purposive sample of 15 educators from diverse primary and secondary school settings, the research employs semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis to uncover systemic barriers. Findings reveal five major themes: (1) inadequate infrastructure and assistive resources; (2) a persistent deficit in specialized teacher training and pedagogical confidence; (3) entrenched attitudinal barriers among stakeholders; (4) the rigidity of curriculum and assessment frameworks; and (5) the logistical strain of large class sizes and time constraints. The study identifies that while legislative frameworks like the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act 2016 provide a robust visionary blueprint, a significant gap persists between policy intent and classroom reality. The analysis concludes that successful inclusion requires a move beyond symbolic compliance toward holistic systemic restructuring, grounded in localized support systems and sustained public investment.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Qualitative Study, School Contexts, Barriers, Teachers' Experiences, NEP 2020.

I. INTRODUCTION

The global trajectory of education has evolved from a model of segregation and exclusion toward one of meaningful participation and equity. Inclusive education is defined as a process that involves the transformation of schools to cater to all children, including those with disabilities, ethnic and linguistic minorities, and learners from socio-economically disadvantaged groups. Historically, children with special needs (CWSN) were often relegated to segregated institutions, a practice that reinforced social stigma and limited their

developmental potential. The modern paradigm, supported by international frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement and Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), posits that diversity should be viewed as a strength rather than a limitation.

In India, the commitment to inclusion is rooted in constitutional mandates of equality and has been further institutionalized through the Right to Education (RTE) Act 2009 and the RPwD Act 2016. Most recently, the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) has identified equitable and inclusive education as the "single greatest tool for achieving social justice and equality." Despite these progressive legislative strides, the implementation of inclusion in Indian schools remains asymmetric and fragmented. Data indicates that children with disabilities represent barely 1.2% of total enrollment, while learning deficits for marginalized groups continue to widen in the post-pandemic era.

Rationale and Significance

The rationale for this study lies in the need to understand the "ground-level" challenges that prevent policy from becoming a lived classroom reality. While quantitative metrics offer data on enrollment, they often fail to capture the relational and pedagogical hurdles faced by teachers. Understanding these qualitative nuances is critical for developing interventions that are context-sensitive rather than top-down.

Research Gap and Objectives

Current literature in the Indian context is often skewed toward policy summaries or student-centric outcomes, frequently overlooking the well-being and preparedness of the educators who are instrumental in implementing these reforms. This study aims to fill this gap by centering teacher voices. The primary objectives are:

1. To identify the core structural and pedagogical barriers to inclusive education in school contexts.
2. To explore how teachers subjectively perceive and navigate these challenges in daily practice.

3. To provide evidence-based recommendations for bridging the policy-to-practice divide.

II. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This research is grounded in the **Rights-Based Model of Disability** and **Social Constructivist Theory**.

Equity, Access, and Participation

Inclusive education is built on three pillars: equity (fairness in resource distribution), access (physical and digital availability), and participation (meaningful engagement in the social and academic life of the school). Unlike "integration," which merely places a student in a regular classroom without adapting the environment, "inclusion" demands that the system itself adapts to accommodate learner diversity.

Key Principles

The conceptual framework recognizes that disability does not limit a person's capacity; rather, it is the environment that creates handicaps through inaccessible architecture and rigid methodologies. Inclusion aligns with the Indian reformist vision of *Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas* (Together with all, Development for all), viewing the classroom as a micro-society where differences are celebrated. In practice, this requires the application of **Universal Design for Learning (UDL)**, a framework that offers flexible approaches that can be adjusted for individual needs.

III. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Scholarly discourse reveals a recurring "implementation-reality gap" globally and in India. International studies from Nordic contexts highlight success when inclusion is embedded within curriculum aims and professional cultures. In contrast, research in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa shows that inclusion remains largely policy-driven rather than practice-driven, hampered by severe resource constraints.

Challenges Faced by Teachers and Institutions

A major theme in recent literature is the "Shortage of Specialized Human Resources." Teachers in Indian mainstream schools often work in professional isolation, deprived of mentorship or feedback from special educators. A 2022 survey found that only 45% of teachers feel confident in implementing methodologies aligned with inclusive policy goals.

Furthermore, "Infrastructural Inadequacy" remains a glaring issue. UDISE+ data indicates that nearly one-third of Indian schools lack ramps, and over 25% do not have functional disabled-friendly toilets. Scholarly critiques also

point to "Attitudinal Barriers," where cultural stigmas and "identity shame" among marginalized groups—such as Scheduled Tribes or low-income students—sap the sense of belonging necessary for academic success.

Identified Research Gaps

While policy literature is abundant, there is a distinct shortage of field-based qualitative studies that explore the *interaction* of these challenges within specific school contexts. This study addresses the need for a voice-centered approach that captures the emotional labor and practical problem-solving strategies of teachers in the post-NEP 2020 landscape.

IV. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a **qualitative, interpretive phenomenological approach**. This methodology is uniquely suited for capturing the "essence" of human experiences and the subjective meanings participants assign to their professional challenges.

Participants and Sampling

The study involved 15 participants, including 10 regular school teachers, 3 school administrators, and 2 special educators from urban and semi-urban schools in India. **Purposive sampling** was employed to ensure representation across primary and secondary levels and to include participants with varying years of experience in inclusive settings.

Data Collection

Primary data were gathered through:

- **Semi-structured Interviews:** Lasting 45–60 minutes, focusing on pedagogical strategies, perceived barriers, and institutional support.
- **Focus Group Discussions:** To explore collaborative dynamics and shared challenges among staff.
- **Structured Observations:** Conducted in three schools to document physical accessibility and classroom interactions.

Data Analysis

The research utilized **thematic analysis**, involving recursive cycles of coding, categorization, and the development of overarching themes. Member checking was performed to enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the results.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to strict ethical guidelines, obtaining informed consent from all participants. Confidentiality was maintained through anonymization, and the researcher remained sensitive to the hierarchical power dynamics inherent in the Indian "guru-shishya" context.

V. FINDINGS / RESULTS

The analysis identified five major themes that characterize the challenges of implementing inclusive education in contemporary Indian schools.

Theme 1: Lack of Infrastructure and Assistive Resources

The most foundational barrier identified was the absence of barrier-free environments. Many teachers reported that despite policy mandates, their schools lacked basic physical accommodations. One participant noted, *"We talk about inclusion, but a student in a wheelchair cannot even enter our science lab because of the steps"*. Beyond physical access, there is a profound scarcity of assistive technologies, such as Braille textbooks or screen-reading software for visually impaired students. In rural regions, this is further compounded by a "power deficit," where schools lack functional electricity to operate digital learning tools.

Theme 2: Insufficient Specialized Teacher Training

A recurring narrative was the "preparedness gap." Regular educators expressed that their pre-service training did not equip them with the practical skills required for inclusive pedagogy, such as differentiated instruction or sign language basics. As one teacher explained, *"I support the idea of inclusion in my heart, but in my hands, I don't know how to teach a child with ADHD alongside forty other students"*. Training programs were often criticized for being too theoretical and lacking hands-on, classroom-based guidance.

Theme 3: Entrenched Attitudinal Barriers

Teachers identified social stigma as a "silent barrier." This includes not only negative stereotypes from peers and parents of "typical" children but also a "deficit mindset" among some educators. Narratives revealed instances where CWSN were viewed as an "extra burden" to the class rather than active participants. Furthermore, parents of marginalized students often reported "identity shame" or persistent anxiety about their child's potential expulsion or bullying in mainstream settings.

Theme 4: Curriculum and Assessment Challenges

The rigidity of the Indian examination system was highlighted as a major obstacle. Teachers struggled to reconcile the need for "Individualized Education Plans" (IEPs) with the demands of a high-stakes, standardized "grade race." The curriculum was described as "overloaded" and visually driven, making it effectively inaccessible for students with cognitive or sensory impairments. Participants noted that without assessment flexibility, inclusion remains symbolic, as marginalized students are set up to fail against standardized benchmarks.

Theme 5: Large Class Sizes and Time Constraints

The logistical reality of the Indian classroom—often exceeding 60 students—makes individualized attention nearly impossible. Teachers described a "time squeeze," where they must rush to complete a heavy syllabus, leaving little room to experiment with inclusive strategies like cooperative learning. This workload strain leads to emotional exhaustion and burnout, particularly among special educators who must manage multiple, often contradictory, responsibilities.

VI. DISCUSSION

The findings illustrate that inclusive education in India is currently in a state of "fragmented transition."

Interpretation through Principles

The "Infrastructure Gap" represents a fundamental failure in providing basic **Access**, while the "Preparedness Gap" undermines **Participation**. When viewed through Social Constructivist Theory, the findings suggest that the school environment is currently "constructing disability" by failing to provide the necessary scaffolding for diverse learners.

Comparison with Previous Research

The study reinforces international findings that teacher attitude is a primary determinant of inclusion success. However, it adds a distinct Indian nuance by highlighting how **Caste and Regional Disparities** intersect with disability to deepen exclusion. Unlike some Western models where inclusion is supported by classroom assistants, Indian teachers are often the sole "well-being architects" in the room, bearing a disproportionate psychological burden.

New Insights

A key insight emerging from the narratives is the concept of "**Professional Isolation**." The findings suggest that the lack of collaboration between regular and special education

teachers is not just a resource issue but a structural failure of school leadership.

VII. IMPLICATIONS

For Teachers: Adopting Relational Pedagogy

Teachers must transition from being "transmitters of information" to "mentors of motivation." This involves adopting "voice circles" to understand student hurdles and using "strength-spotting" to foster a sense of legitimacy among marginalized learners.

For Schools: Creating Support Systems

Institutions must prioritize the creation of **Inclusive Education Resource Centres (IERCs)** and ensure that all new school buildings are barrier-free by design. Leadership must foster a collaborative culture that clarifies the roles of regular and special educators.

For Policymakers: Bridging the Funding Gap

Policymakers must enact a legally binding financial mechanism to ensure the 6% of GDP target for education is met. Funding should be directed toward "Last-Mile" digital connectivity and the recruitment of specialized personnel in rural Special Education Zones (SEZs).

VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Mandatory Practical Training:** Pre-service and in-service training must include at least 50 hours of annual, hands-on professional development in inclusive strategies and UDL.
- Assessment Reform:** Shift from one-size-fits-all exams to competency-based assessments that recognize multiple pathways of achievement.
- Community Awareness:** Launch localized awareness campaigns in regional languages to dismantle the social stigma surrounding disability and caste.
- Frugal Infrastructure Solutions:** Utilize offline-first digital learning tools (e.g., pre-loaded tablets) to bridge the digital divide in resource-deprived settings.

IX. CONCLUSION

This qualitative exploration has demonstrated that the challenges to inclusive education in India are systemic rather than isolated. While the National Education Policy 2020 provides a visionary framework, its success is contingent upon

addressing the fundamental bottlenecks of infrastructure, training, and attitude. Achieving "learning without boundaries" requires more than policy enactment; it demands a cultural and structural revolution within the school ecosystem. By combining a steadfast commitment to public funding with a locally grounded, empathetic approach, India can ensure that its schools become true sites of equity and personal transformation for every child.

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