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The Role of Structured Empathetic Training for Inclusive Learning Environments in Indian Schools: A Systematic Review and Practical Framework

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Abstract

Objectives: The primary objective of this study is to examine the role of empathetic training and intervention for safe learning environments with special reference to children with special needs (CWSN). This study proposes a practical framework for educators promoting inclusive attitudes, improving peer relationships, and enhancing social-emotional learning (SEL) in accordance with NEP 2020.

Methods: A comprehensive systematic review of literature including scholarly publications, books, journals, and other academic sources mostly of the past decade and beyond are used to understand the issue.

Results: Analysis of literature indicates that children face peer victimization or rejection, and CWSN are at a higher risk due to present differences. This study highlights the potential of continuous structured training to inculcate empathy among students, supporting, caring and healthy interactions in heterogeneous classrooms within the Indian educational context.

Conclusions: It advances empathetic training of students for developing emotionally supportive environments that balance academic achievement with emotional resilience. Subsequently, it leads Indian schools to overcome barriers, foster holistic well-being, and enable all students to thrive academically, emotionally, and through enhanced social integration.

Keywords: Inclusive education, Empathetic training, Social Emotional Learning, Children with special needs, Peer victimization.

Introduction

The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action, UNESCO, 1994, proposed the the most effective way to combat discriminatory attitudes and education for all is when regular schools can provide an inclusive environment. It stated, "Every child has a fundamental right

and must be given the opportunity to achieve and maintain an acceptable level of learning" (UNESCO, 1994, p. 9).

This declaration produced an inductive effect in India, which constructed its first right-based legislative framework, the Persons with Disabilities Act, 1995 PWD Act 1995, followed by National Trust Act, 1999 promoting an inclusion of persons with autism, cerebral palsy, multiple disabilities, IDD, previously called Mental Retardation. When India became a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2006, it elevated inclusive education to a fundamental human right. Later, another act, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 expanded the category or recognized 21 categories and a mandate inclusion. The SDG 2015 reinforced equitable quality education for all by 2030, and the NEP 2020 advocated for universal design for learning, a barrier-free environment, and crucially the integration of social-emotional competency in mainstream schooling.

However, the ground reality of inclusive education in India shows a big gap. The UDISE+ 2024-25 produces only 0.86 to 0.91 total enrollment against an estimated population of 2.5 to 3% (Ministry of Education, 2026). The enrollment declines further from the elementary stage to higher secondary, showing just 0.54%. Beyond persistent infrastructure gaps only 34% of schools have accessible toilets and 52% have ramps with handrails (UNESCO, 2019). attitudinal barrier remains the most significant barrier-low expectations, negative attitude, social prejudice remains an entrenched obstacle. The study shows, far beyond infrastructure challenges, that pervasive peer victimization between 25.8% (India) to 42% (International) School children experience bullying ; with children with special needs (CWSN) these cases become more prominent due to visible difference and communication challenges (Nazir, 2019; Rose et al., 2011). This leads to emotional difficulties and impacts academic engagement, and in the worst-case scenario, produces dropout rates among children with special needs, which directly undermines all the efforts towards inclusion.

This obstacle needs to be taken care of, and empathy training can be a proactive measure. The NEP 2020 clearly shows the importance of human values such as empathy and respect. The empathy training, in the context of the social-emotional learning framework, produces evidence of improved classroom climate, reduced bullying, and enhanced social inclusion (Durlak et al., 2011; Lindsay & Edwards, 2013).

Purpose of the Study

The study focuses on the role of structured empathy training in fostering an inclusive learning environment in Indian schools. Through a review of the literature, examine the theoretical foundation of empathy and empathy as a teachable skill, the impact of empathy training, and existing empathy training models. Finally, the study seeks to provide recommendations for integrating empathy training in school education and practice. It also proposes a framework for implementation, and overall, the study attempts to translate the vision of an inclusive society.

Method

The present study is qualitative research design including thematic analysis and then synthesis. This study review the literature of past decade to make in-depth understanding the

role empathetic training in advancing inclusive and safe learning environment particularly for children with special need (CWSN). This study explores the role of empathetic training in ensuring safe and inclusive learning environment, analyse the peer victimization faced by students with reference to children with special need (CWSN). This study proposes a practical and strategic framework for educators promoting inclusive attitudes, improving peer relationships, and enhancing social-emotional learning (SEL) in accordance with NEP 2020. This framework encourages teachers to reteach, revise, and reimaging empathetic learning that truly nurture, reduce prejudices and thrive social integration of children with special need (CWSN).

This study draw on secondary data collected from resources include academic journal educational reports of national and international organisation, policy document and psychological studies from digital repository including 1. Google Scholar 2. Science direct 3. Shodhganga 4. Sage publications.

The reviewed data ranges from 2014 to 2025; However, some highly cited studies and foundational studies from last two decade also included for review. The studies published in English were only considered.

The search keywords used

1. “Peer victimization and children with special needs (CWSN)” 2. “Empathy as a Learned Skill 3. Teacher Role in Inclusive Empathetic Training” 4. Indian Context Challenges

The data collected were analysed using thematic analysis to find pattern and insights by combining the finding from literature. Further literature was classified into 1. Peer Victimization & CWSN 2. Empathy as a Learned Skill 3. Teacher Role in Inclusive education 4. Indian Context Challenges to inclusive education. This study proposes a framework drawn on systematic review of need and requirement of inclusive schools in India. Framework contains stage-wise empathy development structure following the NEP 2020 model. As literature suggest that the Empathy can be acquired so focus on systematic development is from early on, Foundational stage where focus is on developing the cognitive domain of Empathy where animated story or story telling focuses on understanding the emotion subsequently Preparatory stage further builds the understanding and here the perspective taking through Role play scenario which builds the connection between basic awareness and deeper emotional engagement.

The Middle school stage is where framework moves to emotional domain of empathy and they are engage in simulation-based experience which strengths the understanding and develops sensitivity finally the framework moves to prosocial engagement of learner in the secondary stage through community service and initiative.

The data from paper categorised for analysis in thematic synthesis for understanding the patterns the gaps. First is victimization and CWSN second empathy as learned skill; third, teacher role in influences teaching, Indian context challenges of education and the last is effective interventions. The structured review of literature provides manifold insight regarding a safe and empathetic learning environment for CWSN. It ranges from peer

victimization to effective intervention strategies. The synthesis are divided into five binary themes.

Theme 1: Peer Victimization & CWSN

Research shows that empathy training elevates inclusive education by enhancing and ensuring holistic performance of children with special needs. Furthermore it helps in developing social-interpersonal interactions, and creating an effective classroom environment. CWSN reported to be prone to the peer victimization, which manifests as:

1. Communicatory abuse
2. Exclusion from community
3. Bullying
4. The mimicry of disability characteristics

While Woods and Wolke (2004) observed comparable victimization rates among students with and without disabilities. Studies have shown that students with disabilities are at higher risk of peer rejection (Brown et al., 1989; Martlew & Hodson, 1991; Sabornie, 1994; Woods & Wolke, 2004).

Inclusive settings possess the potential to enhance social skill acquisition, foster overall social and academic development (Brown et al., 1989), increase acceptance, reduce negative stereotypes, and expand participation (Martlew & Hodson, 1991; Sabornie, 1994). In contrast, if students lack full integration into peer groups, these settings can maintain or exacerbate victimization (Martlew & Hodson, 1991). As Whitney and colleagues (1994) assert, “Just being different in a noticeable way” places individuals at an elevated risk for victimization (p. 213).

In the Indian context, there are fragmented studies which highlights the peer victimization cases in various regions . A study conducted across three regions of Kashmir (n=1103) revealed that 25.8% of students experienced bullying within the preceding month (Nazir, 2019). Furthermore, an empirical study analyzing violence across 124 rural and urban schools in Punjab and Chandigarh (n=3234) found that two-thirds of the sampled students faced frequent peer victimization (Garg, 2023). Also, UNICEF report states that slightly more than one in three adolescents experience peer bullying in and around school environments (UNICEF, 2018). Ultimately, these results conclude that the noticeable difference of a disability frequently catalyzes peer-led victimization.

Theme 2: Empathy as a Learned Skill

Contemporary literature departs from the traditional perspective of empathy as a fixed, innate trait, instead establishing it as a dynamic skill and professional competence requiring conscious pedagogical effort, reflection, and institutional support. In this vein, Sood (2025) integrates the principles of Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986) to argue that empathy is primarily acquired through observation, imitation, and—crucially—consistent modeling. By doing so, Sood positions these social processes as the essential channels for learning empathy both within and beyond school boundaries. Empathy is an essential, central life skill which lays the foundation for social competencies. Subsequently, empathy enhances social

awareness and perspective-taking skills which allow students to accept, acknowledge, and appreciate differences.

Review finding demonstrate that universal school-based Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs yield significant positive effects on targeted socio-emotional competencies, self-attitudes, and academic performance, while simultaneously increasing prosocial behaviors and reducing conduct and internalizing problems (Durlak et al., 2011). Research shows that empathy should inculcated in students through structured teaching and instructional strategies. These trainings and instructional strategies should be an integral part of the academic curriculum.

High-quality SEL instruction stands on four core elements, summed up by the acronym SAFE: Sequenced using coordinated training methods. Active making learning hands-on and focused on practice. Focused building the curriculum with clear intention. Explicit homing in on specific skills and knowledge (CASEL, 2020). Empedatic training doesn't treat this as just another task to add on. Instead, it sees it as a cornerstone for building strong educational frameworks and healthy social relationships.

Theme 3: Teacher Role in Inclusive Empathetic Training

The teacher plays a significant role in establishing an inclusive, safe, and empathetic learning environment by eliciting appropriate behaviors. This transition from teacher-centered or subject-centered to child-centered pedagogy requires effective inclusions which prioritize students' needs over the rigid academic curriculum.

A crucial challenge of a detector is difficulty in differentiating conflicts. The teacher often found confused in understanding the context of conflict, creating perceptual discrepancies among students and teachers. Educators frequently identify physical threats or abuse as bullying, yet they view verbal or social-emotional abuse as far less severe (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006; Hazler, Mil ler, Carney, & Green, 2001). Rogers (1980, as cited in Hornby, 2000) argued that empathy is a core component of the teacher-student relationship. Furthermore, Effective inclusion requires that educators develop specialized skills in consultation and collaboration (Hobbs & Westling, 2002).

In the Indian context, adopting adequate and appropriate teaching training is required to cultivate supportive pedagogy, which is central to empathetic learning. The teacher role extends from ensuring a safe and empathetic learning environment to active engagement of students, where all students feel valued.

Theme 4

In India, there's a gap between what education policies aim for and what actually happens in real classrooms. A primary obstacle: students with disabilities, or CWSN, often deal with negative attitudes and stereotypes not just from their peers, but from teachers and even other parents too. Furthermore, most school staff don't have the specialized training they need to create and run effective programs for students with disabilities in mainstream schools (Sharma & Deppeler, 2005). Jitendra (2016, as cited in Rajeswari, 2020) points out three major obstacles to real inclusion, and one of the biggest is that teachers simply aren't trained enough.

Solving this takes more than a few workshops. It means making serious investments in both pre-service and ongoing training, making sure teachers actually know how to handle the varied needs of students with disabilities (Sivvala et al., 2021). Statistical data indicates : about 70% of regular teachers in India haven't received any formal special education training, and 87% don't have access to the support services they need in the classroom (Das et al., 2013). The situation gets worse because regulations are split one council oversees general teacher training (NCTE), while another (RCI) handles special educators. The result is a fragmented system that leaves real gaps (Basha & Naseerali, 2017). India faces some tough challenges when it comes to including children with special needs in mainstream classrooms. One of the main problems is that policy goals often don't match what really happens on the ground. Kids with disabilities regularly run into negative attitudes and stereotypes, not just from classmates, but also from teachers and even other parents. Most teachers and school staff aren't trained to handle the unique needs of these students in regular schools, which makes a big difference (Sharma & Deppeler, 2005).

Jitendra (2016, as cited in Rajeswari, 2020) points out three major factors holding back inclusion, and one of the biggest is that teachers aren't getting the training they need. Fixing this problem means investing a lot more in training both before teachers start their jobs and while they're working so they can actually support students with disabilities (Sivvala et al., 2021). The numbers paint a clear picture: about 70% of regular teachers haven't had any formal training in special education, and 87% don't have access to the support services they need in their classrooms (Das et al., 2013). To make matters worse, the whole system is fragmented. The National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) handles general teacher training, while the Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI) oversees special educators so responsibilities end up divided and the system feels disjointed (Basha & Naseerali, 2017).

Discussion

The present analysis indicates that while inclusive education is a proactive measure designed to ensure learning for all, CWSN in mainstream settings remain highly vulnerable to peer victimization. Findings indicates that empathy is a dynamic, learned skill which requires a specific structure, systematic, age-appropriate intervention/ training. Evidence shows a high prevalence of peer-led bullying; for instance, studies in regions like Kashmir and Punjab report victimization rates between 25.8% and two-thirds of students.

This study highlights the role of the teacher in teaching empathy to students, which subsequently shows a gap in Indian schools, which is lack of teacher training and, most essentially, lack of structural, comprehensive framework for empathy teaching in Indian classrooms. NEP 2020 promotes empathy by integrating it into SEL and value-based education to foster ethically grounded citizens; it prioritizes the development of social, ethical, and emotional capacities in students (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Previous research indicates that an inclusive setting should naturally reduce negative stereotypes. However, in the Indian context, victimization is prevalent. Evidence shows a high prevalence of peer-led bullying. Another crucial aspect is the perception of teachers towards victimization; educators frequently identify physical threats as bullying, yet they view verbal or social-emotional abuse as far less severe (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006; Hazler et

al., 2001). The findings underscores the need for a bridge to gap the inclusivity, teacher training, and empathy training to student.

Empathy training requires a structured framework based on SAFE model (Sequence, Action, Focus, Explicit) (CASEL, 2020). In Indian classrooms, which often face constraints of resources and highly diversified classrooms, From empathy labs to classroom instructions and collaborative plays, it is essential to transform empathy from a mere abstract concept to concrete living classroom practice.

For this transition, this study proposes a which aligns to the stages of NEP 2020 and resonates itself through educational psychologist theories such as: Cognitive development (Piaget, 1936), Moral development (Kohlberg, 1958), and Moral development (Gilligan, 1982) which is age-appropriate, teachable, and adapted from many frameworks of student body.

Framework

Framework for Implementing Empathy Training – An Inclusive Education Imperative.

In line with the pedagogical and curricular design of NEP 2020, inclusion pedagogy requires the overlapping of three distinct domains of empathy as defined by **Daniel Goleman** and **Paul Ekman**:

Here's a framework that lays out the steps that teachers could implement to conduct empathy training in an inclusive classroom setting.

Three Domains of Empathy

1. **Cognitive Empathy:** The ability to understand another person's perspective or mental state.
2. **Emotional (Affective) Empathy:** The capacity to physically feel the emotions another person is experiencing.
3. **Compassionate Empathy (Empathic Concern):** The drive to take action and help the person in need.

Stage-wise Empathy Development Framework

As NEP 2020 brings forth a new pedagogical and curricular design of foundational, preparatory, middle, and secondary school education; we have aligned the empathy levels students should be trained at based on their stage of learning.

Empathy Training Framework for Inclusive Classroom

“The Global education developmental agenda signified through Goal 4 (SDG4) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which India ratified in 2015 - aims to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” by 2030. A goal this ambitious will necessitate an entire education system overhaul to enable and encourage learning so every one of the pivotal targets and goals (SDGs) outlined in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development can be met” (Ministry of Education, 2020, p. 4).

Foundational stage

At foundational level, age group 3 to 8 years. The framework emphasizes developing the cognitive domain of empathy. The inspiration is drawn from Empathy Lab, a resource which promotes reading and storytelling as an important component for developing empathy. At this

stage, focus is on developing understanding and building awareness. In India, storytelling or animated stories can be a tool for developing empathy for learners.

Preparatory stage: age group 8 to 11 years

The framework now moves to enable deep understanding and awareness by using various role-play scenarios. These activities allow learners to understand others' feelings, needs, and challenges. The various modes of play enhance understanding. One method can be sharing lived experiences, which will sow the seed for the next domain of empathy: emotional.

Middle school stage 11 to 14 years

At this stage, the emotional domain of empathy is central. Learners can be given simulation-based experiences related to various disabilities, which will develop emotional resonance, sensitivity, and responsiveness. The educator can also engage learners in group activities like problem-solving, project making. The learner's interpersonal skill development becomes critical, for example, active listening, which brings up collaboration supporting inclusion

The Secondary Stage: 14-18 Years

The secondary stage focuses on compassion and prosocial action domain of Empathy. At this stage, learners can be engaged in community service, social initiative, discussion and debates on ethical dilemmas, which will reinforce the idea of empathy that extends beyond attitude to meaningful action within and beyond the classroom environment.

Ethical Considerations in Empathy Activities

Teachers must exercise caution during empathy-building exercises to avoid unintended negative outcomes:

Avoid Pity- Empathy training should lead to respect and equity, not a "savior complex" or pity toward CWSN.

Simulation Ethics- Short-term simulations of disability (e.g., blindfolding) can sometimes oversimplify the experience. They must always be followed by deep debriefing led by individuals with lived experience.

Dignity First-Never use a specific student in the class as a "case study" for empathy training without their explicit consent and a clear pedagogical purpose.

Stage	Core Focus	Suggested Tools/Activities
Foundational Stage (Ages 3-8, Cognitive Domain)	Building Awareness & Basic Understanding of others' perspectives	Storytelling & Animated Stories Reading Resources (inspired by Empathy Lab to spark imagination)
Preparatory Stage (Ages 8-11, Deepening Awareness)	Deepening Awareness, Transition toward Emotional Domain	Role-Play Scenarios & Modes of Play Sharing Lived Experiences to create personal connections
Middle School	Developing Resonance,	Simulation-Based Experiences

(Ages 11-14, Emotional Domain)	Sensitivity, Responsiveness, & Interpersonal Skills	(e.g., disability simulations) Group Projects, Problem- Solving Active Listening for collaboration & inclusion
Secondary Stage (Ages 14-18, Prosocial Action)	Cultivating Compassion, Translating Empathy into Meaningful Action	Community Service & Social Initiatives Debates on Ethical Dilemmas Advocacy within & beyond the classroom

Conclusion

The review highlights that empathetic training in inclusive schools can significantly strengthen and foster a responsive and supportive environment for Children with Special Needs (CWSN). The findings indicate that empathy-based practices can serve as a proactive measure toward strengthening inclusive education efforts in India. The study further emphasizes the importance of addressing the attitudinal dimension of inclusion, particularly within schools and colleges, in order to create a more supportive and nurturing learning climate. The proposed framework suggests that when empathy is systematically developed across cognitive and behavioral domains, it contributes to positive peer interactions, supportive teacher–student relationships, and an overall inclusive school environment.

The implications of this review are particularly important for educational institutions, teacher educators, and policymakers. Integrating empathy-focused approaches within inclusive education may enhance participation, belongingness, and learning experiences of learners with special educational needs and disabilities. Such approaches can also improve teachers' responsiveness toward diverse learners and promote a culture of acceptance and collaboration within classrooms.

Based on the review, it is recommended that structured empathy training should be systematically incorporated into both pre-service and in-service teacher education programmes. Furthermore, evidence-based and longitudinal studies are needed to evaluate the long-term impact of the proposed framework across diverse socio-cultural and institutional contexts in Indian schools. Future research should also examine how empathy training influences school climate, peer relationships, and inclusive practices, while exploring its effectiveness in enhancing learner engagement, participation, and educational outcomes for children with special educational needs and disabilities.

Delimitations

1. First and foremost, as any systematic review, our study is limited by the quantity and variability of primary literature included in the analysis.

2. Our study does not attempt to summarize medical or rehabilitation interventions for certain disabilities. We address disability from a social and humanistic perspective, addressing systemic and pedagogical obstacles.
3. Our systematic review mainly consists of scholarly publications, books, and reports from the recent ten years (circa 2010–2024), allowing us to draw an informational baseline relevant to modern policy trends and societal circumstances.
4. The study sample is composed of CWSN placed in mainstream educational institutions, as opposed to children in separate special schools.

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