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Towards equity: Investigating inclusive education practices in government secondary schools of Trivandrum, Kerala

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Abstract
Inclusive education is a cornerstone of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which envisions an equitable and accessible schooling system for all learners, including those with diverse learning needs. This study, titled Towards Equity: Investigating Inclusive Education Practices in Government Secondary Schools of Trivandrum, Kerala, explores how inclusive education is conceptualized and practiced at the grassroots level. It examines the alignment of current practices with NEP 2020 objectives, focusing on the integration of children with disabilities and other marginalized groups. The research identifies several limitations in the existing system, including inadequate staff training, lack of specialized support personnel, and infrastructural gaps. Challenges in effective policy implementation-ranging from resource constraints to attitudinal barriers-are also discussed. The study concludes with actionable recommendations to strengthen inclusive education, such as enhanced teacher training, restructuring staff patterns, improved monitoring mechanisms, and better community engagement to foster a truly inclusive educational environment.

Keywords: Inclusive education practices, secondary school

Introduction
Inclusive education has emerged as a central theme in global educational discourse, particularly in the context of ensuring equity and social justice. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 reaffirms India's commitment to creating an inclusive, equitable, and flexible educational framework that caters to the diverse needs of all learners, including children with disabilities, socio-economically disadvantaged groups, and linguistic or gender minorities. According to NEP 2020, "no child should be left behind," and it emphasizes early intervention, peer learning, barrier-free infrastructure, and capacity-building among educators to support inclusive learning environments. However, despite these progressive directives, several challenges persist in translating policy into effective classroom practice, particularly in government schools. Prior studies (Singal, 2019; Pandey, 2021) [1, 2] have indicated that while inclusive education is theoretically supported, its practical implementation often falls short due to inadequate teacher preparedness, infrastructure deficits, and societal attitudes toward disability and difference.

In Kerala-often hailed for its high literacy rate and progressive educational policies-the promise of inclusive education presents a mixed picture. A 2023 report by The Hindu highlighted how resource rooms in many government schools across Kerala remain underutilized or understaffed, while special educators are either unavailable or appointed on temporary contracts. Furthermore, many of the field studies suggest that inclusive education remains largely symbolic in many secondary schools, where students with special needs are either informally excluded from classroom participation or provided with minimal academic support. In Trivandrum district, which represents both urban and rural educational settings, these issues are compounded by logistical challenges, lack of awareness among stakeholders, and inadequate training for general education teachers who are expected to implement inclusive practices without sufficient support or guidelines.

This study, therefore, becomes significant in the current scenario-especially from the viewpoint of a teacher educator-because it sheds light on the critical gaps between policy ideals and ground realities. For inclusive education to move beyond tokenistic implementation, there must be a deeper understanding of systemic barriers and the lived experiences of teachers, students, and administrators. As a teacher educator, it is imperative to rethink pre-service and in-service training models, restructure staff deployment patterns, and advocate for an inclusive ethos at the institutional level. This research aims to provide evidence-based recommendations to guide teacher training programs, influence policy reform, and contribute to a more just and inclusive educational future in Kerala and beyond.

Origin of the study

The impetus for this study arose from first-hand observations and experiences during the practice teaching sessions of student teachers in government and government-aided secondary schools in Trivandrum district. During the training period, student teachers consistently reported a lack of structured inclusive practices in classrooms, especially concerning children with disabilities and learning difficulties. Many regular teachers, due to heavy workloads or insufficient training, were found to provide minimal attention or individual care to these learners, often relying on a generalized teaching approach that overlooked the diverse needs of students. Schools lacked proper support systems such as special educators, individualized learning materials, and barrier-free infrastructure. Additionally, evaluation strategies largely followed a uniform, summative model, failing to accommodate alternative assessments suited for children with special needs. These on-ground realities reflect a significant disconnect between the inclusive ideals promoted by the National Education Policy 2020 and their actual implementation, thus highlighting the urgency of this investigation into inclusive education practices.

Review of Related Literature and Studies

Inclusive education has gained global attention as an essential approach to achieving educational equity. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and Sustainable Development Goal 4 emphasize the importance of inclusive and equitable quality education for all learners. In the Indian context, the Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009 and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 have reiterated the government's commitment to inclusive education. NEP 2020 envisions inclusive classrooms where children with special needs are mainstreamed through appropriate support, peer learning, and teacher training (Ministry of Education, 2020). However, bridging the gap between policy and practice remains a challenge, particularly in government schools that often struggle with limited resources.

Inclusive education, as a concept and practice, has evolved significantly over the past few decades, moving from integrationist approaches to more transformative paradigms of equity and social justice. According to Ainscow and Miles (2008) [5], inclusive education is not merely about placing children with disabilities into mainstream classrooms, but about restructuring schools to accommodate and celebrate learner diversity. The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) marked a global turning point, urging educational systems to adopt inclusive practices as a fundamental human right. In the Indian context, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016) and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 both emphasize inclusive education as a key pillar for achieving equity in schooling.

Teacher preparedness is another critical factor in ensuring the success of inclusive education. Research by Sharma and Nuttal (2016) emphasizes the importance of building positive teacher attitudes through professional development and continuous support. However, in many Indian states, including Kerala, teacher education programs still lack a strong component on inclusive pedagogy. As a result, teachers often view inclusion as an added burden rather than an integral part of their professional role. According to Das, Kuyini, and Desai (2013) [8], even when teachers are willing to support inclusive practices, they feel inadequately equipped due to limited exposure to inclusive methodologies during their training.

Despite the progressive vision outlined in NEP 2020, there remains a significant disconnect between policy goals and ground-level realities in government secondary schools, especially in districts like Trivandrum that encompass both urban and rural populations. The policy calls for barrier-free access, inclusive pedagogy, and universal design for learning (UDL), but implementation is impeded by logistical, institutional, and cultural challenges.

Objectives of the study

- To find out the extent to which inclusive education practices are implemented in government secondary schools of Trivandrum district, Kerala.
- To analyze the alignment of current school-level inclusive practices with the objectives and guidelines of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020.
- To identify the key challenges and barriers faced by teachers, administrators, and students in the effective implementation of inclusive education.
- To propose recommendations for improving the inclusivity of government secondary schools through teacher training, policy support, stakeholder involvement, and systemic reform.

Method of the study

The study adopted a descriptive survey research method to investigate the current state of inclusive education practices in government secondary schools of Trivandrum district, Kerala. Both quantitative and qualitative approaches are employed to gather comprehensive data. A structured questionnaire and interview schedule are used as primary tools for data collection from key stakeholders, including school principals, teachers (both general and special educators), and educational administrators. The sample is selected using stratified random sampling, ensuring representation from urban, semi-urban, and rural schools within the district. Quantitative data are analyzed using descriptive statistics to measure the extent of implementation and resource adequacy, while qualitative responses are thematically analyzed to capture challenges, barriers, and context-specific insights. This mixed-method approach enables a nuanced understanding of the alignment between NEP 2020 guidelines and ground-level practices,

ultimately guiding the development of practical, evidence-based recommendations.

Sample Selected

- 20 school principals
- 60 general education teachers
- 10 special educators
- 5 educational administrators

Tools used for the study

Structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, school records, and observation checklists.

Analysis and Discussion of the data

Analysis of the extent to which inclusive education practices are implemented in government secondary schools of Trivandrum district, Kerala

The data are collected from key stakeholders, including 20 school principals, 60 general education teachers, 10 special educators, and 5 educational administrators across 25 government secondary schools in urban, semi-urban, and rural areas of Trivandrum district. The data were collected through structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews and are analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods.

Table 1: Analysis of the extent to which inclusive education practices are implemented

Indicator	Percentage of Respondents Reporting Concern
Inadequate number of special/resource teachers	96%
Special educators handling multiple schools and BRC	94%
Unsatisfactory inclusive teaching-learning experience	88%
Lack of individualized support in classrooms	82%
Examination-related malpractice (e.g., scribe writing with no proper evaluation)	75%
Differently-abled students promoted without adequate learning	70%
Availability of vocational training for inclusive students	5%
NEP 2020 inclusive provisions implemented	18%
Parental guidance on ancillary services at BRC	63%

Qualitative Insights

Interviews with special educators revealed that most are assigned to 2-3 schools and a Block Resource Centre (BRC), significantly reducing their capacity to provide consistent support. Teachers and principals observed that classrooms are ill-equipped to handle diverse learning needs. There is limited use of inclusive pedagogy, and individualized education plans (IEPs) are often missing or poorly implemented. In the opinion of the head of the institutions, their teachers try their best, but they haven't received adequate training for inclusive classrooms and thus learning support becomes a challenge. Many of the teachers also admitted that differently-abled students are often allowed to use scribes in exams, but these students are rarely taught effectively. One of the teacher mentioned: "We're sometimes pressured to pass these students. The scribe writes, and we promote them without meaningful academic assessment."

Educational administrators acknowledged that NEP 2020 is not yet fully translated into action, especially in inclusive settings. They opined that they are aware of NEP goals, but ground-level planning and implementation haven't started in earnest. On a positive note, 63% of parents interviewed received useful information about ancillary services, scholarships, and therapy support through the BRC. However, many schools still do not have a regular system to engage parents meaningfully in their child's learning process.

Analysis of the alignment of current school-level inclusive practices with the objectives and guidelines of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 envisions an inclusive, equitable, and learner-centric school system that provides access to quality education for all, especially for children with disabilities and other marginalized groups. Key inclusive provisions include barrier-free infrastructure, specialized teacher training, Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), universal access to vocational education, and active community participation. Very few schools offer vocational training to students with special needs, though NEP 2020 emphasizes this as part of holistic development.

Table 2: Analysis of the alignment of current school-level inclusive practices with the objectives and guidelines of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020

NEP 2020 Provision	Indicator of Implementation	% of Schools/Respondents Reporting Implementation
Barrier-free infrastructure (ramps, accessible toilets)	Available in functional condition	48%
Individualized Education Plans (IEPs)	Developed and regularly updated	20%
Deployment of special educators	Full-time availability in school	15%
Use of inclusive teaching strategies	Regular use in classrooms	32%
Access to vocational education for CwDs	Offered in school curriculum	8%
Regular assessment with accommodation	Conducted as per learner needs	26%
Teacher training on NEP 2020 inclusion modules	Teacher training on NEP 2020 inclusion modules	22%
Parental and community involvement	Parent meetings on inclusion held	41%

Qualitative Analysis

It was found that schools lack consistent access to barrier-free infrastructure. In many cases, ramps or accessible toilets are present but non-functional. Special educators are usually shared among multiple schools, making regular support impossible. With regard to curriculum and pedagogical practices, it was found that Most teachers are unaware or untrained in implementing inclusive pedagogy

or IEPs. It was evident that classroom strategies are not adapted to diverse learning needs; rote learning dominates.
In terms of Vocational Education and Skill Training, very few schools offer vocational training to students with special needs, though NEP 2020 emphasizes this as part of holistic development. Regarding Assessment and Progress Monitoring, Scribes are assigned but often with no real learning or evaluation happening.

Analysis of key challenges and barriers faced by teachers, administrators, and students in the effective implementation of inclusive education

Inclusive education, as advocated by the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, emphasizes the removal of systemic, pedagogical, infrastructural, and attitudinal barriers that hinder the participation of children with diverse needs.

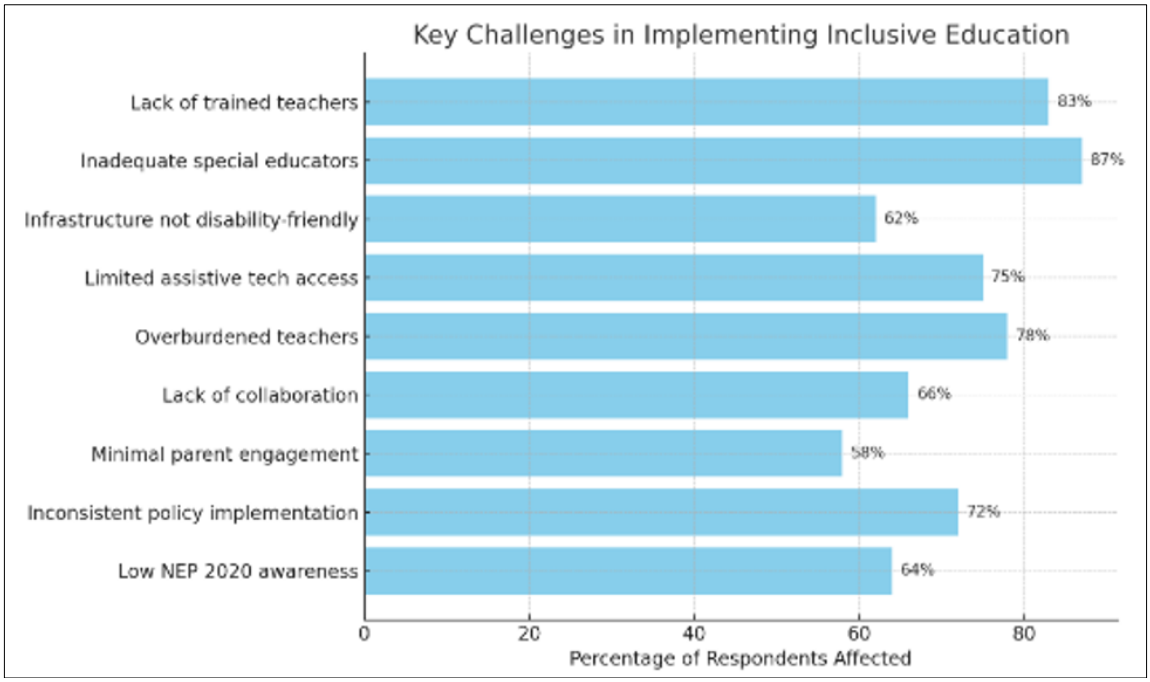

Fig 1: The key challenges and barriers faced by teachers, administrators, and students in the effective implementation of inclusive education

Qualitative Analysis

A. Challenges Faced by Teachers

- Inadequate training in inclusive strategies makes it difficult for teachers to cater to the individual learning needs of children with disabilities.
- Teachers are overloaded with administrative and curricular tasks, leaving little time for individual student support.
- Lack of access to assistive devices and digital content hampers lesson delivery for students with special needs.

B. Challenges Faced by Administrators

- Special educators are scarce, with most assigned to 2-3 schools or a Block Resource Centre (BRC), limiting their availability.
- Administrative heads lack autonomy or resources to make infrastructure modifications or recruit additional support staff.

C. Challenges Faced by Students

- Students with disabilities often feel excluded in classrooms due to peer attitudes and lack of teacher attention.
- The examination system is not accommodating, often relying on scribes without actual learning or assessment happening.
- Vocational and co-curricular inclusion is minimal, making them feel alienated from school life.

Analysis of the recommendations for improving the inclusivity of government secondary schools through teacher training, policy support, stakeholder involvement, and systemic reform

Teacher Training and Professional Development

- Implement mandatory training on inclusive teaching strategies for all teachers.
- Focus on differentiated instruction, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and managing diverseTrain teachers to acknowledge and integrate students' cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds into lesson planning and classroom management. classrooms.
- Provide targeted training on identifying and supporting students with disabilities, learning difficulties, and mental health issues.
- Embed modules on inclusive education in pre-service teacher education curricula.
- Develop a CPD (Continuous Professional Development (CPD) framework with regular workshops, mentoring, and peer learning on inclusive practices.

Policy Support and Institutional Commitment

- Strengthen and update policies to reflect a commitment to inclusive education, aligned with international conventions like the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).
- Allocate adequate funding for inclusive infrastructure (ramps, accessible toilets, assistive technology).
- Provide teaching and learning materials in accessible formats (Braille, large print, audio).

- Implement school-level data collection on diversity indicators (disability, language, socio-economic background) to guide policy interventions.

Stakeholder Involvement and Collaboration

Create formal mechanisms for regular consultation with parents, especially those from marginalized communities.

- Organize community awareness campaigns to combat stigma and promote the value of inclusive education.
- Establish student councils or forums that represent diverse student groups to contribute to school decision-making.
- Foster partnerships with NGOs, local health departments, and social services to support holistic student development and inclusion.

Systemic Reform and Structural Changes

- Revise curricula to include themes of diversity, equity, and inclusion.
- Encourage the use of multilingual and multicultural resources.
- Develop leadership training programs that emphasize inclusive values and practices for school principals and administrators.
- Establish clear indicators and benchmarks for measuring inclusivity in schools.
- Integrate inclusive education performance indicators into school inspections and evaluations.
- Revise teacher recruitment policies to promote diversity among teaching staff.
- Incentivize the deployment of qualified special educators in underserved regions.

Discussion of Data

This study explored the extent and effectiveness of inclusive education practices in government secondary schools across Trivandrum district, Kerala, involving 25 schools and a diverse set of stakeholders, including principals, general and special educators, and educational administrators. The findings indicate significant gaps between policy vision and ground-level practice.

Quantitative data reveal a widespread lack of institutional capacity to support inclusive education. Over 96% of respondents cited an acute shortage of special/resource teachers, with 94% reporting that special educators are responsible for multiple schools and Block Resource Centres (BRCs). Furthermore, 88% noted unsatisfactory inclusive teaching-learning environments, and 82% identified a lack of individualized classroom support. Only 5% of schools offer vocational training to students with disabilities-a key priority under the NEP 2020 (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Qualitative insights further substantiate these concerns. Special educators reported being overstretched, and teachers expressed frustration with their limited training and capacity to cater to diverse learners. As one teacher shared, “We’re sometimes pressured to pass these students. The scribe writes, and we promote them without meaningful academic assessment.” This reflects a systemic issue where examination accommodations substitute genuine learning.

When assessed against the NEP 2020’s inclusion benchmarks-such as barrier-free infrastructure, individualized learning plans, and community participation-the data shows suboptimal alignment. Only 15% of schools have full-time special educators, and just 20% implement IEPs. Furthermore, while 48% claim to have accessible infrastructure, qualitative data revealed many of these facilities are non-functional.

Teachers and administrators face distinct challenges. Teachers lack formal training in inclusive pedagogy, are burdened with administrative duties, and have limited access to assistive technologies. Administrators cited systemic constraints in staffing and infrastructure upgrades. Students with disabilities are often excluded from meaningful classroom interactions and vocational learning, undermining the spirit of holistic education promoted by the NEP.

Despite these challenges, the study found moderate parental engagement (63%) in accessing ancillary services through the BRCs, indicating a potential avenue for strengthening home-school partnerships.

In summary, while policy frameworks such as NEP 2020 advocate for inclusive, learner-centered education, implementation on the ground remains fragmented and inequitable. The data calls for a robust response through teacher training, systemic reform, community involvement, and policy alignment to make inclusive education a functional reality in Kerala’s government secondary schools.

Conclusion

This study explored the implementation of inclusive education in government secondary schools of Trivandrum, revealing a significant gap between NEP 2020’s vision and actual practices. Despite some awareness, critical areas like vocational training, inclusive pedagogy, barrier-free infrastructure, and individualized support remain largely unaddressed. Teachers, administrators, and students face multiple challenges, including lack of training, insufficient resources, and systemic barriers. While parental engagement and BRC support show potential, they are not consistently applied. The study concludes that bridging these gaps requires a coordinated effort involving teacher training, policy strengthening, stakeholder collaboration, and structural reform. A sustained, well-resourced commitment is essential to make inclusive education a functional reality in Kerala’s school system.

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