



# Conception and Misconception of Elementary School Teachers about Inclusion

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to examine elementary level teachers' beliefs on inclusion and a range of classroom practices that ongoing along with initiatives for inclusiveness. The study focuses on teachers' experiences and practices used in classrooms, based on data collected from elementary school teachers and classroom observations. The major findings show that, a larger social domain, top-down decision forcing approach can affect teachers own cognitive congruence and their act towards accepting disabilities in classroom. Their belief of responsibilities towards these students are of a range of other stakeholders which significantly reflected in their classroom practices. Teachers clear indication of special schools for students with disabilities challenged the running axiom of "everyone" of inclusive practice in the study. Based on the findings the paper also outlines educational implications.

**Keywords:** Inclusive Education, Elementary school Teachers, Elementary schools, Adaptation process, Classroom management

The National Education Policy (NEP) is a comprehensive policy that was formulated by the Government of India in July 2020, was seen as the sole favorable component to reforming the Indian education system in its totality. The current system appears to have made an effort to remove any possible obstacles to learning for all children through different initiatives and of a revised framework of curriculum promised by National education policy. Despite attempts, it has been claimed that some teachers believe it is impractical to include all children in a single classroom (Gupta 1984; Jangira, 1995) while other believe inclusive education only applies to students who are disabilities (Croll & Moses, 2000). The success of

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the elementary educational system's transition to inclusion as a guiding principle may therefore depend on the current crop of teachers. Therefore, this paper examines how teachers of elementary schools perceive inclusive education. This inquiry aims to determine how participants view inclusive education and whether they possess the knowledge needed to encourage students to completely participate in the creation of this significant educational initiative.

Before analyzing teachers' beliefs, it appears essential to provide an overview of the development of inclusive education as well as an outline of how it is defined and operationalized within the Indian education framework. It has been a long time since the English monarchy's individualism was questioned as a result of the emergence of liberalism, paving the way for a right-based strategy. John Locke, the father of liberalism, claimed that people are free and deserving of using reason to direct their behavior from the moment they are born. This contemporary form of liberalism holds that a nation's dedication to each child's education is its duty. The centralization of all human rights is most consistent with this liberal philosophy, which also has a big impact on Indian and around the world policy frameworks.

### **The Evolution of Inclusion Approach**

The idea of inclusion should not be considered a recent development. Indeed its origin may be tracked back in the 1990s, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) have been promoting the idea that all children in the world have the same rights to education (Mukhopadhyay & Mani, 2000) through several united nation level initiatives in subsequent years such as UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, the UN Standard Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities in 1993, and the remarkable UNESCO Salamanca Statement in 1994 and additionally UNESCAP Biwako Millennium Framework in 2002. This may have been the first time in a clear and concise way to highlight the idea of inclusive education as one that requires international consent. Two primary driving factors which are: "The right based educational opportunities for all children, including children with disabilities", and support of "legal enactments" are the key to serve as the impetus for inclusion in the Indian education system.

However, it is observable that, despite these efforts, the Indian educational system has only lately started implementing inclusive practices. Amongst the resilience and adaptation of such new practice external influences, development of new concepts following global developments like the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), sudden increased foreign funding, the nation was not prepared for such events at the grassroots level.

Although some might argue, now the adoption of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Schooling Act (RTE) (The Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2009) and The RPwD Act (2016) can be considered as the major follow up by the Govt. of India to preserve the Rights of students.

### **The Difficulties of Definition**

There is no question that the idea of inclusion has elevated itself to a high status within the Indian

educational system after even a cursory study of the relevant literature. A distinctive context of education (Singh, 2016) has been set out in 2005 by the National Curriculum Framework (NCF), and the Central Advisory Board for Education (CABE) observed that at some point, all children have special needs and may not be the result of disability only (Gowramma *et al.* 2018) and therefore the philosophy of inclusion is an advantage for all kind of students. The term ‘disadvantaged group’ used under RTE-2009 rise a more debate for having more consideration defines such groups as those in scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, backward social and educational classes or disadvantaged by socially, culturally, economically, geographically, linguistically, gender or other factors (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2009 page 2).

In addition, despite the SSA objectives are set at the national level, there is flexibility in how they are carried out at the state and district levels, primarily based on the number of children identified and the available resources (Singal, 2016). Not surprisingly the multiple models implemented for a single objective resulted in rising concerns of quality education for all students.

### **The Current Position**

The success of the adoption of inclusive practices may depend on a variety of parameters. An analysis of these fundamental elements makes a compelling case for the conception or misconception of teaching professionals. It would seem appropriate therefore to examine how schools, and more specifically elementary teachers, may have an influence towards implementation of inclusive education.

The research made clear how teachers perceived various types of disability. Teachers’ reluctance to educate students with disabilities due to workload has an impact on how they perceive inclusion. Their perspective is greatly influenced by their experience and training too. Jamnet (2010) find out, while low socioeconomic conditions contribute to the rise in ADHD behaviors among students, instructors’ negative attitudes toward them and low expectations from these students lead to the exclusion of the majority of children from learning. Study showed that the qualification of teachers has also an impact on their attitude towards student with disability (Prakash, 2012). Teachers with higher qualifications were more likely to include hearing impairment than teachers with lower qualifications. While the ability of teachers in creating an inclusive classroom is highly increased in the experimental study conducted by Leifler (2020), their professional commitment is affected by their effort towards inclusion process (Bansal, 2016).

Studies also found that the Discriminatory practices, Macro-cultural barriers, Diversity inside class and Linguistic differences are reflected in teachers and their perception. Ramachandran and Naorem (2012) reported that the teachers in Madhya Pradesh think that pupils who are not “bright” are left behind in class because it is difficult to motivate them. Even teachers from the SC group in Odisha shared the perception that SC and ST students (as well as some OBC students) are “dull and delayed in academics”. Children who “fear that teachers scold, beat, or insult them or that co-peers mock them about what they do not know” were discovered in great numbers, according to the Center for Equity Studies’ (2014) research. As they are “slow learners” or “unteachable,” their teachers publicly discriminated against

them. The English mandated textbooks by the State school board are a barrier for indigenous students to acquire curricular content and form founded by Dar and Najar (2017). It seems the development of a school ethos that not only allows all students to be supported but also caters to the needs of teachers will seem to be necessary if schools are to become inclusive (Hanco, 2003).

## **Research Questions**

According to the literature analysis above, teachers' definitions of inclusive education, their training in this area, and their confidence in their ability to provide it all seem to have an impact on how effectively it is implemented. The study addresses three questions in an effort to determine whether elementary teachers are prepared to promote inclusive education:

1. Do teachers believe that all children population can receive an education in one classroom setting?
2. Do teachers feel that the schools have the necessary adaptation facilities to support the inclusive educational practices?
3. What are the inclusive practices followed at elementary schools?

## **Methodology**

The researcher used a qualitative interpretive approach of inquiry for comprehending the intentions, meanings, and purposes people assign to their own behavior and interactions with other people. The naturalistic inquiry was done within a 4-A scheme recommended by Tomassevski (2006) in order to provide a more systematic view of participants. It encompasses the four areas of focus: availability, accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability within a right based model towards inclusion.

## **Participants**

The study used a purposeful sampling technique to select the participants. Patton (2015) emphasized the significance of purposeful sampling by stating: "Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry." The present study selected the sample within the geo-political boundaries of Kendrapada and Ganjam districts of Odisha state. Key individuals (such as Block Education Officers-BEOs) were asked to recommend names of schools that they believed to be the best inclusive practices because there was no clear definition of inclusive schools in Odisha. Amongst the suggested names 09 schools were selected for the study.

## **Tools and Techniques**

The perception of teachers was investigated using a semi-structured open-ended interview. Each of the nine teachers participated in the interview. To assess their perceptions of inclusive classroom practices on the two dimensions specified in the research objectives, each teacher is individually questioned.

Nine classroom observations were made in addition to interviews to examine the level of preparedness in the schools. The outline of sample and techniques of data collection is given in the table 1.

**Table 1:** Sample and Data collection techniques

	<b>Sample</b>	<b>Data collection techniques</b>
Teachers	9 teachers (5 males, 4 females)	9 Semi-structured interviews
Schools	9 schools (5 public schools, 4 madrasahs)	18 classroom observations

### Data Analysis

The phases of data analysis were two-tiered. The themes for data analysis in the first layer were the markers and indicators of inclusive education. The emergent marker was detected in the second layer through inductive analysis. The data was organized into conceptual categories and themes through the use of multi-layered thematic analysis, which also aided in the formulation of numerous key generalizations or concepts. Themes from the interviews mostly revolved around the 4-A scheme. Classroom climate and teaching-learning structure were the two primary areas of classroom observation.

### Findings

The data and insights offered here particularly address the following concerns:

1. The transformational process carried out in these schools in an attempt to become “inclusive”.
2. The classroom practices and adaptations for creating a “Inclusive classroom culture”.
3. Perception of teachers in this process and their reflections regarding school preparedness for successful inclusion.

### Making it Happen

#### *The transformational process*

In accepting a broad group of pupils, including those with disabilities, teachers held a variety of viewpoints. A phobic reaction towards the said practice is an instance for their ignorance about the said practice.

*‘I’m not sure whether the disabilities ...Off course everyone cannot be included, can they? not that I wouldn’t want to include them’.*

In all 09 schools’ respondents identified ‘accountable individualized measures as a growing problem. The learning of all kids is more important to teachers than the needs of specific children. The majority of educators thought that letting students figure out the issues on their own would motivate them to learn throughout their lives; yet, there are instances when it is only possible to provide emotional support and guidance.

Teachers exposed the community's members' unwillingness to cooperate when admitting severe disabilities. In terms of academic hardship for normal students to slight differences (cultural/linguistic minorities, learning difficulties) by extreme disabilities, admission of all types of students, including those with disabilities, is considered unreasonable by community members.

Some teachers recognize that there may be a gap between a student's social and cognitive perspectives on "completeness", from the perspective of society. This may make it difficult for them to enter the academic setting. Teachers also admitted that although while all students have access to facilities that allow for "Equal" participation, they are sometimes unable to confirm if a student can participate in the academic setting of their school.

The teachers of elementary schools were aware that pupils with severe disabilities and mental disturbances might experience a medical emergency. Responding to the unstructured inquiry, "So that's why you don't want to include them?" Most of the general school teachers, including some Madrashah teachers, voiced conflicting perspectives, asking: "Why do you keep saying that? Yes, I really want them to be included, but in other places, they might have greater benefits or a bigger room—possibly a school that is for them." Because the resources and environment of the school are now insufficient for practising inclusiveness by taking a varied group of pupils, the remarks were primarily preconceived and as a result tempting to include only normal students. Teachers often use words like "he might include" and "they should be at" that run counter to the axiom of inclusivity that "everyone" is accepted.

The efforts of teachers to break down social and attitudinal barriers are sometimes perceived as being confined to offering emotional support and showing empathy for their students. This mainly featured occurrences that were accidental rather than planned. Removing attitudinal barriers was difficult for some teachers. One of the teachers revealed "*It's challenging to convince students and sometimes other staff of schools regarding this because some of them don't want to hear that they are causing the problem. It's difficult when matters are like that*".

Teachers stated in many interviews that the heads or BEOs had not taken the realities of their classrooms into account. The teachers of Madrashas were argued that though they were not involved in the taking any decision, they nonetheless bore the burden of decisions. The next part discusses the classroom practices and adaptations for creating a "Inclusive classroom culture".

Teachers firmly believe that students' cultural background influences their social behavior in schools in a significant way. Despite their best efforts, teachers were powerless to stop peer-produced bullying and name-calling targeted towards religious minorities in the classroom.

### *The classroom system*

The climate of classroom not necessarily relate positively towards an inclusion friendly classroom despite many positive measures. The ease with which students accepting to teacher remarks and receive them during class activities has been observed as a sign of positive student-teacher interactions. Yet, student behaviour in the classroom suggested a lower-moderate discussion led acceptance of teachers

remarks. But most children prefer to remain puzzled or ask their peers for explanations when they are confused instead of asking questions to teachers, which is an indication of fear factor towards teachers which are still present in the classrooms.

Although teachers did make accommodations for disabled children in the classroom, it was found that these pupils were still seen as the “excluded ones”. The teachers’ attempts to foster inclusivity were refuted by the observation of the classroom, as the majority of students did not voice their thoughts on the classroom interactions. Consequently, no CWSNs were ever observed contributing ideas to group projects.

In the majority of classrooms, a small number of students assume leadership roles in group or classroom activities, and teachers and peers seem to be fine with it. The evidence used to dispute the teachers’ claims about peer segregation included normal students sharing copies with CWSNs, accompanying them to the restroom, and assisting them in engaging in various classroom activities etc. Teachers would frequently issue strong instructions to their students to maintain silence. In one of the instances a social science teacher 11 times asked students to keep silence/stop shouting within 45 mins of teaching. The noisy classroom led teachers in frustration. The teachers ordered several pupils to stand up because the teacher was so annoyed by the volume of the disturbance, and he warned several times that anyone who talked would have to complete extra work on the blackboards.

This might be expected in the light of the classroom observation that teachers often practice inconsistent roles in the class-room and of the fact that the study indicates little inclusive practices as a result of normal teacher behavior without any modification for the demands to meet inclusivity. In four classroom observations, activities such as simplifying the language, helping students with group projects, providing them individualised feedback on their work, etc. were seen. Although it was discovered that teachers were aware of and sensitive to CWSNs, they were unable to offer practical solutions in the classroom for particular pupils.

### *The adaptation process*

Although most teachers concur that it is a good idea to be flexible when it comes to teaching methods, they often lack the knowledge of where the alterations should be made because they are rule-bidders. After one academic year, teachers stated that they place a high value on the overall “learning outcome” that a class should attain, as opposed to “individualised support measures” a different endeavour that takes more time and effort but has no financial benefit to the providers.

Participants claimed that having an expert’s perspective is necessary for teachers to feel confident about creating an effective inclusive design in the classroom. Teachers adopt a non-judgmental stance while considering whether or not changing their teaching strategies would be beneficial, as frequent changes might only lead to chaos. But interestingly, adaptation in curriculum highly appreciated by respondents, but their concerns are with time boundary.

In addition to making demands on learning outcome, individual support measure, need of experts, curriculum etc. teachers also emphasized on the role of parents in child's learning. Teachers have repeatedly advocated that the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) be able to provide support services for successful inclusion process. They claimed that most parents are unaware of their responsibility and rely solely on teachers to educate their children.

Strangely, the teachers at these institutions do not believe that it is their responsibility that people with disabilities get admitted to their schools; instead, they rely entirely on others for their education.

## DISCUSSION

The study shed light on a variety of events that can lead to speculation of the unwanted contributions made by some teachers to the discrepancies that undermine their own sense of congruence and regard, due to the disordered cognitive processes originating from the larger social domain (Robinson, & Goodey, 2017; Croll and Moses, 2000; Shevlin, Winder, and Flynn, 2013). Rightly argued by Rao, Cheng, K. & Narain, (2003) Indian educators are typically viewed as knowledge providers rather than facilitators of learning. Because of their dependence on parents, experts, NGOs, and special educators to facilitate the learning of disabled pupils and show the community's influence, teachers may come to believe that they are merely acting as passive agents for implementing educational reforms. Teachers don't feel like they can effect change. (Priestley, 2011) which is a crucial element for a successful educational implementation of any act, (Fullan, 1993b).

Despite numerous compassionate attempts to include CWSNs in classroom routines, schools lack a right-based inclusion strategy. O'Brien and Forest (1989, p. 6) correctly observed "there is no complete procedure for instant inclusion, the making of an inclusive school a reality is a difficult task". The study identifies teachers as the primary decision-makers for the standard of the learning environment, but the majority of the teachers reported they are rule-bidding, thereby unable to take decisions on their own. The system is made more complex by the contradiction between practitioners and decision-makers, which is evident in the voices of the teachers. Also, it was more challenging to practise an inclusive culture due to the insufficient resources.

Appasamy, Guhan, Hema, Majumdar, and Vaidyanathan (1995) note the continued existence of "multiple forms of inequality: 'market inequality' (poverty), 'spatial and sexual disparity', 'status inequality', which continue to render certain social groups incapable of achieving freedom from illiteracy and innumeracy" (p. 42). Such "market inequality" is evident in the current study as all individuals share struggle with a number of disparities, including different forms of disabilities, challenges relating to minorities' religion and cultures, and academic aptitudes of different learners.

An incredibly pleasant student-student interaction was seen in classroom activities, which was in direct opposition to teachers' perceptions of peer-led social exclusion. Students have been observed offering assistance to CWSNs, whether it be by exchanging copies or escorting them to the restroom. Peer effect on children's behaviour in a school setting, including their social, cognitive, ethical, and emotional

development, begins to show more clearly (Kolak, 2010). It seems the anxiety towards teachers, however, persists as evidenced by the students' tendency to remain confused and seek to their friends rather than teachers when they have questions. (Kearney *et al.* 1984).

Due to large classroom demands, little to no individual attention and few student leadership in group works, efforts are also primarily focused on upholding discipline, rather than individual attention and curricular adaptation, which is defined as perfect silence and no noise for smooth conduction of teacher led classroom practices (Shotton, 1998).

## Implication

Finding common ground for so many challenges to implementing inclusive policies is probably impossible. Here some key implications of the study highlight a few areas that may be useful to teachers and other stakeholders who are either directly or indirectly involved in putting inclusive practises into reality. It appears that the top-down decision-making process has significant impact on teachers by forcing them to practice any practice. To make the inclusion a reality, necessary measures should be implemented to incorporate them at all levels, from the state to the block. It is important to plan ongoing professional development for teachers for adapting teaching methods to all types of student learning. A handbook of inclusive approach of assessment adaptation should be prepared by taking consideration to all spectrums of children and made available to schools. The study is too early to say peer led social inclusion strategies as the peer acceptance process is skewed towards age and other social factors. Yet, value-integrated awareness programmes should be arranged by schools to promote a healthy peer relationship. The study used a diagnostic technique to uncover the main causes of teachers' conceptions and misconceptions about inclusion; subsequent longitudinal study may aid in producing deeper insights and long-term implications.

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