



Preparing teachers to support students with special needs in everyday classrooms

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Abstract

The Indian education landscape has transformed dramatically with policy shifts mandating inclusive classrooms. The Right to Education Act (2009) emphasised access for all children, while the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016) expanded legal protections from seven to twenty-one disability categories. India's ratification of the UNCRPD in 2007 further reinforced the commitment to inclusive education. These developments have placed significant demands on regular classroom teachers, who now teach alongside students with special needs in ordinary schools. However, the preparation of teachers for this reality remains questionable. Empirical research up to 2022 reveals significant gaps in teacher readiness. Studies indicate that many teachers lack special education training and experience with students with disabilities, resulting in limited competence in individualised instruction, behaviour management, assessment adaptations, and collaboration. Pre-service teacher education programs often prioritise theoretical knowledge over practical application, with insufficient opportunities for hands-on experience and feedback. In-service professional development is predominantly short-term workshops that do not lead to sustained changes in classroom practice. Psychological dimensions, such as self-efficacy and attitudes toward inclusion, play a crucial role in effective teaching, as outlined in Bandura's social cognitive theory and validated scales. Classroom realities in India, characterised by large class sizes (often exceeding 40 students), limited resources, and inadequate infrastructure, exacerbate these challenges. Policy frameworks have evolved, but implementation gaps persist across states due to uneven resource allocation and weak monitoring. This review analyses the historical context, current preparedness, curriculum issues, professional development challenges, and barriers to implementation. It proposes recommendations for strengthening teacher preparation through competency frameworks, extended programs, school-based training, and enhanced support systems. The goal is to align teacher development with the needs of inclusive classrooms, ultimately improving outcomes for students with special needs in everyday Indian schools.

Keywords: Inclusive education, teacher preparation, special needs, self-efficacy, implementation barriers

Introduction

The landscape of Indian education has transformed dramatically. Policy shifts now mandate inclusive classrooms. The Right to Education Act (2009) emphasised access for all children. Subsequent legislation reinforced this commitment. India ratified the UNCRPD in 2007. These developments created urgent demands on teachers. Regular classroom teachers now face unprecedented diversity in their students. Children with special needs are no longer confined to segregated settings. They learn alongside their peers in ordinary schools. This reality fundamentally changes classroom dynamics.

The preparation of teachers for this new reality remains questionable. Research consistently reveals significant gaps in teacher readiness. A landmark study by Das and colleagues examined teacher competencies in Delhi ^[1]. Their survey of 353 teachers found that nearly seventy per cent had received no special education training, 87 per cent reported no access to support services, and teachers rated their competence in individualised instruction, behaviour management, and collaboration as low. Primary and secondary teachers showed similar skill levels with no statistically significant difference ^[1].

Teacher preparation programs face structural challenges. Programs emphasise theory over practice. Opportunities for hands-on application remain limited. The mismatch between training and placement realities compounds these problems. Graduates typically find placement in inclusive settings and must work with students across the full range of disabilities.

Literature reviews have highlighted significant improvements in enrolment and retention, alongside persistent implementation gaps, uneven resource distribution, and infrastructure barriers. The necessity of holistic policy changes, strengthened teacher development programs, and greater investment in accessibility features remains essential.

Teacher attitudes represent another critical dimension. Studies have shown that self-efficacy levels were not significantly affected by gender, school locality, or teaching experience. However, teacher attitudes were significantly affected by school location, with urban teachers exhibiting more favourable attitudes than their rural counterparts. A significant positive correlation emerged between self-efficacy and teacher attitudes, though self-efficacy's predictive power remained relatively low. Teachers expressed clear apprehensions about increasing student diversity and identified professional development, curriculum adaptation, and teacher well-being as priority needs. Studies further examined teachers' self-efficacy and learning engagement practices, finding no significant demographic differences but a clear link between higher self-efficacy and more effective engagement strategies.

The theoretical foundations of teacher preparation require examination. Indian competency standards remain underdeveloped compared to international benchmarks. This gap complicates curriculum design and evaluation. Programs lack clear benchmarks for measuring effectiveness. Students with disabilities consequently receive inconsistent support.

The everyday classroom presents unique challenges in India. Class sizes remain large. Resources remain limited. Support services remain scarce. Teachers must manage diverse learning needs simultaneously without specialised training, ongoing professional development, or collaborative structures. These conditions demand innovative approaches to teacher preparation.

This review synthesises current research on preparing Indian teachers for inclusive classrooms. It examines policy frameworks, analyses empirical studies of teacher preparedness, explores psychological dimensions including self-efficacy and attitudes, identifies gaps between policy intentions and classroom realities, and proposes directions for strengthening teacher preparation.

Policy Frameworks and Historical Context

India's commitment to inclusive education has deep policy roots. The National Policy on Education (1986) first articulated the principles of integration. The Persons with Disabilities Act (1995) provided a legal foundation. The National Trust Act (1999) addressed specific disability categories. These early frameworks established important precedents, though implementation remained inconsistent across states [7].

The Right to Education Act (2009) marked a watershed moment. Section 3 explicitly prohibited discrimination and

mandated free and compulsory education for all children, including those with disabilities [8].

India's ratification of the UNCRPD in 2007 shifted the paradigm toward social and human rights approaches, emphasising accessibility and reasonable accommodation [9]. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016) strengthened domestic law by expanding disability categories and mandating inclusive education in all government institutions [10].

National education policies have responded. The National Curriculum Framework (2005) emphasised inclusive pedagogy and differentiated instruction [11]. The National Education Policy (2020) recommends four-year integrated teacher education programs with inclusive education as a core component and continuous professional development [12].

Despite these advances, implementation gaps persist. Singh and colleagues (2019) examined policy-practice alignment and revealed significant state-level variation in support structures, resource allocation, and monitoring mechanisms [13]. Sharma and Das (2015) found that policy intentions rarely translated into practice due to slow curriculum updates, insufficient faculty development, and lagging infrastructure [14].

Comparative

Table 1: Major Policy Milestones in Inclusive Education

Year	Policy / Act	Key Provision	Citation
1986	National Policy on Education	Integration principles	[7]
2009	Right to Education Act	Free & compulsory education for all	[8]
2016	Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act	Expanded to 21 disability categories & mandatory inclusion	[10]
2020	National Education Policy	Four-year integrated B.Ed. with an inclusive focus	[12]

Current State of Teacher Preparedness

Empirical research consistently documents gaps in teacher preparedness. Das and colleagues (2013) [1] conducted foundational research in Delhi schools [1]. Their survey revealed that teachers lacked skills in individualised instruction, behaviour management strategies, assessment adaptations, and collaboration with specialists. Teachers reported limited ability to develop individual education plans, modify curricula, or accommodate classrooms effectively [1].

Analyses of teacher education curricula across states revealed similar patterns. Most programs offered only isolated courses on inclusive education that lacked integration with practice teaching [17].

Teacher training programs inadequately addressed real classroom conditions. Pre-service preparation assumed available resources and manageable class sizes that rarely matched reality. The cumulative evidence shows current preparedness levels remain inadequate, with self-efficacy emerging as a critical yet underdeveloped factor.

Psychological Dimensions: Self-Efficacy and Teacher Attitudes

Teacher psychology fundamentally shapes inclusive classroom practice. Bandura's social cognitive theory (1997) provides the foundation: self-efficacy influences effort, persistence, and emotional reactions [15]. Sharma and colleagues (2012) developed the Teacher Efficacy for Inclusive Practices (TEIP) scale, validated in India, which measures efficacy in instruction, collaboration, and behaviour management [16].

Research using the TEIP scale showed moderate overall self-efficacy, with teachers most confident in instructional domains and least confident in behaviour management. The Teacher Attitudes Toward Inclusive Education scale revealed generally positive attitudes but significant variation. Self-efficacy correlated positively with attitudes, though other factors (school leadership, resources) also mattered. Demographic variables showed limited effects. Teacher well-being support emerged as essential to prevent burnout amid competing demands.

Self-efficacy development requires mastery experiences, vicarious learning, social persuasion, and affective management [15]. Attitude formation benefits from direct experience and reflection.

Preservice Teacher Education Curriculum Analysis

The curriculum for teacher preparation requires critical examination. Most programs offered isolated courses on inclusive education that provided theoretical overviews but lacked integration with practice teaching [17]. Indian programs showed limited correspondence with global frameworks, emphasising disability categories over instructional strategies and neglecting universal design for learning and assistive technology [18].

The duration and structure of programs present challenges. Most remain one-year programmes, insufficient for developing competence through repeated practice and feedback [19]. Integrated four-year programs recommended by NEP 2020 offer greater promise for comprehensive skill development [12].

Comparative

Table 2: Curriculum and Program Structure Gaps

Aspect	Description	Citation
Course Integration	Isolated inclusive education courses	[17]
International Alignment	Limited correspondence; deficit-focused approach	[18]
Program Duration	Mostly one-year B.Ed. programmes	[19]

In-Service Professional Development Challenges

Preservice preparation alone cannot ensure competence. Ongoing professional development remains essential [20]. Current provision is inadequate: most teachers receive no inclusion-focused training after initial preparation, relying instead on brief workshops that lack depth or follow-up [21]. Workshop formats predominate despite evidence of limited effectiveness [22].

School-based models (coaching, peer observation, collaborative planning) have shown significant skill gains

and improved student engagement within existing resources [23]. Online platforms like DIKSHA offer scalability but limited opportunities for interaction and practice [24]. Mentoring remains underutilised [25]. Flexible, context-responsive models are essential given India's scale and diversity [26].

Classroom Realities and Implementation Barriers

Indian classrooms differ dramatically from idealised settings. Class sizes often exceed forty students. Teachers lack adaptive equipment, assistive technology, teaching assistants, and specialist support [28]. Physical infrastructure barriers include missing ramps, narrow doorways, and inaccessible toilets. Curriculum and assessment systems remain standardised and inflexible. Support services are scarce: 87% of teachers lack classroom assistance [1]. Collaboration, parent engagement, and community attitudes add further challenges [29, 30, 31].

Comparative

Table 3: Implementation Barriers Across Indian School Contexts

Barrier Type	Urban Government Schools	Rural Government Schools	Private Schools
Physical Accessibility	Moderate	Severe	Variable
Support Services Access [1]	Limited	Minimal	Moderate
Material Resources [28]	Limited	Minimal	Moderate
Specialist Availability [1]	Scarce	Absent	Limited

Toward Effective Teacher Preparation: Research-Based Recommendations

Teacher preparation must become practical and comprehensive. Indigenous competency frameworks should reflect Indian realities and guide curriculum design. Curriculum revision must emphasise supervised practice in authentic settings. Four-year integrated programs should be prioritised [12]. Self-efficacy development requires intentional use of Bandura's four sources [15]. In-service development must shift to coaching, mentoring, and school-based models [23]. Policy implementation needs stronger resources, monitoring, and accountability. Comprehensive support systems (specialists, equipment, parent mechanisms) are essential [28]. Sustained research must evaluate the effectiveness of models in Indian contexts.

Conclusion

The preparation of teachers for inclusive classrooms in India stands at a critical juncture. Policy frameworks have evolved substantially, yet classroom realities have changed more slowly. Teacher preparation has not kept pace with the diverse demands of the classroom. The evidence reveals consistent gaps: theoretical emphasis over practice, inadequate in-service support, underdeveloped self-efficacy, and formidable classroom barriers.

The path forward requires comprehensive reform: competency frameworks, practice-focused curricula, extended programs, systematic psychological development, ongoing support models, and strengthened policy implementation. These reforms demand commitment from teacher educators, policymakers, school leaders, researchers, and communities. Students with special needs deserve teachers equipped to support their learning and full participation. Translating research into action will realise

the vision of an inclusive education system that truly serves all children.

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