



INCLUSIVE EDUCATION – OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

Dr. E. SUDHA MADHURI

Guest Faculty, Institute of Advanced Studies in Education (IASE),
Andhra University, Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh, India.

ORCID ID: 0009-0007-9364-0443

Abstract

Inclusive education is one of the recent trends that many international organisations interested in educating people with disabilities seek to promote in various educational systems around the world. Therefore, many relevant international organisations have urged the need to adopt this concept as a cornerstone in any educational system that seeks to be an integral part of the global education system and other related human rights, such as the right to citizenship and the right to belonging. For example, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 stated that education is a human right for everyone (Munongi, 2022). Specifically, with regard to inclusive education, in 1994, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) organised its international conference in Salamanca, Spain, under the title “The International Conference on Education for People with Special Needs: Access and Quality,” which resulted in the 1994 Salamanca statement and framework. This statement was signed by 92 countries and 25 international organisations. The main objective of this statement was to promote and develop inclusive education systems globally (Ainscow et al. 2019).

Key Words: development, fundamental, inclusive education, schooling, special needs

Received: 10.11.2025; Accepted: 25.11.2025; Publication: 10.12.2025

Definition of Inclusive Education

Inclusive education does not have a single, universally agreed-upon definition, as explained by Roger Slee in his famous book *The irregular school: Exclusion, schooling, and inclusive education* (Slee, 2011). Bates et al. (2015, p. 1929) argue that “there is, as yet, no consensus about what inclusive education is or how it should be implemented in schools.” The absence of a unified definition of inclusive education was attributed to several reasons. These reasons varied based on the diversity of each research school that touched on this aspect. For example, Loreman et al. (2014) attributed this absence to a fundamental reason, including the lack of a unified definition of inclusive education approved by relevant international organisations. On the other hand, Jahnukainen (2015) emphasised that the lack of a unified definition of inclusive education is due to the overlap and confusion in the use of various and



multiple terms such as “integration,” “mainstreaming,” and “placement” as well as the variation in terms from one country to another and one educational system to another.

Inclusion as is known today has its origins in special education. The development of special education field has involved a series of stages, during which education systems have explored different ways of responding to children with disabilities, and to students who experience difficulties in learning. In some cases, special education has been provided as a supplement to general education, in other cases it has been entirely separate field. In recent years, the appropriateness of separate systems of education has been challenged, both from a human rights perspective and from the point of view of effectiveness in dealing with children with special needs. In past 20 years, the issue of inclusion has had a huge impact on development in thinking and practice in the education of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) both in India and overseas. Legislation of most countries encourages regular schools to adopt a more inclusive approach to education.

Today, in India there is a growing importance to provide equal opportunities for education for all. One of the important aims of schools in India has become to include students with special needs in the regular classrooms. The Government of India has enacted the legislation Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities and Full Participation) Act, 1995 (PWD Act) to achieve the goal of providing access to free education in an appropriate environment to all learners with disabilities till the learner attains the age of eighteen years. The Act endeavors to promote the integration of learners with disabilities in mainstream schools by providing inclusive education. Inclusive education opposes the practice of separation and it is based on the notion of equity. Emphasis is given to the needs and rights of children, including their right to education. It accepts all children as they are, providing them with adequate resources and support according to their needs. When talking about integration, it refers to the integration of an individual into a school in which learner was not previously accepted.

Inclusive education does not simply refer to the placement of children with disabilities into normal schools, but it is also concerned with the conditions under which all children can be educated effectively (Barton, 1997). Sebba and Ainscow (1996) define inclusive education as the process with which schools try to respond to all pupils as individuals, reviewing the organization and provision of their curriculum.

THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN INDIA

The Indian education system is structured as follows:

Pre-School: Education at this level is not compulsory. The Montessori system is especially popular at the pre-school level



Kindergarten: This is divided into lower kindergarten (for three- to four-year olds) and upper kindergarten (for four- to five-year-olds)

Primary School: First to fifth standard/class/grade (for six- to ten-year-olds)

Middle School: Fifth to eighth standard/class/grade (for 11- to 14-year-olds)

Secondary School: Ninth and tenth standard/class/grade (for 14- to 16-year-olds)

Higher Secondary or Pre-University: 11th and 12th standard/class/grade (for 16- to 17-year-olds) This is when students choose an academic area on which to focus .

Undergraduate and Graduate: Bachelors degree is a three-year degree in science, commerce and arts.

Postgraduate and Professional Courses: Medicine, Engineering, Management and Teacher Education.

Types of Schools

There are mainly three streams of school education in India. Two of these are coordinated at the national level, of which one is under the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) named Kendriya Vidyalayas, run by the central government. The second central scheme is the Indian Certificate of Secondary Education (ICSE). These are private schools. The third stream of school is Secondary School Certificate (SSC) run by each state government in India. Other schools in India are National Open Schools which provide education up to the higher secondary level for children whose schooling have been interrupted and have been unable to complete formal education and Special Needs Schools which provides nonformal education and vocational training to children with disabilities. Malini Sen (2007) reports that school in India at all the levels need to promote an education system that brings all learners onto a common platform. The curriculum needs to balance what is common for all and at the same time, take into account the individual needs of all the learners.

The biggest challenge to inclusion of children with special needs is lack of awareness in school authorities and teachers in India. Most schools do not have the appropriate environment to make children with disabilities feel welcome. “Besides lack of resources and infrastructure, the current education system does not allow for individual development of children at their own pace. Teachers are unable to cope with differences in children, not because they do not want to, but due to lack of training to indentify students with disabilities. All this stems from lack of awareness,” asserts Lilly Vishwanathan, Project Manager, Plan India and Delhi. In a typical Indian class, there are fifty or more children, Firstly, children with disabilities, fall outside the teacher’s tolerance level. Secondly, their nondisabled peers do not accept these students. Thirdly, the reason children with disabilities are especially



vulnerable, particularly in the Indian milieu, is that teachers do not know how to deal with these children. There is a visible lack of awareness among teachers. In India, the government and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are initiating measures to review and plan appropriate strategies for inclusive education. These measures include evolving policy guidelines, analyzing practices, developing teacher training programmes, and creating resource persons and special teachers by establishing linkages to complement each other.

The roles of the teachers today are very diverse and they need to understand their contribution towards making a good individual out of every student. To understand the students with disabilities training of teachers is necessary. The present study revealed that it is possible to develop awareness of inclusive education among preservice teachers. The responsibility to train teacher lies on the preservice teacher education. The present situation demands preservice teachers become confident, competent, and skillful to handle any situation in inclusive setup.

Inclusive Education is a new approach towards educating the children with disability and learning difficulties with that of normal ones under the same roof. It advocates that special children with special needs have to be educated along with normal peers in regular classrooms. It brings all students together in one classroom and community, regardless of their strengths or weaknesses in any area, and seeks to maximize the potential of all students. It is one of the most effective ways to promote an inclusive and tolerant society. India has advocated the implementation of inclusive education supported by relevant policies, legal enactments, schemes, programmes and plans.

The 1994 Salamanca statement on inclusive education states— “School should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions. This should include disabled and gifted children, street and working children, children from remote or nomadic populations, children from linguistic, ethnic or cultural minorities and children from other disadvantaged or marginalized areas or groups.”

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.



Opportunities of Inclusive Education: Provides access to students with disabilities to curricula and text books to which most of the other students are exposed who have no disability. Inclusive education enables the handicapped and the gifted to learn in accordance with their potential and needs. Provides equal opportunities to special children with regard to education. Inclusive education is based on the principles of social justice and human rights. No separate education for special children because it terms it as, dehumanizing, labelling ineffective and expensive. Inclusive education provides appropriate education to special children that afford them the opportunity to achieve their best and safeguards the interest of the children.

Inclusive education firmly states that the educational institutions shall make to every extent possible, their facilities and programmes amenable to use with relative ease by physically challenged students. Provide special support to students who wish to pursue their higher education. With the right training and support, good strategies, the children with special educational needs can be successfully included in the mainstream education. Inclusion of special children in inclusive education is the process by which schools, local authorities of education and others develop their cultures, policies and practices to include all the students. Inclusive education services offer excellent choice and incorporate the views of parents and children.

Challenges of Inclusive Education:

The latest challenge to inclusive education is to meet the needs of all the children, with and without disability in the general classroom. It is not an easy process and requires lot of struggle and commitment to overcome attitudinal and social barriers. The determinant factors that refers to the attitude of the community towards persons with disabilities and inclusion is the limited understanding of the concept of disability, negative attitude towards persons with disabilities and a hardened resistance to change. The challenge towards inclusive education emanates from different directions e.g. Attitudinal factors.

- Parental approach.
- Resistance to change.
- Rigid school system and learning environment.
- Lack of clear educational strategies.
- Lack of instructional and learning materials.
- Inadequate budget.
- Poor response by the society at large.
- Remove barriers to learning and participation.

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.

The aspiration to inclusive education has increased significantly following the promulgation in 1994 of the Salamanca Statement and more recently the recognition of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. Inclusive education is a best practice, policy and provision in education systems and schools. Orientations to inclusive education are important since they shape practice implementation. This paper explored the rationale and critique of inclusive education. Evidentially, the critique professes measures such as evidence-based practice, teacher professional development and effective resourcing as important to enhancing inclusive education. The paper argues that beyond the criticisms, inclusive education remains the best educational alternative for promoting equitable, socially just and value-oriented practice in schools and education systems. It suggests 'accelerated inclusive education' as a best practice for achieving comprehensive inclusion especially for those with



disability or marginalised in schools and society. The paper provides some implications for inclusive education practice in developing countries.

Conclusion

Inclusion is the ideological basis for the process of inclusion of students with disabilities in general education. It is an idea where every child will have a certain place in the field of education and teachers will become not only information distributors, but also appropriate teaching-assistants. The ideal inclusive situation will only arise when the education of students with disabilities becomes an integral part of that education system. That is to say, from now on, the general teachers of every general school will be able to provide minimum education to the disabled students without the help of any special teacher.

References

1. Dash, N. (2012). Inclusive Education. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors (P) Ltd.
2. Janshala (2003): Perspectives in Special Needs Education in India: A Journey from Isolation to Inclusion. Available on www.un.org.in/janshala/janmar03/incluson.html-38k.
3. Menon, L. (2014). Inclusive and Integrated Approaches to Special Education. New Delhi: Kanishka Publishers, Distributors.
4. MHRD (2005): Action Plan for Inclusive Education of Children and Youth with Disabilities. Available on <http://www.education.nic.in>.
5. Sharma, B. (2011). Inclusive Education Needs, Practices and Prospects. New Delhi: Kanishka Publishers, Distributors.
6. Sexena, K. M. (2008). Inclusion Issues and Perspectives. New Delhi: Kanishka Publishers, Distributors.
7. Sharma, Y. K. (2014). Inclusive Education Planning and Management of Curriculum. New Delhi: Kanishka Publishers, Distributor.
8. Siddiqui, H. (20018/19). Inclusive Education, Agra-2: Agrawal Publications.
9. Sanjeev. K. (2007): Feasibility of Inclusive Education In Knowledge economy of Bihar: Initiative and Perspective at higher Level, Peoples Dialogue on Education, Vol.1, No.1, January issue, pp.50-59.