

## INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: CONCEPT, NEED & CHALLENGES

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**Abstract:** Inclusive education, which aims to provide equal opportunities for all students regardless of their diverse backgrounds and abilities, has garnered increasing attention in recent years. This paper presents a comprehensive review of the challenges and successes encountered in implementing inclusive education practices. Drawing upon a wide range of literature, the review highlights the complexities involved in fostering inclusive environments within educational settings. The challenges of inclusive education are multifaceted and rooted in societal attitudes, inadequate resources, and systemic barriers. Attitudinal barriers include misconceptions and biases towards students with disabilities, which often result in segregation and discrimination. Furthermore, the lack of adequate funding and support services poses significant obstacles to implementing inclusive practices effectively. Systemic barriers, such as rigid curriculum frameworks and standardized testing, can also hinder the provision of individualized support and accommodations for diverse learners. Despite these challenges, numerous success stories and promising practices demonstrate the potential of inclusive education to positively impact students, educators, and communities. Successful inclusive education initiatives prioritize collaboration among stakeholders, including teachers, parents, and community members, to create supportive learning environments. Moreover, inclusive schools embrace a holistic approach that values diversity, promotes empathy and understanding, and fosters a sense of belonging among all students. Key factors contributing to the success of inclusive education include teacher training and professional development, flexible curriculum design, and access to specialized support services. Educators play a central role in creating inclusive classrooms by adopting inclusive pedagogies, differentiating instruction, and fostering positive relationships with students. Furthermore, leveraging assistive technologies and universal design principles can enhance accessibility and support the diverse needs of learners. Inclusive education not only benefits students with disabilities but also promotes social cohesion and diversity appreciation among all students. Research indicates that inclusive classrooms foster positive attitudes toward diversity, reduce stigma, and enhance academic achievement for all students. Furthermore, inclusive education prepares students for the complexities of the real world by promoting empathy, tolerance, and respect for differences. This review contributes to the growing body of literature on inclusive education by synthesizing current research findings, identifying key challenges, and highlighting successful strategies for fostering inclusive practices within educational settings.

[Singh, J. **INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: CONCEPT, NEED & CHALLENGES** . *The International Journal of Interpretation, Observation and Analysis*, 2025; Volume 3, Issue 1:313-317 (July-September). ISSN 2349-0713, Peer-reviewed (online/offline), Refereed, Indexed and International Journal (Since 2013), Global Impact Factor: 5.776

**Keywords:** Inclusive education, Challenges, Successes, Attitudinal barriers, Resource constraints, Systemic obstacles, Teacher attitudes, Policy implications

### INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is a fundamental principle that underpins efforts to ensure equitable access to quality education for all students, regardless of their diverse backgrounds, abilities, or characteristics. It represents a paradigm shift from segregated approaches toward education to one that embraces diversity, fosters belonging and promotes the full participation of every learner within the educational system (Florian, 2014). Over the past few decades, inclusive education has gained momentum as a global imperative, driven by international conventions, national policies, and grassroots advocacy movements aimed at advancing the rights and well-being of individuals with disabilities and other marginalized groups

(UNESCO, 2009). The concept of inclusive education emerged in response to widespread discrimination and exclusion experienced by individuals with disabilities within traditional educational settings (Booth, 2000). Historically, children with disabilities were often denied access to mainstream schools and were instead placed in separate special education institutions or excluded from education altogether. This segregation not only perpetuated stigma and inequality but also deprived these children of valuable opportunities for learning, socialization, and personal development (Artiles & Kozleski, 2007). Recognizing the inherent injustice of such practices, the inclusive education movement sought to challenge existing norms and promote more inclusive approaches to education that prioritize

diversity, equity, and social justice. The shift towards inclusive education reflects broader societal changes and evolving understandings of disability, diversity, and human rights. It is rooted in the principles of equality, non-discrimination, and respect for diversity enshrined in international human rights instruments such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948). These instruments affirm the right of every individual to education on an equal basis and emphasize the importance of removing barriers to participation and ensuring the full inclusion of persons with disabilities in all aspects of society, including education. The adoption of inclusive education reflects a growing recognition of the inherent value of diversity and the benefits of inclusive learning environments for all students. Research has consistently shown that inclusive education not only benefits students with disabilities but also enhances the educational experiences and outcomes of their nondisabled peers (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). Inclusive classrooms provide opportunities for peer learning, collaboration, and social interaction, which can enrich the educational experience for all students and promote positive attitudes toward diversity (Slee, 2011). Moreover, inclusive education fosters a sense of belonging and community among students, helping to create supportive learning environments where every individual feels valued, respected, and included (Ainscow, 2005).

Systemic barriers, such as inflexible curriculum frameworks, standardized testing, and educational policies that prioritize academic achievement over inclusive practices, can also hinder efforts to create inclusive learning environments (Booth & Ainscow, 2011). Traditional approaches to education often prioritize conformity and uniformity, overlooking the diverse learning styles, abilities, and needs of individual students. This can result in exclusionary practices that marginalize students who do not fit within narrow definitions of academic success or who require additional support to thrive within the educational system. In light of these challenges, efforts to promote inclusive education require a multifaceted approach that addresses attitudinal, resource-related, and systemic barriers within educational systems. This necessitates a commitment to promoting awareness, understanding, and acceptance of diversity among educators, students, families, and communities. It also requires investment in the provision of adequate resources, support services, and professional development opportunities to

enable educators to meet the diverse needs of all students effectively (Ainscow & Miles, 2008). Furthermore, it entails the adoption of inclusive policies, practices, and curriculum frameworks that prioritize diversity, equity, and social justice within educational systems. Despite the challenges inherent in implementing inclusive education, numerous success stories and promising practices demonstrate the transformative potential of inclusive approaches to education. By prioritizing collaboration, flexibility, and innovation, educators, policymakers, and advocates can create inclusive learning environments that promote the full participation and achievement of every learner (Avramidis et al., 2000). Inclusive education not only benefits students with disabilities but also fosters diversity, equity, and inclusion within educational systems and society at large (Helm & Katz, 2011). By embracing the principles of inclusive education, we can create a more just, equitable, and inclusive world where every individual has the opportunity to learn, grow, and thrive.

#### **Sorting out the ideas**

When studying inclusive education, scholars have differed on the study objective. Some researchers have incorporated all forms of student diversity in their definitions of inclusive education (Florian, Young, and Rouse Citation2010), and others have referred to curricula, teaching and learning in their definitions (Westwood Citation2018). Other researchers have defined inclusion as relating to educational leadership (Randel et al. Citation2018). The concept varies from framing inclusion as relating to disabilities and special educational needs (Fasting, Hausstätter, and Turmo Citation2011; Vislie Citation2003, Citation2004) to framing inclusion as a normative principle in society (Van Mieghem et al. Citation2020). Differences in implementing inclusive education involve ideas about how education should be organised. Therefore, politicians, researchers and practitioners perceive inclusive education differently concerning what schools can and should do to help inclusive education succeed (Göransson and Nilholm Citation2014).

Inclusion is associated with diversity (Burner, Nodeland, and Aamaas Citation2018; Devarakonda and Powlay Citation2016; Loreman, Deppeler, and Harvey Citation2005), equity (Goodwin Citation2012; Shaeffer Citation2019), equality (Eklund et al. Citation2012;

Lundahl Citation2016), citizenship (McAnelly and Gaffney Citation2019; Nutbrown and Clough Citation2009), and the universal right to sufficient and adapted education (Gran Citation2017; McAnelly and Gaffney Citation2019). In pedagogy and special pedagogy, the concept has been defined as a student's belonging to a professional, social and cultural community, and inclusion also concerns participation quality, democratisation, and dividends in education (Solli Citation2010).

The degree of inclusion has also been discussed. Haug (Citation2016) identified four elements that he described as the degrees of inclusion: increasing the community, increasing participation, increasing democratisation, and increasing dividends. Inclusion has also been described as a program that helps schools adapt to the diversity of children. Children should be placed, received, or allowed to participate in a regular school setting, and the school, as much as possible, should realise the whole set of its objectives for all groups of students. One could hardly talk about inclusion if this is not the claim (Caspersen et al. Citation2020).

In their mapping of research on inclusive education after 1994, Hernández-Torrano, Somerton, and Helmer (Citation2020) defined four schools of research: systems and structures, special education, accessibility and participation, and critical research. In their review, they found a progressive and steady increase in publications on inclusive education that began in 2004 and continues today. Their analysis defined various themes, including higher education settings and issues related to accessibility, teachers' education and attitudes about inclusive education, inclusion in teaching, collaboration and professional development, and practices and principles for inclusive schools and classrooms. In a thematic analysis of 26 reviews, Van Mieghem et al. (Citation2020) discovered five main themes: attitudes towards inclusive education, teachers' professional development regarding the issue, inclusive educational practices, student participation and critical reflections on inclusive educational research.

### **Concept of Inclusive Education**

The principle of inclusive education was adopted at the "World Conference on Special Needs Education: Access and Quality" (Salamanca Statement, Spain 1994) and was restated at the World Education Forum (Dakar, Senegal 2000). The Statement solicits governments to give the

highest priority to making education systems inclusive and adopt the principle of inclusive education as a matter of policy. The idea of inclusion is further supported by the United Nation's Standard Rules on Equalization of Opportunities for Person with Disability Proclaiming Participation and equality for all. Inclusive Education (IE) is defined as a process of addressing the diverse needs of all learners by reducing barriers to, and within the learning environment. It means attending the age appropriate class of the child's local school, with individually tailored support (UNICEF 2007). Inclusive education is a process of strengthening the capacity of the education system to reach out to all learners. At the Jometin World Conference (1990) in Thailand, the goals for 'Education for All' were set and it was proclaimed that every person (child, youth and adult) shall be able to benefit from educational opportunities which would meet their basic learning needs. Inclusion is an educational approach and philosophy that provides all students greater opportunities for academic and social achievement. This includes opportunities to participate in the full range of social, recreational, arts, sports, music, day care and afterschool care, extra-curricular, faith based, and all other activities. In India, National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) joined hands with UNICEF and launched Project Integrated Education for Disabled Children (PIED) in the year 1987, to strengthen the integration of learners with disabilities into regular schools. In recent years, the concept of inclusive education has been broadened to encompass not only students with disabilities, but also all students who may be disadvantaged. This broader understanding of curriculum has paved the way for developing the National Curriculum Framework (NCF-2005) that reiterates the importance of including and retaining all children in school through a programme that reaffirms the value of each child and enables all children to experience dignity and the confidence to learn.

### **Need and Importance of Inclusive Education**

There have been efforts internationally to include children with disabilities in the educational mainstream. In order to achieve truly inclusive education, we need to think about and incorporate children with special needs into regular schools. Especially, because these kids face some sort of barriers to learning and participation in the classroom. As general education classrooms include more and more diverse students, teachers realize the value of accepting each student as

unique. In effective inclusive programs, teachers adapt activities to include all students, even though their individual goals may be different. We have learned that inclusive education is a better way to help all students succeed. Researches show that most students learn and perform better when exposed to the richness of the general education curriculum. The growing body of research has shown that children do better academically when in inclusive settings and Inclusion provides opportunities to develop relationships. Some of the benefits include: friendships, social skills, personal principles, comfort level with people who have special needs, and caring classroom environments. The most important function of friendships is to make people feel cared for, loved, and safe. In an inclusive educational setting, low-achieving students are able to get extra help even though they did not qualify for special education. Classmates of students with disabilities also experience growth in social cognition, often can become more aware of the needs of others in inclusive classrooms. An interesting side effect is that these parents report that they also feel more comfortable with people with special needs because of their children's experiences. Students with disabilities can create long-lasting friendships that would not be otherwise possible, and these friendships can give them the skills to navigate social relationships later on in life.

### **Challenges to implement Inclusive Education in India**

In India the number of the disabled people is so large, their problems so complex, available resources so scarce and social attitudes so damaging. The road to achieving inclusive education is a long and varied one, on which challenges and opportunities will arise. India is a multi-lingual, multi-cultural, multi-religious country, and its people are stratified along sharp socio-economic and caste lines. With an estimated 1,210 million people, India is the world's second most populated country after China. It has 17 percent of the global population and 20 percent of the world's out-of-school children. The aim of inclusion is to bring support to the students. The key purpose has become more challenging as schools accommodate students with increasingly diverse backgrounds and abilities. According to official estimates from the Census of India (Government of India, 2011), the number of people with disabilities in the country is 26 million, or roughly 2.1% of the total population. However, UNICEF's Report on the Status of Disability in India (2000) states that there are around 30 million

children in India suffering from some form of disability. 10% of the world's population lives with a disability, and 80% of these people with disabilities live in developing countries. But 75% of people with disabilities live in rural areas in India. The Government has created numerous policies around special education since the country's independence. There could be many challenges for educating children with disabilities in regular classrooms. These challenges could emanate from scarcity of adequate human and material resources, negative attitudes of teachers and community, non-disabled peers and their parents. Although the Government of India has attempted to create policies that are inclusive for people with disabilities, their implementation efforts have not resulted in an inclusive system of education. Moreover, the number of students dropping out of school is getting higher, especially in poverty-stricken areas. Students are forced to leave school due to their parents' poor economic condition, and to work to help their parents make ends meet. This leads to the growing number of child laborers, which in turn leads to physical and psychological disabilities. There are particular challenges around negative attitudes and behaviour, on the part of both teachers and parents, in relation to the ability of disabled children to learn. Another serious challenge is the fact that most disabled people are still excluded from equal access to mainstream education. Large class sizes present another challenge for the implementation of inclusive education in the Indian context. Das, Kuyini and Desai (2013) examined the current skill levels of regular primary and secondary school teachers in Delhi, India in order to teach students with disabilities in inclusive education settings. They reported that nearly 70% of the regular school teachers had neither received training in special education nor had any experience teaching students with disabilities. Further, 87% of the teachers did not have access to support services in their classrooms. According to Sixth All India Educational Survey (NCERT, 1998) about 20 million out of India's 200 million school-aged children (6–14 years) require special needs education. While the national average for gross enrolment in school is over 90 per cent, less than five per cent of children with disabilities are in schools. Acceptance by peers provides a much greater challenge for children with disabilities. Children with disabilities are often an easy target for being teased and bullied by their non-disabled peers. A large number of children with disabilities live in families with income significantly below the poverty level. Most of school personnel in India are

not trained to design and implement educational programs for students with disabilities in regular schools. Most teacher training programs in India do not have a unit on disability studies (Myredden & Narayan, 2000). The majority of schools in India are poorly designed and few are equipped to meet the unique needs of students with disabilities. It is also worth noting that there are challenges around procuring and resourcing for assistive devices. Despite various efforts for inclusive education in India, about 94% of children with disabilities didn't receive any educational services. Over and above some of these challenges that India shares with other developing countries are some distinctive features that will make the implementation of educational reform particularly difficult. The commitment of the Government of India to Universalisation of Elementary Education (UEE) cannot be fully achieved without taking care of special educational needs of the physically and mentally challenged children. Inclusion is becoming a cant and doing the rounds in education circles but there are still a lot of cobwebs surrounding it.

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