

Inclusive Education Practices in the Elementary Schools of Nagaon District

Dr. Rihunlang Rymbai¹ and Hrisikesh Madhukalya²

¹Associate Professor, Department of Education, North-Eastern Hill University

²MEd Student, Department of Education, North-Eastern Hill University

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ABSTRACT

Education is a process that helps individuals to learn how to adjust in a society with proper values, knowledge, skills, behaviors etc. In the present scenario, the concept of education has gradually shifted towards the concept of Inclusive Education that provides opportunities to the students from various backgrounds to learn together through equal participation within the educational system. Though the government is taking major initiatives through various policy frameworks to promote inclusive education, but proper implementation of inclusive education remains challenging. Inclusive education practices in the elementary schools of Nagaon district, Assam especially in Nagaon Sadar (Urban area) need proper investigation to identify their actual implementation as well as the challenges, so that future improvement regarding equitable learning opportunities for all children can be expected. Therefore, this study shows the empirical research that focuses the actual implementation of inclusive education practices in the selected elementary schools of Nagaon district which identifies the ground realities to help the education stakeholders for the better improvement of inclusive practices in the elementary stage for all the learners.

Keywords: inclusive education practices, elementary schools

INTRODUCTION

Education is a tool that deals with the intellectual, emotional, moral, social, physical etc. aspects of human being. Mahatma Gandhi emphasized education as a tool to build character, self-reliance, integrating head, heart and hand (Gandhi, 1937).

Earlier education was believed as a mean for the holistic development of human as well as for the progress of the society and now in the current scenario, this broad concept of education has gradually encompassed the concept of Inclusive Education which welcomes the diversity of learners from various backgrounds to the field of education through equal participation within the educational system.

Inclusive education is a significant educational approach where the teachers play the central role in the effective implementation of inclusive education by educating all the children together including those with disabilities, learning difficulties etc. It is important for the teachers to understand about the individual differences among the learners. That is why the teachers plan lessons using flexible teaching methods, such as group work, visual aids, activity-based learning which helps to participate all the learners together (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

UNESCO states that inclusive education is a process to help the learners to address and fulfill their diverse needs by allowing them to participate equally in different activities of an educational institute to reduce exclusion (UNESCO, 2009).

The international foundation of inclusive education was strongly articulated in the Salamanca Statement (1994), which is a landmark international policy document that emphasizes that the ordinary schools with the

inclusive orientation are the most significant means of combating discriminatory attitudes and building inclusive environment and thus the inclusive education will be able to extend beyond the mere placement of learners with disabilities in mainstream schools (Salamanca Statement, 1994). As noted by Ainscow and (2008) Miles, inclusive education is an ongoing process that emphasis on developing schools' capacity to respond to learner diversity as well as promote participation for all students.

The concept of inclusive education was influenced by various theories that has evolved over time. Initially, inclusive education was influenced by the Medical Model of Disability, which accepted disability as an individual's impairment that requires proper treatment. Basically, this model focuses on identifying the learners with special educational needs and providing accommodations to help those learners for the better adjustment into mainstream educational settings. Over time, the perspective has shifted towards the Social Model of Disability, which argues that one's impairment does not only cause disability but also disability can be largely influenced by the social barriers and the educational environment. Building upon the social model, the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) developed by the World Health Organization (WHO) provides a more comprehensive understanding of disability that the functioning level of a person is dynamic and it can be improved when the person will be given appropriate support and inclusive environment. By understanding all these theoretical developments on inclusive education, the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework has further strengthened the concept of inclusive education by advocating the design of curriculum, teaching methods, learning materials and assessments that are accessible to all learners. UDL is based on three principles such as providing multiple means of representation, multiple means of action and expression and multiple means of engagement which helps in reducing the barriers and ensures meaningful participation for every student in the educational settings (Cambridge International Education, 2020).

In India, inclusive education reflects in the constitutional provisions as well as in the policy frameworks, such as the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 and the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan that promotes education for all children at the elementary level (Government of India, 2020).

Generally inclusive education has been strongly emphasized in the national and international educational policies, whereas the actual implementation at the elementary level, especially in the classroom practices in district specific and semi-urban settings remains uneven.

Nagaon district is characterized by its diverse student population, making inclusive education practices relevant at the elementary schools but, there is a lack of studies regarding how inclusive education is practiced at the elementary schools that needs investigation to identify the practical implementation of inclusive education practices and its challenges.

Therefore, the present study is concerned about the existing practices of inclusive education in the elementary schools of Nagaon district, Assam to find its actual implementation, challenges and to identify measures for effective implementation of inclusive practices in those schools. The aims is to examine the existing inclusive education practices such as the general information of school inclusivity, availability of infrastructural and instructional facilities, classroom practices, teachers' role, challenges and suggestions for future improvement in implementing inclusive education practices. So, this study can be helpful to identify the gaps between policy and practices and contribute to improving inclusive education at the grassroots level.

Research Questions

1. What is the overall status of inclusive education in the elementary schools of Nagaon District?
2. What inclusive classroom practices are followed and what roles do teachers play in implementing inclusive education at the elementary level in Nagaon District?
3. What challenges are faced by schools and teachers in the effective implementation of inclusive education in Nagaon District?

4. What suggestions can be identified for the future improvement of inclusive education in the elementary schools of Nagaon district?

Objectives

The objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To study the general information related to school inclusivity in the elementary schools of Nagaon district.
2. To study the availability of infrastructural facilities supporting inclusive education in elementary schools of Nagaon district.
3. To study the availability of instructional facilities supporting inclusive education in elementary schools of Nagaon district.
4. To find out the classroom practices in an inclusive classroom.
5. To identify the role of teachers in implementing inclusive education practices at the elementary level.
6. To find out the challenges faced by schools and teachers in the effective implementation of inclusive education in Nagaon district.
7. To identify suggestions for the future improvement of inclusive education in the elementary schools of Nagaon district.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The present study adopted the descriptive survey method to examine the current status of inclusive education practices in the elementary schools of Nagaon district, Assam. The descriptive method is applicable when the aim of a study is to explore what exists in a particular situation (Cohen et al., 2018). The descriptive method aims to describe and interpret current conditions, practices and opinions of a population as they naturally occur without any manipulation of variables (Best & Khan, 2014). The descriptive survey method is suitable to study a large sample apart from being economical and time-saving. This method provides realistic information about the status of educational practices by identifying its strengths, limitations and also the area of improvement that support future educational planning.

Tool

A self-developed questionnaire was used for data collection namely “Questionnaire for Teachers on Inclusive Education Practices in the Elementary Schools of Nagaon District, Assam”.

The questionnaire for the study was constructed as a structured tool to collect only relevant data that aligned with the objectives of the research. The questionnaire was developed after an extensive review of the previous studies related to inclusive education. The items of the questionnaire were divided into seven sections that is, general information on school inclusivity, availability of infrastructural facilities, availability of instructional facilities, classroom practices, role of teachers, challenges and suggestions for future improvement in implementing inclusive education. These sections are based on the objectives of the research. The questionnaire adopted simple, clear and unambiguous language for ensuring easy understanding by the respondents. The questionnaire followed close-ended with Yes/No responses including multiple-choice options and also allowed the respondents to elaborate where necessary. The questionnaire was properly examined by expert and necessary modifications were incorporated to enhance the clarity, validity and reliability of the items.

Sample of the study

A total of 152 elementary school teachers from 41 inclusive elementary schools of Nagaon Sadar (Urban Area) within Nagaon District, Assam participated in the study.

Sampling Technique

The sampling technique that adopted for the study is simple random technique. After adopting the technique, the permitted schools were visited personally by the researcher and the questionnaires were distributed among the teachers. While collecting the data, no specific eligibility criteria were imposed and all the teachers were given equal opportunity to participate. The participation was voluntary by allowing respondents to fill in the questionnaire freely, ensuring unbiased and representative data collection.

Procedure of Data Collection

For the collection of data, the researcher visited the selected elementary schools directly after obtaining prior permission from the Office of the Inspector of Schools (Nagaon, Assam) which also provided all the information regarding the elementary schools. The researcher met the head teachers and the assistant teachers directly and the research topic, objectives, purpose of the data collection etc. were clearly explained to them. Structured questionnaires were provided to each elementary school teachers and they were assured that the information provided would be used strictly for academic purpose with confidentiality. The teachers were given adequate time to fill in the questionnaire to ensure accuracy and sincerity in responses.

Analytical Techniques of the Data

The data collected through the structured questionnaire were analyzed by using descriptive statistical techniques, mainly frequency and percentage analysis. The responses obtained from the 152 teachers were systematically organized and presented in tabular form.

For each statement, the responses were categorized as “Yes” and “No”. The frequency (N) represents the number of teachers who provided a particular response, while the percentage represents the proportion of respondents corresponding to that frequency.

The analyzed data were presented in tables consisting of statement, Response, Frequency [N (152)] and Percentage. The percentage was calculated to make the responses easier to interpret.

Thus, frequency and percentage were used as the principal techniques for the analysis and interpretation of the data in the present study.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The major results from the data collected are presented below on the basis of the objectives of the study:

General information related to school inclusivity in the elementary schools of Nagaon district.

The general information related to school inclusivity in the elementary schools of Nagaon district revealed a highly positive status of school inclusivity where all 152 teacher respondents (100%) reported that their schools are inclusive and follow the national inclusive education policies such as NEP 2020 and RPWD Act. Child centered and flexible teaching practices, inclusive assessment methods and non-discriminatory approach were also unanimously acknowledged. A large majority of teachers (89.48%) reported adapting the curriculum to meet diverse learning needs, while 85.52% had received training related to inclusive education. However, only 68.42% of the teachers reported preparing Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) for children with special needs.

The result is broadly consistent with NEP 2020 that gives high priority to the inclusion and equal participation of children with disabilities in regular school (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2020). The results are also

consistent with Section 16 of the RPwD Act, 2016 that requires educational institutions to provide inclusive education and admit children with disabilities without any discrimination (Government of India, 2016, Section 16).

Nengnong (2023) conducted a study on the status of inclusive education in the state of Meghalaya with objectives such as to find out the status of the implementation of inclusive education in the state of Meghalaya where the researcher also found that schools of Meghalaya especially in East Khasi Hills, West Garo Hills and Ri-Bhoi districts, largely follow national inclusive education policies and teaching-learning practices are child-centered supported by low-cost teaching learning materials (TLMs), Individualized Education Plans, peer learning and remedial instruction but the curriculum adaptation was found as flexible.

Availability of infrastructural facilities supporting inclusive education in elementary schools of Nagaon district.

Regarding the availability of infrastructural facilities that support inclusive education in the elementary schools of Nagaon district, it was found that almost the teachers (100%) reported the availability of basic infrastructural facilities such as pucca buildings, electricity and blackboards which indicates that foundational infrastructure is well established. A large majority of teachers (78.95%) reported that their schools provide barrier-free access, while 80.26% of teachers confirmed the availability of accessible toilets for children with disabilities. However, only 46.05% of teachers stated that classrooms are sufficiently spacious to meet diverse learning needs, suggesting overcrowding in many schools. A major infrastructural limitation is the availability of resource rooms, as only 11.84% of teachers indicated the presence of such facilities.

These results have a direct connection with NEP 2020 that emphasizes barrier-free access and the establishment of resource centers for children with disabilities (MoE, 2020). Similarly, Section 16 of the RPwD Act requires educational institutions to make buildings, campuses and facilities accessible and provide reasonable accommodation on the basis of individual needs (Government of India, 2016, Section 16). Section 17 further calls for adequate resource centers to support inclusive education (Government of India, 2016, Section 17)

These results are also similar with the findings of the study of Babla (2017) on Inclusive Education at the elementary school level in Arunachal Pradesh where the researcher also found out that in the elementary schools of Arunachal Pradesh, the basic infrastructural facilities are available but limited resources, especially the toilets, playground, drinking water etc. were found unsatisfactory.

Availability of instructional facilities supporting inclusive education in elementary schools of Nagaon district.

The results from the collected data shows that the availability of instructional facilities supporting inclusive education is inadequate. Among the 152 teacher respondents from various elementary schools of Nagaon district, Assam, 53.29% reported that their schools provide instructional facilities for children with special needs, while only 36.84% stated that adapted teaching-learning materials are available and used. None of respondents (0%) reported that availability of Braille materials, ICT tools, audio-visual aids or assistive devices, highlighting a significant gap in essential inclusive resources. However, despite these limitations, teachers showed a positive commitment towards inclusive practices where 100% reported about the use of inclusive teaching methods, 98.03% reported regarding individual attention and 90.79% reported about the utilization of activity-based learning.

These results are in line with the NEP 2020 which emphasizes instructional facilities such as assistive devices, technology-based tools, accessible teaching-learning materials etc. for children with special needs (MoE, 2020). The results also indicate a gap with Section 16 of the RPwD Act which requires appropriate support, suitable modes of communication, while Section 17 promotes training, resource centers and appropriate communication methods including Braille and sign language (Government of India, 2016, Sections 16-17)

The study of Babla (2017) on Inclusive Education at elementary school stage in Arunachal Pradesh, Agarwal (2019) on Implementation of inclusive education in Noida and East Delhi region as per RTE 2009 at upper

primary stage, Singh (2022) on Inclusive practices in Pune city schools also showed that they found those schools mainly adopted the traditional method of teaching where ICT based teaching, cooperative and experiential strategies, e-learning resources, disability specific tools etc. were largely absent.

Classroom practices in an inclusive classroom.

The results indicate that inclusive classroom practices are widely adopted by elementary school teachers. All the 152 teacher respondents (100%) from different elementary schools of Nagaon district, Assam reported implementing inclusive teaching practices, while 100% promoted a respectful classroom environment, 98.68% encouraged the participation of all students and 98.03% reported individual attention. Most of the teachers also adopted activity-based learning (91.45%), peer interaction (92.11%), mixed-ability grouping (96.05%) and inclusive classroom engagement (95.05%). Teachers reflected on their teaching mainly through discussion with colleagues that reported by 99.34% teachers and self-reflection by 86.84%, whereas student feedback (73.68%), peer tutoring (71.05%), cooperative learning (57.89%) and differentiated instruction (52.63%) were implemented to a comparatively moderated extent.

The results are relevant to NEP 2020 which emphasizes flexible curriculum and teaching approaches suited to the strengths and learning needs of the children (MoE, 2020). The RPwD Act also requires educational institutions to provide reasonable accommodation and individualized support to maximize academic and social development (Government of India, 2016, Section 16).

The studies of Kaul (2015) on the status of inclusion of children with special needs at the elementary school level, Singh (2022) on Inclusive education classroom practice in Pune city schools also revealed that those schools moderately used peer tutoring, cooperative learning and individualized instruction. In the studies of Singh, it was found that teaching practices were mostly generalized which means differentiated instructions were largely absent.

Role of teachers in implementing inclusive education practices at the elementary level.

By analyzing the role of teachers in implementing inclusive education practices at the elementary level, it was found that the teachers play a crucial role in inclusion. All the 152 teacher respondents (100%) reported planning lessons for diverse learners and providing academic support, while 78.95% offered remedial teaching and 82.24% used flexible assessment methods. Teachers also addressed the needs of socio-economically weaker students (100%) and promoted their equal participation in school activities that reported by 98.03% teacher respondents. Most respondents maintained positive relationship with students which reported by 97.37% respondents, provided emotional support reported by 80.92% respondents and demonstrated empathy reported by 65.13% respondents. However, individualized goal setting was limited that reported by 46.05% respondents and adapted lesson planning was also found as limited that reported by only 25% respondents which indicates the need for greater emphasis on personalized instruction planning in inclusive classrooms.

The role of teachers is consistent with NEP 2020 that emphasizes appropriate assessment, flexible curriculum, identification of learning difficulties and teacher preparation for addressing diverse learning needs (MoE, 2020). The results also linked to Section 17 that emphasizes teacher training and trained professionals to support inclusive education (Government of India, 2016, Section 17)

The studies, especially Kaul (2015) on the status of inclusion of children with special needs at the elementary level in inclusive schools of Delhi and NCR region and Nengnong (2023) on status of inclusive education in Meghalaya, showed that they also found the teachers who utilized limited individualized instruction, curriculum adaptation, inclusive assessment etc. because of their lack of professional training.

Challenges faced by schools and teachers in the effective implementation of inclusive education in Nagaon district.

It was found that almost all the teachers faced various challenges in implementing inclusive education. Out of 152 teacher respondents, 99.34% reported difficulty in balancing inclusive practices in the classroom. All

teachers (100%) identified a shortage of instructional resources, while 94.74% reported limited training and 90.79% highlighted the lack of assistive devices as major barriers. Time constraints for providing individual attention were reported by 86.84% respondents. Learner-related challenges, including behavioral difficulties that reported by 90.13% respondents, classroom management issues reported by 79.61% respondents and wide learning diversity reported by 63.82% respondents which were also common.

Teachers further indicated that social, attitudinal, parental and administrative factors hindered the effective implementation of inclusive education in the elementary schools.

These results are significant because NEP 2020 calls for teacher training, assistive devices, accessible TLMs, resource centers, special educators and appropriate support mechanisms (MoE, 2020). The RPwD Act similarly requires teacher training institutions, trained teachers, resource centers, accessible facilities, individualized support etc. for inclusive education (Government of India, 2016, Sections 16-17).

The studies of Kaul (2015) on the status of inclusion of children with special needs at the elementary school level, Nizeyimana (2016) on the influence of inclusion of special children, Babla (2017) on Inclusive Education at elementary school stage in Arunachal Pradesh, Mahajan (2022) on Inclusive education initiatives in government elementary schools of Punjab and Chandigarh, Singh (2022) on Inclusive education classroom practice in Pune city schools, Upreti (2023) on implementation status of inclusive education in elementary schools of Uttarakhand, Kaur (2025) on social inclusion through inclusive education by giving emphasis on differently abled students in Sri Mukstar Sahib District of Punjab, mainly found out the challenges regarding the insufficient infrastructure, lack of teacher training, limited assistive devices, limited instructional resources etc. in the schools where they conducted their researches. Hence, in the present study also similar challenges were found from maximum numbers of teachers. So, it has proved that challenges of infrastructure, teacher training, instructional resources etc. are not yet improved which needs urgent initiatives by the schools as well as the government.

Suggestions for the future improvement of inclusive education in the elementary schools of Nagaon district.

After analyzing the data regarding the suggestions by the teachers for the future improvement of inclusive education in the elementary schools of Nagaon district, it was found that only a small proportion of the 152 teacher respondents provided suggestions. 11.84% respondents emphasized the need for strengthening teacher training and professional development, while 10.53% respondents suggested improving school infrastructure and physical facilities. 5.92% recommended enhancing teaching-learning materials, providing assistive devices, appointing special teachers, increasing parental involvement and strengthening support services. However, the majority of respondents, 65.79% did not offer any suggestions.

These suggestions have the similarity with the suggestions by NEP 2020 and RPwD Act for strengthening inclusive education. Thus, inclusive education can be strengthened by effectively implementing the provisions of NEP 2020 and RPwD Act, 2016 through accessible school infrastructure, trained teachers, adequate teaching-learning materials and assistive devices, special educators, individualized support, non-discrimination etc. Regular monitoring and proper implementation of these provisions are also significant for ensuring equal opportunities and meaningful participation of children with special needs in education.

Nizeyimana (2016) and Ramakrishna (2020) also conducted studies related to inclusive education where both the researchers found key suggestions by the respondents that teachers training, infrastructure, instructional materials etc. should be improved in the schools where they conducted their studies and these findings are comparable with the present study.

Therefore, the results of the present study can be also resembled with the studies of above discussed studies of various researchers.

CONCLUSION

The present study provides a comprehensive understanding regarding the status of inclusive education practices in the elementary schools of Nagaon district, Assam. The overall findings highlight that the inclusive education is formally accepted and practiced across the schools as well as follow the national policies and guidelines of inclusive education. However, the findings also revealed that critical gaps are there in the elementary schools that hinders in proper implementation of inclusive education.

The results of the present study indicate a strong institutional acceptance of inclusive education in elementary schools of Nagaon district, reflecting alignment with national policies and inclusive principles. However, comparatively lower responses related to curriculum adaptation, teacher training and preparation of IEPs suggest gaps between policy and classroom implementation. This highlights the need for continuous professional development and structured support systems to strengthen inclusive practices in everyday teaching-learning processes.

While basic infrastructural facilities exist in most of the elementary schools, some of them also show that they still have the issues regarding availability of adequate classroom space and resource rooms which restricts the proper utilization of inclusive education practices. It indicates that those schools are not fully developed yet in case of physical infrastructure that needs to be improved in the future.

Almost all the elementary schools in Nagaon district Sadar area do not utilize the advanced instructional facilities which shows there is a huge gap between teaching practices and instructional resources. In result, it indicates that those elementary schools face issues in proper implementation of inclusive practices that requires urgent need for resource allocation and integration of technology to strengthen instructional support for inclusive education.

The present study also reveals that inclusive classroom practices are valued in a good manner. However, the partial implementation of differentiated instruction, cooperative learning and peer tutoring indicates the need for deeper pedagogical training of the teachers to strengthen the inclusive practices in the future.

According to the study the teachers play the crucial role by applying the suitable teaching practices that matches the learners' needs through a healthy relationship with the students. However, limited individualized planning and adapted lesson planning restricts the actual implementation of inclusive education practices.

The results of the study highlighted that implementation of inclusive education is not very convenient where lot of challenges are faced by almost all the schools. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated efforts at policy, institutional and community levels to ensure sustainable and effective inclusive education.

The limited responses and suggestions by teachers may indicate perceived adequacy of existing inclusive provisions or insufficient awareness regarding improvement strategies. The emphasis on teacher training and infrastructure reflects practical challenges faced in the schools. The high non-responses rate suggests the need to encourage reflective participation among the teachers.

Therefore, addressing these areas is essential to ensure meaningful inclusion and equitable learning opportunities for all children in the elementary schools as well as it needs immediate initiatives by the schools and the government.

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