

Teacher Preparedness and Professional Development for Inclusive Classrooms: A Global and Indian Perspective

Mahima Chaudhary¹, Vijay Kumar Chaudhary²

¹Lecturer in Special Education, Armaan Teacher Training Institute, Faridabad, Haryana

²Director, Armaan Teacher Training Institute, Faridabad, Haryana

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education has emerged as a transformative approach that seeks to provide equitable learning opportunities to all children, regardless of their abilities or disabilities. Central to the success of inclusive education is teacher preparedness and professional development. This review explores the global and Indian perspectives on teacher preparedness for inclusive classrooms, with particular reference to policy frameworks, teacher attitudes, pedagogical competencies, and the impact of professional development initiatives. The review synthesizes empirical findings and theoretical contributions from the past decade to identify trends, gaps, and implications for educational reform. Findings suggest that while policy-level commitments to inclusion are strong, particularly under India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, implementation remains uneven due to limited teacher training, resource constraints, and persistent attitudinal barriers. The paper concludes by recommending structured pre-service and in-service professional development programs, collaborative practices, and ongoing policy reinforcement to enhance the capacity of teachers in inclusive education.

Keywords: inclusive education, teacher preparedness, professional development, CWSN, NEP 2020, inclusive pedagogy

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education represents a shift from segregation to participation and equity. It is grounded in the belief that every child has the right to quality education within the general education system, irrespective of their physical, intellectual, social, or emotional differences (UNESCO, 2017). The teacher, as the key agent of change, plays a pivotal role in transforming this vision into practice. However, the success of inclusive classrooms heavily depends on the preparedness, competence, and ongoing professional development of teachers (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

Globally, inclusive education has been promoted through frameworks such as the **Salamanca Statement** (UNESCO, 1994) and the **UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities** (2006). In India, major educational reforms such as the **Right to Education Act** (2009), the **Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act** (2016), and the **National Education Policy (NEP, 2020)** emphasize inclusion as a national priority. Despite these policies, research indicates that teachers often feel underprepared to handle diverse learners, particularly Children with Special Needs (CWSN) (Sharma & Das, 2015).

The concept of inclusive education extends beyond the physical placement of children with disabilities into mainstream classrooms; it encompasses a transformation in the educational philosophy, structure, and pedagogy to support **equitable participation of all learners** (Ainscow, 2020; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Teachers, therefore, are not only instructional facilitators but also agents of social change who challenge exclusionary practices and promote diversity as a resource for learning. Effective inclusion demands that teachers possess not only knowledge of disability and pedagogy but also develop positive attitudes, flexibility, and the confidence to differentiate instruction according to individual needs. This makes teacher preparedness a cornerstone of inclusive reform and highlights the need for continuous professional learning across all stages of a teacher's career.

In India, the movement toward inclusive education has gained momentum under frameworks such as the **Right to Education (RTE) Act (2009)**, the **Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act (2016)**, and the **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020**. These policies emphasize inclusive schooling as a right and mandate the integration of inclusive practices within teacher education programs. However, despite progressive policy intent, there remains a significant gap between theoretical understanding and classroom implementation (Sharma & Das, 2015; Panda & Rath, 2020). Many teachers continue to feel underprepared to handle diverse learning needs, often citing limited exposure to inclusive pedagogy, inadequate institutional support, and lack of collaboration among professionals. Addressing these challenges requires a robust and responsive system of **teacher preparation and professional development**, which equips educators with both the mindset and skillset to create inclusive learning environments.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

1. Conceptualizing Teacher Preparedness for Inclusion

Teacher preparedness refers to the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and confidence teachers possess to meet the needs of diverse learners in inclusive settings. Studies emphasize that inclusive readiness involves not only pedagogical proficiency but also an inclusive mindset (Forlin, 2010). Avramidis and Norwich (2002) found that teachers' attitudes towards inclusion are strongly influenced by their perceived efficacy and training experiences. Teachers with formal exposure to inclusive pedagogy tend to adopt more positive attitudes toward CWSN.

2. Global Perspectives on Teacher Training for Inclusion

In developed contexts such as the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada, inclusive education is integrated within pre-service teacher education (Forlin & Chambers, 2011). Programs emphasize reflective teaching, collaboration, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Florian and Linklater (2010) highlight that inclusion is not merely about adding content on disability but embedding inclusive values throughout the teacher education curriculum.

However, research from countries in the Global South reveals systemic challenges. According to Loreman (2017), many teachers in developing nations report feeling inadequately trained to manage inclusive classrooms due to lack of resources, large class sizes, and insufficient support systems. Professional development models that emphasize mentorship and continuous learning have been found effective in bridging these gaps (Ainscow, 2020).

3. Indian Context: Policy Framework and Teacher Readiness

India's commitment to inclusive education has evolved significantly over the past two decades. Initiatives such as **Integrated Education for Disabled Children (IEDC, 1974)**, **Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA)**, and **Inclusive Education for Disabled at Secondary Stage (IEDSS)** laid the foundation for inclusion. The **NEP 2020** marks a progressive shift by promoting inclusive pedagogy, flexible curricula, and cross-sectoral collaboration for CWSN.

However, empirical studies reveal a discrepancy between policy intent and classroom implementation. Sharma and Nuttal (2016) found that a majority of Indian teachers lack the practical skills to differentiate instruction and manage classroom diversity. Similarly, Singal and Muthukrishna (2014) highlight that teacher education programs often offer limited exposure to inclusive methodologies and rely on theoretical instruction rather than experiential learning.

4. Teacher Attitudes, Beliefs, and Competence

Teacher attitudes play a crucial role in shaping inclusive practices. Studies suggest that teachers with positive attitudes toward CWSN are more likely to employ differentiated strategies (Sharma & Loreman, 2012). Factors such as previous contact with students with disabilities, perceived administrative support, and access to resources significantly affect these attitudes (Subban & Sharma, 2006). Negative attitudes often stem from a lack of confidence or fear of classroom management challenges.

5. Pre-service Teacher Education

Pre-service teacher training programs serve as the foundation for developing inclusive competencies. Globally, courses integrating UDL, collaborative learning, and inclusive curriculum design have demonstrated improvements in teacher readiness (Jordan et al., 2009). In India, institutions such as the Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI) and NCERT have revised curricula to include disability inclusion modules. Yet, the integration remains fragmented across general teacher education programs, leading to inconsistent preparedness among graduates (Panda & Rath, 2020).

6. In-service Professional Development

Continuous professional development (CPD) is essential for updating teachers' skills in inclusive practices. Effective CPD programs are participatory, practice-based, and reflective (Guskey, 2002). Research across Asia and Africa emphasizes the success of collaborative learning communities and peer mentoring (Ainscow, 2020). In India, projects like **Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA 2.0)** have initiated capacity-building workshops and resource centers, though coverage and quality remain uneven (MHRD, 2021).

7. Barriers to Teacher Preparedness

Barriers to teacher preparedness can be categorized as **systemic, institutional, and personal**. Systemic barriers include policy-practice gaps and inadequate resource allocation. Institutional challenges involve lack of accessibility, absence of special educators, and poor administrative support. On the personal front, teachers face time constraints, fear of failure, and lack of confidence (Sharma & Das, 2015). Addressing these barriers requires integrated policy and professional development frameworks.

DISCUSSION

The literature indicates that teacher preparedness is a multidimensional construct encompassing knowledge, skills, attitudes, and contextual adaptability. Globally, inclusion is supported through continuous professional learning and school-based collaboration. In contrast, Indian teachers often operate within resource-poor contexts with limited exposure to inclusive pedagogies.

Globally, inclusive education has moved from a **medical model of disability**—focused on deficits—to a **social and rights-based model** that views diversity as a natural element of classrooms (Ainscow, 2020; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). This paradigm shift demands that teachers not only acquire instructional strategies but also **reconceptualize their understanding of diversity and equity**. Teacher education programs in developed countries have responded by embedding inclusive values into curriculum design, pedagogy, and assessment, preparing teachers to manage heterogeneity through **Universal Design for Learning (UDL)** and **differentiated instruction** (Florian & Linklater, 2010).

However, despite progressive global frameworks, **teacher self-efficacy** remains a crucial determinant of success. Studies suggest that even well-trained teachers may struggle with inclusion if they lack confidence in adapting instruction for learners with disabilities (Sharma & Loreman, 2012). Hence, professional development should go beyond imparting techniques to fostering **reflective practice and attitudinal change**.

Comparative Reflections: India and the Global Scenario:

When comparing India with developed nations, the gap in teacher preparedness is both structural and attitudinal. In many OECD countries, teacher education institutions are well-resourced and supported by inclusion-oriented policies, whereas in India, **teacher education remains uneven and fragmented**. Institutions recognized by the **Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI)** have initiated specialized B.Ed. programs in special education, but these remain separate from mainstream teacher training. This structural dualism often leads to a **parallel system** where general educators feel unprepared and special educators are overburdened (Panda & Rath, 2020).

The **National Education Policy (NEP, 2020)** attempts to bridge this divide by emphasizing a multidisciplinary approach and the inclusion of special needs education in general teacher training curricula. Yet, the

implementation challenges persist—including lack of trained faculty, limited practicum exposure, and insufficient collaboration between regular and special educators. This points to the need for **policy convergence** between NEP 2020 and the **Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016**, ensuring coherent training and accountability frameworks.

Comparative analysis shows that while countries such as Canada and Finland embed inclusion within the general teaching philosophy, India still treats it as an additional responsibility. Teacher preparation must, therefore, shift from a “deficit model” of disability to a “strength-based” inclusive pedagogy that recognizes diversity as an asset. Digital technology, peer learning, and collaborative teaching can enhance inclusive competence if properly integrated into professional development programs.

The Role of Attitudes and Beliefs:

Teacher attitudes remain a decisive factor in inclusion outcomes. Positive attitudes are correlated with training exposure, institutional support, and prior experience with CWSN (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Sharma & Nuttal, 2016). Conversely, **negative attitudes often stem from systemic pressures**—such as overcrowded classrooms, high academic expectations, and lack of individualized support systems. For inclusion to be sustainable, teacher training must focus on **empathy, diversity sensitivity, and inclusive ethics**, not only technical skill development.

Furthermore, in collectivist societies like India, where disability is still stigmatized in some communities, teachers’ social and cultural beliefs may inadvertently reinforce exclusion. Thus, **teacher professional development must address socio-cultural dimensions of disability**, integrating awareness, community engagement, and attitudinal transformation as key components.

Professional Development: Continuous and Contextual:

The global consensus supports **Continuous Professional Development (CPD)** as an essential mechanism for enhancing teacher competence (Guskey, 2002). However, the effectiveness of CPD depends on **contextual relevance, participation, and continuity**. Traditional one-day workshops are often insufficient to generate lasting change. Instead, **school-based professional learning communities (PLCs)**, peer mentoring, and reflective teaching journals have shown higher impact in sustaining inclusive practices (Ainscow, 2020).

In India, initiatives such as **Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA)** and **NISHTHA** have introduced large-scale capacity-building programs. While these are significant, evaluations reveal they often emphasize policy orientation rather than hands-on inclusive pedagogy (MHRD, 2021). Therefore, a **shift from top-down training models to participatory learning ecosystems**—where teachers share experiences, co-develop lesson plans, and observe each other’s practices—is critical for meaningful change.

Technological Innovations and the Post-Pandemic Context:

The COVID-19 pandemic reshaped educational delivery and highlighted the digital divide affecting CWSN. Teachers struggled with **digital accessibility, assistive technology adaptation, and engagement of learners with special needs**. Yet, the period also accelerated innovation in digital pedagogy. The integration of technology, when coupled with professional training, can expand inclusive opportunities (UNESCO, 2022).

Emerging models of **blended professional development**, combining online and face-to-face modules, have demonstrated improved outcomes in building teacher capacity (Jordan et al., 2009). India’s **DIKSHA** platform and **NIPUN Bharat Mission** have potential to institutionalize scalable, inclusive teacher training if adapted to diverse regional needs and languages.

SYSTEMIC GAPS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Despite progress, systemic challenges continue to undermine teacher preparedness. **Fragmented governance**, lack of convergence between education and disability sectors, and **inadequate monitoring** of teacher

performance hinder sustainable inclusion. Moreover, teacher education curricula often lag behind policy changes, creating a disconnection between theoretical knowledge and practical realities.

To move forward, inclusion must become a **core philosophy of teacher identity** rather than a specialized area of competence. Policy reforms should integrate inclusive education across all teacher training frameworks—from early childhood to higher education—ensuring **vertical coherence and professional continuity**. Furthermore, **action research by teachers** should be encouraged, enabling practitioners to test and refine inclusive strategies within their classrooms.

Finally, universities and teacher training institutes must form **collaborative partnerships with schools** to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Through such synergies, teacher preparedness can evolve from compliance-based training to **empowered professional learning**, aligning with both global inclusive values and India's socio-educational realities.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND POLICY

1. **Integration of Inclusive Pedagogy in Teacher Education** – A major implication emerging from this review is the need for systematic integration of **inclusive pedagogy** within all levels of teacher education. Both **pre-service** and **in-service** teacher education curricula must embed inclusive values as foundational principles rather than optional modules. This includes adopting frameworks such as **Universal Design for Learning (UDL)**, **Differentiated Instruction (DI)**, and **Response to Intervention (RTI)** to guide planning, teaching, and assessment. Teacher educators should employ **case-based learning, simulations, and reflective practice** to help trainees internalize inclusion as an everyday practice. The **National Education Policy (NEP, 2020)** has already recognized the importance of inclusive pedagogy, yet its translation into curriculum frameworks remains inconsistent. The **National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE)** and **Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI)** must collaborate to design joint modules that balance theoretical understanding of disability with practical classroom strategies. By reorienting teacher preparation in this way, educators can develop the competencies needed to effectively address the diverse learning needs of all students, including CWSN.
2. **Collaborative Professional Development** – Professional development for inclusion must go beyond isolated training sessions to become **ongoing, collaborative, and practice-oriented**. Teachers learn best when they engage in professional communities that encourage **peer observation, mentoring, and joint problem-solving**. Models such as **Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)**, **lesson study**, and **co-teaching frameworks** have shown positive outcomes globally (Ainscow, 2020). In the Indian context, where teacher workloads are heavy and resources limited, collaborative approaches can provide both professional support and emotional resilience. School leaders should institutionalize structures for regular peer sharing, reflective dialogues, and joint curriculum planning between general and special educators. Collaborative professional development also nurtures a culture of **collective responsibility** for inclusion, reinforcing the idea that inclusion is not the task of one teacher but the ethos of the entire school.
3. **Capacity Building under NEP 2020** –The **NEP 2020** presents an unprecedented opportunity to strengthen inclusive education through teacher empowerment. It envisions a shift from rote-based teaching to **experiential, holistic, and inclusive learning**. To realize this vision, teacher education institutions must conduct **structured capacity-building programs** that focus on experiential learning, inclusive classroom management, and adaptation of instructional materials for CWSN. Additionally, partnerships between universities, **District Institutes of Education and Training (DIETs)**, and schools should be enhanced to provide real-world exposure. Trainee teachers should participate in inclusive classroom internships and field experiences where they can interact directly with children with varied abilities. Such exposure builds **practical confidence and empathy**, enabling teachers to translate inclusive theory into tangible classroom practice. Moreover, capacity building should also extend to **school administrators and policymakers**, as their understanding and support are vital to sustain inclusion. Without leadership alignment, even well-trained teachers may find it difficult to implement inclusive strategies effectively.
4. **Policy Support and Monitoring** – Effective inclusion requires robust **policy implementation, monitoring, and accountability mechanisms**. Despite strong policy frameworks like the **RPwD Act (2016)** and **NEP 2020**, many schools lack systematic follow-up or monitoring to ensure compliance.

Governments must establish **multi-tiered monitoring systems** involving education departments, local authorities, and independent evaluators to assess teacher preparedness and inclusive outcomes. Furthermore, adequate **financial and infrastructural support** is essential. Budgetary allocations for assistive technology, classroom modifications, and teacher training must be prioritized. Cross-sectoral collaboration between the **education, social justice, and health ministries** can facilitate the creation of resource support networks. Policymakers should also incentivize inclusive practices through recognition schemes, professional advancement credits, or institutional accreditation linked to inclusion indicators. Ultimately, policy must evolve from being **document-based** to being **practice-driven**, with measurable outcomes related to teacher competence, student participation, and inclusive learning achievements.

5. **Research and Evidence-based Practice** – There is a pressing need for **empirical, longitudinal, and practice-based research** on the impact of teacher training on inclusive education outcomes. While numerous studies describe teacher attitudes and preparedness, few systematically evaluate the long-term effects of professional development interventions on classroom practices or student learning. Future research should focus on **evaluating specific training models**, such as blended learning, mentoring, or peer collaboration, to identify what works best in diverse contexts. Institutions such as **NCERT, RCI**, and universities should promote **action research among teachers**, enabling practitioners to investigate and refine their own inclusive methods. Collaborative research projects that document local innovations—such as community-based inclusion or indigenous pedagogies—can enrich global knowledge while remaining contextually relevant to India.

CONCLUSION

Inclusive education is no longer a peripheral ideal but a central pillar of equitable and quality education systems worldwide. Teachers, as the architects of classroom experiences, play an indispensable role in translating inclusion from policy to practice. This review underscores that while legislative frameworks such as the **RPwD Act (2016)** and **NEP 2020** have laid the foundation for inclusion in India, the real transformation hinges on sustained investment in **teacher preparedness** and **professional development**. Both pre-service and in-service teacher education must evolve to ensure that teachers are not only aware of inclusive pedagogies but are confident and competent in applying them effectively.

Globally, the discourse on inclusive education highlights the need for **systemic and continuous professional learning**, supported by collaborative school cultures and responsive policies. In the Indian context, bridging the gap between inclusive intent and classroom practice requires curriculum redesign, experiential learning modules, and greater institutional accountability. Furthermore, professional development must extend beyond mere training sessions to cultivate reflective, adaptive, and empathetic educators who can address diverse learner needs.

In conclusion, strengthening teacher preparedness is not a one-time effort but a dynamic and ongoing process that requires **synergy between policy, practice, and research**. When teachers are empowered with knowledge, skills, and inclusive mindsets, classrooms transform into environments where every learner — regardless of ability — can participate, progress, and thrive. Thus, investing in teacher education for inclusion is not just an educational reform but a moral imperative toward building a more just, compassionate, and inclusive society.

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