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Council for Teacher Education Foundation (CTEF, Gujarat Chapter)

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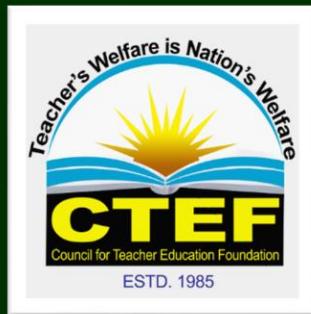
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Paradigm Shift from Exclusion to Inclusion: Justification for Inclusive Education

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Abstract

The journey of education has witnessed a significant paradigm shift from exclusion to inclusion, particularly in the context of children with disabilities and other marginalized groups. Historically, educational opportunities were restricted to privileged sections of society, leaving vast numbers of learners deprived of their fundamental right to learn. The rise of inclusive education reflects a response to these injustices, aiming to ensure equal opportunities, respect for diversity, and holistic development of every child. While debates persist regarding its effectiveness, research highlights that inclusive practices when supported with proper policies, resources, and teacher preparation enhance academic achievement, social integration, and self-esteem for all learners. Furthermore, global frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement and the UN's advocacy for "Education for All" strengthen the justification for inclusive education, positioning it as both a moral obligation and a social necessity for building equitable and sustainable societies.

Keywords: Inclusive education, exclusion, equity, diversity, educational rights, Salamanca Statement, Education for All

Introduction

Education has evolved remarkably since ancient times, moving from selective systems of learning toward more inclusive approaches. In early civilizations, such as the Gurukul system in India and the Platonic academies in Greece, access to education was often restricted to

privileged groups, excluding women, marginalized communities, and individuals with disabilities (Sharma, 2019; Nussbaum, 2010). Over time, education came to be recognized as a universal right rather than a privilege, paving the way for the concept of inclusive education. This approach emphasizes equity, respect for diversity, and the conviction that every learner can succeed when provided with appropriate support (Ainscow, 2020). Rather than segregating students according to ability or background, inclusive education encourages flexible, collaborative teaching practices designed to meet diverse needs (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

Despite its promise, debates continue regarding the efficiency and effectiveness of inclusive education. Critics caution that accommodating varied learners in a single classroom may dilute academic standards or place excessive demands on teachers who lack adequate preparation (Norwich, 2014). Yet, advocates highlight that, with sufficient resources and professional training, inclusive classrooms can foster peer interaction, strengthen academic performance, and enhance self-esteem for all students (Florian & Spratt, 2013; Ainscow, 2020). The justification for inclusive education extends beyond pedagogy to moral and social dimensions, as it affirms education as a fundamental human right and promotes social cohesion by reducing discrimination and valuing diversity (UNESCO, 2009). Anchored in international frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), inclusive education is not only a response to the needs of marginalized groups but also a vital step toward building equitable, democratic, and sustainable societies.

Conceptual Framework

The shift toward inclusive education stems from longstanding criticisms of segregated and integrative programs, which frequently failed to address the underlying, systemic challenges that underprivileged students experience. Researchers contend that previous approaches had a deficit view, blaming individual students for learning issues rather than acknowledging how school architecture, regulations, and cultural norms contributed to exclusion (Slee, 2011). This method of thinking is strongly related to the medical model of disability, which views disability as a personal issue that must be addressed by remediation or separate placement. As a result, pupils were commonly categorized based on diagnostic classifications, limiting their options and reinforcing stigma.

In response, the social model of disability shifted the focus away from students' impairments and toward the environmental, structural, and attitudinal barriers to participation (Oliver, 1990). Exclusion, according to this viewpoint, is caused by restrictive curricula, inaccessible

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environments, and discriminating attitudes, rather than intrinsic student traits. This concept reframes inclusive education as the system's responsibility, advocating for changes in how schools are organized rather than expecting students to adapt to rigid institutions. This transformation provided a solid framework for conceptualizing more egalitarian educational approaches.

Expanding on these ideas, bio-psychosocial frameworks, such as the WHO's International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (ICF), provide a more balanced understanding by recognizing that disability is caused by the interaction of a learner's personal characteristics and their environment (World Health Organization, 2001). This integrated perspective emphasizes the importance of learning settings that are adaptable, responsive, and free of unnecessary barriers.

Along with these conceptual changes, the rights-based approach views inclusive education as a legal and ethical duty. Based on global accords such as the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006), this approach claims that every learner has an intrinsic right to quality education. It moves the emphasis to education institutions' responsibilities to remove obstacles, make reasonable accommodations, and create circumstances for meaningful participation—regardless of disability, background, or circumstance.

At the educational level, the inclusive pedagogy framework provides direction for teachers looking to establish learning environments that embrace all students. Inclusive pedagogy encourages educators to widen what is "ordinarily available" so that all students can participate together (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). It is founded on the notion that every student can advance and that effective teaching necessitates flexibility, collaboration, and high standards for all.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) supports this pedagogical perspective by providing a research-based model for constructing accessible and flexible classrooms. UDL promotes teachers to provide students with numerous methods to engage with content, express their learning, and obtain information (CAST, 2018). By preparing for learner differences from the beginning, rather than changing after issues develop, UDL helps minimize obstacles and offer learning opportunities that build on individuals' strengths and preferences.

The medical, sociological, and bio-psychosocial models of disability, as well as the rights-based approach, inclusive pedagogy framework, and Universal Design for Learning, all

contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the broad movement from exclusion to inclusion. They emphasize that inclusive education is more than just a collection of ideas; it is a systematic commitment to equity, dignity, and meaningful involvement for all students in the process of education.

Methodology

The present paper is conceptual in nature that brings together all the major theoretical perspective to present a comprehensive view of paradigm shift from exclusion to inclusion. The literature included in this paper was taken through online searches in databases such as ERIC, Scopus, Research gate and Google Scholar, as well as notable books and policy documents on inclusive education. These materials were then carefully examined and synthesize to produce a clear and coherent picture of journey towards inclusive education.

Concept of Inclusive Education

The global movement toward inclusive education gained significant momentum with the World Conference on Special Needs Education: Access and Quality held in Salamanca, Spain (1994), followed by the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal (2000). These landmark events, along with United Nations efforts to promote equal opportunities and full participation for people with disabilities (Kumar, 2007), laid the foundation for how inclusion is understood today.

Inclusive education is broadly seen as the practice of educating children with diverse learning needs—including those with disabilities—within regular classrooms, alongside their peers, and under the guidance of general education teachers. It reflects a shift away from segregated or special schools and toward a system where all learners are welcomed and supported within the same learning environment.

The UNESCO Salamanca Statement (1994) emphasizes that every individual has a fundamental right to education and should be provided with opportunities to reach and sustain an appropriate level of learning. It also recognizes that children vary in their abilities, interests, and learning needs, which means that education systems must be flexible and responsive. Inclusive education offers a way to achieve this by ensuring that classrooms are designed to accommodate all learners, not just those who fit traditional expectations.

In this sense, inclusive education is more than placing students with disabilities in general classrooms it is an approach that values diversity and creates environments where every

learner can participate meaningfully. An inclusive classroom celebrates differences, promotes a sense of belonging, and strives to help each student achieve their full potential.

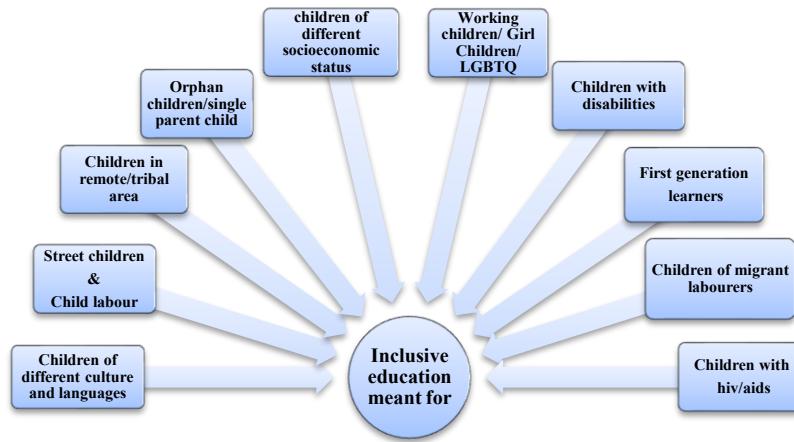


Figure 1 Children come under Inclusiveness

The concept of inclusive education goes far beyond supporting children with disabilities. It recognizes that learners come from a wide range of social, cultural, and economic backgrounds. This includes children from diverse linguistic and cultural communities, those from economically disadvantaged families, street children, child laborers, tribal children, orphans, children raised by a single parent, children of migrant workers, first-generation learners, children affected by HIV/AIDS, and girls—along with many others who may be marginalized or overlooked within traditional schooling systems. In essence, inclusive education seeks to ensure that every child, regardless of their circumstances, has equal access to meaningful learning opportunities.

However, putting inclusive education into practice demands more than simply opening classroom doors. It requires a fundamental transformation of the traditional education system. This includes revising laws and regulations, strengthening financial and administrative structures, and improving how curriculum is designed, delivered, and assessed. It also involves rethinking school organization to create environments where all learners can participate and succeed (UNICEF, 2017).

Critical Analysis of Key Policies on Inclusive Education

The transition from exclusion to inclusion in education is influenced not just by theory, but also by legislative frameworks that define rights, duties, and practical strategies. In India,

several landmark policies and legislation have played critical roles in fostering inclusive education, but their implementation reveals both success and continued obstacles.

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016 is a crucial step toward protecting the educational rights of children with disabilities. The Act is consistent with worldwide standards such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities by emphasizing access to free and high-quality education in inclusive settings. It mandates fair accommodations, barrier-free infrastructure, and tailored support, acknowledging learners' various requirements. Despite its solid legal framework, there are still obstacles in putting these rules into practice. Many schools still lack qualified teachers, accessible facilities, and enough resources, limiting the Act's effectiveness at the grassroots level (Kumar & Sharma, 2020).

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 reinforces the inclusive goal by expressly incorporating inclusion as a guiding concept at all levels of education. NEP 2020 emphasized adaptable curricula, multilingual learning, and child-centered pedagogy, which are consistent with Universal Design for Learning and inclusive pedagogy principles (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; CAST, 2018). It also emphasizes the necessity of early detection and intervention for children with special needs and learning problems. While the policy is ambitious, its success is strongly dependent on the ability of schools and teachers to implement inclusive practices, emphasizing the importance of thorough teacher training and ongoing professional development (Singh & Sharma, 2021).

As a comprehensive school education program Samagra Shiksha, combines several schemes with the purpose of ensuring equitable access to education for all students, particularly those from marginalized communities. It focuses on upgrading infrastructure, providing scholarships, and assisting children with special needs, therefore supplementing the goals of the RPwD Act and NEP 2020. However, implementation issues remain, particularly in rural and resource-constrained areas where monitoring systems and teacher preparedness frequently fall short of policy objectives (UNICEF India, 2019).

Together, these measures reflect India's commitment to inclusive education and provide a solid framework for moving from theory to action. However, a close analysis finds continuing disparities between policy aims and classroom realities. Historical injustices, systemic limits, and inadequate capacity building continue to impede full participation. To bridge this gap, concerted efforts across policy, teacher education, curriculum design, and school infrastructure are essential to ensure that inclusion becomes a lived reality rather than a policy goal.

Systemic barriers to inclusion

Despite strong policies and theoretical frameworks promoting inclusive education, many structural impediments remain to impede its effective implementation. These barriers occur on numerous levels classroom, school, and community and frequently overlap, influencing how students experience education.

Teacher training

One of the most serious difficulties is a lack of appropriate teacher preparation. Many instructors are not adequately trained in inclusive pedagogy, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), or ways to help diverse learners (Forlin, 2013; Sharma & Sokal, 2016). Without the necessary skills and confidence, teachers may resort to traditional teaching approaches that may not meet the requirements of all pupils, leaving some behind.

Infrastructure

Physical infrastructure is a significant challenge in many schools. Ramps, accessible toilets, adaptive learning materials, and assistive technology are frequently unavailable, preventing students with disabilities from fully participating in class and school activities (Kumar & Sharma, 2020). Even when rules require accessibility, gaps in funding, monitoring, and maintenance limit the effectiveness of these measures.

Curriculum rigidity

Rigid curricula and standardized assessment systems frequently fail to accommodate learners' diverse abilities and learning styles (Florian, 2014). Uniform lesson plans, strict schedules, and high-stakes exams leave little room for creativity or differentiated instruction, making it difficult for teachers to provide meaningful support to all students.

Social stigma and attitude

Social prejudices and stereotypes continue to obstruct inclusion. Negative feelings about disability, gender, or socioeconomic status can have an impact on teacher expectations, peer interactions, and family engagement (Slee, 2011; Ainscow, 2020). Such views can hinder students' confidence, involvement, and sense of belonging, emphasizing the importance of community engagement, awareness initiatives, and cultural transformation, in addition to governmental interventions.

In conclusion, systemic barriers play a substantial role in the mismatch between inclusive education policies and classroom realities. To address these issues, a comprehensive approach is required, including investments in teacher training, infrastructural improvements, curricula

flexibility, and the creation of supporting social settings. Only by addressing these interconnected concerns will inclusive education progress from theory and policy to meaningful practice for all students.

Paradigm Shift from Exclusion to Inclusion

The progress of any nation is closely linked to the quality and inclusiveness of its education system. Today, education is widely recognized as a basic human right, ensuring that every child has the opportunity to learn according to their needs. This was not always the case. In the past, education was largely reserved for specific groups—children from elite families or higher castes—while girls, children from poor families, minorities, and those with disabilities were often denied access.

Globally, around 15% of the population lives with some form of disability (World Health Organization, 2011), and historically, this group faced the greatest exclusion from educational opportunities (Sahu, 2019). To understand how education has evolved for children with disabilities, it is useful to look at it as a journey from complete exclusion to growing inclusion.

Examining this shift across different historical periods helps to highlight how societal attitudes, policies, and educational practices have gradually changed to create the inclusive approaches we aim for today.

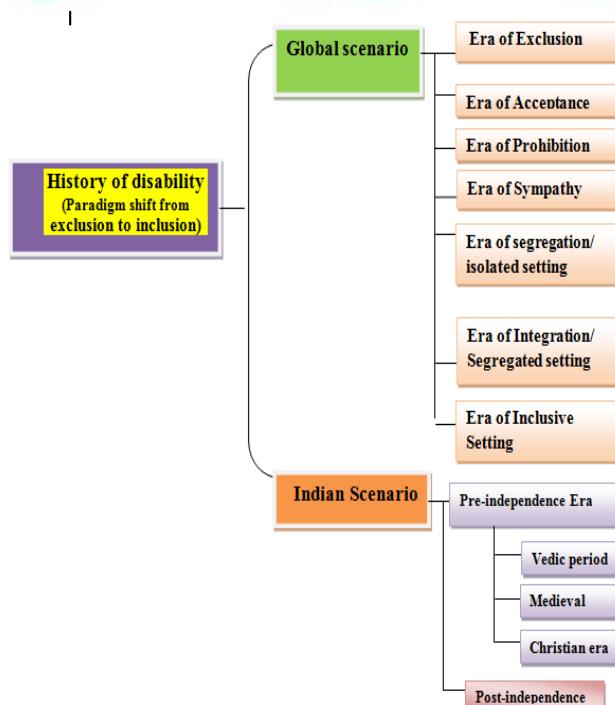


Figure 2. History of Disability (Source: Sahu, 2018 & Sharma, 2021)

The Global Scenario

Era of Exclusion

Exclusion era refers to that period in human history, when in the ancient Greek civilisation the disabled persons were fully excluded from society. Practice of infanticide i.e. killing of deformed infants was become a tradition at that time (Sahu, 2019). Child with any form of disability was treated as a useless burden on society. Their disability was considered as a result of God's punishment and their own sins.

Era of Acceptance

In earlier times, children with disabilities were often exploited rather than treated as human beings. Many were forced into begging, slavery, or prostitution, while others were reduced to objects of amusement. In ancient Rome, wealthy families purchased disabled children for entertainment, and circuses frequently exhibited individuals such as dwarfs as spectacles. Such exploitation continued for centuries, with extreme practices like confining the mentally disabled in "idiot's cages" during the 16th century (Sahu, 2019).

Era of Prohibition

In the medieval period, the treatment and the attitude towards the disability changed towards a new tone in the church as a religious institution. The Bible started to become a code of ethics. The discipline of 'Bible' actually labeled disabilities as impurities and demanded individual social rights deprivations from access to cult and indeed participation itself.

Era of sympathy, Asylum and institutionalization

At the commencement of the second phase of Christian era, the attempts commenced to eliminate the abuse of disabled children. Now they were the subject of sympathy. During the later part of Christian era, numerous attempts were undertaken to provide them protection and asylum. Many institutions and asylums were set up for the welfare and rehabilitation of disabled people as a gesture of sympathy. Whatever the reasons might have been behind their institutionalization, it emerged as a practice to confine the disabled people into a boundary wall of institutions. Consequently a substantial number of institutions such as mental hospitals, asylums, rehabilitation centre for providing protection to all categories of disabled have come into existence throughout the world.

Era of segregation / isolated setting

The Renaissance movement began in the 16th century in Italy out of which it spread in the 17th century to western world bringing a new era of hope for the disabled people (Sharma,

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2021). In contrast with the inhumane stance by previous, this movement strongly firmed up the independence of the disabled. It was the spirit of renaissance that made more attempts to send differently abled to special education. Therefore, special education was thus introduced during the period of late renaissance. Different persons and organizations run special schools to provide special education for the disabled children. The deaf children became the issue that came to the forefront in the history of special education and hence the first school made for deaf children was opened in Spain for the first time (Sahu, 2018). The second category of children that attracted the attention for special establishment of school after deaf were blind children. France takes a pioneering step for establishing a special school of blind children (Sahu, 2018). The first school for blind in Paris was established by Valentine Hauy, 1784 (Sahu, 2018). It is said that attempts for imparting this special education to mentally retarded was made by a French Dr. Jean Marc Gaspard Itar (1775-1850) the chief medical officer of National Institute for Deaf and Dumb (Sahu, 2018). This way the era of special education in isolation begins, and spreads throughout all over the world.

Era of integration / segregated setting

For children with disabilities a new era in the history of education is ushered when twentieth century arrives as placing of these children in isolated settings of special schools for them, gradually shifted to segregated settings in special classes with in regular schools which besides introduce new education regulations that increasingly require the equality of educational opportunities to all the children (irrespective of their disabilities) in their respective regular schools (Sharma, 2021). This integration in education calls for placing all disabled children in regular classrooms with their non disabled peers and leaving the system of delivery of education intact. The first planned integrated school was set up in Northern Ireland in 1981. In 1985, another three schools began as an alternative to existing segregated schools, further.

Era of inclusive setting

The latest development till now in the field of education for differently abled is inclusive education i.e. imparting education in inclusive settings represents the modern era of education. It implies educating all children with and without disability in a common mainstream classroom, with proper adaptation of curriculum, and other school structure

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suiting to the requirements of all children. The beginning of the inclusive era may be traced back to the 1970s.

Indian Scenario

Pre independence Era

India holds a wonderful history with respect to the treatment and educational resources available for the disabled people.

Vedic Period

The Vedic period in Indian History shows the glaring example of “ASHTAVAKRA” (a chronic and severe case of orthopedic impairment) for becoming a great scholar by virtue of educational facilities offered to everyone regardless of their strengths, weaknesses and disabilities (Sahu, 2018). All children were getting the opportunity of education according to their capabilities under the “GURUKULA SYSTEM”. During Vedic era, the Gurus were known to provide equal treatment to their pupils irrespective of their strength and weaknesses.

Medieval period

The care and protection of disabled people through the tradition of state funding and continuous charitable flow was evident during the regimes of Muslim rulers in the medieval period. During their rule, an important edict of Islam was Zakat that is giving of donations and alms by common people to the poor and disabled.

Christian era

The pattern of special school education followed in our country at present owes its origin from the work of Christian missionaries and charitable organization of the nation (sahu, 2018). In India the initial special school dedicated to hearing impaired children was established in 1883 at Bombay and a special learning centre catering the necessities of visually challenged children was started in 1887 at Amritsar. Similarly again in 1906 at Lahore the first government school “The Emerson Institute for Blind” was started (sahu, 2018). Although the psycho medical treatment facilities were available from 1934 at Ranchi, yet the first home for mentally Retarded came up in 1941 at Bombay.

Post-independence era

Until the 1990s, nearly 90% of India's estimated 40 million children with physical and mental disabilities (aged 4–16) were excluded from mainstream education, largely due to societal apathy and parental concerns. Special schools for the blind, deaf, and mentally challenged grew in number—from 65 in 1947 to nearly 3,000 by 2000 (Department of Education, 2000)—but they catered to only a small, mostly urban population, were costly, and reinforced segregation. Recognizing these drawbacks and guided by the principle of “Education for All,” policy initiatives such as the National Policy on Education (1986) and the Programme of Action (1992) emphasized integrating children with disabilities into regular schools, promoting equal participation, holistic growth, and preparedness for life's challenges.

Shifting from Integration to Inclusion

An action Plan for Inclusive Education of Children and Youth with Disabilities was issued by the Indian government in 2005 to complement integrated education for Disabled Children (IEDC) and to supplement SSA programmes.

By introducing this action plan by MHRD, the Indian education system made attempts to move from integration to inclusion by accepting the diversity of its client group and adapting to their individual needs. The main focus of this intervention was to include disabled children and youth in mainstream educational institutions.

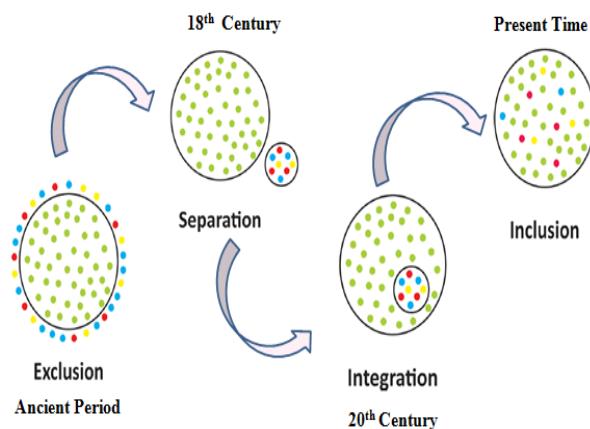


Figure 3. Overview of Exclusion to Inclusion (Source: CBSE, 2020; Handbook of Inclusive Education)

Justification for Inclusive Education in India

The justification for inclusive education lies in educational, sociological, economic, humanitarian, democratic, and legal perspectives. Its benefits extend to both differently-abled and non-disabled children, including talented learners.

Educational Viewpoint:

Inclusive schooling incorporates all children in regular classrooms regardless of ability, disability, or background (Dash, 2006). It benefits differently-abled children by preparing them for community life, supports teachers' professional growth, and upholds equality. Studies show inclusion fosters friendships, empathy, social and academic skills, while segregation creates isolation and low competence (Vandercook et al., 1988; Wehman, 1990). Teachers also gain through collaboration, consultation, and shared decision-making (Sindelar et al., 1992).

Sociological Viewpoint:

Segregated schools are inappropriate in a diverse society (Stainback & Stainback, 1990). Inclusion fosters harmony, acceptance, and socialization. Exclusion, by contrast, cultivates prejudice, unrest, and inequality (CSIE Report, 2002; Dash, 2006).

Economic Viewpoint:

With nearly 60 million differently-abled persons in India (Disability, 2003), special schools remain limited and costly, especially in rural areas. Inclusive education is more feasible and cost-effective, reduces parental burden, and empowers children to contribute productively to society (WHO, 1997).

Humanitarian Viewpoint:

Based on normalization, inclusive education ensures equal experiences and opportunities for children with disabilities, preventing low self-esteem and inferiority (Stainback et al., 1989). Inclusion upholds dignity and human rights as stressed in the Salamanca Statement (1994).

Democratic Viewpoint:

Education is a basic human right, not to be earned. Inclusion affirms equality, integration, and participation, making every child an active member of the school community. Segregation undermines democratic ideals.

Legal Viewpoint:

The Constitution guarantees equal rights to education under Article 29(2) and free compulsory education up to age 14 under Article 21(A). Thus, inclusive education is both a legal entitlement and a social necessity.

Discussion of Results

The present paper demonstrate that, although the concept of inclusive education has progressed from exclusion and segregation to integration and, finally, inclusion, several

challenges remain in putting these principles into practice. Historically, children from underprivileged groups, particularly those with impairments, have been denied access to education. Global movements such as the Salamanca Statement (1994) and rights-based policies prompted countries, including India, to reconsider how to make their education systems more inclusive. This historical history indicates a distinct shift in thinking: learners are no longer considered as the problem, but the system is expected to adapt to meet their requirements.

However, despite effective laws such as the RPwD Act 2016, NEP 2020, and Samagra Shiksha, the data indicate a continuous gap between policy goals and classroom reality. One key concern is teacher preparation. Many teachers are still unskilled or lack confidence in implementing inclusive teaching approaches, adjusting classes, and assisting students with special needs. Without practical training and ongoing professional support, teachers struggle to effectively implement inclusive practices.

Systemic and structural constraints also impede advancement. Schools frequently lack accessible structures, assistive technologies, adaptable curricula, and supportive learning resources. Curriculum rigidity and exam-centered teaching make it difficult to tailor teachings to diverse students. Social stigma also plays a role—negative perceptions toward disability, gender, caste, or socioeconomic background continue to impact how pupils are treated and how confidently they participate in school activities.

Overall, the findings indicate that, while inclusion goals are universally supported, their reality is greatly influenced by day-to-day implementation. There is a definite need for improved teacher training, infrastructure, and continued attempts to close the policy-practice gap. Only by addressing these difficulties collectively will the historical aim of inclusive education genuinely become a reality for all children.

Educational Implications

The present paper has following educational implications

Teachers

The paper emphasizes the importance of continued professional development in inclusive teaching, classroom differentiation, and techniques for supporting diverse students. Teachers require not only the necessary abilities, but also the confidence to embrace diversity and create classroom environments in which every student may engage meaningfully.

Policy Makers

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The present paper will inform the policy makers to organize more number of training programs, faculty induction or faculty development program on the topic inclusive education and handling diversity Short term courses, workshops on inclusive education strategies, pedagogies, how to include children in classrooms and schools, for secondary school teachers to develop their professional skills which are essentials to handle an inclusive classroom.

Educational planners

The present paper inform the educational planner for establishing flexible curricula, creating accessible learning resources, and ensuring that school infrastructure and assessment methods meet the requirements of all students. Planning must be based on actual classroom experiences and involve consultation with teachers, parents, and special educators.

Conclusion

Inclusive education in India is not simply an educational reform but a holistic approach that integrates moral, social, economic, democratic, and legal responsibilities. It ensures that children with disabilities are not left behind but are given equal opportunities to learn and grow alongside their peers. Beyond benefiting differently-abled learners, inclusion enriches classroom experiences for all students by fostering empathy, cooperation, and mutual respect. Economically, it offers a cost-effective and sustainable alternative to special schools, while socially it promotes harmony, reduces prejudice, and strengthens democratic values. From a humanitarian and legal standpoint, inclusive education safeguards the dignity and rights of every child, aligning with both constitutional provisions and international commitments such as the Salamanca Statement. Therefore, the justification for inclusive education is firmly grounded in its potential to create a more equitable, compassionate, and forward-looking society.

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